UNCLE HERBERT
By Fred Hobbs

He was a dreamer. He was a drifter. He was a serial exaggerator.

Accounts of his exploits are not to be believed, at least not fully.

This was Uncle Herbert, my Mother's older brother. Members of our family circle considered it strange indeed that the steady, practical guiding hand of a person such as my Mother could have had a sibling of the likes of Uncle Herbert.

He wasn't a bad man, really kind and gentle, just a tad too self-indulgent, operating on a decidedly different wave length than the rest of the world.

He lived on a small farm outside the town of Warren in southern Arkansas, home of the annual Pink Tomato Festival. Over the years, the town has steadily lost population and now numbers around 6,000. The tall pine trees surrounding the community provide lumber processed in the local mill, a bigger enterprise back in Herbert's salad days than today. Herbert worked there from time to time in addition to raising a few hogs and chickens and tending to a small garden, which, among other crops, produced some of those famous pink tomatoes.

Herbert's wife was a diminutive pleasant sort known by all as "Sweetie." He called her the love of his life. The couple had no children, and by all accounts, Sweetie was devoted to her husband. She was an excellent southern cook and kept Herbert well fed. He maintained his ample girth by dining on such home-grown menu items as bacon, ham, sweet potatoes and apple pie. Once when my family visited Herbert and Sweetie, I was especially impressed when, as we were departing, he loaded in the trunk of our car, a full side of bacon and a large ham from his smokehouse.

One might conclude that this simple small town life was just right for Uncle Herbert. But he apparently had a case of unrequited wanderlust. One day as he was hoeing weeds from the garden, he heard the whistle of a nearby freight train. As he tells it, anyway, he was suddenly compelled to drop the hoe, race for the tracks and hop the freight. No fond goodbyes to Sweetie; no certainty of his destination.

Herbert's account of his odyssey placed him at times and circumstances that are subject to varying degrees of skepticism. His first adventure did not start on a high note. After getting off the train in Little Rock he hitched a ride with a stranger who turned out to have been driving a stolen car. The Arkansas highway patrol forced the driver to pull over. Not only had the car been stolen, but the driver had a previous criminal record. Though innocent of any of this, Herbert was taken into custody along with the driver and spent two nights in the county jail.

Eventually he wound up in the west. In June, 1921 a terrific cloud burst flooded the Arkansas River near Pueblo, Colorado. More than 1,500 people lost their lives; damage topped $20 million dollars. Herbert claimed he was there when it happened. Later, using his experience at the lumber mill, Herbert was hired at a logging camp near Klamath Falls, Oregon. It was there he met who was apparently the second love of his life. He called her "Honey".

Herbert wrote an account of his adventures, never quite explaining how he juggled his life between Sweetie and Honey. However, he eventually returned to Arkansas and to Sweetie.

He claimed to have a publisher for the memoir, but details of that are sketchy and no one in the family has a copy of such a work. Herbert also claimed to be a personal friend of Johnny Cash's father. Johnny supposedly had written and recorded a song based on Herbert's book, but it certainly never appeared on the list of top ten country hits.

In his late 70s, Herbert visited Denver. Remembering the ham and bacon gift, we invited him for dinner with T-Bone steaks and all the trimmings. Politely, but firmly, Herbert declined, saying: "No thanks, just bring me a bowl of corn flakes and let me watch my favorite soap opera, 'As the World Turns.'

We never fully understood how the world turned for this seemingly simple, yet strangely complicated man. All we know is that in conversations at family reunions, his name is bound to surface.