

Only A Memory Away - The Dave and Vi Stogner Story

(A history of his music and their romance)

CHAPTER FOUR

Capitola, California

August 4, 2000

Vi knew Bethany would be returning soon. She knew it would be time to tell her what she wanted her to know. Marie was busy in the kitchen, so Vi took a walk down to the beach while she waited for her granddaughter. As the sun's rays caused sparkling ripples in the dark, blue-green water, she casually walked along on the warm sand.

As she looked out across the bay, she had an overwhelming feeling come over her. She was remembering walking along hand in hand with Dave, enjoying the feelings of calm and serenity that would come over her at those times. It was moments like this when she wouldn't even realize tears were watering her eyes. Sometimes, she could miss Dave almost more than she could bear. Other times, she could be comforted just by her thoughts of him. This was one of those times. Their love was so alive in her heart.

It crossed Vi's mind that she had been the same age as Bethany when she first met Dave, and near Marie's age when they married. Those years in between were the part of her past that she needed to share. She may have danced her last dance with Dave, but she wanted her family to know her feelings and the true depth of their love for one another.

When she returned to the house, Bethany was just arriving. She was happy and refreshed and had the manuscript in her hand. It was the first thing she wanted to talk about, and Vi was ready for her. Marie came out of the kitchen with a tray of snacks. They made themselves comfortable in the living room and Vi began to talk.

Fate came into play, I'm sure, in Fresno in 1951. Back then when a family was looking for something to do on Sundays, they usually went to Roeding Park. There was a large amphitheater there and every Sunday afternoon there was a "Battle of the Bands" on the bandstand. There was a zoo there then, also, so it was a fun place for children. You could spread a blanket on the mowed, green grass and sit beneath the large shade trees while you picnicked and listened to the music.

One Sunday afternoon my two little sons and I went to the park with my mother and stepfather and some other relatives. We were sitting on a grassy knoll not far from the bandstand. We were listening to that sentimental Country Western sound that I remembered from growing up in Oklahoma.

On stage *Dave Stogner and The Western Rhythmaires* began to perform.

*There was a time when I thought of no other/And we sang our own
love refrain/Our hearts beat as one as we had our fun/But time
changes everything/When you left me my poor heart was broken/Our
romance seemed all in vain/But now the dark clouds are gone/And
there's blue skies again/Cause time changes everything...*

Oh, the band! That band! They played that Bob Wills song so well. The two fiddles played great harmony. The steel guitar and drums made the band sound a little different from other bands I had heard. It was just wonderful music. I told Mama that day that this was the sweetest music in the world, and she agreed. I hadn't seen Dave Stogner in person before that day, so I just assumed he was the one singing and leading the band. His voice was heaven!

The Western Rhythmaires had finished their set. My three-year-old son, Michael, kept running around, and I was chasing after him. Dave and another man were walking near the bandstand. I followed Michael around a corner and nearly collided with Dave. He was tall and so good-looking in his green and white western style suit. He had cowboy boots on, and green musical notes ran down the side of his pant legs. Dark wavy hair was sticking out from under his cowboy hat, and when he smiled you couldn't help but notice him. "

Those kids can sure get away from you," Dave said, jokingly.

I remember I was wearing a red sleeveless blouse and white shorts, and I was running around barefoot. I was a little shy. I looked up at him and quietly said, "Yeah, they sure can." I smiled, and then I took Michael by the hand and walked back to where we were sitting.

Later, Dave and his band played again. This time when Michael was running around, he went up on the bandstand! I asked my mother to go up there to get him, because I was too embarrassed. She brought him back and told him to stay on the blanket. I listened to the music and watched Dave when he'd walk down into the audience to talk with people. As we packed up our picnic things and were leaving the park, I was one awe-struck girl for having met Dave Stogner. He was a well-known personality and he had spoken to me. Besides, I think I was a bit smitten that day by his good looks and friendliness.

A few days after that chance meeting, I called the Sanger radio station where Dave worked as a disc jockey. He'd take requests and then play them later in the day. I had never called in requests before, so I thought it would be fun to call him and ask for one.

The station manager answered the phone when I called. When he put me on with Dave I got nervous, but I asked for the request and mentioned having heard the song at Roeding Park. To my amazement, he asked me if I was the girl he ran into in the park? He described what I had been wearing. I answered yes that had been me chasing my little boy. I never expected anything like that. I was just thrilled that he had remembered me.

Our acquaintance began on the telephone. I'd call for requests and he'd talk for a while. There was nothing shy about Dave, and he seemed genuinely interested in talking to me. This went on for a while, then one day he asked me if I'd meet him for coffee at a little café on Broadway Street. I was hesitant about that, then finally I agreed. I was nervous and excited at the same time. When I got there, he was waiting outside casually leaning against a column in front of the café. You can only imagine what this felt like for me.

