

GARY IN ST. LOUIS

A SCENIC SOJOURN

DEC. 4, 2004

ON THE OCCASION OF HIS 60TH BIRTHDAY





George Gerhart "Gary" Kuennen, the first child of George Glenn Kuennen and Dorothy Earline Doherty, was born during the Second World War in Austin, Tex., 60 years ago today.

While Gary left St. Louis soon after graduation from St. Louis University, and traveled the world over ("... **there's a world out there, boy** ...") it was St. Louis which molded him, excited him and remained with him. In some ways it's as though he never left St. Louis ... just ask Julie!

Today you will visit sites of importance and historic memory in St. Louis to Gary and his sibs Matt, Terri, Julie, Vickie and Tom ... not to mention their spouses, children and other significant people!

C'MON, LET'S GO! "CIRCUS PEANUT !!!"

STOP NO. 1: DEFENSE MAPPING AGENCY

During the Vietnam War Gary was loyal to his country, completing ROTC training during his college days, to the point that on graduation from St. Louis University, Gary quickly was able to complete basic training and emerge as a noncommissioned officer in the U.S. Air Force. He spent many years in the Pacific and SE Asia, but because he is an expert cartographer, he served his country principally through the Aeronautical Chart and Information Center, now the **Defense Mapping Agency**, in St. Louis, located at the site of the old **St. Louis Arsenal**. Today, following a distinguished career in the Air Force, from which he retired at the rank of major, Gary spends his time between suburban Washington, D.C., and St. Louis, continuing the fight for freedom through better maps, or so we are led to believe, and introducing "Inside the Beltway" types to St. Louis classics like parchment-wrapped hot tamales, pickled pigs feet, and White Castles.





STOP NO. 2: GRAND & OLIVE

Grand & Olive was the heart of the old Twenties entertainment district, and when Gary and the family were growing up on Astra Ave., we still were able to go to movies there. But the area around Grand & Olive was early Gary territory ... it's the location of his alma mater, **St. Louis University**, and of his immortal pool-shooting hangout, **Grand-Olive Billiards**. Gary is an accomplished pool-shooter, if not pool shark, and has had a pool table since teenage days.

Today the remaining movie palaces host live acts, like the Fox Theater, and the old St. Louis Theater, now Powell Symphony Hall. But the tradition lives on, as daughter Mary E. is a grad of SLU, as are cousins Becky and Jennifer, and who knows whom in the future?



STOP NO. 3: 3501 BARRETT ST. AND FAIRGROUNDS PARK

St. Louis attained its highest population in 1950 (856,000) as tens of thousands of new families of postwar veterans crowded into the city's apartment buildings, bungalows, mansions and row houses after 1945 for lack of anywhere else to live.

Among those new postwar families were George, Earline and Gary. (Fortunately, Dad's glider pilot training did not have to be put to use, no doubt in the Invasion of Japan, or else we might not be here.) On arrival from Texas, all three came to live in Grandma Mamie and Grandpa Jule Kuennen's house at **3501 Barrett St.**, where Dad and Uncle Wil had grown up, along with city kid chums like Johnny Rice and Leo Staniszewski.

This was the old neighborhood, where folks slept out in Fairgrounds Park on steamy summer nights, kids had "road apple" fights, and blew out stone curbs with huge firecrackers. Sounds like an old Three Stooges short. When Gary lived there in 1946-47, those earliest days were gone, but both Gary and Tom have memories of old Barrett Street. Mom, Dad and Gary helped launch the postwar suburban boom when they broke ground on a new home in Jennings in 1946, and Mamie, Jule and Aunt Gussie followed to a new home in Dellwood in 1960.



Barrett St., 1946: Mamie, Gary and Earline ("Mer") ; Below, George ("Big G") and Gary in front of 3501 Barrett St.

