

Fred and Della Lancaster
wedding portrait, circa
1934.

FINDING FRED

By Craig Lancaster

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My grandfather was a ghost.
When my dad was just a boy, his father disappeared. Relatives say that one day he beat my grandmother viciously and left, walking out on three small children in Great Falls, Montana¹. That was the early 1940s. Dad saw his father again in the mid-1950s, just before entering the Navy, and that was that. Fred Seath Lancaster became just a name and a fading memory.

In the curious mind of the child I was—the sort of kid who wanted to know his connection to everything in the universe—Fred was a mystery I wasn't able to reconcile. My taciturn father kept me at arm's length; even his best mood would last for only a few questions, and not even that if the questions centered on his childhood. What I learned about his early years came to me in conversations I wasn't supposed to hear. I was 8 or 9 years old when I heard my stepmother whisper to a friend that Dad was beaten as a child.

When I would think about that sort of horror, my mind would wander back to Fred. How much did his leaving account for the life Dad led? If Fred had been around, would Dad have been horsewhipped by a stepfather who seemed to step from the pages of a Dickens novel²? Or would Dad's young life have been just a different kind of bad? I couldn't know. I always wondered.

I kept those thoughts to myself, mostly, and struggled with the not knowing and the wondering why I wanted to know so badly. In time, the answer became clear: Finding Fred is part of my struggle to stay close to Dad, who lived apart from me after he and my mother divorced when I was 3. I know he loves me, but it's hard-won knowledge. When I was a child and my father didn't remember my birthday or call me just to say hello, I didn't think about what life had done to him. I simply wondered what I'd done wrong. As I grew older and was able to look at it more rationally, I wondered if he kept me at a distance because he was afraid he'd hurt me, like he'd been hurt.

IN MY ADULT YEARS, Dad and I have built a shaky bond across long absences. He doesn't really understand me, and I grasp for ways to communicate with him. The honor, for both of us, is in not giving up. In that sense, we're defying family history.

In 1999, I began to unravel the mystery of my grandfather. An online search of the Social Security Death Index yielded his date of death (June 1970, at age 64, just four months after my birth) and last residence (Clackamas County, Oregon). With a little more digging, I learned that he died in Madras, Oregon, and was buried there.

I sent a nominal fee to the Social Security folks, and they sent me a photocopy of Fred's application. The shabby penmanship and poor spelling of a semi-literate working man gave me my first tangible connection with the grandfather I never knew. And now I could tell Dad where his father had gone.

At first, finding out what became of Fred seemed enough. But I could never quite forget about Madras. If there were secrets to be revealed, they were buried there. So in late July of 2004, as I drove home to California from a vacation in Washington state, I decided to swing east to the high-desert town where Fred spent his final years. I figured the most I would get to do is stand over a grave and try to corral my thoughts about my father and the father who abandoned him. I was wrong.



How Fred's grave appeared in 2015, more than a decade after my original visit. Someone had cleaned it up between my finding it and a subsequent visit to Madras, Oregon.

In the archives of the weekly paper in Madras, I found Fred's obituary ("Lancaster rites slated here Friday, June 19"). At City Hall, I got a map to his burial site and a copy of the bill of sale for property that the woman he married late in life, Maybell, sold the year after he died.

Fred is buried in a lovely little hilltop cemetery; you can see the town and the mountains to the west. His grave is next to Maybell's. Someone had left flowers on her well-tended grave. His was covered by overgrown shrubs. I had to get down on my stomach and dig in the mud to find the headstone.

On the property Maybell sold back in '71, I found cars in the driveway, a name on the mailbox, open windows letting in the breeze, but no one at home. I had a long drive to Eugene ahead of me, so I left, intent on calling the house that night.

SEVERAL HOURS LATER, I was in a Motel 6 that hugged Interstate 5 and Bill Wayne was on the other end of my phone. He's the guy who bought the property 30-odd years earlier. He's also Maybell's son-in-law. He knew Fred, but he didn't know of the family the man had left behind in Montana. He was suspicious of my call, and I was afraid I would lose a connection I never expected to make.

