Our Years in Pammel Court

In September 1954, when I matriculated as a freshman at Iowa State College (now University), I was six years out of high school, married and a little over a year back from the war in Korea. As the start of that school year approached, a number of issues combined to make our move to Ames more than a little hectic. Ever since our marriage the year before, we had been living in Waverly, the town where I grew up in northeast Iowa—and where I had returned after the war to my job in the family greenhouse business. Because we expected that to be a permanent situation, Myrna and I had bought a house in town earlier in the year. Now, however, circumstances had made the pursuit of an education more appealing, so we were faced with a number of decisions concerning our relocation—particularly what to do with the house. In addition, the family was building several new greenhouses that summer and I needed to remain involved with that project for as long as possible.

As a result, I ended up arriving at Iowa State for registration at the last possible moment—by myself and without a place to live. Married student housing was available on the campus, but there was a long waiting list. Although we had asked to be put on the list some weeks earlier, our names were languishing well below many others with a higher priority. Priorities were determined first by whether you had children and second by whether you were a military veteran. That is, veterans with children had the highest priority, followed by non-veterans with children. Having no children at the time, we were in the next priority group, with a predicted wait of possibly months before we could expect to get into one of the housing units.

Of course, my first priority was to get registered and to begin classes. Fortunately, I had friends living at the time in Pammel Court (the Iowa State married student housing complex where we hoped to become residents) and they graciously invited me to make a temporary home on the sofa in their living room. The Swensens were among our closest friends. Dick Swensen and I had graduated from high school together and Grace and Myrna had been roommates in college. Dick was now a graduate student in chemistry at Iowa State.

I don't think I occupied that sofa very long because I soon located a small house trailer for sale and found space for it in a section of Pammel Court set aside for trailers. In fact, this was a "house" trailer in a very real sense. Unlike most mobile homes, it looked like a house, complete with gabled roof, white-painted siding and ersatz green shutters. Meanwhile, we had found a renter for our house in Waverly and Myrna moved to join me in the trailer. It was not a very large trailer and, as I recall, it did not have a bathroom that was connected to any sewer system. There was a bathhouse a short walk down the street and I do recall making that trip to the use the facilities.

I don't remember exactly how long we stayed in that trailer, but it wasn't long. I know that we were living there when I was studying for mid-terms that first quarter. This may seem to be a strange thing to remember after almost sixty years, but I can still recall sitting at the table in that trailer and having an intense craving for a cigarette. I had quit smoking while I was in Korea a year and a half earlier and this was the first time I had experienced the kind of pressure I had dealt with by smoking in those earlier days. Happily, I resisted the craving and went on pass all my mid-terms.

Meanwhile, "the rabbit died" around that time and our housing situation improved almost immediately. For those who may not know about pregnancy tests in those days, the term "the rabbit died," although not a totally accurate description of the test result, was commonly used to indicate that the result was positive. Myrna was pregnant and, as a result, we instantly rocketed

to the top of the Pammel Court waiting list—that is, just as soon as I could deliver the evidence to Mrs. Daley in the housing office. Funny that I should still remember her name after all these years, but then, I had spent a lot of time in her office checking on our status on the waiting list. Within a week or so she advised us that a two-bedroom unit at 669 Pammel Court would be available shortly for us to occupy.

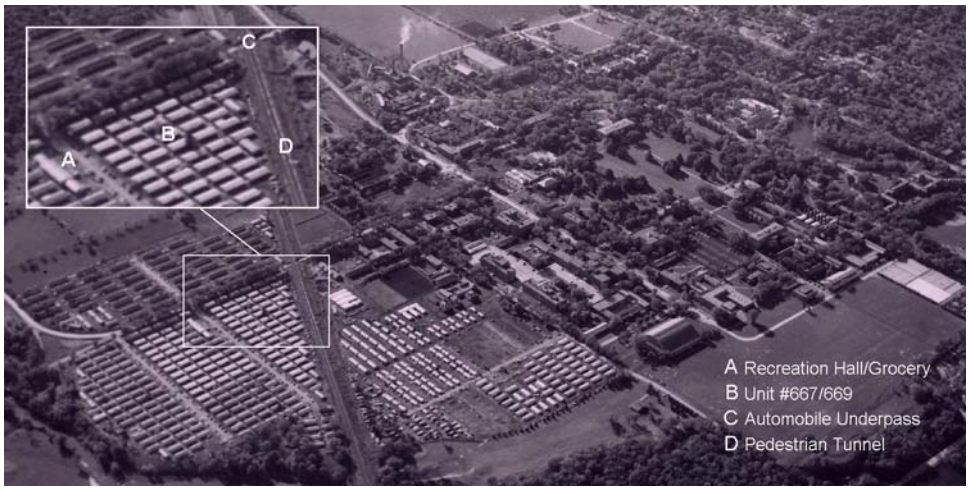
Driving by the unit before we moved in, we got our first picture of the neighborhood we would be living in for the next few years. The two-bedroom neighborhood was a vast expanse of duplex units—surplus buildings from the Second World War era with wood frame construction and corrugated steel roofing and siding. Our friends, the Swensens, were living in a one-bedroom unit of similar construction in a different area of the complex.

Just exactly how and when we moved into the unit, I don't now remember. I do remember that we didn't have much furniture, but then with only about 500 square feet of living area, we didn't have room for a lot. The floor plan for two-bedroom units in shown on the right. In fact, the space in the apartment was planned quite efficiently. That was a good thing, because those 500 square feet would become our home for the next six and a half years. (Originally, I had planned on seeking a four-year degree in Landscape Architecture—which was a reasonable extension of my background in the greenhouse business—but an academic environment has a way of toying with ones uninformed aspirations, as the ongoing narrative will illustrate.)