STOP NO. 4: LEE & GRAND

We continue our trip deep into historic Kuennen country in desolate North St. Louis. Just north of 3501 Barrett St. on Grand Ave. is a white two-story commercial building at the **SE corner of Lee and Grand**. This building of memory housed, on the ground floor, a former office of Stann Realty, operated by Dad's long-time Barrett St. friend Leo Staniszewski, better known as Leo Stann. Upstairs, Earline's mom, **Grandma Laura "Pascal"** Warmath Doherty, lived for a few years. The girls remember buying penny candy from a confectionary across Lee. Gary and Tom would visit on Saturday nights, watching the busy traffic on Grand, buying the early Sunday paper, and eating jelly-filled ABC Donuts from the shop next door.

STOP NO. 5: 1400 BLOCK, DESTREHAN ST.



"Big G" merged artistic and commercial talent, a media and marketing magician who in retrospect helped develop the concept of the "big box" store, and certainly developed the first big box hardware store in Central Hardware. He was less successful as a real estate wheeler-and-dealer.

When, in the 1960s, real estate mogul and pal Leo Stann suggested Dad become a man of the landed gentry, and invest in "income property" that would no doubt be a sure thing, through him Dad bought a tenement house in the **1400 block of Destrehan St.** As a money-maker it was a bust; fortunately Dad could buy paint, lumber, tile, turpentine, and bug killer "at cost" at Central so Gary could spend his summers there painting, painting and painting.

Every year Gary or Dad would have to repaint the joint after the hoosiers would skip their last months' rent; here also was the incredible roach infestation in which tens of thousands of cockroaches battled Dad, Gary, Leo, his son Stevie, and Tom over a three-day period (a true story). **In an old rear house on the alley Grandma Pascal lived for a while.** Dad sold the property in the late Sixties as the neighborhood declined.

With Gary in tow we will attempt to identify the exact address of the house. This is now an historic district; Holy Trinity Church, where Grandpa Jule, Great-Grandpa Gerhart, and Great-Great Grandpa Bernard Anton Kuennen worshipped, dominates the skyline. Clay School, where Jule went to grade school, still is in operation just to the north.



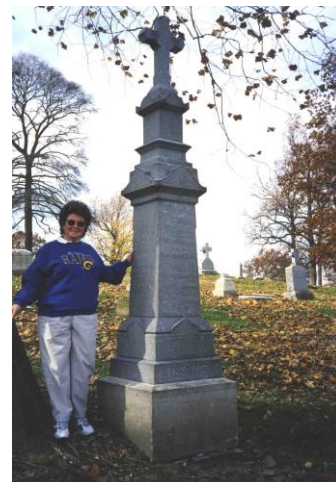
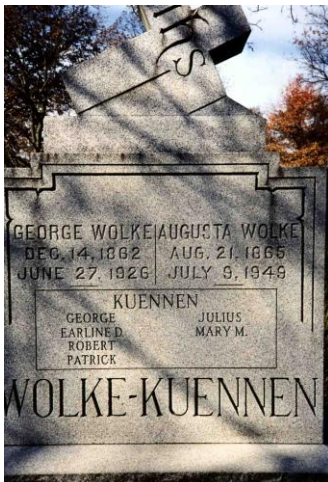
STOP NO. 6: MC BRIDE HIGH SCHOOL

In 1958, Gary entered the Archdiocese of St. Louis' No. 1 school for brainy Catholic boys, **William Cullen McBride High School**. Gary called it "Mac Brad", in homage to the increasing number of African-Americans who were taking over the neighborhood. Gary studied art and hot rodding at this institution and suffered from beatings from the Brothers of Mary, who ran the joint. He was graduated in 1962.

For many families, McBride was a "family affair". Thus brother Tom attended McBride from 1967 to 1971, the year it closed. It was sold to the St. Louis Public School System and became a school for unruly boys who were kicked out of the public high schools, no mean feat.

