My earliest memories go back to a time when I was less than five years old. There were three of us boys, Robert Ronnie, the oldest; me, Billy Joe, second in line by one year; and then the youngest by another year, Gary Dale. My dad was known as Tex because he was born and raised in Texas. He had remarried my stepmother Charity.

We lived in a small cabin that consisted of only two rooms as I remember, maybe three. We had an apple box attached to the side of the house at the kitchen window that we used for an icebox in the months with cooler temperatures. It was located so we could slide the window open and reach into the box. In the summer time we could purchase large blocks of ice for the stand-alone icebox inside the house. I would probably describe the cabin now as a shack.

My best memory of the ‘shack’ was at Christmas time. Dad and Mom drove us across the bridge into town. Oroville was very small and had one main street and a few stores. We spent some time in town and on the way home, Dad exclaimed as he pointed out the side window of the car, ‘There’s Santa Claus.’ We were sure he was on a housetop and about to go down the chimney.

When we arrived back at the shack, the door was swung open and there in the middle of the room in a large pile were Christmas presents. That was the best Christmas ever.

I remember Grandpa Kitterman. He seemed a big man to me, rough in appearance with skin darkened by the many hours outside in the sunlight day in and day out. His simple shirt, partially exposed from behind the bib overalls that hung button-less at the sides, showed years of wear.

Our grandpa always had a chore of some kind to do. But, one of my favorites was when he would feed the huge red boar hog in the pen built with sturdy wood planks. He always warned us not to get in the pen. The hog would get us for sure. I was afraid it would.

It must have been that relationship that led to us three boys having a litter of baby pigs to care for soon after those years.

The baby pigs were great fun until the temperatures dropped dramatically and one of us had to venture out to the shed in back and feed them. I always thought the hot pig feed smelled just like the hot Malto Meal we had for breakfast. Maybe it was the same. Steam rolled out of the pan I held on my way to the shed in the frigid temperature.
I remember only one or two trips to the shed. And I don’t remember which of us found them all dead, succumbing to the bitter cold of the nights of Northern Okanogan Valley in Washington state.

My memories are few from those early days in Oroville. I do remember in 1948 walking to school to become a first grader. Ronnie was an old hat at this by now. He was starting the second grade. The walk was long, even at an adult standard. It was not a walk any child in America would make to school now.

The school was a multilevel brick building about four stories high. It stood at the top of the highest hill in Oroville overlooking the town much like a monument for all to see. You could see the distant mountains so prominent in this part of the state. You could also see the meandering line of large Cottonwood trees that followed the Okanogan River to the south.

Our walk to school took us across the Similkameen River Bridge. The river raced a dozen feet beneath the bridge and us boys were always so fascinated that a crossing could not be made without stopping and peering over the short rail keeping us from the edge. The water was clean and clear and we always had hopes of seeing one of the White Fish that were so common. And of course we always found a stone or stick for tossing in the river.

The year of 1948 was the year that the bridge would bid this world goodbye though. Accumulations of deep snow and the subsequent spring melts would bring large amounts of logs and other debris downstream and jam so tightly around the bridge base that it could not be dislodged and the water backed up higher and higher until the bridge simply gave way and was no more.

That was the end of school for us that year in Oroville. There was no reasonable way to get across the river, and besides that Dad took a job in Soap Lake, about five hours away by car.

Soap Lake was located in the Great Columbia Basin and was named for the medium sized lake at the edge of town. The lake had a very high soapy content to the extent soap products were derived from the water and marketed. The water was quite dense and it was nearly impossible to sink while in the lake.

It was a dry arid landscape with prairie Bunch Grass and Sage Brush everywhere. There were few trees and occasionally a cactus could be seen.

This small spot in the Columbia Basin was to become our stomping grounds for the next six years. We would hike the rolling hills and basalt outcrops on self-made adventures.

Gary was smaller than Ronnie and me. Partially because he was the youngest, but also because he had a heart condition resulting from a defective heart valve he was born with.

