

The Betten Story: More Than One Good Life

By Ty Adams

Introduction

France and Coe Betten created an enduring marriage union lasting over 60 years and raised nine healthy, entrepreneurial and world-wise children. With those children in tow, they traveled every state in the lower 48 at least two times over, resting their eyes on the wonders of a vast and prosperous country: the hissing white plumes of Old Faithful, the diving cliffs of Yosemite and the breathtaking splendor of the Grand Canyon. They thrived in cities like New York, Kansas City and St. Louis, rubbing elbows with celebrities, business magnates and blue collars alike. They started with humble beginnings in a town of 1,800 people and together created a business empire worth millions.

It was the late 1970s in Ames, Iowa, and France and Coe Betten had come a long way from their small town roots in Lebanon, Illinois, where very few people would have suspected that the mayor's daughter and the self-proclaimed "village clown" would have blossomed to the heights of such success. They now owned Betten Trucks, the largest beverage truck distributorship in the country. They were also among the first in the country to travel the United States in a motorhome, what was now becoming a huge national trend. Between Coe's amazing organization, solid dedication and straight-talking

persona and France's charisma, outgoing nature and "never met a stranger" attitude, they had earned allies in high places and friends in low places.

"I remember walking down the street in Ames, and there was a gardener working by the sidewalk there," France said. "During football season I always took out a full-page ad in the newspaper for the Iowa State Cyclones, saying 'Betten Trucks Supports the Cyclones' or something like that, but I didn't really think that anybody knew who I was just by looking at me. Well, this fella looks up and in a very sincere way, he says, 'Thank you for all you've done for Iowa State.' I turned around. I thought he was talking to somebody else."

Well-known and respected in Ames, the Bettens had created a name for themselves, but they didn't know that challenging times were coming, and that the wealth they had worked so hard to build would soon disappear down to the last dollar. It was yet to be seen what would lie ahead for the family, or how they would respond to this test, but through it all, they held tightly to their most important priorities.

"Family was always the most important thing. It didn't matter what was going on," Coe said. "Whatever else happened, good or bad, we just dealt with it."

Chapter One: Where It All Began

France Betten and Coe Harris were born in the same town of Lebanon, Illinois in the 1920s. It was the end of the “Roaring Twenties,” a decade of renewed confidence in the United States with its emergence as an industrial superpower and the return of young soldiers from World War I. The general mood around the country was that a new and different era was emerging. With rapidly evolving modern technology, many people felt that anything was possible, and economic growth seemed unlimited.

Anything recent and modern was in fashion, and these ideas were spread to large portions of the population through the latest advancements in communication: the radio and the telephone. And while formal decorative frills were being shed in exchange for practicality, amusement and lightness were also being cultivated through the emergence of jazz and the dances that came with it. In addition, the role of women in society was being re-evaluated and pushed to new levels with all women in every state receiving the right to vote in 1920. In many ways, it was one of the most colorful American decades, and if there’s any couple that would prove to be colorful, it was France and Coe.

A Happy France

France was born to Frank and Viola Betten on July 16, 1926. There's no evidence that he came into the world making deals or telling stories and jokes, but for those who know him, it wouldn't be much of a surprise.

“My dad is probably the most enthusiastic person I've ever known,” said Laura Betten, the eighth Betten child. “He always embraces everything, and he can strike up a conversation with just about anyone. I don't feel like I've ever seen him say he's too tired to do something.”

France got a good deal of his boisterous side from his father Frank, who owned an oil delivery business in Lebanon. Frank was cheerful and would clown it up with his friends, but when it came to his children, there was no messing around. “With my dad, there was only black and white; there was no grey,” France said. “In fact, he went to law school and didn't like it because of all the grey area. So he quit law school because of his principles.”

Many of France's early memories include his father singing, even though it was always off key. “He loved to sing, especially when he was driving in his oil truck,” France said. “He'd always say, ‘It isn't very good but it's loud enough.’ He loved to sing World War I songs: ‘Just Like A Gypsy,’ I know all the World War I songs from him. And he liked to use a lot of catchy phrases like, ‘None of us is as smart as all of us.’”

Frank's own birth parents, the Shultzes, had died shortly after his birth. He was adopted and raised by Frank senior and Mary Betten, who was called Nanon. "She was big on pretense," France said. "If her maid was going to a dance at the veteran's hall downtown, just a regular dance, Nanon would say, 'Oh she's going to the ball tonight.'"