Because these units were simple frame structures on a concrete slab, the space had to include room for a heating unit and a water heater. As the floor plan indicates, the only space for these facilities was in the living room. The space heater had to be in a relatively central and open area to allow the circulation of heat into the other rooms of the apartment. The water heater had to be proximate to kitchen and bath. As I recall, water and trash collection were provided by the college. Other utilities were our responsibility. The kitchen range (which we had to supply) was fired by bottled propane. The space heater and the water heater were fired by fuel oil. So, before we could set up housekeeping, we had to make arrangements with vendors to keep our oil tank filled and to regularly replace the bottles (metal tanks) of propane. Typically, these vendors were themselves students at the college (and Pammel Court neighbors). They used these enterprises to help support their own families. In fact, I still remember the name of they guy who brought our bottle gas—Mr. Dotson.

The aerial photo on the following page provides a bit of a picture of how dominant married-student housing was on the Iowa State College campus in the 1950s. Pammel Court included all of the buildings in the lower left of the photo, bisected by the railroad right-of-way. To the left (north) of the railroad were the one-bedroom units (toward the top of that section) and the two-bedroom units (below them in the photo). On the south side of the tracks there were primarily Quonset huts, prefab apartments and house trailers—also part of Pammel Court. As most of the rest of the campus is included in this photo, it is clear that married students were a big factor in campus life at that time.

In the upper left of this photo is an expanded view of that part of the two-bedroom neighborhood that included our unit (#667/669) and the building that housed the recreation center ("rec hall") and the Pammel grocery. Also identified in the photo are the two locations that north-side Pammel Court residents could use to traverse the railroad right-of-way to the rest of the campus—the automobile underpass on the access road from the campus, and a pedestrian tunnel through the elevated right-of-way.



Most Pammel Court residents were veterans and, because preference was given for families with children, the neighborhood teemed with kids. The photo below was taken in our first year there, before we had begun to make our own contributions to the accumulation of youngsters on our street. It was taken in front of the unit that shared the duplex building with us. Unit #667 was occupied at the time by Jack and Irene McDowell. Jack was a veterinary student. They had one child, Timmy. Tim is the kid in the cowboy hat in the photo. In those days, this was a pretty typical collection neighborhood waifs.

The photo also shows a typical Pammel Court street, looking south—toward the elevated railroad track that ran through the middle of the housing complex. I don't remember now whether they were still running steam trains in those days, but I do recall that freight trains would come through at all times of the day and night. For those of us living in areas near the tracks, the noise was deafening—and our dishes rattled in the cupboard whenever it was train time. In those days, it was a running joke that the train through Pammel Court was primarily responsible for the high birth rate in the neighborhood.

At the time we moved in, rent for a two-bedroom Pammel Court apartment was $20.00 per month. These days that seems like a very small amount, but you have to bear in mind that our incomes were also very small. Most of us lived primarily on funding from the Korean War GI Bill, which provided $135.00 per month for married vets without children and $160.00 per month for vets with children—no matter how many. Out of that stipend, we had to pay all of our

own college expenses and support our families. Reasonable rent was essential to survival. More about that later.

Most of us, at least those who didn't receive any additional outside support, had to find part-time work on the campus (or in Ames) to supplement our incomes—and a lot of the wives found employment as well, often full-time. By the time we paid for tuition, books and fees, rent and other living expenses, there was usually not much left for non-essentials. Nobody had health insurance in those days and student loans were unheard of. We paid our own doctor (and hospital) bills and adjusted our lifestyles to fit the availability of funds. Fortunately, tuition (they called it a registration fee) was reasonable at $50.00 per quarter (when we started), most books were moderately priced and, as I recall, fees were minimal.

Myrna and I were a bit better off financially than some of our neighbors partly because I had stayed in the active Army Reserve when I was released from active duty after the war. The reserve unit of which I was a member had its weekly meetings right on the campus. So every Monday night, I would spend two hours with my reserve unit and collect a full day's pay—at that time, as I recall, about $13.00. In addition, for most of the first school year, Myrna worked part time as the parish secretary at our church—St. Andrew's Lutheran Church, a small mission congregation located at the West end of Campustown. And, not too long after I got established in school, I obtained a part-time job as a laboratory technician in the Botany Department. So, all in all, we were able to set up housekeeping in Pammel Court and get me settled in as an ISC student without being tremendously overburdened by financial concerns.

Meanwhile, we put the house trailer on the market (very likely on some bulletin board) and found a buyer in a short time. I don't recall what we paid for the trailer originally, but I do remember what we received when we sold it…and I remember vividly what happened to the check the buyer gave me. It was in the amount of $1,300.00 and I put it in the pocket of my shirt. The transaction must have taken place early in the day—probably on a Monday—because I forgot about it and hung the shirt in the closet when I changed into my uniform for Army Reserve drill that evening. Later, when I went to retrieve the check, the shirt was gone. Myrna had put it in the laundry and washed it. Fortunately, the man who purchased the trailer was willing to issue a replacement check.

Although this narrative is intended primarily as a memoir of our years living in Pammel Court, some of the things that went on in my life as a student impacted our domestic existence sufficiently that they require some further explanation. My tenure as a technician in Botany is one such instance, primarily because it began a transformation that ultimately extended our stay in Pammel Court well beyond the four years we originally intended to stay.