Years passed and it became common place for us to be running along through the sage brush with Gary in the distance behind us. He just couldn’t keep up.

On one adventure hike I remember waiting for him to catch up with us while we were upset with him for holding us back. We complained. He didn’t. He wanted to be with us. His face had become quite pale, and his lips a shade of deepened purple. His heart just wasn’t providing the blood circulation required. I think this was my first realization that something really was wrong with Gary’s heart.

It was on this same hike that we discovered, ‘Three Trees.’ That was the name we came up with because the grouping of tall Poplar trees looked to number three in the distance as we approached. Once in their midst we could see there were several more.

The trees had grown up on an old homestead property where the remains of the original house could still be seen. There was a rusty old wood cook stove standing amongst the fallen lumber of the walls and roof.
Also, in the debris we found a rusty and battered skillet. This caused our little minds to begin
to fashion all kinds of ideas linking the stove and skillet together. One idea was to pull up some of
the wild onions that grew abundantly in the area and fry them in the pan. We called them wild
because they really were, and onion simply because they had a bulblike a small onion.

With a good gathering of onions, another idea sprang forth from the group of four of us. The
fourth was Claude who was our best friend at the time. Why not catch some grasshoppers and fry
their legs with the onions? We had heard that grasshopper legs were very good.

I don’t remember where the matches came from. None of us were in the habit of carrying
them, but they appeared and soon some of the house lumber was fitted into the stove with dry bunch
grass stuffed in underneath it. A couple matches later and smoke was billowing out of the back of
the broken down stove.

Somehow we managed to stir the onions and legs together in the dry, rusty pan and let them
remain until the onions were really black and brown. The grasshopper legs just got hard and
tasteless. But, we ate them and convinced each other that it was the best meal we had ever had.
Strange, we never cooked them again.

All three of us boys attended Sunday School and Church every Sunday, even receiving bibles
for attendance without fail for a whole year at a time. It was a ‘fire and brimstone’ style of preaching
in a small Pentecostal Church. The preaching sometimes scared the sin right out of me.

We lived in the ‘Projects’ after living in a variety of cabins and small antiquated motel style
places. The ‘Projects’ were great. They were new and roomy compared to anything we had lived
in previously. They were duplex and each had a sidewalk that connected the front door with a main
sidewalk that went down the center, and around the outer edge of the ‘Project.’

This sidewalk became our roller skate track. We saved money from bottles, pop and beer, that
we collected from around town. Beer bottles were worth a penny at the super market, and pop
bottles, two cents. Most bottles came from the homes where parties had been held the night before.
We always bought some item of clothing with our proceeds because Mom and Dad taught us that
way. Required items always came before ‘nice to have’ items. But soon we were able to muster
enough cash for roller skates.

Skates were metal, including the wheels, and made quite a racket on the semi rough sidewalk.
We ran barefoot the entire summer while school was out but Mom would let us wear shoes while
skating. The steel clamps would fasten onto the sole of the shoe and could be tightened with a skate
key that we kept on a string around our neck. There were plenty of skinned elbows and knees until
we mastered the sharp corners in the sidewalk.

One year Ronnie and I received bicycles for Christmas. Gary got a tricycle. I was seven at the
time, and my bike was a 20-inch wheel size, small. Ronnie’s was a 24-inch wheel, much bigger in
our eyes. The bikes lasted us for more than five years. We had run the fenders and all attachments
right off of them by then. No pedals remained, just the round bolt the petal fit onto. The bikes were
pretty much frame, wheels, and chain at the end.

The best part about the bikes though was the fact that they were Donald Duck bikes. They
were yellow and blue, with a Donald Duck head for a head light. The eyes were actually the lights
for the bicycles. When we eventually moved back to Oroville, the bikes were left at the back of the
house at the ‘Projects.’

The three of us always shared a room that was small and there was little space to do anything
but sleep. Gary and I had bunk beds and Ronnie had a hospital style bed.