STOP NO. 7: CALVARY CEMETERY

Many call it "Cavalry", as in horsemen, but indeed it is **Calvary Cemetery** where perhaps the corporeal remains of many of the people on this bus will spend eternity. Here we will take a pause to stretch our legs, and lift a toast of champagne to our departed forebears, including Mom, Dad, brothers Robert and Patrick, grandparents Julius and Mary (Mamie), and Mamie's protectors Mr. and "Tanta" Wolke; great-grandparents Gerhart and Elizabeth; Jule's brother Uncle Fred and Aunt Millie; and, thanks to Anne Gillette Kuennen, the newly discovered grave of Bernard Anton and kin, the Künnen who came to America and started it all, him overlooking the Mississippi in the older part of the cemetery.



STOP NO. 8: 5986 ASTRA AVE.

5986 Astra Ave. was the big one, the house where George and Earline's family came into maturity. This two-story brick city house with stained glass windows and big basement had room for everyone, including "Uncle" Lloyd Rupp, who would stop by for cocktails every night.

With Mer pregnant with her sixth child, Julie, space was running out at 2035 Park Lane. In 1959 Mom and Dad bucked the suburban trend by moving back into the city, into a splendid tree-lined neighborhood abundant with parks, children and city amenities. Here was Gary's biology lab, stocked with St. Louis University castoff equipment. Here was the garage where Gary worked on his hot rods ... where Gary's hubcaps fell on the hood of Dad's 1967 **Country Squire** station wagon, and wound up in Gary's bed ... where Gary took his pre-announced, hot-water-hogging steam showers ... where **Vickie, Julie and Terri** raked leaves for Beatles albums ... where Gary would thrill the girls and **Matt** with "**Mop Guy**", shaking dust, inducing sneezes.

Where Gary would **shoot pool** on his table late Saturday nights until the Hercsters ("Movie Spectacular") would come on at 10:30 ... where Dad would come home every lunchtime and his **red MG** sports car would announce its presence as he backed into the garage every evening ... where Mer, under assault by her darlings, would clench her fists, roll her eyes to heaven and mutter "**Give Me Strength!**", before unleashing the dread **flyswatter** ... where Gary would make late summer night runs to **Shady Grove** beer garden and bring back those traditional parchment-wrapped hot tamales with cellophane-wrapped bundles of four crumbling saltines. Where Mom and Dad went to Big Red Cardinal football games every Sunday and out to Ruggeri's on the Hill almost every month.

Where Leo Stann and his family lived next door and there were six, count 'em, six girls playing nonstop, nine when the Hudgins would visit from Chicago. The dead-end "alley" in back ... the malt shop on the corner ... the **Rio Theater**, where on big weekends the lines would "wrap around" **Lombardo's** ... and **Nativity of Our Lord Parish**, where Gary wed Mary's mom.

By 1972, Gary had moved away, Dad had gone over the Rainbow Bridge, Tom was on the way to Mizzou and the neighborhood was changing. In 1973 Uncle Lloyd and other family friends mobilized to get Mom, the girls and Matt moved into new home in Florissant, Sparrow Court, and 5986 Astra became a memory ... except that Terri toured the house at the owner's invitation a couple of decades later!

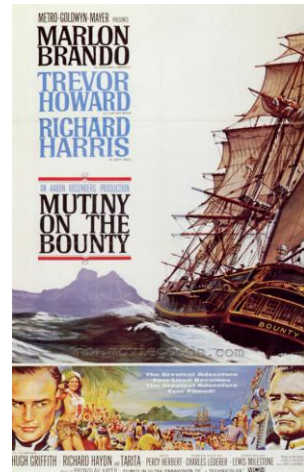


Christmas, 1960 at 5986 Astra; that's Terri just back from the hospital!

MEMORIES OF ASTRA DAYS



Mom and Dad in Acapulco, 25th Anniversary ... their favorite restaurant, Ruggeri's on the Hill



"They're wrapped around !!!!!" ... this was the "new" Lombardo's

"Mills, am I dying Mills?"



Booger Doll!!!!