Nanon kept a very formal house, and the living and dining areas downstairs always looked untouched, and rarely did anyone use them. They did all of their living on the upper story of the house. "There were oodles of ornate china downstairs and it was all for show," France said.

Grandpa Frank Betten was known for his generosity with his grandkids, letting them do things that Frank junior and Nanon Betten would frown on.

"Grandpa had a new car, and Nanon and my dad didn't want us to use it, but he always hung the keys inside the door downstairs," France said. "When my brother and I asked to use it, he would say, 'I know you're not supposed to use it, but you know where the keys are.'"

One afternoon, France borrowed his grandpa's car and drove out into the country with a friend, speeding along the country road. A chicken flew out in front of them and they hit it, knocking out a headlight in the car. France called up his grandpa, who snuck out of the house to meet his grandson at the auto shop to have it fixed.

“He came without even a reprimand,” France said. “My dad would have thrown a shoe—heavens!—but nobody ever knew but grandpa.”

Frank Jr. was strict with his nine children and expected them to work as hard as he did.

“He was a domineering, nose-to-the grindstone type of man,” France said. “He was very religious and firm. Mom would be too lenient and then he would blow up when he found out that she was letting something go.”

But even with all the hard work and strict upbringing, young France almost always had a smile on his face. “I’ve always been happy,” France said. “I make situations happy and have a great time wherever I am.”

The Dear Daughter

Coe Harris was born on July 23, 1927 to George and Cecilia Harris. She was the last of seven children and two of her brothers and one sister had already married and moved out of the house before she was born. While France could have been born telling stories, Coe could have been born with a no-nonsense look on her face, ready to direct and take care of people. If there is a woman who might symbolize the new role of women in business and society emerging out of the 1920s, it would be Coe Betten. She would not become a stand-alone businesswoman, but a strong and integral part of a husband/wife team and “the General” of a family unit.

“My mother was the grease that made it all work,” said Rick Betten, France and Coe’s fifth child. “She has always been working behind the scenes, and made all of us feel like number one. She is loving and patient and plain gorgeous from the inside out.”

“I was the baby, and, growing up, I was very sheltered,” Coe said. “I wasn’t allowed to do a lot of things that my friends could do because my parents were older and more conservative.”

Even so, Coe was not the rebellious type, and was fine with following the rules, even if they were a little strict.

“I liked to be outdoors more than anything,” she said. “We’d play street games like kick ball and dodge ball. I was not permitted to ride a bicycle because I could hurt myself. I was not permitted to roller skate. I couldn’t wear blue jeans or dirty saddle Oxford shoes. But I could take shoeboxes and put colored tissue paper over them, put candles inside and make trains and walk all around the block. That was fine! And I could shoot firecrackers!”

Young Coe did manage to find a way around some of the rules. For example, enlisting the help of her siblings. “My brother bought my blue jeans for me,” she said. “He knew that I wanted them and that our parents wouldn’t buy them, so he got them for me.”

Coe's father George was a skilled carpenter and the mayor of Lebanon for 12 years. He was known for his straight-dealing and giving ways. "He was very, very generous man," Coe said. "He was a contractor, he built houses, although in those days they didn't cost very much, around \$7,000, but a young couple would come to him and say, 'Mr. Harris we'd like to buy your house, but we don't have any money.' And he'd say, 'Oh, I'll rent it to you.' So he'd rent it to them for a few dollars a month and then they'd come along a few years later and say, 'We'd like to buy it.' He would subtract out the amount they'd paid in rent."

Cecilia Harris was all about family. She organized the gatherings and made sure that family came first. "She was very much a homebody," Coe said. "The holidays were a big deal and she would always plan ahead of time for Easter and Thanksgiving and Christmas. She worked very hard, but she enjoyed life too."