Mom taught us to clean house and we had our chores to do. We swept, mopped, and made
beds. Anything that had to do with keeping a house presentable we had to do. I still insist on a clean house today.

We had our mischief days too though. One particular pillow fight got out of hand one night while Mom and Dad were uptown. The pillow that Ronnie was wielding sprung a leak at the seam and feathers began to fly. The appearance of the feathers didn’t slow the fight at all. We were caught up in the moment. Soon the floor to our room was covered in feathers, not to mention the beds.

Of course, that was the very moment that the front door opened and in stepped Mom and Dad. There was always a price to pay for foolishness in our household. Dad administered the discipline and he was good at it.

This is the way it usually went. Dad would look us over and then say, ‘Take a knife and go cut a switch.’

It was torture for us to cut our own switch. We agonized over whether to cut a tiny one that would sting more, or a heavy one that would hurt more. We had to find the ‘just right’ one. But, whichever we chose, the welts would rise on our bare butts and legs.

Mom was very affectionate during the day with discipline, but she would only have to say, ‘Wait until your Dad gets home. Then you’ll get it.’ That didn’t bother us too much until just before Dad was supposed to arrive home, then the worry started. Sometimes Mom would surprise us and did not tell Dad at all.

On another occasion us boys were home alone and Ronnie discovered a chocolate bar high in a kitchen cabinet. Only a climbing boy would have ever found it. We were delighted and began devouring it. Of course Ronnie, being the oldest and finder of the prize, was the one entitled to the majority of the chocolate, and he took advantage of that entitlement.

I’m not sure how long it was before Mom missed the chocolate, but it was shortly after we three boys all had a serious case of diarrhea, and Ronnie had it the worst of all. It was then that we learned that the chocolate was ‘Exlax,’ a laxative. No punishment was needed for this infraction; our crime included its own punishment.

The best part of the year for us was by far the summer vacation from school that lasted a full three months. It was heaven on earth for us. We dug underground forts, climbed trees, tortured bees and other flying insects by tearing off their wings and throwing them on an ant hill, and rode our bikes like there was no tomorrow.

We would use clothes line pins to fasten playing cards onto our bike frame where the end of the card would be struck by each wheel spoke that came by the card. This was our engine and we thought it made just the right engine sound. We were sure of that.

Through all these years, Gary and I were quite close. In fact, we three boys fought often enough, like any brothers would. But, Gary and I most often seemed teamed against Ronnie, our older brother. He was the authority and he didn’t mind pushing that onto us. We had to team up to stand against him.

Gary would sometimes start a disagreement with one of our less friendly opponents on the playground and then run to Ronnie or me for help. Ronnie was always more prepared to defend than I was, but I don’t remember ever backing away from Gary’s need for defense.

I learned a lot at school in those early days. My second grade teacher, Mrs. Elliot, stopped me one day on the playground and said, ‘Williamson, you’re never going to get anywhere in life with your feet pointed out to the sides like that.’

I looked down and sure enough my feet were spread and pointing outward. I still catch myself
noticing my feet today and consciously bringing them around to the front more. Her words never left me.

Our summers weren’t always play. We worked at various jobs, usually with Mom. I seemed to be her go-to-person for picking apples, and she would have me move the ladders and even climb to the top of the fourteen-foot ladder to get the apples in the highest part of the tree. She always bragged on me and that spurred me on to do even more daring feats. She furthered my work ethic a lot, as did Dad, who insisted we do chores and get ourselves a job.

I was eight years old when I had my first payroll job working alongside my Mom. I actually had to get a social security card before I was hired. We were pulling weeds out of rows of green beans on a commercial vegetable farm. The rows were very long, a quarter mile or so. We received pennies per row and I remember my first check of $5.62 for a week of work. I was so excited.

Of course, Gary and Ronnie were right there working too, but at times it seemed like I was the only one.