"I have a feeling you don't like me"



STOP NO. 9: CORPUS CHRISTI PARISH

The “Little Vatican”, or “**Corpus Delicious**” – as Gary called it – was Gary’s home parish and grade school when the Kuennen family lived at 2035 Park Lane (1947-1959). The parish boasted a two-story stand-alone kindergarten, a grade school, a high school, a stadium, a bowling alley and party room, and a huge brown brick church with tower that was rebuilt in a 1960s “flying saucer” motif, as many suburban churches were. Late in 2004 the parish faces consolidation.

It was at a Corpus Christi kindergarten extravaganza that Gary first set foot on stage. His only line in the pageant was “**Rabbits hop, horses clop**”. He practiced and practiced ... but guess how it came out when it was his turn to orate.

It also was at Corpus Delicious that Gary first committed venial sins, lewdly daydreaming about his crush **Debbie Reynolds** when he should have been learning his letters and ciphers.





Aug. 15, 1948: After a year in the new house, Mom and Dad do "St Louis Style Ribs" in brick pit that Dad built by hand; Dad built an identical pit in the rear of 5986 Astra, but with an added sheet metal hood to enhance smoking of meats ... all designed by him.

STOP NO. 10: 2035 PARK LANE

The ancestral home of the George and Earline Kuennens, 2035 Park Lane was constructed on farm land beginning summer of 1946. A tiny home with only two bedrooms, it would have three once Dad finished closing in a back porch, which became Gary's room. There, fabulous Mer started her family. It had a huge back yard with a creek at the rear, later enclosed into a storm drain. A steep driveway, shared with the house next door, served a downstairs garage. The basement and garage were reached via scary metal steps without risers, but down there was a tiny bar and an old-fashioned, illegal pinball game without flippers.

At Park Lane, Gary tried to get Tom to go down the laundry chute ... he got in up to his armpits. On summer mornings the milk man would take a break in the shade at Park Lane and Jennings Station Road, and the kids would hang around and suck on big ice chips he'd give them; if they were lucky he'd give them little wax cartons of lemonade or chocolate milk. In Park Lane's living room fireplace Big G would build roaring fires with newspaper wads and the big WOOOSH of a leather bellows. It was there that we played with Patrick, with Gary's O-gauge Lionel train with the heavy steel locomotive, with his Skyline building set, and Gilbert chemistry set.



Mom with Gary at Park Lane, 1949

PARK LANE IN PICTURES



Earline and Gary in front of Park Lane, Oct 1956; the landscaping is growing up



Gary, Tom, Mom, Patrick in kitchen Mar. 15, 1956; below, Christmas, 1955





Patrick and Gary, undated



PROUD MOM WITH GROWING FAMILY:
Memorial Day, 1959; Vickie is on the scene, and Julie is "in the oven" ... Kuennens would move by end of the year.

STOP NO. 11: RIVERVIEW, OR HALLS FERRY CIRCLE

The Riverview Circle, or **Halls Ferry Circle** – home to the **Circle Steak** – was Gary and his friends', and cousins' greatest hangout. On long summer nights Gary drove his '57 Ford "Salmon Beaut" "hut rud" to the Circle Steak and ate skinny fries and chewed the fat with guys like Chuck and Jim Latty, Terry Hanratty and cuzins Billy and Steve "Mikey" Burbank. One guy went around the circle over 90 times before the cops stopped him.