I told Bill what I knew, as quickly as I could get the words out. Bill relaxed, then told me about Fred's last days, how he got sick on a trip to Delaware and came home and died. He told me Fred loved fishing and camping. That he had a real spark with kids.

I wrote to Bill when I got home and told him what I knew of Dad's life, of the brutal stepfather ("Crazy" Dick Mader, they called him in Great Falls), of the story my second cousin Sharon Horner told me a decade ago, a catch in her throat. Dad was just a kid, she said, and he ran away from home and showed up on her family's doorstep. Sharon's father took off Dad's shirt to reveal a back split wide by Crazy Dick's whip. I hoped that if I told Bill these things, he might be able to understand why I was trying to fill in the outlines of my grandfather.

A few weeks later, Bill called and said he was sending pictures of Fred, the first I'd ever seen. He said he'd also pass along Fred's favorite fishing pole once he got it from his son, Billy Jr., who had inherited it³. Like the father he never really knew, Dad is a fisherman. He'll get that rod and reel.

When the pictures arrived, I felt the breath go out of me. A black-and-white photograph of Fred sitting in a chair could be one of Dad, the resemblance is so striking. The picture of Fred with Maybell and Billy Jr. made me cringe a little. Fred managed to be a family man—to someone else's children and grandchildren.

I sent Dad photos of Fred, but he claimed not to see the resemblance. He has asked if I have the fishing pole yet; that's as close as he'll come to saying he wants it. He did tell me, in his own way, that he was happy I found his father.

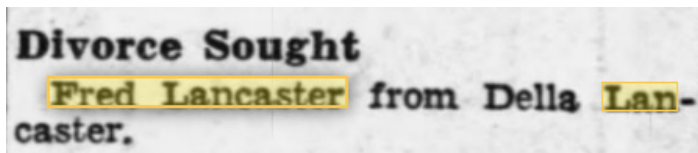
"Appreciate it," he said. "I wouldn't have done it."

At some point, it all dawned on me: I was giving my father his father so I could get something I want. Fathers don't have to run away, and it's high time Dad stopped⁴. I'm tired of our phone calls, the ones where I ask him how his garden is doing and he teases me about the Dallas Cowboys. They never last more than five minutes. By rote, he closes with "we love you," his plural pronoun shading his singular insecurity. Just as predictably, I answer, "Love you, too." It's easier to say without putting the "I" into it, but it's getting us nowhere.

I've brought Fred to my father. In return, I want Dad and the life he has kept from me. I'm his son. I deserve to know.

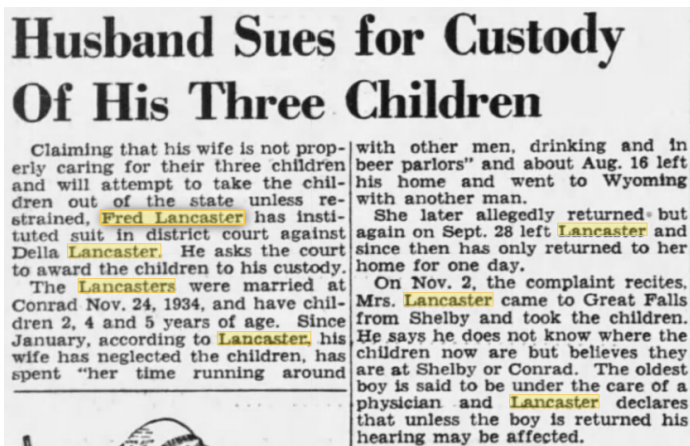
End Notes

¹ There was certainly violence, but in 2004, when I wrote this, I had the sequencing wrong, having relied on unreliable memories and narrators. Fred didn't beat Della, my grandmother, and walk out on her and the children. She walked out on him, and it was Fred who sought the divorce and custody of the children. That he didn't altogether succeed put my father in harm's way later. Consider:



Divorce Sought
Fred Lancaster from Della Lancaster.