There is a memory lobe of my mind that is filled with some of my most precious memories. I was a boy of nine years old and Dad’s work had taken us to Saltese, Montana. There were only seventy-five people in the entire town. Twenty-four of us were school kids.

Saltese had been a boom town at one time for mining. The remains of glory holes and mining structures could be seen everywhere. The mining had dried up and the majority of the residents moved to where they could find other work.

Much of the town was like a Ghost Town, but there were a few houses still in use. We lived in a very small RV camp trailer in a Trailer Park at the edge of town on the St. Regis river. It was summer time and we were in a perfect spot for three boys of eight, nine, and ten years old. Of course we had chores to do every day, but ‘play’ was the operative word for us that summer.

Our first adventure had to do with the St. Regis river. It was only feet away from our trailer and we couldn’t stay out of it. The water was cold but three boys our age didn’t even feel the cold. We would put on our cut off jeans and wade in. There was no budget for much in the way of clothing, much less swimming suits.

The boulders in the river were hard to walk on and around so we just began to move some of them. The rocks moved easily in the water and soon it all began to have a purpose. Dam up the river! I don’t remember who had that idea but we set out to accomplish it. It was our daily project, and we would get into the water as soon as Mom would let us. We started at the edge of the river closest to our trailer and started stacking rocks. The river was shallow in the summer, maybe one foot deep, so it didn’t take long to see the effects of our work.

We had been working on the dam for several days and we had gotten a small wall of rocks protruding out into the river for about ten feet that was high enough it was beginning to force the water toward the center of the river. It was getting harder for us to hold the rocks in place as the current increased around them.

To our surprise one morning when we ran to the river’s edge, we noticed fresh-cut Willow branches placed along the top of our dam. They had been jammed into the holes around the rocks. Upon closer examination we could see that each limb had been cut by beaver teeth. Beaver had begun helping us with our dam. We couldn’t have been happier.

We never did see even one beaver on our dam, but each day we would place boulders in a line and stack them up. The beavers would come by night and reinforce and add to the height of the dam.

Eventually the dam extended completely across the river and there was a very nice pool of water behind it. The beavers continued to do their engineering until they had placed branches all the
way across and packed mud into it for sealing. It was a fine dam. We swam daily and even found that fishing was good behind the dam. Native trout was plentiful in the area and they loved the deeper water behind the dam. The fish were so hungry that sometimes we would catch them by simply tossing our line out with a shiny gold hook on it without bait. They would strike as soon as the hook hit the water.

We hiked along the river many times and followed side-streams into the mountains searching for beaver ponds. It was common to come back with a string of trout for our effort. We soon found that we could sell the fish to a man who sat in a chair outside the one grocery store in town. We were never sure what he did with the fish but were happy to put a few coins in our pocket.

Fire Crackers were legal and seemed to be available all the time in Saltese. We used many of the coins to buy them. Lady Fingers, Cherry Bombs, and just ordinary fire crackers were sounding off all summer in Saltese.

Black Bear were abundant in the area too. We often watched them come down the mountainside across the river at evening. They loved to come search through our garbage cans at night. They made a mess for us to clean up, but seeing the bears was worth it.

Much to our dismay our summer days came to an end and school started. It was disappointing to discover that even here in the mountains of Montana there was school.

The red brick school building was huge in my eyes. It was built in the boom days and could hold hundreds of kids. There were enough classrooms for every grade. It had a large gym with a stage for presentations. There was plenty of room for assemblies and of course basketball and other indoor sports. The school sat on the banks of the St. Regis river. There was a playground between the building and the river.

I learned early on that I could bring my fishing pole to school and fish in the river during recess and lunch hour. And I did just that. I caught my biggest trout during lunch hour one day. I had to put it back in the water because there was no way to keep it until after school.

I was in the fourth grade and there were only three of us in our grade, me and two girls. Ronnie and Gary had similar situations. In fact, our whole school of twenty-four kids sat in one room. Each grade had their own row of seats, or segment of a row. Our teacher would give instructions to one grade at a time while the others worked on assignments.

