

# 1

## Iowa Roots

“The only thing we had in common was that she was from Iowa, and I had once heard of Iowa.”

Ray Kinsella  
*Field of Dreams*

Perched comfortably on the steel spring seat of his Farmall tractor, LaVern McMains first turned his steel blue eyes to the well-worn pasture and then the tall prairie of big bluestem and Indian grass. Dapper and disciplined, LaVern always wore a wool suit and tie to church, and even on the tractor, he wore a leather belt, with his linen shirt neatly tucked-in.

Known to many by his nickname of “Shorty Mac,” LaVern was an affable and hard-working man. He wore a simple straw-woven hat to shade his eyes, and he surveyed his land with the thorough, experienced gaze of a farmer.

It was a look of contentment.

## 2 - B.R. HOFFMAN

With seed money, literally, from his father – and a loan from Farmer’s State Bank in nearby Bloomfield – LaVern and his new wife had purchased the three hundred acre farm with an eye to the future.

The purchase of the battleship-gray tractor with steel wheels stretched them further. Brand-new, it cost \$595.00 and had the power of ten horses. This was decades before the Iowa landscape would be dotted with red and green tractors with multiple gears and air-conditioned cabs, and the young couple was rightly proud to have one of the few tractors in the area.<sup>i</sup>

Neither LaVern nor his wife doubted their ability to turn the tall prairie grass into a well-manicured field of Iowa corn.

LaVern often picked-up rocks on the prairie, a by-product of grinding glaciers that had at last retreated some 10,000 years ago. Walking the fields, he sometimes found sharp, hand-chiseled arrowheads and spearheads among the smooth, round glacial stones. He turned them over in his hand, admiring the craftsmanship of the American Indians who once roamed his land.

One tribe of American Indians – the “Ioway” – gave their name to the region. LaVern imagined the Ioway Indians revered the rolling hills and woodlands, teeming with buffalo and elk now long gone.

With lean, strong shoulders and hands that would never know a desk job, LaVern was well suited for the hardscrabble work of an Iowa farmer. He’d inherited an indefatigable work ethic from his father, learning and living the Midwest values of faith, family and work – in that order.

LaVern’s faith in God guided his love of family and friends, even his work. He embraced the Bible as “God’s Word” and heeded its warnings against idleness, committing the words of the Apostle Paul in Thessalonians to memory:

“If a man will not work, he shall not eat.”<sup>ii</sup>

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This triad of beliefs – faith, family and work – fit LaVern like a pair of well-worn calfskin gloves – not that he ever wore any. He was an Iowan.

LaVern was an inquisitive, learned man, but it's doubtful he gave much thought to the history and geology of the area that shaped his upbringing.

In the country school he attended through the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, he learned the United States obtained control of the area in 1803 as part of the famed Louisiana Purchase. Settlers quickly converted much of the fertile territory to farmland, though there was continued fighting between settlers and Indians through the end of the century.

Iowa became a state in 1846, her borders set by the Mississippi River to the east and the Missouri and Big Sioux Rivers to the west. Rolling hills and prairie dominated the landscape, sprinkled with growing farms and separated by dense woodlands and river valleys. It was not as flat as outsiders expected, yet no one ever labeled Iowa as “mountainous.”

The state's highest point – known as “Hawkeye Point” – was but 1,670 feet above sea level. Years later, a hog feed bunker would be placed on the high point, shaded by a corrugated tin roof. It was a spot often visited by tourists, the bunker adorned with license plates from all 50 states.

A grain silo stood nearby, stretching Iowa's highest point another 30 feet skyward.<sup>iii</sup>

Farmers, though, aren't really interested in hills or mountains. They like dirt. Tillable. Fertile. Rock-free.

As it happened, Iowa was home to the richest and deepest topsoil in America, a product of the glacial melt from the Pleistocene Epoch and centuries of cyclical growth and decay of prairie grasses.

This nutrient-rich dirt attracts farmers like honeybees to pollen-rich violets, a fact Iowans acknowledged with pride and prejudice. For decades to come, Iowa farmers would lead the Nation in grain production and livestock, earning title as the "Food Capital of the World."<sup>iv</sup>

#### 4 - B.R. HOFFMAN

This environment – this dirt – suited the farmer LaVern McMains quite well.

Up by 5:00 a.m. nearly every day of his life, he wasted little time in attending to the myriad needs of the farm near the small town of Mark, Iowa. With the help of friends and neighbors, LaVern planted nearly 80 acres of corn.