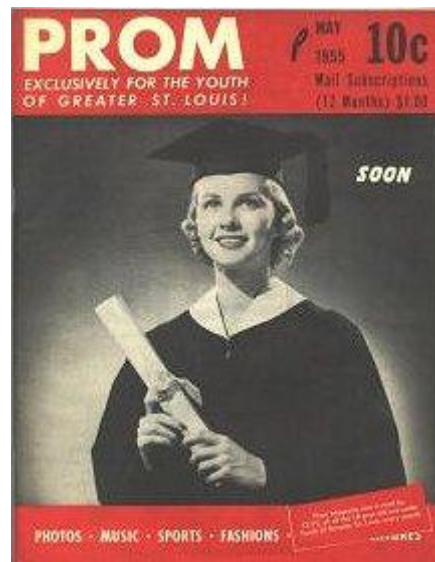
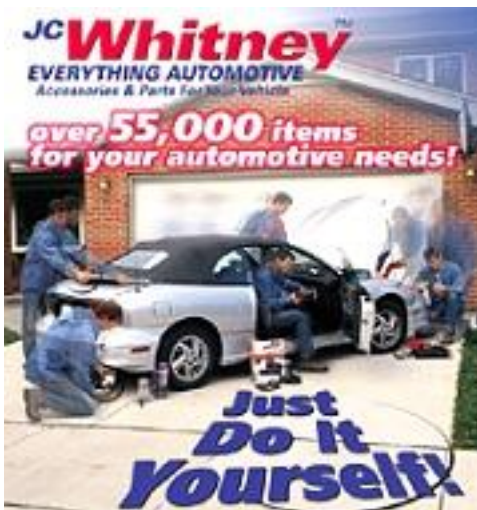
A '57 Ford ... but Gary's 'Salmon Beaut' lacked the hood scoop.





Remembrance of the Circle Katz. Gary's favorite Katz spot ... other than reading the naughty *Police Gazette* on the upper level magazine racks overlooking Circle Steak ... was going downstairs (under an internal rotating circular sign) to the pet section, where old peeling decals had a fish dressed as a policeman warning you to NOT TAP ON THE GLASS. The giant, rotating, neon red Circle Katz sign outside was visible from Gary's back porch room on winter nights.

And one of the best things about hot rodding ... was that Gary would take his brothers and sisters cruising, too! ... so long as we helped wash the car ... and the Chain of Rocks Bridge was a likely destination.





STOP NO. 12: CHAIN OF ROCKS BRIDGE

The Circle was only the beginning. A quick ride past the Latty residence on Riverview Blvd. brought a hot rodder to the Chain of Rocks Amusement Park, City Park, and **Chain of Rocks Bridge!**

The bridge, now open as a bicycle trail, was our early route to visit the **Hudgins and Chicago** when we drove out **Route 66**. These are some of the most treasured family events. LLLLivingston! LLLLitchfield!!! I see the Dome!!! TWWWandah! Dwight! CIRCUS PEANUT!! CIRCUS PEANUT!!!

We can exit the bus and stretch our legs out over the river.



ST VRAIN ROAD: We will drive north from the bridge up to another of Gary's favorite spots, a little, wretched, potholed, dead-end road called "**St. Vrain**" (Gary called it "St Virian") and see how far we can go ... just like Gary in the 1960s!

Suddenly we are very close to another historic site ...



Gary braves the dreaded red welts in a traditional Wiffle Ball game, Old Grandma's 1959.

STOP NO. 13: OLD GRANDMA'S

Few spots are so hallowed in blessed memory than Henry Kahr's farm in unincorporated North County. Henry was great friends with Aunt Gussie's husband, Joseph, through a gun club to which they both belonged, and invited Joseph's family to picnic there. Better known as "**Old Grandma's**", it hosted virtually every extended Kuennen/Meier family picnic for years.

Cars would begin to arrive at 10:30 a.m. and stake out a place. Tailgates and trunks would open, bottles of beer and soda would gush, Mamie's deviled eggs would appear, bags of Kas potato chips and Rold Gold pretzels and pork rinds with little plastic bags of hot sauce would be ripped open. There would be Wiffle Ball, volleyball and badminton games. There was the scary well at which adults would hold kids up to peer down into the cool darkness. A friendly mule always crowded the fence, looking for affection. Mer loved the summer kitchen and old farmhouse, likely built in the 1840s or earlier. The Wisslers ... Cotton ... Ken and Jane Walsh ... obscure Meier kids. **Who were these people, anyway?** It didn't matter, because we knew we'd see them again and again at Old Grandma's.