I don’t remember anything particular that I learned that year. I spent most of my time looking out of the window dreaming I was fishing in a beaver pond somewhere.

Soon winter began to dump snow into the mountains around Saltese and Dad’s work had to stop. He was part of a huge road construction project that was building a new highway through the mountains. We packed up everything and hitched our camp trailer and said our sad farewells to Saltese, Montana.

That was the best summer ever.

I was twelve years old before Dad gave up the construction work and we moved back to Oroville and the Okanogan Valley.

Ron was a teen and he insisted that he should be called Ron. Ronnie was a kid’s name. I determined a similar thing about Billy, and Bill became my more mature name. There was definitely a change happening in us. There didn’t seem to be a substitute for the name Gary, and besides it didn’t seem so important to him.

Elvis Presley was beginning to make a name for himself and this is when I first noticed music could be enjoyable. I was also noticing girls. But I was a shy boy that just couldn’t get anything out of my mouth when around girls.
Gary on the other hand was very popular with the girls. He was a lady’s man that always had a few around him. We were at opposite ends of the spectrum when it came to girls. He would sometimes come home and tell me about this girl, or that girl, that ‘really liked me.’ I liked to hear that, but my tongue would get even more stuck in my mouth when around that particular girl.

Gary was small for his age, but his wavy blond hair that curled over his forehead, and his blue eyes more than made up for his size.

I had worked every chance I had since I was eight years old and got that Social Security card. I was now working for Prince’s IGA Super Market in Tonasket for the summer. I liked having money in my pocket, so working was a priority to me. So much so that when school started and I had spent only two weeks as a Sophomore in High School, I opted out. I quit school and went back to work at the store again.

I thought Dad would be furious at me for quitting, but he only said, ‘Don’t blame me later if you regret it.’

I promptly replied, ‘I won’t, Dad.’

Of course later in life when I realized how important education is, I blamed him. I know now that it is a father’s responsibility to see that his kids get schooling.

Gary’s health became more of an issue as he grew. His heart just couldn’t meet the demand for oxygen his body required. Something had to be done. I know Mom and Dad agonized over the options, but did finally make a decision. Surgery had to be done and it had to be soon.

Gary’s defective heart valve needed to be opened somehow to allow more blood flow. Newer surgery procedures would give him a 50/50 chance for success of making it through the surgery.

Finally he was scheduled for the surgery at Sacred Heart Hospital in Seattle. We all drove to the Greyhound bus station in Tonasket. Mom and Dad boarded with Gary. They would pull out from the curb any moment and head for Seattle.

I looked up toward the area where I thought they might be on the bus from my position on the sidewalk. There was Gary with his face near the window looking at me and Ron. I just looked at him. We had never been apart much except one period when we moved to Tonasket and I stayed behind in Oroville to finish my ninth grade first semester. I stared after him as the bus pulled out and disappeared down our main street.

It occurred to me at that moment. ‘I didn’t say goodbye.’

Days went by while Ron and I batched it at home alone. We were old enough at sixteen and fifteen to take care of ourselves. Ron had his drivers license, and a ‘46’ Ford Coupe to get us around. I had a ‘49’ Ford sitting by the house, but wasn’t yet legal to drive it.

The phone rang, and the rest of that day is a blur to me still. I don’t even remember how the phone call went, nor who answered it, me or Ron. The news was the worst possible. Gary had not made it off the operating table. He was dead.

I didn’t cry. I didn’t say anything. But inside I was reliving everything about Gary. He was my best friend and now he was gone.

Mom and Dad arrived home and they were basket cases. They had been told that this could happen, but they had been told that if Gary didn’t have the surgery he would not make it past the age of twenty. They made their choice, but I know now they thought they had made the wrong one. He could have at least been with us for another six years.