He circled the pasture nearest the farmhouse with a three-strand, barbed wire fence suitable to enclose his “herd” of pigs. He always called it a herd, though a well-read farmer once told him otherwise:

“Sounder,” he said. “That’s what you’re supposed to call a group of pigs.”

“Well, thank you Professor,” replied LaVern.

The sounder numbered about 50. Eight milk cows also roamed the pasture, as did a small “brood” of chickens that had escaped from the makeshift henhouse.

“What do you call a bunch of chickens?” LaVern wondered aloud to Helen, standing by his side.

“About 12 dollars,” she replied, grinning at her husband the farmer.

Helen was always by his side.

Like the man she would marry, Helen was an Iowan, born and raised. Her parents Lewis and Jeannette Kimball had likewise embraced faith, family and work as their mantra.

Lewis Kimball ran a chain of grocery stores in southeast Iowa and Helen would sometimes accompany him on routes, visiting other small towns like West Grove or Unionville. On occasion, they would venture north on the new U.S. 63 to the big city of Ottumwa, at the time a growing community of about 25,000 people.

She cherished time with her father and was devastated when Lewis Ross Kimball later succumbed to leukemia, in 1941. Helen

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was 27 years old. Her brother Harold had long been closer to their mother, who never remarried.

Like the McMains family, the life and times of the Kimballs were centered in Davis County.

Though named for distinguished U.S. Senator Garrett Davis, Davis County was borne of a dubious reputation. In its early days, the area was referred to as “Hairy Nation” due to the shaggy, unkempt appearance and rude manner of the men that resided in the area.<sup>v</sup>

This reputation did little to draw pioneers and entrepreneurs – or certainly, the attention of marriage-minded women.

Bloomfield was situated at the junction of U.S. 63 and IA 2. It was and is the largest city in Davis County and also served as the county seat.

Bloomfield was given its name when County Commissioners pulled a slip of paper out of a hat. In 1843, voters chose Bloomfield over Richmond as the “headquarters” for Davis County.

For Bloomfield, the reward was the design and construction of the Davis County Courthouse, a magnificent building that would serve as the city center for decades to come.

Designed by Thomas Nolan & Sons, the courthouse was completed in 1879. It was Second Empire architecture, as evidenced by its distinctive mansard roof, sandstone veneer and dormer windows. It also featured a Seth Thomas clock in the tower.

The Davis County Courthouse later put Bloomfield on the map for another reason.

In August of 1924, Henry “Dare-Devil” Roland came to town and attempted to climb the northwest corner of the courthouse. It was an event that captured the imagination and lived on in infamy.

Roland was a German born to self-promotion and also called himself “The Human Fly.”

He began quickly on his ascent of the Davis County Courthouse but lost his grip around a cornice and fell 35 feet to the sidewalk below. The fall broke his hip – and his ego.

It’s not known if Helen Kimball or LaVern McMains - then 8 and 11 respectively - witnessed the fall, but they were likely present for the well-publicized sequel.

In June of 1932, Henry Roland returned to Bloomfield. “The Human Fly” was focused and determined. It was reported that Roland was “determined to remove the blot from his record of successful climbs.”<sup>vi</sup>

This time – to the astonishment of onlookers – Roland scaled the courthouse walls like a spider monkey.

In just 11 minutes, Roland sat at the peak of the courthouse with a satisfied grin. In fact, he even climbed the bronze statue that was positioned on top and sat confidently atop the head of the blindfolded, bronze lady known as “Blind Justice.” The statue stood about 123 feet above the courthouse grounds.

As recorded in *The Bloomfield Democrat*, Roland, a natural showman, even paused briefly for a death-defying handstand on a third-story ledge, delighted by the gasps of amazement from the large crowd gathered below.

In between these two events in Bloomfield’s history, LaVern and Helen first met as teenagers.

One afternoon, Helen spotted LaVern walking on the town square. LaVern was well dressed and striding confidently, as always. Helen was smitten. It was 1929.

Helen was not shy and soon asked around about this dapper young man.

Eventually, she learned the young man’s friends called him “Shorty Mac.” She thought the name odd, given that he wasn’t really short for the time. LaVern stood about 5 foot, 7 inches. McMains was also pronounced “Mick” and not “Mack.”

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It hardly mattered to Helen. His smooth, handsome face and twinkling eyes captivated her attention, and she boldly pronounced her intentions to her girlfriends. She said:

“Someday I’m going to marry that man. Really, I am.”

She got her wish about two years later.

LaVern graduated from Bloomfield High School and began to court the pretty girl from Moulton. While the courtship began of attraction and affection, the relationship was founded on friendship and respect.