Chapter Two: Dealing with the Depression

While both France and Coe exhibited the confidence of the decade they were born in, the majority of their formative years occurred in the 1930s, a decade of tough times for most of America. The Great Depression slowed or halted much of the growth of the 1920s, and the economic downturn was centered in North America and Europe, but had devastating effects around the world, especially in industrialized countries. In the U.S. the Depression lasted nearly the entire decade. Many people lost their jobs and their homes, and struggled even to gain the basic necessities like food, shelter and heat. Heavy industry, mining and logging felt the hardest blows as demand fell sharply, but farmers and rural areas like Lebanon also suffered as crop prices fell by 40 – 60 percent. As many families did at the time, the Bettens went more rural to gain greater self-sufficiency.

“During the Depression my dad bought this small farm to live on,” France said. “It was about an 80-acre farm a mile from school and town. It had pigs and cows and chickens, and he hired a guy to plow the fields and cultivate and tend the farm, but we kids had to do the chores.”

For the kids, chores were duties that were to be put off as long as possible. When they could get their mother to be more lenient they would, and their farm tasks were slowed until dad came back from work.

“It was a small town and we could hear his truck coming down the road,” France said. “It was a mile away, but we could hear it. We’d run and get the cows in quick and start milking. But the move to the farm was a good one. We’d get milk from the cows and eggs from the chickens and, in those days, having something to eat was something.”

The decade of the Depression may have played a role in France’s grocery shopping style. Many years later, living in a time of abundance, his own kids would tease him about it. “I don’t know how he keeps it all straight in his head, but he can remember the price of all sorts of groceries in five different stores,” said Laura, child number eight. “And when he finds a sale on something, he’ll buy boxes full of whatever it is, so that he can bring some to everyone in the family. He’s an amazing bargain shopper.”

Coe’s family also felt the squeeze of the thirties, and although they didn’t move outside of town to a farm, they did have to adjust to a new lifestyle. “I think she was pretty young at the time, but there was a time when everybody in her family would only get a boiled potato for lunch,” France said. “And they weren’t poor.”

But for the most part, Coe and France were able to grow up doing all the “normal” activities of kids their age, where friends and adventures were the priorities.

“There were about four of us that hung around together most of the time,” Coe said. “I think we got a nickel a day. We’d stop at the drugstore and buy one Coke and split it.

Then we'd go to the grocery store and buy a package of donuts, and that was great. That was our entertainment.”

For France, entertainment mostly came in the form of his siblings, especially his six brothers, although they often had a good time at his expense. For example, France says that he received the bulk of his street smarts from his older brother Jim, who was given the nickname “Jipper” from younger brother Bill after riding off with his bike one day. It stuck, and Jim definitely lived up to the name where France was concerned.

“My brother Jim made me very sage,” France said. “Our chores were to feed and pump water for the chickens, slop the hogs, milk the cows and carry the hay. Well, Jipper came up to me one day and said, ‘If you do my chores for the day, I’ll tell you something you really want to know. Trust me, you really want to know this.’”

France agreed to do the chores and worked like mad to get them finished, which was especially difficult because he wasn’t yet as big or strong as his older brother. “When I was all finished, I went up to him and said, ‘Okay, I got all the chores done, what’s the big secret?’ And he said, ‘There ain’t no Santa Clause, and there ain’t no Easter Bunny either.’ I was the only kid in the world who worked to figure that out.”

On another occasion, when France was 12 or 13 and Jim was 16, his older brother had a part-time job washing out the used bottles of milk. France was envious and asked his brother to let him help with the washing so he could earn pay too. “I was so industrious, I

worked two days straight at it, and I kept asking him, ‘Did we get paid yet?’ and he’d say, ‘Not yet.’ Finally, he said, ‘Yeah we got paid.’ And he took me out to the garage. There was an old Buick, and the Jipper pointed to some new fog lights and said, ‘Looky there. They’re half yours.’ Well, I couldn’t drive, I couldn’t even sit up front to see my fog lights!”

Between his brother Jim and an experience working for a not-so-generous sales manager at Divco trucks in his later years, France said that he was well educated on the art of the rip-off. “After the Jipper and Divco, I didn’t buy many Brooklyn bridges,” France said. “They made me a pretty shrewd businessman.”

Chapter Three: Into the Forties

Before France and Coe could tackle the business world, however, they had to tackle high school in Lebanon as they entered their teenage years in the 1940s. After the uncertainty of the Depression, the U.S. economy picked up as a result of the great demand for resources and labor generated by World War II. It would become the most widely spread and most destructive armed conflict in human history, and even the young men and women in isolated towns like Lebanon were not exempt from its draw.

