

Only A Memory Away - The Dave and Vi Stogner Story

PROLOGUE

Fresno, California

May 1989

The Fresno Police Department asked those in the funeral procession to turn on their lights and emergency flashers, and to obey the traffic signs and signals when the motorcycle escort was not in the intersection controlling traffic. They had also asked them to please watch the cemetery assistant for parking instructions. The line of cars was coming from Lisle Calaveras Chapel eight miles away.

David Stout Stogner had died of lung cancer on May 17 at three-thirty in the morning. He was being buried May 23 at Belmont Memorial Park near his mother and his father.

In Madera, the local newspaper had carried an announcement of his death:

Services will be Tuesday for Dave Stogner, age 69, a Western Swing musician and an entertainer who had his own television programs in Fresno during the 1950s. Mr. Stogner died Wednesday. Services will be at noon at Lisle Funeral Home in Fresno. He had been living in Madera, Ca. Mr. Stogner had become well known in Western Swing musical circles when he moved to the San Joaquin Valley after World War II and was bandleader for The Western Rhythmairs. Mr. Stogner has been honored with displays in the Western Swing Hall of Fame in Sacramento, the Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville, and the West Coast Country Museum in Bakersfield, Ca., Surviving him are his wife, Viola, two sons and two stepsons, three sisters, one brother and nine grandchildren.

The day he died the noon news carried a story and a film clip of his band playing. The announcer said, "A legend is gone, and along with him a lot of music history."

Dave was at home the last two months of his life. He wanted his wife beside him all the time. Vi, as family and friends knew her, gave him constant attention trying to make him as comfortable as possible. Her anguish and exhaustion never surpassed the love she felt or the caring she gave to him those last days. She was trying to prepare for what appeared imminent. Two weeks before Dave's death, she had spoken with his doctor. The doctor told her not to be surprised to go into his bedroom and find him gone. The pain he was suffering had become terrible. Dave's sisters, Judy and Merle, had come in to help, as well as Hospice.

One day, as Vi, Judy, and Merle stood at the foot of his bed Dave said weakly, "If

this cancer gets me, and it just might, I can say I lived my life the way I wanted and I achieved what I wanted. I've had a good life, but there is one thing I'd change. I would have married Vi sooner." Vi had felt a strong twinge in her heart. Dave was the love of her life, but not even their sons knew the depth of that love.

Dan, his oldest stepson, thought the world of Dave. He had planted a vegetable garden for him in the early spring. Dave asked him why he planted the rows so far apart. Dan said it was so Dave could go up the rows in his wheelchair and pull weeds from both sides! Dave laughed at that idea.

About a week before Dave's death, his stepson, Michael, with his wife, Dawna, came to Madera from Corralitos in Santa Cruz County. They had been coming as often as they could to help. Dave was heavily sedated, but had been asking about pictures wanting to see "Mama." Michael asked Vi to gather some family photos. He put them on a small bulletin board and placed it at the foot of the bed so Dave could see his mother and father and his grandchildren. This satisfied Dave.

One night, he asked Vi if she'd mind if he saw his son, David. Ofcourse she didn't mind, only she didn't know where he was. Dave hadn't seen or spoken with his oldest son for about seven years. Dave said to call his youngest son, Daryl, and he could find him. Daryl lived in Arizona, at the time, but he and his father had always kept in touch.

Daryl knew David was somewhere in Los Angeles. He telephoned the Los Angeles County Sheriff's office. They located David, notified him of his father's impending death, and told him his father had asked for him. Two days before Dave died, David and his wife, Laurie, were there to see him. It happened to be Dave's birthday. Father and son embraced with tears running down their faces. Each one saying sorry, and that they loved the other.

The last night, Dave wanted to talk and talk. At one o'clock in the morning, Merle told Vi to go into the living room to rest while she sat up with him. Around three o'clock, Vi suddenly awoke and went into the bedroom. She asked his sister if she had given him his pain medication. Merle said she had and then went out of the room.

Just then, Dave wanted Vi to get on the bed with him. She kindly lay beside him. Dave reached for her hand and told her he loved her. Then, he asked her to pray for him. As she prayed for God to stop the pain, Merle returned and placed a damp washcloth on his forehead.