During their courtship, LaVern and Helen sometimes took a leisurely drive to Lake Wapello. Other times, they enjoyed a movie in Bloomfield or Ottumwa. Charlie Chaplin and Peter Lorre were two of their favorite actors.

It came as no surprise when LaVern mentioned marriage, but it was hardly a conventional proposal. In fact, it was delivered abruptly as LaVern jumped into the front seat of a friend’s jalopy.

“I’m going into town to buy a new pair of shoes.”

“Why now, what’s the hurry?” said Helen, puzzled.

Struggling to be heard over the sputtering, 4-cylinder engine, LaVern shouted out the window: “We’re getting married!”

“Well, it’s the first I’ve heard of it!” Helen exclaimed.

LaVern drove off with a wink and a grin. It was a story Helen retold early and often to friends and family.

LaVern and Helen were married on November 25<sup>th</sup>, 1933.

The ceremony took place in the home of Helen’s parents outside Moulton, Iowa. Only a few friends and family members were present.

By all accounts, it was a simple but elegant wedding, consistent with the persona of its two principals.

Helen was resplendent in a beautiful white dress her mother had made from an older wedding dress, complete with sparkling

glass buttons. LaVern was as dapper as ever and wore his Sunday's best.

During the ceremony, LaVern pointed to the shiny new shoes he'd bought in town shortly after the proposal. The gesture earned a sweet, playful smile from his blushing bride.

The first year or so of marriage passed quickly and joyfully, yet it was not without its trials.

Hardscrabble and inauspicious perhaps best described the life of a young farming couple in 1930s Iowa, yet neither LaVern nor Helen was ever known to complain.

That first year, they lived in a small, four-room cement house on the outskirts of Mark. A single wood-fired stove provided nominal heat for an Iowa winter, and they would often awake with frost on the walls - and the blankets.

Saving money to buy a farmstead, LaVern delivered mail on horseback for the U.S. Post Office. He looped the dirt roads from Bloomfield to Monterey, Mark, Savannah and back. It was about 15 miles in all.

Trusted by all who knew him, LaVern also cashed checks or made small deliveries for the farmers in the area while earning \$1.25 per day as a mailman.

With 10-12 families in Mark, the town became a gathering place for country folk. Mark was a draw because of its Baptist Church, gas station, grocery store and poultry house.

Though Mark would never number more than 100 people and would later disappear from the map entirely, it was well situated by U.S. Highway 63. It was just five miles North of the border with Missouri. Bloomfield was 11 miles to the northeast.<sup>vii</sup>

Two of their neighbors in Mark were LaVern's parents – James Alva and Mertie Frances McMains.

James was known to most as "Alvie" though some called him "Shorty Mac" – a nickname he passed-on to his only son. Alvie and Mertie also had three girls: Wilma, Leone and Maxine.

As the baby boy, LaVern was often spoiled.



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The McMains children grew up in the small two-bedroom home along the “Main Street” of Mark. The property included a few acres with a barn, a lovely little pond and a peach orchard.

The outhouse was relocated every few years or so.

It was not a farm in the traditional sense, but like many other area residents they tended to a few animals and crops for their daily sustenance.

Alvie McMains owned and operated the Shell gas station in Mark. It was situated across the street from the Baptist Church and just down the street from their home.

Though Alvie ran the two-pump station for many years, no one could recall that Alvie ever had an automobile of his own. He and Mertie only traveled to Bloomfield if someone took them.

Mertie was a skilled housewife. Gardening, cooking and canning were second nature and necessary, and Mark residents recalled Mertie delivered Alvie’s lunch to the station each afternoon, always a well-prepared, hot meal, covered with a tea towel.

Like other residents, Mertie sold cream and eggs at the poultry house along Main Street. She used the money to purchase groceries across the street. It was a system that worked well.

As important as the grocery store and poultry were to Mark, however, they were not the heart and soul of the town. Nor was the Shell station – even to the McMains family.

Like most small towns, it was the local church that made Mark what it was.

The church was a place to celebrate birth, mourn death and honor marriage and family.

It was a place where even the legendary Iowa work ethic was affirmed. Parents often reminded children of the Book of Ecclesiastes, Chapter 9, Verse 10. It said:

“Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might.”

Unlike the Amish and Mennonite sects nearby, the citizens of Mark did not desire to live apart from the rest of society but simply embraced faith and fellowship as guiding principles of community.

Prayer was an essential part of the community and as natural as breathing. It was not uncommon for a prayer service to stretch on for hours. Private, family prayer was practiced at dining tables, between husband and wife and parents and children.