While the momentous world events couldn't be ignored, France and Coe also had their minds on one of the most important topics for teenagers in any time: getting a date. Although they knew each other in junior high, it wasn't until Coe's junior year and France's senior year that any sort of a romantic connection was formed.

"I knew of France, I thought he was pretty swell, but I didn't think I should be running around with a wild thing like him," Coe said. "I guess I got a little more adventuresome, even though I was still very protected. Down the street, there was a little bakery with a jukebox and all the kids would go there to dance, but I was not permitted to do that. I could go to the movies, but I had to go to the drugstore across the street to call my parents before and after. That went on until I was a senior in high school."

France definitely remembers wanting to see more of the pretty mayor's daughter, but it wasn't an easy task. After all, this was the girl whose brother-in-law, a teacher, would take her to school dances and take her back home immediately after.

"My senior year we had a class together," France said. "But she was so sheltered that I didn't know her other than what happened at school. But she was beautiful. I thought she was a nice girl and everything. Her uncle would bring her to and from the school dances and she couldn't go to the juke joint. But all the sudden something clicked and I decided to go for it."

France wasn't a new hand at asking a girl out on a date, and he hoped that Coe would go for his charm. It worked.

"I guess I decided to go with him because all my girlfriends were going with him," Coe said. "I thought there must be something to that."

For his part, France insists that Coe was different; he just wished her parents weren't so strict with her. "It wasn't my fault," he said, laughing about his reputation as a high school ladies' man. "I had to take her home at ten, and then she'd get mad if I'd go out with another girl after that."

On their first date, France dropped by the Harris house to pick Coe up. Of course, Cecilia Harris was there with some questions for this new boy with a questionable reputation.

“Where are you going?” Mrs. Harris asked.

“Oh, we might go over to a movie in Breese, 20 miles that way,” France answered in his casual way. “Or we might go over to Belleville (which is 20 miles the other way).”

Casual wasn't good enough for Mrs. Harris. She said, “No, before you go, you'll decide exactly where you're going.” So, the young couple did, and went just where they said they would.

Away to the Army

During France's senior year in high school, he was accepted into the Naval Air Corp. It was 1943, and the United States was thoroughly embroiled in World War II, fighting on German fronts, mounting the first American air raid with 50 bombers, and fighting with Japan in the waters of the South Pacific. France was 17, and like nearly every American teenager at that time, he was ready to serve his country when he was out of school. Coe, like many others around the country, was preparing to watch her beau head overseas to join what was becoming the deadliest conflict in human history. But France was young enough to have an invincible mindset, and he was excited about the Air Corp. What he didn't know was that life had other plans, and he would soon be one seat away from dying.

On December 23, 1943, France went caroling and carousing with six of his friends, a bunch of juniors and seniors that often clowned around together. They stopped at a tavern outside of Lebanon to fuel their merry mood.

“We parked right in front of the front door on a steep incline,” France said. “The driver’s side door was facing down the slope and the passenger’s side was facing up, so it was really hard to climb out.”

When they went into the pub, they continued their singing, and a couple bought them a round of beer. Now they were really having a good time, but the bartender noticed that they were high school kids and the waiter advised them that they had been cut off.

“So we left, and when we were getting in the car, I got in the seat right behind the driver first, but I had to climb in from the door on the uphill side,” France said. At that point, the couple that had bought them a round was also leaving. “I saw them and had enough manners to climb back up to the door, which was tough when the car was leaning that way. I just got one leg out, but I got to where I could see them, and said, ‘Thanks for the beer, Merry Christmas.’ With that, one of the other guys snuck by me to get in the seat behind the driver, the seat I’d been sitting in.”

It was a small thing that would have huge consequences. The boy who stole France’s seat died just a few minutes later. “We sideswiped an Army truck,” France said. “He and the

driver died. If I would have sat there, I would have died. If he would have taken the time to say ‘thank you,’ it would have been me.”

The collision didn’t leave the others without injuries, however, and France went to the hospital with a bruised kidney. As a result of concerns over his health, the Navy gave him the order to take a urine test. “I flunked it,” France said. “And there went the Naval Air Corp. So on my eighteenth birthday, I volunteered, and the only thing left was infantry.”