January 1942



Husband Sues for Custody Of His Three Children

Claiming that his wife is not properly caring for their three children and will attempt to take the children out of the state unless restrained, Fred Lancaster has instituted suit in district court against Della Lancaster. He asks the court to award the children to his custody.

The Lancasters were married at Conrad Nov. 24, 1934, and have children 2, 4 and 5 years of age. Since January, according to Lancaster, his wife has neglected the children, has spent "her time running around with other men, drinking and in beer parlors" and about Aug. 16 left his home and went to Wyoming with another man.

She later allegedly returned but again on Sept. 28 left Lancaster and since then has only returned to her home for one day.

On Nov. 2, the complaint recites, Mrs. Lancaster came to Great Falls from Shelby and took the children. He says he does not know where the children now are but believes they are at Shelby or Conrad. The oldest boy is said to be under the care of a physician and Lancaster declares that unless the boy is returned his hearing may be affected.

November 1941

² Fred tried, and there is documented violence of him toward Della, and of Della and Dick Mader toward him. Once Dick Mader got Dad into his clutches, everything got worse.



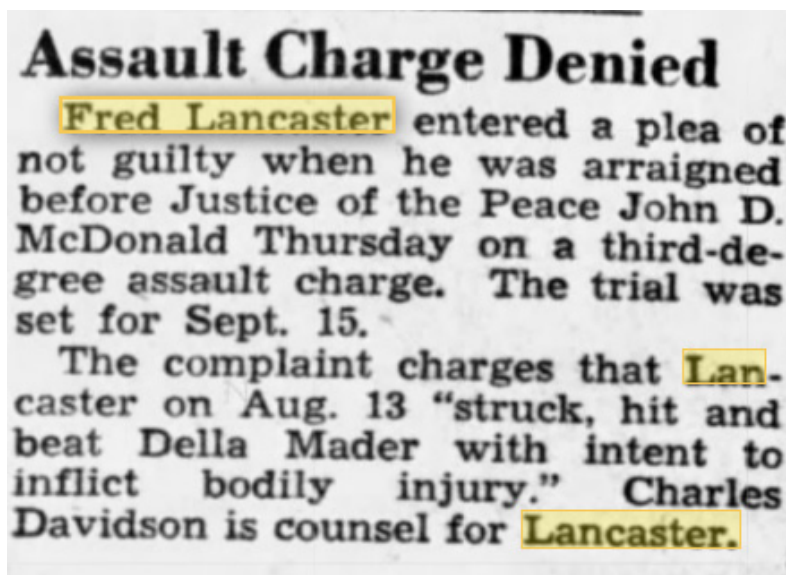
Assault Charged On Conrad Trio In Court Here

Charges of third degree assault were filed in the Isaacson justice court Tuesday against Della Mader, Dick Mader and Rose Sutherland, all of Conrad.

Fred Lancaster, the complaining witness, alleges Sutherland and Mader beat him and that Mrs. Mader struck Hazel Torgelson.

Lancaster, authorities said, declared the trio from Conrad followed him toward his home and forced his car to the curb. The men allegedly attacked Lancaster, while Mrs. Mader struck the other woman.

September 1942



Assault Charge Denied

Fred Lancaster entered a plea of not guilty when he was arraigned before Justice of the Peace John D. McDonald Thursday on a third-degree assault charge. The trial was set for Sept. 15.

The complaint charges that Lancaster on Aug. 13 "struck, hit and beat Della Mader with intent to inflict bodily injury." Charles Davidson is counsel for Lancaster.

August 1945

³ We never received the fishing pole.

⁴ Four years after this was written, and two years after his common-law wife Mildred died, he joined me in Billings, Montana. I've seen him several times a week for thirteen years now. It's fair to say our relationship has changed.