When I chose Landscape Architecture as my major, I really had no idea what other kinds of things in academia might stimulate my interest. As it turned out, I found the college to be a gold mine of interesting stuff for anyone with a modicum of curiosity. My academic transformation started early in the second quarter, when it became apparent that I was not cut out to be a landscape architect. One of the early requirements of that major was botany—and I had a professor for that first botany course who began to open my eyes to fields of endeavor that went well beyond the back yard. The professor's name was Wayne Keim. He was the one who first planted the seed in the back of my head that graduate study was a worthy and achievable goal. Forthwith, I changed my major to Botany and he became my advisor. Soon thereafter, he helped me acquire a job as a laboratory technician with a plant pathologist in the department.

However, my activities over on the campus were of little more than passing interest to others that shared an address in Pammel Court. In fact, most of us considered our studies to be

much like a job—a place we went off to during the day and returned from to eat and sleep. And, because the campus was only a stone's throw from where we lived—and parking on campus was unavailable during the day—we walked to work and back. For most of us, it very quickly became a matter of routine. As the photo on page 2 indicates, #669 was closer to the campus than most of the units on the north side of the tracks. For me, it was a relatively short walk through the pedestrian tunnel to most of the buildings in which I had classes or business.

No matter where you live your life, neighbors inevitably become an important part of it—and our Pammel Court neighbors remain among our most treasured memories. Because #669 was our home for such an extended period, we observed a lot of turnover in the neighborhood, so some of those memories have undoubtedly become a bit hazy. However, our relationships with some of them were particularly close—and with others our interactions were sufficiently stimulating—that they must necessarily become players in this narrative. The most obvious of these were our next-door neighbors, Jack and Irene McDowell. They were only our neighbors for a couple of years, but it would be impossible to ignore people with whom you share a wall—even if you didn't like them. But we really liked the Jack an Irene—and Timmy was great kid.

In regard to sharing the wall, it was usually the fourth member of the McDowell family that often reminded us that someone lived on the other side of it. They had a guinea pig—an unusual pet, but in a research and teaching institution, they were more common animals. Having worked with that species myself on occasions over the years, I can attest that they are not the brightest creatures on the face of the earth, but the McDowell pet had learned one thing for sure—he knew he wouldn't get fed until after Irene opened door to the refrigerator. So we always knew when Irene was in her refrigerator, because it was then that we could hear through the wall as the pig started squealing at the top of its lungs.

In those early days, the unit across the street from us was occupied by Bob and Joy Reel. Bob was an Air Force veteran and a student in one of the departments of the Agriculture Division. Joy worked full time in the office of the Treasurer of the college. They had one son. They called him "Butch." I recall vividly when I first discovered what his actual name was. It was a weekend early in our residence in Pammel Court and the Reels had family members visiting from their hometown in rural Iowa. I was talking with Bob out in his yard—but within hearing distance of people in his home—when the subject of Butch's given name came up. "Ward Fletcher?" I repeated, a bit louder than discretion would counsel. "Where in the world did the kid get a name like that?" In an embarrassed whisper, Bob advised me that the grandfather bearing that name was at that very moment sitting in the living room. In my own defense, however, I will offer a picture of the kid and ask if you think he looks like a Ward Fletcher.

My relationship with Bob Reel took on an added dimension when I was able to recruit him to become an NCO (non-commissioned officer) in my Army reserve unit. When we relocated to Ames, I was assigned as the commander of a company of combat engineers that had been declining in membership over the past several years. One of my jobs was to rebuild the size of the unit, so I was always on the lookout for likely prospects. Bob had been an NCO in the Air Force and my offer of the rank of staff sergeant (and the weekly pay that went with it) was too tempting for him to pass up. I signed him up and we spent Monday nights together until he graduated.

Without question, one of the most memorable of my Pammel Court experiences came about because of Joy Reel's employment in the college treasurer's office. Sometime in the middle of our second year in Pammel Court, we were advised by the college that rents for two-bedroom units would be increased to $26.00 per month. We had already endured a $3.00 per month increase the year before. For students on subsistence incomes, these were substantial increases. I didn't like it—none of us did—but we all prepared ourselves to adjust to the added expense. I went along, that is, until Joy Reel came home from her job with inside information that the college was profiting to the tune of $50,000 per year from Pammel Court rents. I was incensed and I determined to do something about it.

Most Pammel Court residents could not make a fuss over the matter and expect to be heard—but I could. Back in my hometown of Waverly, Iowa, my father played poker every week with a group of men that included a local attorney named Harry Hagemann. Among other things, Harry was president of the State Board of Education. I did not know Harry as well as my father, of course, but we had been on amiable speaking terms for a number of years. So, I sat down at my typewriter and whipped out a letter to Mr. Hagemann, pointing out how unfair it was for the college to make such profits from rents paid by struggling veterans who had already made monumental sacrifices and were subsisting on the most minimum incomes. I posted the letter without any idea what sort of Pandora's Box I might be opening. I was not so naïve as to believe that my raising the issue was going to change anything, but I did expect some kind of letter thanking me for my interest and patronizingly suggesting that these were complex issues that went beyond the interests of any particular minority of students.

What I was not expecting was the news Myrna welcomed me with when I came home from class one day a week or so later. "You got a call today from the secretary to the president of the college," she said. "She wants to know when it would be convenient for you to meet with Dr. Hilton. She requested that you to give her a call." I don't expect that I relished such a meeting, but I had opened the box and now I needed to prepare myself to deal with what was in it. I dutifully I called the president's secretary and arranged the time for a meeting.