That summer, for France, it was goodbye to Lebanon and off to Fort Hood, Texas for basic training. Coe was a junior and still had a year left, so she stayed in the hometown. They promised to write each other letters.

The Hungry Soldier

At Fort Hood, France and his fellow soldiers marched 1,700 miles in 17 weeks. “As an infantryman, that’s all you do is march and learn to shoot guns,” France said. “It’s grunt work.”

The biggest effect that had on France was on his stomach. He was one hungry soldier boy, constantly craving more food. So he broke into the mess hall overnight, but there weren’t any extra rations to be found.

“One day, I was at the end of the chow line, and when I got to my seat, I realized that there were no more takers on all the food up there,” France said. “So I went back out the building and went through the line again.”

As he was balancing one plate between his legs and one on the table, France noticed a pair of white pants standing next to him, and it was the chef, giving him the stink eye. He’d been caught, and although the chef didn’t say anything, France knew he’d probably have to dig a six-by-six, a standard punishment of digging a six-foot by six-foot hole in the hard Texas clay, then fill it back up again and pack it down to make it level.

Sure enough, the sergeant came looking for young France later that day and took him to the captain’s office. Captain Lindquist was the kind of person you remember, a thin man with bright red hair, and when France entered, he sat back, put his feet up on the desk and laughed. He said, “What’s the matter soldier, are you hungry?”

France replied solemnly. “Yes sir, I’m hungry.”

Captain Lindquist nodded and said, “You’ll get more food.” And that was the end of it. From that day on, France got more food, and he would have a fond remembrance of Captain Lindquist, the red headed captain with a soft spot for his hungry soldier. It was a story that would someday come back to play a role in France’s life.

Back in Lebanon, Coe was continuing with the life of a high school senior whose sweetheart was heading into a conflict that had already claimed many of the 25 million soldiers lives that it would eventually claim. Naturally, she worried about his fate, but she wrote letters to him, and in turn received letters from Fort Hood and then the South Pacific.

Of course, France wasn't above doing a little wheeling and dealing to convince his girlfriend to send more letters. "He did write some nice letters, but he also wrote to many girls," Coe said with a chuckle. "I'd get letters from him that said, 'I heard from so-and-so, why don't you write more?'"

Fortunately, while France was blessed with the confidence and courage of an 18-year-old, he was also blessed with an initial assignment that put him in the South Pacific, rather than on the European fronts where thousands of American soldiers were dying. In his fifteenth week of boot camp, France's father got sick and went to the hospital. France got a furlough to go home and help out while his father returned to health. The following week, the rest of France's boot camp regimen was sent to assist in the bloody Battle of the Bulge in the Ardennes region of Belgium, Luxembourg and Germany. When France's father recovered, he returned to boot camp to finish out his last weeks, but the battle was already over, so he was sent to the South Pacific.

It was also fortunate that the tide of the war was turning in favor of the allies. After six years of brutal combat and genocide, Germany surrendered in May of 1945 and World

War II officially ended. After only one year overseas, France returned home to Lebanon, his family, and Coe.

‘If That’s What You Want’

“I knew Coe was the one for me, shortly after our first date,” France said. “We were standing on the sidewalk. I know right where it was. We’d been to a party together out at a neighbor’s farmhouse where I got to know her better, and that was it. I remember that night when the love fairy bit me. She was a dream.”

And after being away from that dream for a year, France didn’t want to wait much longer before he asked her to be his wife. When he returned home to Lebanon after his year and a half in the military, he proposed one night when the spirit hit him.

France remembers it well. “I said, ‘Let’s get married,’ and she agreed, but she said, ‘We have to ask my dad.’ And I said, ‘Well, let’s go ask him now!’ She said, ‘Oh no, it’s ten o’ clock at night. They’re in bed.’ So I said, ‘What time do they get up?’ She said, ‘Six o’ clock.’ I said, ‘Well, I’ll be there.’”

“I guess I saw the proposal coming,” Coe said. “But I was surprised when he wanted to go talk to my Dad that time of night.”

“I was a full court press,” France added. “I showed up the next morning — six o’ clock — I mean, I came early. And her mother and brother acted like I came every morning for breakfast! But everybody knew something was up.”