After about a year in the tiny cement house, LaVern and Helen decided to take a leap of faith and buy the farm outside of Mark.

The farm included about 300 acres of prairie and woodlands. It was located about two miles south of Mark, adjoining North Fabius creek.

Combining their savings with loans from Alvie and the bank, LaVern and Helen became landowners.

They embraced the challenge of restoring the farmstead with great relish, with LaVern putting plow to dirt and Helen putting paint to the faded clapboard of the two-story A-frame farmhouse.

Helen’s father Lewis built the kitchen cabinets by hand. The cabinets were of exquisite quarter-sawn oak and graced a small sunlit kitchen on the east side of the house.

Central to the kitchen was a much-used Hoosier cabinet. It included milk glass inserts, an enamel-covered metal countertop and a tin flour bin.

The farm outside Mark had become a home for LaVern and Helen. It would be their home for the next 45 years.

With the house painted and field plowed, the young couple turned their attention to family plans.

Their first child was born in 1936.

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Charles was an easy child with a quiet, reserved and obedient nature. Usually. Not long out of cloth diapers, Charles was working alongside his father.

Through middle and high school, he proved himself as a beloved son and invaluable farmhand.

At the age of five, Charles welcomed sister Mary Karen. Likewise, she was a content and happy child and a great help to her proud parents.

Her family called her by her middle name, and by the age of seven, little Karen had already taken over many of the household responsibilities, freeing Helen to help in the fields.

Using his well-honed carpentry skills, LaVern even made a little stepping stool for Karen so she could better manage pots and pans atop the cooking stove.

Though perched over a hot cast iron stove of crackling skillets, Karen was never known to burn a finger or tip a pot.

Charles and Karen were birthed at home with help from Mertie. However, their younger brother Phil was born at the hospital in Ottumwa.

The contrasts between the siblings would not end there.

Phil was an inquisitive, passionate boy. He would also test his parent's patience, yet they loved him dearly. Thankfully, Phil also proved to be a tireless worker. When Charles joined the Air Force, the responsibility for early morning chores fell to Phil.

Years later, Phil again followed his brother's footsteps and joined the military. Both boys saw the writing on the wall and volunteered before they were drafted.

While life seemed to revolve around work on the farm, LaVern and Helen's Christian faith gave purpose and meaning to their lives.

LaVern began each day with reading scripture. It was a daily habit he'd continue his entire life, as he modeled religious discipline to his children.

Without fail, LaVern led his family in prayer before every meal and neither farm work nor illness would keep LaVern and his family from worship services at Mark Baptist Church.

The family looked forward to Saturdays.

Sometimes they enjoyed a scenic drive east to Van Buren County and the Des Moines River. More often they drove into Bloomfield and took in a movie at the Iowa Theatre near the courthouse.

While in town, LaVern and Helen relished the opportunity to catch up with friends and neighbors. They were eager to learn news of World War II and later, the Korean War.

Returning home on Saturday night, Helen set out church clothes while Karen shined shoes.

With Charles about to return home from the Air Force, Karen graduated from Bloomfield High School. Like many kids, Karen was uncertain of her future.

Though a bright, sincere student, Karen had given little thought to career or college. A quiet girl who'd grown up in the sheltered environment of a small farm, she'd hardly known the world outside Davis County.

Karen quickly rejected the thought of attending college out-of-state, or even in Ames or Iowa City, and instead, ventured just 24 miles from home for a job in Centerville.<sup>viii</sup>

Hired as a secretary by the General Manager of the Appanoose County Telephone Company, Karen proved studious and reliable. The hard work and discipline she'd learned on the farm served her and the telephone company well.

Karen was a very pretty young lady.

With short dark hair and a petite figure, she had lovely, smooth skin. She also had a beautiful smile and sparkling hazel eyes, though they were often hidden behind horn-rimmed glasses.

It was little surprise this attractive young lady would garner the attention of boys and men, yet DW Archibold was the first with the confidence to pursue her.

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DW Archibold served as the supervisor of the telephone line crew. He had been hired by the telephone company upon his return from a two-year tour in the U.S. Army.

His mother, Coyla, ran the telephone lines in their hometown of Tingley, so it gave DW a leg-up on employment, though he'd also learned the trade at DeFry Technical School in Chicago.

DW was older than Karen by five years. He was also slim, tall and handsome. He radiated confidence and charm.

Karen quickly caught DW's eye, and he began spending a lot more time around the telephone office.

Soon after, DW and Karen were dating. They could frequently be seen driving around the Centerville area in his 1956 Ford Fairlane Crown Victoria. DW had purchased the car new after returning from Korea, and it was his pride and joy.