I don't think I walked into the president's office that day with any sense of being a crusader—and I don't believe that I expected to change any minds—but I had a good argument and I intended to see that it was presented. Certainly, I had no intention of creating any sort of difficulty over the issue. I would present my case and put the administration on notice that married veterans were fully aware that an injustice was being done.

I have no memory of anything specific that happened in the meeting with President Hilton. What I do remember is walking out of his office with a clear understanding of why he was the president of the college. He was so personable and so convincing in his explanations that, at least at the moment, my own arguments seemed to pale in comparison. Thus, although I may have disagreed with the outcome, I emerged from the meeting convinced that the rent increase was necessary. I expect that my neighbors would have disagreed, but then, they didn't have the experience of being smoozed by Dr. Hilton.

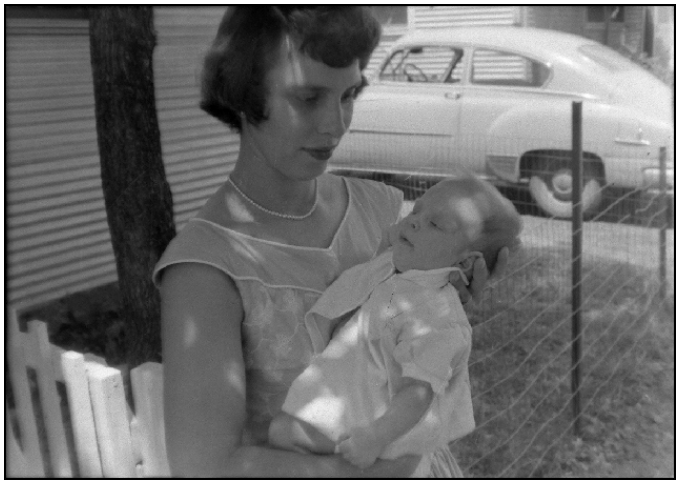
Returning for a moment to my first year at the college, during which my wife had been showing ever more obvious signs of impending motherhood, I was preparing for the final week of my third quarter in school as the first of June 1955 approached. We were sitting at the kitchen table on the evening of May 31st, where she was typing a term paper for me, when the fetus announced with a rush of amniotic fluid that it was prepared for its freedom. Our first child, Susan, was born a little after six o'clock the next morning at Mary Greeley Hospital in Ames. She was supposed to wait till after final week, but these things tend never to be that predictable.

Myrna was in the hospital after the delivery for 4½ days, which was a typical post-delivery hospital stay at that time. As we look back on it now, of course, that seems a long time to stay in the hospital after a normal delivery. But, the most astounding thing in retrospect is what it cost us for the delivery and the hospital. As I pointed out previously, we had no health insurance, but we really didn't need it at the time. The hospital bill was $96.00, and the obstetrician charged us $150.00 for all pre-natal care, the delivery and all post-natal care up to the six-week checkup.

We came home from the hospital on a Sunday and final week started the next day. It was really bad timing. In addition, Myrna's mother came that week to help with the new arrival. At the time, I was not one of my mother-in-law's most ardent fans, so the imposition of two disturbances into my home during final week compelled me to seek refuge elsewhere. Fortunately, my friend Dick Adler, who lived in one of the pre-fab Pammel Court units south of the tracks, was by himself for the moment and consented to have me move in with him for final week. His wife, Mary, had taken their son back to their hometown, where she would soon be delivering their second child. Quite astoundingly, I had reconnected with Adler—who had been in my unit in Korea—during freshman orientation at the beginning of the school year.

So, with finals passed and only one intruder remaining in our home, the summer of 1955 began by introducing us to a whole new way of life. Our days became dominated by this new addition to our family. However, when I say "our" I do not suggest that the responsibilities I faced as a new father were equivalent in any way to what Myrna had to endure while I spent the summer in the classroom and in my job as a technician in the Botany Department. Two unexpected realities added to our trials as new parents. First, the child came into the world with her biological clock set twelve hours out of phase. She stayed up much of the night and slept like a rock after the sun came up. In addition, it was a blistering hot summer in central Iowa that year.

We had arrived home from the hospital with a small supply of cloth diapers and instructions to acquire several dozen more. Babies use a lot of diapers and even a large supply can become exhausted in a short time. This meant that we spent a lot of time (and hot water) keeping the child in clean diapers. Although there was a coin laundry in the rec hall up the street, the furniture from our home in Waverly had included an automatic washer. The washer was really indispensable, but it had one glaring disadvantage. The hot water it used had to be produced by the water heater in the living room, making daytime temperatures in the apartment insufferably hot. I can recall how, on many evenings that summer, the three of us would escape the heat at 669 and drive around Ames in our car with all the windows down till the sun set and the temperature began to moderate in our home.



The photo on the right shows Myrna with Sue that summer and our trusty automobile in the background. I had bought that car new while I was on leave from the Army at Christmas in 1951. It was a two-door Fleetline Chevrolet with a manual transmission. The car was very dependable and we drove it all the time we lived in Pammel

Court. By today's standards, it was not particularly expensive to operate. We did not drive it a lot and it got good mileage—and gas was cheap at the time. As I recall, gas cost usually somewhere around 15 cents per gallon—although we once paid as little as eight cents per gallon during a gas war. I don't remember ever having to make any major repairs.