The question lingered on everyone’s mind while breakfast was served. Finally France built up his nerve and came out with it. “France told my dad, ‘We want to get married,’” Coe said. “And there was silence at the table. My mother, my dad, my brother, myself and France — we all just stirred our eggs for a while, waiting for my dad to say something.”

George Harris looked down. The tension was thick when he finally looked up and spoke. He said, “Well ... if that’s what you want.”

“So that was the blessing,” Coe said with a chuckle. “If that’s what you want.”

“I was a tough pill for them to swallow,” France added. “I was a barnburner. I was the high school kid who smoked cigars. She was the precious little thing, and nobody was good enough for her.”

Even so, George and Cecilia Harris couldn’t argue with love, and France and Coe were married on December 28, 1946. They had a ceremony at the St. Joseph Catholic Church in Lebanon, with nearly the entire town in attendance. For a honeymoon, they took a trip to Miami with the \$200 that Frank Sr. gave them as a wedding gift.

Chapter Four: “A Life of Adjustment”

France and Coe were fresh newlyweds and had the energy and excitement of young love on their side, but as a joker who didn't take life too seriously and liked to shake things up and have a good time, France was in for some trying times with his new in-laws. He didn't start out in their good graces, and didn't make things much better for himself.

Finding a house to rent was nearly impossible after the war, but France and Coe managed to find one in Lebanon, renting out space from a widowed nurse. One night during the winter, France banked the furnace with a shovel full of coal and closed the damper to make sure the coals would smolder and burn slowly all night, keeping the house warm until the morning. They went to bed, but awoke at 3:00 am to stifling heat.

“When we stepped on the wood floor, it was too hot for our bare feet,” France said. “We went into the bathroom and the cold water in the toilet bowl was steaming hot. The reservoir had broken. The damper had fallen backwards in the open position. The wind was howling, and with all that coal in there, it was blazing.”

Aside from the toilet bowl, only the wallpaper in the bathroom was damaged, streaked from all the steam. The next day, France and Coe had a plumber put in a new bowl and were busy fixing the wallpaper, when the landlady came home from her nursing shift and

found them. “She said, ‘What happened?’ and France just told her the truth,” Coe said. “She said, ‘Well, you’re two nice kids, but you’re going to have to leave. This house is all I’ve got.’”

“So she kicked us out and we had to go live with Coe’s parents,” France added. “Oooh man, was I in for it.”

A Long Year

For the next year after the furnace incident, Coe and France lived with George and Cecilia Harris. Mr. Harris and France’s father had signed a note at the bank to have a house built for the young couple, but in the meantime, France would pay his dues at his in-laws’ house.

“That was a life of adjustment for me,” France said. “We were living rent-free, but I didn’t realize that. I was stubborn and ungrateful, but Coe helped me get my head straight.”

But it took a while. Although they were living under watchful eyes, France and Coe still liked to stay out late with their friends. And while she couldn’t stop them from doing it, Cecilia Harris made it clear that she noticed.

“I figured, we were married and could stay out as late as we wanted,” France said. “But she’d stay awake every night, and whenever we’d come in, whether it was eleven or

midnight or two in the morning, she'd make sure to say 'good niight' as we passed their bedroom.'"

At other times, when France came in the front door, Cecilia would look up and say, "Oh ... I thought somebody came in." But her disapproval wasn't enough to keep France from his mischievous ways. In fact, it seemed like some of his most disastrous pranks happened at the Harris house.

"I'll never forget the day I put a bomb on my own car," France said, referring to a device that was something like a firecracker. It was supposed to be a harmless gag that would whistle and make a loud boom when the target car's ignition was turned on.

One summer day, around the fourth of July in 1947, France bought a couple car bombs. For kicks, he tied one under the hood of his own car. George Harris kept a cow and a couple pigs across town, and he would milk the cow every morning and every night. On this particular night, his car was in the shop, so young France offered to give him a ride. He thought it would be kind of funny to see his father-in-law's reaction when the bomb went off. When George was a few feet away from the car, France turned the key.

"It was supposed to go, 'Kerboom!' but it went 'shhhhpew!'" France said. "I thought it was a dud, but the next thing I know, he's throwing a bucket of water on the engine, saying, 'It's on fire!'"

France laughed and told George that, no, the engine wasn't on fire. It was just a car bomb.