A memorial service was held at the Methodist Church in Tonasket and Gary’s classmates and friends filled the sanctuary. The burial ceremony at grave-side was at the Tonasket Cemetery high above the Okanogan River just outside of town.
At the cemetery I just sat in the car and stared into space. I had not said but a very few words in days. How could this be? Tear drops tried to form in my sixteen-year-old eyes. Today was my sixteenth birthday. I fought the tears back and refused to let them roll over my cheeks and fall away. I choked them in and held them. I had always been told that big boys don’t cry and I wasn’t going to start now.

Less than one week later a neighbor boy who was one of our friends was playing around the stove oil barrel beside their house when the barrel framework collapsed and crushed him to his death. Gary’s death was so fresh in my mind that I refused to go to our friend’s funeral and vowed I would never attend another as long as I lived. I have broken that vow since then, but not often.

One scene that never left me was the one of Gary looking out of the bus window as I saw him for the last time. I so assumed he would be back. I struggled with the fact I had not said goodbye.

I worked at the IGA Super Market and even held second jobs in the local apple orchards. I had a strong work ethic and I used it. I eventually quit working at the store and went to work with Ashley Holden at the Tonasket Tribune, the local newspaper.

Ron joined the Navy and left Tonasket.

Gary was gone, and Ron was gone.

I have vivid memories of myself standing in front of the jukebox in the Tiger’s Den, our local burger joint hangout, listening to Rusty Draper’s song ‘Freight Train.’ And especially the words, ‘I don’t care what train I’m on, as long as it keeps rolling on.’

As I walked home from work at the Tribune one day, I noticed a group of my friends gathered in front of the Tiger’s Den. I crossed the street and found they were talking to an Army Recruiter. In moments I was filling out papers to join up. There was only one catch, because I was only seventeen I had to have Dad’s approval. He had to sign the papers.

He did and I left.

I was pretty much a lily white teenager at seventeen years old. I was naive and inexperienced with the world. I didn’t drink, smoke, or hadn’t been intimate with a girl, and hardly even kissed one.

My time in the Army changed all of that. I came back with experience in all of those areas. It took many years to unlearn some of the things I thought were important to my life at that young age. I came to learn they were detrimental to my life.

After my Honorable Discharge from the Army I returned to Tonasket to my parents home for a short season before marrying Lenora and becoming the father of Kelly and Leah.

I pursued my dream of working for the US Forest Service. I was hired at the Tonasket Ranger District, but soon transferred to the Methow Valley Engineers on the Twisp Ranger District compound. After nine years on the Okanogan National Forest I moved to the Mt Hood National Forest in Oregon where I finished my career in Roadway Engineering.

I retired from the Forest Service at forty-three years old in Gresham, Oregon.

It was during my time at Gresham that Lenora and I divorced and I found myself living alone.

It had been twenty-five years since Gary had died. Memories of his death would surface on rare occasion, but he had not been on my mind for some years. I was driving on the I-5 Interstate Freeway between Portland and Salem one afternoon. Out of nowhere I began thinking of Gary. My thoughts went deeper and deeper into long past memories. The tears formed again in my eyes like they had done on that day of my sixteenth birthday at the cemetery.

But this time I made no effort to hold the tears back. The tears flowing over my cheeks and into my lap led the way for sobs that came from deep within. I let forth an uncontrolled sobbing that
went on for several miles down the freeway. This time it wasn’t so painful. It felt like a huge release, like a break in a dam letting the backwater flow freely downstream.

For twenty-five years my emotional dam had been holding this mourning back, and now it was flowing like a roaring torrent.

Something cracked during that few blurry miles of sobbing. I still think of Gary, my lost brother, often. But it is always a fond memory for me now. Maybe it is because I believe he is in heaven, and I now understand what heaven is, and the requirement to get there. And I know that I have met the requirement of accepting Jesus Christ into my life and living it all for him in obedience to his written word, ensuring we will meet once again where eternity will not separate us.

Interesting that I came to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ and eternal salvation just days before that encounter with my mourning on the Interstate.

I still miss my little brother, Gary. But, I know now that he is not gone forever, we will meet again.