CENTRAL HARDWARE[®]



Gary and "Big G" at Central Hardware, Union Ave. office, 1962

STOP NO. 14: HALLS FERRY CENTRAL SITE

Dad's fabulous career as advertising manager of Central Hardware stores opened doors for his kids. Dad's hand-lettered ads appeared each day in the daily morning *Globe* and afternoon *Post* newspapers, and radio commercials he supervised ran each night on KMOX and other stations. He was among the first professionals in the city to hire a black in a creative role and our family was threatened anonymously for it (a man called to say Vickie had been kidnapped from high school). Dad's ad placements in the local media assured a continuing flow of free sporting event tickets headed our way every week! Dad's hand-drawn illustrations were lifted from Central's ads and he would see them in retail store ads in other cities.

As Central Hardware expanded from the city into suburban markets in St Louis and other midwestern cities, Dad was instrumental in expanding the old-line "hardware" and lumber store into a housewares, electronics, toy and in particular, sporting goods destination, housed within a new-concept, free-span, glorious Sixties, three-arch structure that put all of these products under one vast roof. This prototype store, *Central City*, was located in the triangle formed by Old and New Halls Ferry Roads, and I-270, and was the anchor store of a sprawling suburban mall. Gary worked at Central City during high school and college, putting his artistic talents to use custom-blending paint. Dad even set Gary up to do freelance ad artwork at home through the "Gary Art Studio". But Gary would have nothing of it, and Dad wound up doing the work in the evenings, with Mer banging out invoices each month on her Smith-Corona typewriter. We kids – on call while we did our homework -- would make and bring Dad highballs while he worked after dinner. Later, Tom and Vickie worked in the Central Hardware credit department, and Cousin Becky worked at the Halls Ferry Service Desk!

Central Hardware was acquired by Interco Inc. in the mid-1960s and continued to expand. But Dad died in December 1972, and Central then underwent a series of owners as the big-box hardware store concept took off and competition worsened. The chain went out of business in the 1990s and Central City was demolished late in the century and replaced by a Home Depot.



9023 Vickie Place in 1962: Jule, Mame (holding Terri?), Kris, Gig, Dougie, Jeff, Tom, Gary, Julie, Becky (holding Jennifer?), Danny.



Nearby Northland Shopping Center, abandoned; in December 2004 it's being demolished.

STOP NO. 15: 9023 VICKIE PLACE

In the late 1950s it was clear to Grandma Mamie and Grandpa Jule that the neighborhood around Barrett Street was going bad ... and fast. They settled on a new north suburban town, Dellwood, that was midway between Mom and Dad's house in the city and Uncle Wil and Aunt Dorothy's house on Packard in Berkeley.

Mame, Jule and Aunt Gussie Meier (Mamie's sister) moved to Vickie Place in 1960 and it soon became a favorite haunt of the grandkids. Mer would drop us off in mid-morning while she would shop at **Northland** and elsewhere, and we'd watch game shows ("ssssh ... *the Password is ...*"), the soaps ("*Like sands through the hourglass ...*"), and see Mame, Jule and Gussie all mix their first highballs sometime around 11 a.m.

A special drawer was filled with crayons and coloring books. Remember the cool **cardboard side dressers** that Mame and Gus had? The **clear glass bottles with colored water** in the bathroom? Or Grandpa's **weird wooden cigarette** dispenser in which a cigarette would appear in a duck's bill? Or the plastic ducks on spikes shoved in their front lawn ... you can see them on the title page in back of Gary and Dad.

Christmas was special fun ... *Ring-on-a-String* ... *Feather-on-a-Sheet* ... the *Schnitzelbank* song, as German as enchiladas ... Jule's pink wig and his dreaded **Spankamarino Stick** ... Santa's making an appearance. The NORAD tracking of Santa over Jule's big old wooden radio in the Utility Room. And in the distance, the **huge electric candles** on the roof of Northland Shopping Center. Ken and Jane Walsh lived just a few blocks to the north.