My limited participation in parental responsibilities that summer was not by choice, but by necessity. Somehow I had ended the year still short one quarter of chemistry. So I had to sign up for it during the summer term. In addition, the botany professor for whom I worked as a technician was a plant pathologist studying a disease in oats. Because all of the researchers on the campus that worked with grains (wheat, oats, barley etc.) maintained summer experimental plots on the agronomy farm south of town, their technical staffs joined forces to plant, cultivate and harvest these crops. As a result, I spent my mornings that summer (beginning at 4 am) working on the agronomy farm. However, I do recall taking my turns getting up at night with the baby after Myrna found that she could not keep her nourished by nursing.

In my early years at Iowa State, one special ritual took us out of Ames for a couple of weeks at the end of each summer. The Army Reserve division to which my company was assigned assembled every August at Camp McCoy, Wisconsin (now Ft. McCoy) for two weeks of active duty training. For me, it was a welcome respite from the routines of academic life and, for Myrna, it was an opportunity to spend two weeks with her parents, who lived in southeastern Minnesota, right on the way from Ames to Camp McCoy. And, for students like us on a subsistence income, two weeks of active duty pay was particularly welcome. The photo on the left shows Sue and her dad in front of their apartment a couple years later, as he was leaving for Army Reserve drill on the campus.

Meanwhile, events in my academic life continued impact our life in Pammel Court in significant ways. As I began my second year at Iowa State, I was no longer working for the plant pathologist in Botany—for reasons I can no longer remember. In need of another job, I approached a friend from our church—an instructor in the Bacteriology Department—and inquired if anyone in his department might be looking for a technician. A few days later, he responded that Prof. William Lockhart of his department had just received a grant from the Damon Runyon Cancer Fund that included money for a part-time technician. I interviewed with Dr. Lockhart and got the job. Little did I know at the time that I would be spending the next five years in that laboratory.

However, at the time, I had slightly different ambitions. In the summer of 1955, as I began to contemplate the additional time commitment for me to pursue graduate school after I finished my bachelors degree, I began to reconsider a career path I had chosen during my early years in high school…medicine. That fall, I changed my major to pre-med and adjusted my course schedules to include courses that were required for admission to medical schools. So, after one year in college, I had already changed my major twice.

Of course, as I began my second year as a collegian, our lives in Pammel Court were now dominated by the fact that we had a child. Our daughter was growing and we were becoming

seasoned in the minimalist existence of married undergraduate parents. What helped make that existence tolerable was the fact that all of our neighbors were in the same boat—and we all cooperated in making the best of the situation. We never hired a baby sitter. We simply swapped opportunities with our neighbors. Or, if we were visiting nearby neighbors, we would slip out regularly to check on our sleeping offspring.

As the academic quarters elapsed, neighbors graduated and moved on and new neighbors moved in to take their place. Apartments in Pammel Court were never vacant for very long. Most of those neighbors are only fading memories. A few continue to evoke fond recollections. Two, however, have remained close friends throughout the years. The first of them, Ed and Greta Meyer, moved in across the street from us after Bob Reel graduated. Ed, a Navy veteran, had transferred from a community college near his hometown. Greta was a nurse and got a job working nights at Mary Greeley Hospital.

The second of those close friendships began somewhat earlier, in a philosophy course on the campus. Something I had said in a class discussion that day evoked a reaction in one of my classmates, a young, redheaded freshman wearing an ROTC uniform. The young man, Francis Nelson, approached me on the way out of class and asked if we could talk. As we both had the next hour free, and my Army Reserve office was in the building next door, we went there and he shared with me some concerns about the direction he was taking in his education. Fran was enrolled as a student in engineering, but he really wanted to become a pastor in the Lutheran Church. I don't recall that anything monumental resulted from that conversation, but the fact that we were both Lutherans led ultimately to his bringing his fiancé, Jean (also an ISC student), to begin attending our church. A friendship blossomed and, after they were married, they moved into a house trailer off campus. Then, when Jean became pregnant, they were able to qualify for housing in Pammel Court. I don't recall now how we managed to get them assigned to the recently-vacated apartment next door to Ed and Greta, but that's what happened—and they became our neighbors.

We never did get to know very well the people that replaced the McDowells across the wall from us in 667. However, we did become unavoidable sideliners (through the wall) to their frequent, high-volume verbal battles, particularly in the morning as they were trying to get him to school, her to work and their daughter to the baby sitter.

Meanwhile, we were managing to keep up our contributions to the population explosion in Pammel Court. Our son, Mark, was born in January 1957. Like Sue, he was born at Mary Greeley, but I don't have any records of how much of a dent his birth put into our budget. As costs of living were fairly stable at that time, his advent was probably not much more expensive than that of his sister. However, one other memorable thing I should mention that the two deliveries had in common. That was Marie, the head nurse in obstetrics. Nobody—mothers or fathers—became parents at Mary Greeley Hospital and emerged from the experience without vivid memories of Marie. She was the closest thing to a "drill sergeant" I had encountered since my days in basic training.

One of the things I remember about Mark's entry into the world was our concern that, when the day came, the car might not start when we needed it most. It was late January and below-zero temperatures were common. In fact, one year while we were there, there was one day when Ames recorded the lowest temperature in the nation. To guard against the possibility that the car wouldn't start when we had to get to the hospital, I applied a little wisdom I had learned in a physics class the year before. The physics professor's name was Dr. Carr and we were studying the theory of heat in his class at that time. Prof. Carr was a private pilot and he had been

involved in the Civil Air Patrol during the Second World War. Making a point to us about the heat output of incandescent light bulbs, he told a story about one of his CAP colleagues who was concerned about getting his small plane cranked up in cold weather. This pilot had heard that you could keep the engine warm by putting a light bulb under the cowling in cold weather when the plane was sitting out in the open. Pointing out to the class that even a 40 watt bulb can put out a lot of heat, Prof. Carr went on the explain that his colleague needed to allow some ventilation in the engine compartment to avoid overheating. He had, however, closed his cowling tightly and, the next morning, found that he had baked all the wiring on his engine. I did not have to worry about having insufficient ventilation under the hood of my Cheve and I found that the 100-watt bulb I placed next to the engine kept it from having any problem starting.