We went inside and sat at a booth that had potted plants along the ledge above it. They gave us some privacy. I sat down then Dave sat next to me. As I said before I was a shy girl, but he just had a way of pulling conversation out of a person. His friendliness took over the whole atmosphere. He made me feel so comfortable that it was easy to talk to him. He told me about his music business and I told him about myself.

I made him laugh with a story about when I was a young girl in Oklahoma. My mother used to take my little brother, Harry, and me to a park where Bob Wills often performed. I was used to hearing that type of music. Everyday when we walked to school we could hear his radio show on at every house. Walking by, we didn't miss a song. Bob Wills was very popular. There was one family I knew that had about ten kids and half of them were named after Bob Wills' musicians. Dave thought that was being devoted fans.

I was wearing a gold-colored corduroy vest and matching skirt. He had been smoking most of the time while we talked. Somehow, an ash from his cigarette had fallen on my skirt and had made a round burn hole in it. We were so caught up in our conversation that we hadn't noticed. When we did, he kept apologizing and even offered to buy me a new skirt. I told him he didn't have to do that. He felt so bad about ruining my skirt.

Something else happened that I didn't expect. Dave took my hand and held it for part of the time we sat there. Now here I was, a twenty-three-year-old girl who had never been romanced; yet I had been married seven years and had two sons. He treated me so differently from how I was used to being treated. I couldn't help but to like him. I was so happy to know him. To me he was a big star even then, and he liked me.

One night in the fall of 1951, Little Jimmy Dickens was going to perform at The Barn. Dave invited him to be interviewed on the Sanger radio station. The radio show was being done remote from another place downtown. Dave called and

invited me to come to meet Jimmy. I didn't want to go alone, so I invited Harry and my girlfriend to go with me.

I went to where Dave was and he introduced me to Little Jimmy Dickens. He asked Dave, "Does she have a sister?" He was very funny. I was so impressed to be able to meet someone like him. Dave asked me if I had a ride home. I told him I was with my brother. I think we were both disappointed that I didn't need a ride.

My brother and his friend were sneaking into the Cozy Inn to hear Dave play. They weren't old enough to be there, but they loved to dance. They nearly got Dave into trouble. By then, Harry knew that I was acquainted with Dave, but not to what extent. My girlfriend and I started going to the café part of the Cozy Inn when Dave was there. Sometimes, he'd come out from where the band performed to sit with us before they started to play.

There is still a little Coney Island Hot Dog stand in Fresno where he took me for a hot dog the next time we met alone. We just stood there and got more acquainted while we ate. He always dressed so well, and looked so good. His whole band was always well dressed in different western outfits. Dave told me how important that was to him for his band to look professional. After that, our paths just kept overlapping more often.

One day I had to go to the courthouse to pay for a speeding ticket. They wouldn't let me go up to the cashier window to pay. They told me that I had to wait to talk to the judge. While I waited, I walked Dave and he went to the cashier window. I knew he frequently got tickets for going too fast in the band station wagon when they were on the road. I guessed that was why he was there.

He was surprised to see me. I told him what had happened. I was driving home from my niece's house around midnight. The boys were asleep in the back seat. A Highway Patrol officer stopped me and asked me where I was going in such a hurry. Danny woke up and asked why we were getting a ticket. I told him that the officer had to give it to somebody, so he chose us.

The officer had written "belligerent" on the ticket, so that was why I had to talk to the judge. Dave thought that was so funny, since he knew how shy I was. I was kind of embarrassed, but it was fun to run into Dave. I was beginning to think about him more, but only as a friend. Since we were both married, I felt that was all there was to it.

After the courthouse episode, I called in to the radio station and Dave invited me to stop by to see where he did his radio show. I told him no that I couldn't do that. He invited me again a couple of times, but I always told him I couldn't. Then one day I said yes that I would come by to see him.

Dave wasn't actually in Sanger. They had him set up in a small room in the Sequoia Hotel in Fresno. I thought it would be all right to go there by myself. It was daytime and in public. I went to the hotel and rode up in the elevator to his

floor. I knocked on the door and he invited me to come inside. There was a desk and some equipment in the room. He showed me how he took requests and how his setup worked. He put the headphones on me so I could listen to the music. We talked when he wasn't on the air.

While I was there someone else knocked on the door. I about jumped out of my skin, I had been so jittery. Dave went to the door and spoke to someone looking for one of his band members. I said I had better leave. He said to stay a while longer and then asked me if I had a picture of myself that he could have. I did have a picture in my wallet. It was one of me sitting on a rail fence in a western outfit I had made. I had been making most of my clothes since high school. I got the photo out of my purse and gave it to him.

He looked at it, and as he slipped it under his desk pad he said, "Now I can look at you when I talk to you on the phone."

As I was getting up from the chair to leave, he stood also. He walked up to me and put his arm around my waist. Then he leaned down and kissed me very gently. I didn't know what to think. I think I was enchanted. He was such a gentleman, and just plain kind. I probably floated out of the room.