Today, if it's still there, by the back yard gate, next to the carport, should be a **concrete slab** dated 1960, in which Dad immortalized the grandkids' names. Let's see it! Let's dig it up!!!

Gary and Betty lived at an apartment down the street from 9023 Vickie Place, in the **Northwinds Apartments**. Perhaps he can find it for us, along with his apartments in **Cordoba** off Chambers.



STOP NO. 16: 8042 PACKARD LANE

Another Kuennen Clan party house was **Wil and Dot's** house at 8042 Packard Lane. Distinguished by its gigantic backyard with fruit trees and busy train tracks, it was the site of countless barbecues and holiday parties. Gary perpetually hung there with cousins Danny and Dougie.

Wil was cool because he was the first person we knew with a riding lawn mower. He'd pile kids into a little cart and drag them around all over the manse. When a fast passenger train was on the way kids would be grabbed by grownups and we'd all race through the **rotting fruit** to see the fast train ... but would miss it more often than not.

Like Mame's, **Packard Lane** was the site of many weekend sleepovers by the older kids. Kris taught us how to lie hours in the sun without moving, **listening to KXOK on a transistor radio**. On mild summer nights she'd lead us out on the front lawn and regale us with ghost stories ... if the swarming **June bugs** didn't drive us in first.

We never understood why the house didn't have a basement. The weird louvered door to the "pink" bathroom. That **finger-crushing Dutch door**. And always, there was that solemn oil portrait of Becky staring at you ...

Gary and Betty lived in a subdivision just beyond Packard Lane, on **Bayberry**. But we will need his guidance to find it.



Sparrow Court, c. 1989: Tom, Mer, Gig, Woody, Gary, Julie holding Claire, Ralph, Matt, Terri and Steve. Anne holds the camera.

STOP NO. 17: 5 SPARROW COURT

Beset with neighborhood troubles and with four kids to rear without a husband, Mom entered the “Mer” era with her move from Astra Ave. to **5 Sparrow Court** in 1973. There, a big back yard adjoining a park with tennis courts, a full basement, great neighbors and the Missouri River a quick stroll away all resulted in good times growing up in **suburban Florissant**.

There, Vickie, Julie, Terri and Matt attended high school and college. On Sparrow Court the girls learned to drive, romance boys and plan for the future under Mer’s loving guidance. Matt was an anchor of the household. And Gary and Tom came back for the family, food and old times.

During his repeat visits Gary would repay Mer for her **signature mostcaccioli** by painting, doing house repairs, or working on her cars. Late winter afternoons before dinner were punctuated by Gary’s call to any and all: “**Let’s walk up to Sunset!**” Those who went were rewarded with a spectacular view of the Missouri River and valley from a high wooded bluff, just minutes from 5 Sparrow Court.

At Sparrow Court Gary taught Matt how to listen to preachers, sketch and look to the future. And there, Julius **Caesar** of Antioch in Rome, as Mer named him, our miniature Schnauzer, lived out his days. Mer would sweep that “**filthy, disgusting dog**” down the steps, and if we “so much as touched the dog” would have to wash our hands. But he was a good and loyal terrier, and Mer and Julie were at his side when he Went Over the Rainbow Bridge in 1980.





18TH AND FINAL STOP: SUNSET PARK

If we are lucky we will have a view of the sun setting over the Missouri River at 4:39 p.m. ... and we have one more opportunity to stretch our legs.

It's been a long trip today, but not as long as the one we have all enjoyed as siblings with Gary leading the way. Now it's time to raise another toast to Gary and yet another to Mom and Dad who set the stage and gave us life.

And there's more to come ... time to ride the bus back to Julie and Ralph's for more feasting on traditional Kuennen dishes ... Mamie's creamed spinach ... Mer's mostcaccioli ... "paste" ... those parchment-wrapped tamales ... and much more! It's all waiting NOW.

ALL ABOARD FOR MORE!!!

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