Karen was not impressed with the car.

She was, however, impressed with DW. She enjoyed his wit and wisdom, romance blossomed, and there was talk of marriage in the air.

DW Archibold was the first-born of Harry and Coyla Archibold of Tingley, Iowa.

Coyla claimed she intended to name him Dean Willard, but the birth certificate simply read "DW." He'd sometimes joke of his two-initial name, later telling his future son-in-law that it stood for "Dim Wit – just ask my wife!"<sup>ix</sup>

Harry and Coyla Archibold were enterprising and industrious.

While Coyla ran the Tingley phone switchboard, Harry ran the local gas station.

Though rare at the time, Coyla worked a full-time job while also serving as a very capable homemaker. She was very loving and nurturing with the children.

Harry and Coyla raised three boys and a girl in Tingley, Iowa.

DW's two brothers – Jim and Mike – looked up to the eldest brother and were much alike him in talent and interests.

Jim was the spitting image of his older brother, and like DW, he worked for the phone company and served in the military. Mike also followed his brothers into military service.

DW also had a sister in Jo Ellen.

While the boys were rowdy and fun loving, Jo was reserved, gracious and elegant. She was a good student. She was also well liked and popular, and the Archibold boys were rightly proud and protective of their sister.

The siblings would remain close through trials and triumphs.

Since LaVern had already given his blessing, no one was surprised when DW and Karen announced their engagement.

The location for the wedding was even less of a surprise. It was to be held at Mark Baptist Church.

With the Reverend William Logan officiating, DW and Karen were married in June of 1960.

Charles' wife Judy served as the matron of honor. DW's brother Jim served as the best man.

Unlike the bridal shower - held the previous month with 85 women and children - the wedding was a small one with mostly immediate family and a few long-time friends.

As reported in the *Dallas County Republican*, the bride wore a lovely ballerina gown of white silk organza, with a draped neckline and wrist length gloves.

LaVern was tearful and proud as he gave away his beloved daughter. He put a penny in her shoe for good luck. Karen later glued the 1953 wheat penny into her wedding album for posterity.

A honeymoon in Colorado followed the wedding ceremony. Much of the honeymoon was spent traveling in the Ford Fairlane or holed-up in hotels along the way. The newlyweds enjoyed a stopover in Dodge City and a visit to the infamous Hangman's Tree at Boot Hill Cemetery.

For Karen, the highlight was the Rocky Mountains, as she was awestruck from her first sight of the towering, snow-covered

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peaks. It was a far cry from the rolling hills of Davis County, and Karen took pictures at every scenic point and overlook.

Refreshed and happy, the young couple returned to their home near the intersection of S. 18<sup>th</sup> Street and E. Prairie Street in Centerville.

With the new demands of home and marriage, the next few years would pass quickly. Since married couples were prohibited from working together at the telephone company, Karen took a job with a local agricultural office.

After about two years, they bought a 3-bedroom mobile home located on a private lot (#13) in Centerville.

DW and Karen spent most of their leisure time at home or with extended family, though DW sometimes enjoyed hunting and fishing with his brothers.

As with many marriages, conflict would come later, but for now, they were happy and looking to the future.

## Chapter One (Iowa Roots)

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<sup>i</sup> Though the Farmall (International Harvester) tractor would later be identified by its all-red color (in contrast to the now-famous green of the John Deere), early Farmall tractors were painted gray. The company switched to "Farmall red" in late 1936.

<sup>ii</sup> 2 Thessalonians 3:10.

<sup>iii</sup> "Hawkeye Point" is often visited by "Highpointers," whose goal is to reach the highest point in each state. LaVern and Helen's great grandson, Silas, would later visit Hawkeye Point with the family of Timothy Scott, a Highpointer, and describe it as "pretty cool."

<sup>iv</sup> Iowans have long taken pride in their status as the leading agricultural state. I recall the dismay and disappointment years ago when Iowans learned we'd dropped to #2 in hog production, surpassed by North Carolina.

<sup>v</sup> "A Brief History of Davis County," 2011.

<sup>vi</sup> Wikipedia, Bloomfield, 2011. Sadly, Roland died in 1937 as a result of a trapeze fall in Tennessee.

<sup>vii</sup> Though none of the early buildings of Mark remain standing, the Mark Baptist Church remains a vibrant gathering place for the area. It was moved nearer to Hwy 63 and expanded in 2003.

<sup>viii</sup> Some early residents spell it "Centreville," but maps and other documents record it as "Centerville."

<sup>ix</sup> DW shared this with the author when we first met. I shared it at his funeral a few years later.