“But then I looked, and it WAS on fire,” France said. “The damn thing malfunctioned and there was a fuel pump leak, and when the bomb went off, it had the fuel pump up in flames. So we had to call the fire department. The neighbors were out on their porches and, of course, the whole town comes when there's a fire engine. Everybody's standing around, talking, ‘He put a bomb on his own car. He put a bomb on his own car.’ The next day the insurance agent called and said, ‘Don't bother with a claim, France.’ So I couldn't pay to get the thing rewired.”

With a car up in smoke by his own hand, a penchant for staying out late and less than stellar grades at St. Louis University, France was quickly losing ground on gaining favor with Coe's parents. To make things worse, he began opening up charge accounts with all the stores around town.

“Well, my dad did that, but he always had good credit,” France explained. “So when I started my own charge accounts, the stores started asking him to guarantee the loans. Well, he had some words of wisdom for me. He told me, ‘Son, you can't borrow your way out of debt.’”

The First House

Finally, the day came when the young couple's first house was finished. France and Coe were both relieved to finally have a space of their own, even if it was smaller than the Harris house — a lot smaller.

“That first little house was just a rectangle, about 25-feet long and 12-feet wide,” Coe said. “There were four rooms total: two in the basement and two upstairs, with the kitchen and the living room upstairs.”

“It wasn't very big, but it got us out of her parent's house,” France added. “We went back many years later and took pictures of that house with the motorhomes that we owned in front, and some of them were twice as long as it was.”

Even so, the Betten's new abode in Lebanon came just at the right time.

Chapter Five: A New Family

It was 1948, France was 22, Coe 21, and in addition to the house, they were about to celebrate another big first in their lives. On April 2, 1948, they welcomed a new life to the world, Terry Betten — a baby boy.

At first, the new parents were completely distraught. “He was our first born, and as a natural birth, his head was pointed like a Hershey’s Kiss,” Coe said.

“So I thought we had a weirdo,” France added. “I was ashamed of it. Both parents came down and everyone was standing around saying, ‘Aaahh, isn’t he sweet?’ And I said, ‘What do you mean, sweet? He’s a freak.’ Then they explained to me that the baby’s head gets squeezed coming through the canal and it was normal.”

It proved to be true. Terry grew into a handsome and extremely healthy boy with a strange nickname.

“We always referred to him as little red before the birth, because we thought that we might have a red head,” France said. “But he came out with brown hair. Never did have any red hair.”

When it came to personality — as he got older — Terry was very much like the Harris side of the family. He was a sage and somber young man who didn't waste a lot of words, but when he did speak, he meant it. Of course he liked to have his fun, too, but his default was to think things through.

Terry's parents experienced this many times, as when he was in college and France was buying a car, a beige Cadillac convertible. But while France was at the dealership waiting for the car to be prepped, a white Oldsmobile convertible with a big engine caught his eye.

"I thought it would be perfect for Coe, and it was already prepped, so I bought it," France said.

It was the type of purchase that a teenager would be excited about, but when Terry saw it, his only response was, "Dad, are you crazy?"

"Why?" France answered.

"All the boys drive mom's car," Terry said, talking about his younger brothers. "And you just bought her the hottest car in town." He knew how his siblings would treat a vehicle with that kind of power.

But the Bettens kept the Olds, and Coe enjoyed it. “She would be sitting in that Olds at a stoplight with 18 kids in the car,” France said. “And somebody would come up next to her and rev their engine. Then she’d dust him off the line. She liked that speed.”

Leaving Lebanon

It was a long climb to the point where France and Coe could buy fast cars, however. For them, the first step began with a move away from home. It was an easy decision for France, who was tired of being judged in a small community.

“Lebanon was a hick town,” he said. “It was not very progressive. Everybody knew everybody, and everybody knew how much everyone else made, and who they owed and everything else. It was a predominantly Methodist town, and a lot of people were closet drinkers, so if you were seen walking into a tavern, you were trash by their standards.”

At first, the moves were small. They started by heading to Jerseyville, Illinois, just north of St. Louis. France opened up a service station there. They lived above a drugstore, which turned out to be a curse.

“The drugstore had a jukebox,” Coe said. “And there was a popular song at the time that everybody played constantly.”

“...my sister, my brother, my mother, my father, I’ll never see Maggie alooone,” France added, singing the verse. “That darn jukebox was only a nickel and everybody had a nickel, and we had to listen to it.”

