

Uncle Tom

By Dennis Knight

We didn't get to see a lot of him because he lived several hundred miles away. He never married or had children, but I believe Uncle Tom always took quiet pride in his brother's brood of seven kids as if we were his own.

Thomas Vincent Knight was born in June of 1901 to a family of eleven children. It was a slightly nomadic life because his father was moved about to supervise various sections along the D&RG railroad.

In his early adult years, he worked at the famous Sunnyside Mine at Silverton, Colorado. The family story is that he spent only one day in the mineshaft, and declined to ever go down again. There seemed to be plenty of work to do at the top, and they gave him a variety of jobs over the years that didn't require a lantern.

Uncle Tom was happy in his solitude, enjoying good friendships at all stages and places of his life. He had the most even temperament you can imagine, never complaining about a thing, but when he recognized something was not for him, he simply didn't entertain it. I think that was why Tom had no interest in marriage, no interest in mine shafts, and no interest in driving an automobile. We remember him as a nonsmoker and a nondrinker, so I suppose he found those as other vices he could live without.

Tom would have been nearly forty when he was drafted into the Army early in the Second World War. He was injured and received a small disability pension from the government for the rest of his life. He worked in the railroad shops in Denver for a short time but soon returned to Silverton where he worked again at the Sunnyside, mostly as a caretaker.

By the late nineteen-fifties, he had retired to live in a small boardinghouse in Durango. He would walk for miles, every day that weather permitted, upstream and down, to fish the beautiful Animas River.

In about 1970 my brother Jim and I drove down to see Uncle Tom. He was delighted with our visit, taking us to see the sights of Durango and giving us his own guided tour of Mesa Verde. He was in his late sixties then but in shape as he led us over the walking trails and up the ladders to show us the nooks and crannies of the cliff dwellings.

Tom knew the history and lore of the railroads, the towns, the tribes and the countryside of the Four Corners region and of the San Luis Valley to the east. He spent his final decades at the State Soldiers and Sailors Home at Monte Vista. He had a small room there, really kind of an efficiency apartment, where he lived independently, enjoying a mix of solitude, friendships, and things to do at the center.

He was a good conversationalist and always had a grasp of current events, taking great wonder at the modern developments and luxuries of the twentieth century, but imbibing in few of them. He didn't like to stray far from Monte Vista but he would sometimes take excursions organized by the Veterans Center.

One of those trips brought Uncle Tom at age 94 to see the Colorado Rockies, Coors Field and his first major league baseball game. He was a big Rockies fan from their inception in 1993 and reported to our family that the new stadium was just about the finest in the world.

I do not share all of the virtues of Uncle Tom, but he is my model for living a deliberately simple life and making the best of it. Thomas Vincent Knight died a happy man in December of 1997.