Now, with two children in diapers, laundry became a major effort at 669 Pammel Court. We had a clothesline behind the apartment but it soon became apparent—particularly given Iowa winters—that we were going to need a better way to dry laundry. A gas-fired clothes dryer was the obvious solution and we acquired one—although I don't remember where or exactly when. A major question, given our shrinking living space, was where to install it. There was no space available in the vicinity of the washing machine, which was at the end of the kitchen counter, already intruding on our limited dining area. In fact, there was only one possible space for it and that was in the small bedroom, next to the closet. So we asked Mr. Dotson to install a new line from the gas cylinder into the apartment at that location. The photo above shows how much of a fixture it became in that bedroom. Both Sue and Mark still recall going to sleep to the soothing sound of that dryer.

Another matter in which limited space required us to make an adaptation of our facilities was bathing accommodations for infants and small children. There was no tub in our 5 x 7-foot bathroom, so we had to make do with the kitchen sink. Fortunately, as the photo above indicates, it was plenty roomy enough to accommodate children until they were old enough to use the shower.

One of the most often-used facilities at 669 Pammel Court did not belong to us. It belonged to the company that delivered our milk. That milk box was usually our only outdoor seating. The adjoining photo shows Mark perched on it, licking some frosting off a spatula. One of the reasons the milk box was a popular resting

place in the summer was that daytime temperatures in the apartment could become very uncomfortable. We had no air conditioning. In fact, at that time, air conditioners were rare in Pammel Court. We acquired a window fan and it helped, but a pleasant interlude outside the front door was always welcome. In fact, I logged a lot of time on that milk box in the years we lived there—sometimes reading, sometimes pushing a kid in the swing and sometimes whittling.

The overhang of the eaves on our unit made an ideal support for a small swing—and the milk box was a convenient perch to sit on when pushing the swing. The adjoining photo shows Sue in the swing. She and her brother were frequent passengers in that seat over the years.

Although I, like most guys in my generation, had a jackknife when I was young, I never really did any serious whittling until I was in Korea during the war. That may seem like a strange place to whittle, but when we weren't directly involved in the fighting, time often weighed heavily on our hands. To deal with those periods of boredom, I took up whittling. It was relaxing and took my mind off more serious matters. The only knife I had for whittling in Korea was a TL-29 knife, which was part of the tool set used by linemen—the guys that strung communication wire. It was essentially just a big single-blade jackknife. Wood for carving usually came from construction scraps. I can recall only two things that my Korean whittling produced: one chess piece (a knight, or horse) and a chain attached to a cage with a ball in it. I still have the chained cage, but only one link has survived.

Quality wood for carving in Ames was abundant, albeit somewhat limited in size. The village maintained a wonderful public park, Brookside, along the creek between Campustown and downtown Ames. The park was equipped with an abundance of fireplaces and piles of wood cut to fit the hearths. Among the kinds of firewood available were pieces of walnut, an ideal wood for carving—at least for the patient woodcarver. So, on a family picnic, I acquired a piece of walnut firewood and began to whittle on it in my spare time. It was a slow process and took a long time—although I had acquired a set of woodcarving tools that made the job easier than using a jackknife. Many evenings—for many months—I could be seen, sitting on our milk box, carving away on that piece of firewood. Occasionally, a neighborhood kid would stop by, watch for a while and then ask what I was doing.

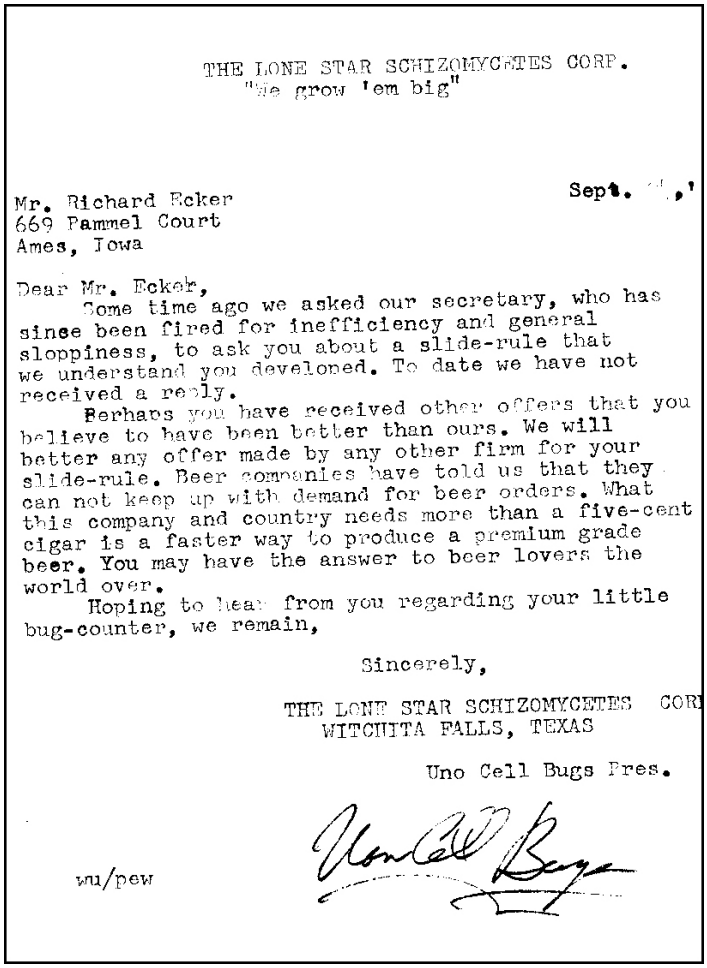
"Carving," I would reply.