Merle looked toward Vi and said very softly, "I think he is dying." Dave took two deep breaths, then he was gone.

Vi ran from the room screaming in sorrow and anguish. Merle told her that a peace had come over Dave, all the pain and lines in his face were gone. She said Vi should come back in to see him. Vi just couldn't. She remained in the living room while Dave's brothers-in-law tended to him. The coroner was called and

arrived in the next hour. Vi went into the garage when they carried him out of the house on a stretcher. She couldn't bear to see him go.

Vi had to gather her strength and tell herself to be brave. She had to prepare for the funeral. This was very important to her because she wanted to give Dave the funeral she thought he deserved. She received dozens of phone calls, and many people sent flowers. She knew there would be a lot of people who would want to come to the funeral out of respect for Dave.

Dave had told her, "I don't care where you bury me as long as you're there, too, someday." Vi had chosen for him to be put to rest on a corner near a rose garden.

On the day of the funeral, she lay Dave's favorite fiddle in a beautiful spray of red and white carnations. A red satin banner ran through the green leaves with *To My Sweetheart* on one ribbon and *A Memory Away* on the other. She placed the arrangement at the head of the casket. Into a little side pocket of the casket, she slipped a photo of each of their grandchildren and one of herself standing by a rosebush. As she looked at Dave, she thought he looked so handsome. He was dressed in a blue pinstriped suit with a light blue shirt that she had once given him. She had chosen a string tie and a fiddle lapel pin for him to wear. She kissed and touched him until her family made her leave him.

She had prayed for strength to carry this funeral through without crying. She wanted to hold her head up and be proud of Dave. Dan sat next to her in the family room during the service. She might have been all cried out, but she made it through even while she comforted Dan when he was crying so hard.

Hundreds of people came to give their respects to Dave, Vi, and their families. Six family members and close friends were pallbearers and six of his original Fresno band members walked in front of the casket as honorary pallbearers. Vi told them to handle the coffin with care for there was a precious person inside.

Their pastor and assistant pastor from Corralitos were there to conduct the service. Some of Dave's Santa Cruz band members and musician friends had come to perform the music. One of them was Joe Richie, who had become a close friend to Dave. He sang one of Dave's favorite songs, *I Hear The Country Calling Me*. He also sang a special hymn that Vi had chosen, *In The Garden*.

Anne Steinhardt, also from Santa Cruz, was asked by Vi to play *Orange Blossom Special* on her fiddle. When Anne saw Vi standing near the casket, she had thought, "There is Vi, an old fashion flower, like the name Viola itself, the distaff side of the country ethos Dave embodied on the manly side—down home, down to earth, stand-by-your-man, and most of all devoted to Dave with a love so strong and pure it was practically visible; a light that seemed to beam from her eyes and surround them both as she looked at him, standing by his side or gazing up at him from the side of the stage with her porcelain skin, innocent China blue eyes, and bouffant blonde hair; a soft, feminine, bright presence, chirping away in her Oklahoma accent." In all of her memories of Dave this was how she always

pictured Vi, gazing raptly at him.

When Anne stood ready to perform, she looked out over the umber brown chapel. Among all the others, she noticed a couple of old Bob Wills musicians sitting together to usher yet another of their dwindling numbers off to that big jam in the sky. She felt odd to be fiddling the *Orange Blossom Special* with no band in back of her, or amplifier; just her and her fiddle in front of Dave's casket. She played, not hot and jazzy like she and Dave were used to, but very softly and beautifully.

She thought, "Come on Dave, mentor and inspiration, lift your fiddle and draw the bow across the strings with an impish grin, salt my tail one more time!"

If a funeral could be beautiful, his was. Vi knew in her heart that Dave was pleased and said, "Yes Sir."

*Does my baby call me honey/Yes sir, yes sir/Does she help me spend my money/
Yes sir, yes sir/When she rolls them big black eyes/And breathes those heavy
sighs/Does it make goose bumps rise/Yes sir, yes sir/Is there goin' to be a
weddin'/Yes sir, yes sir/Is the news already spreadin'/Yes sir, yes sir/When they
play here comes the bride/We'll walk down side by side/Will I be puffed out with
pride/Yes sir, yes sir....*