"What are you carving?"

That question came often and needed an answer. So, early on in those interrogations, I took a cue from abstract artists that tended to give peculiar names to their works, and replied, "A Small Boy Digging Peanuts in the Mojave Desert." It has had that name ever since and the finished work (missing a loop at the top that broke off and was lost sometime in the past half century) can be seen in the photo at the left.

I don't recall now exactly how long I remained a pre-med major before I was again back pouring over the college catalog planning a different course of study. Two factors were primarily responsible for this decision. First, it was becoming apparent that attending medical school as a family of four was going to be an expensive and demanding ordeal for the whole family. Second, my boss, Dr. Lockhart, had begun dangling before me the prospect that I could continue working in his laboratory as a graduate student…and get paid for doing it. He could see that I liked doing research and was good at it. I had already co-authored one paper with him and we were working on two others, on methods I had developed in the lab. It was not a hard decision and I began to prepare myself for graduate study in bacteriology. Our stay in Pammel Court was going to be extended…significantly.

Not too long after my decision became known around the neighborhood, I received this letter, postmarked in Wichita Falls, TX, on September 24, 1957. Of course, the prime suspect in this little charade had to be Ed Meyer, our across-the-street neighbor and a first class practical joker. Although Ed always denied any involvement—consistently managing to maintain a straight face—I was sure he was the culprit. He and I drank beer together on regular occasions and his wife, being a nurse, was familiar with the technical terms he used. Yet, I could never get a confession out of him.



THE LONE STAR SCHIZOMYCETES CORP.
"We grow 'em big"

Sept. [illegible],'

Mr. Richard Ecker
669 Pammel Court
Ames, Iowa

Dear Mr. Ecker,

Some time ago we asked our secretary, who has since been fired for inefficiency and general sloppiness, to ask you about a slide-rule that we understand you developed. To date we have not received a reply.

Perhaps you have received other offers that you believe to have been better than ours. We will better any offer made by any other firm for your slide-rule. Beer companies have told us that they can not keep up with demand for beer orders. What this company and country needs more than a five-cent cigar is a faster way to produce a premium grade beer. You may have the answer to beer lovers the world over.

Hoping to hear from you regarding your little bug-counter, we remain,

Sincerely,

THE LONE STAR SCHIZOMYCETES CORP
WITCHITA FALLS, TEXAS

Uno Cell Bugs Pres.

wu/pew

In fact, our beer-drinking camaraderie had once led to an embarrassing episode much like the time I had made fun of Butch Reel's given name. It happened one pleasant Saturday afternoon. I was about to open a cold beer and I thought that Ed might like to join me. By then, Sue was a talkative two-year–old and knew our neighbor as "Uncle Ed." So I said to her, "Sue. Why don't you go ask Uncle Ed if he wants a beer."

I don't know what else I might have expected, but she excitedly burst through our screen door and headed across the street shouting at the top of her voice, "You want some beer, Ed? Uncle Ed. You want some beer?" She never got quite to his door when Ed came through it, plaintively shushing her and leading her back over to our door, where he explained that some of his wife's relatives were visiting and they didn't know he was a beer drinker—and wouldn't at all have approved if they had known.

Over the next twenty-one months, I received four more similar letters and a postcard, most of them sent from Travis Air Force Base in California. The last one was postmarked in June

of 1959, which was, coincidentally, the month Ed graduated. It wasn't till decades later that he finally confessed that he was the creator of The Lone Star Schizomycetes Corporation.

Over on the campus, I was now a senior and making preparations for graduation—and for graduate school, which I would enter immediately. My only problem was that the major I had finally selected, General Science, would have kept me in school an additional quarter to meet its requirements. That major actually consisted of four minors, and was ideal for someone about to enter graduate school. However, I balked at spending an extra quarter as an undergraduate and opted instead to fill my last two quarters with bacteriology courses to qualify for a major in that field. So, I graduated at the end of winter quarter 1958 with a major in bacteriology and minors in chemistry and zoology. On the right is the only family photo I can find taken that graduation day. It shows me with Sue and my parents.

Graduate school started for me the next quarter, with Dr. Lockhart as my major professor. I had just one quarter of GI-Bill eligibility remaining and then I was going to need an alternative source of income. I still had Pammel Court rent to pay and a family to feed—in addition to continuing academic expenses. Fortunately, my professor was looking out for me and had encouraged me to apply for a graduate fellowship from the National Science Foundation, which I received for the next academic year. This grant paid a lot better than a graduate assistantship and left me full time for doing my thesis research.

In Pammel Court, our neighbors were graduating and moving on and I have relatively few recollections of those who lived around us after the Meyers and the Nelsons left. This may have been because I was now burning a lot more midnight oil over in my laboratory on the campus. I didn't want to spend any more time than absolutely necessary qualifying for my doctorate. College regulations required that I spend a minimum of three full-time academic years meeting those qualifications. That was my goal and, because I had a significant head start from having already worked in that laboratory for two years, it should have been reasonably achievable.

Finances remained a minimum obstacle to that goal, as the National Science Foundation renewed my fellowship for a second year. However, one unplanned expense did bite into our budget a bit. Our third child, Eric, was born in January 1960. When Eric was born, I was still more than a year away from my hoped-for graduation, so we had to accommodate an additional resident at #669—no small task given the limited space in the unit. However, we found room for Eric in our bedroom, while Sue and Mark continued to share the other bedroom with the clothes dryer.

That year, 1960, was a presidential election year. For reasons I cannot now explain—or even totally comprehend—I filed that spring to stand for election as Republican committeeman in the Ames precinct that encompassed the campus of Iowa State University (now no longer a "college"). Of course, most of the voting residents in that precinct lived in Pammel Court, but any single student who lived on the campus and was registered to vote there could do so. Because of its high population density, it was one of the largest precincts in the county. I was probably uncontested in the election and I won, forthwith becoming a political being—albeit a very inexperienced one.

I have very little recollection of the months leading up to the November election that year, except for one particularly painful televised two-man debate with a Democratic counterpart. He was a professor at Iowa State, possibly in political science although I don't now recall. One of his stipulations for agreeing to the debate was that I not be identified as a student. I agreed, probably because I didn't want to acknowledge that I was as dumb as I was. My performance in the debate is best described as a reluctance on my part to take some sound advice my father had given me as I was growing up: "It is better to keep your mouth shut and have people think you are an idiot," he cautioned, "than to open it and remove all doubt."

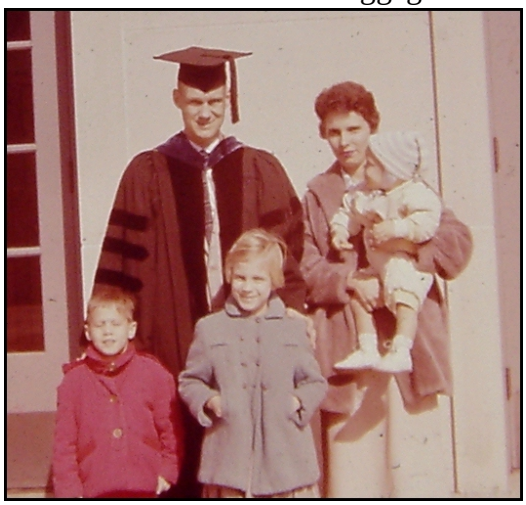
The polling place in my precinct for that election was the Pammel Court recreation hall. That election was a truly fascinating experience for me. I was involved in the process as an authorized observer from the beginning till the end. I watched the voting machines (circa 1960) being set up by the election judges. I was in and out of the polling place throughout the day as I saw to my official duties. And I was there throughout the evening till the last votes were counted and submitted to the county officials. Those results showed that, in spite of my amateurish performance in that TV debate, my precinct turned out more votes for the Republican ticket than any other in the county. However, I say that with a certain sense of sadness, because I became convinced in later years that Richard Nixon was a crook and I gave up membership in the Republican Party when he was pardoned for his offenses.

By the time of the election in 1960—and after six years there—my family was approaching its final months as residents in Pammel Court. My course work was finished and I had passed my preliminary examinations. My thesis work was nearing completion and I had to register for just one more quarter as an Iowa State graduate student. However, my second year of financial support from the National Science Foundation had terminated at the end of that summer and I needed some way to provide for my family as I completed my work. As it turned out, Dr. Lockhart had been named recently as Chairman of the Department of Bacteriology, and he appointed me to the faculty as an instructor for my six remaining months in graduate school. It was a welcome boost in our resources as we began to plan for life after graduate school.

That life would begin in Gainesville, FL, where I had obtained a postdoctoral fellowship working with Dr. Moselio Schaechter at the University of Florida Medical School. However, before that move the following March, we had a lot of loose ends to tie together before we could get ourselves and our possessions removed from Pammel Court and on our way south. First, although we didn't have a lot of personal property—and much of what we had was not worth transporting—we did have enough that we had to plan how to get it moved. Our solution was a trailer, which we acquired from an enterprising Ames resident who was manufacturing them in his garage using the rear axles from junked cars. Ours, as I recall, had once been an Oldsmobile. The photo on the right shows the trailer as it was before I built onto it with an enclosure that would protect our worldly possessions from the elements.

The other problem we faced in moving our family a thousand miles across the country was that ours was no longer a family-friendly car. We had a two-door sedan and three kids, one of them just a year old. We needed a roomier car. So, with prospects for an acceptable income, we were able to obtain financing for a new car—a 1960 Ford Falcon station wagon. It was without a doubt the most ill advised major purchase I have every made. However, it did provide

the additional room we needed—although we did have to acquire a car-top carrier to accommodate much of our luggage and some odds and ends we couldn't fit into the trailer.



Meanwhile, I finished my thesis and fulfilled all the other obligations required for me to be granted the degree of Doctor of Philosophy with a major in Bacteriology. Myrna and the kids were all present for the graduation ceremonies. The photo on the left shows us after graduation in front of the ISU Science Building, where I had spent much of my time over the past five years. A week or so later, we loaded our car, carrier and trailer with what they would accommodate—selling, throwing away or giving away what wouldn't—and hit the road for Florida.

We did not return to Pammel Court till some 33 years later, when we were in Ames for a performance on the ISU campus. The pictures on the right, taken in 1994, shows our apartment unit still standing, although by then many of the other units had been razed. Our two white ash trees (*Fraxinus alba*, as I learned in my freshman class in systematic botany) were very much larger—but no longer the beautiful shade trees under which I so often sat carving on "A Small Boy Digging Peanuts…."

Richard E. Ecker
January 2012