Fortunately for their sanity, they were only in Jerseyville for about a year. France got a new job selling for a liquor company, Southern Illinois Wholesale, and they made another small move to another ‘ville’ on the outskirts of St. Louis: Collinsville.

Collinsville, Illinois is the self-proclaimed “horseradish capitol of the world,” about 20 miles north of Lebanon. Collinsville would go on to mild Americana fame for housing the world’s largest ketchup bottle, actually a 170-foot water tower.

It’s a Girl

In the horseradish capitol, the second Betten child arrived. Cheryl was born in the spring of 1949, on March 23. It soon became clear that, when it came to communication, Cheryl had inherited her father’s love of talking. She was inquisitive and interested in other people and the events going on around her.

“We called Cheryl the ‘mouth of the south,’” Coe said with a laugh. “She liked knowing what was going on — all the rumors — and she’d spread them pretty fast.”

While France began his career in sales at Southern Illinois Wholesale, Coe handled the full-time job of caring for two infants ... and caring for France, who could be a big kid, too.

“At that time, nobody really thought too much about how to go about raising kids,” Coe said. “We just did it. I think we just raised our kids like our parents raised us.”

France was thinking about the future of his career, and he didn't much like it at Southern Illinois, where he was selling Hiram Walker products and had been given a sales territory pieced together from three other salesmen.

“All my accounts were junk accounts,” he said. “Walker's Deluxe was our big ticket item, and it was short supply and was very popular during the war. But they gave me all these small country saloons to sell it. I'd go through town and only sell about 5 bottles of Walker's Deluxe, although I managed to get one big account in Collinsville; a dance hall that would host about 3,000 people.”

Always the entrepreneur, France figured out a way to make money on the side in the little country saloons. “They had this stuff in the basement where it was nice and damp, and the labels had fallen off the bottles,” he said. “So I'd buy them for nickels on the dollar.”

Chapter Six: Collinsville and the 1950s

After the challenging times of the Depression and World War II, the early 1950s marked a period where, in general, the people of the United States sought a stable, consistent and “normal” way of life. The age of the automobile was gearing up, spurring the development of suburbs, which began in earnest. Returning GI’s flowed to these areas, many creating a domestic life for themselves. The television began to replace radio as the most popular mass media, and a black and white world was piped into American living rooms. It was the beginning of a “baby boom,” and France and Coe Betten would become a poster couple for booming babies.

The latest addition made his appearance on December 11, 1950. They named their new baby boy Scott, and he soon earned the reputation as a kid who enjoyed his solitude.

“Scott liked to do things by himself,” Coe said. “Later, when we had one big group, Scott would usually be the one who wandered off to go explore by himself.”

Another boy quickly followed Scott into the Collinsville mix. On April 24, 1952, Randy was born. Randy would gain fame for becoming the spitfire of the group, a quick-witted and mischievous firebrand who was constantly being blamed for disturbing the peace.

“Usually, they were right [about blaming me],” Randy admitted with a smile. “But it’s not my fault that it was so much fun to outsmart them.”

A safe and neighborly place, Collinsville was a great town for young kids, which was a good thing, because the Betten household was quickly turning into a baby parade. Rick was born on May 3, 1954, followed by Mark on September 1, 1956, followed by Chrissie on November 30, 1957.

The personalities here were distinctly different. In contrast to the relatively low-key manner of three of his older siblings, Rick brought a charge of energy and showmanship to the family. During the motorhoming days of the sixties, Rick developed a little act known as the pigeon routine, where he would bird-step around, cooing and neck-bobbing in the spitting image of a teenage pigeon, minus the feathers.

“Rick was on springs,” Coe said. “He couldn’t walk across the room, he had to run. And he liked to be the entertainer.”

Mark was a different story. His energy was directed toward overcoming an early obstacle. He was born with a clubbed foot, and the medical treatments for this in the 1950s were not sophisticated. Still, the rest of Mark’s body was extremely healthy and strong, and he endured the treatments and the braces and went on to become a successful athlete.

“That was one of the hardest things for me as a mother,” Coe said. “The first doctor said that he’d never really be able to run or play sports, but years later he would [run a triathlon].”

As if to compensate for the large amount of energy that her parents put into corralling Randy and tending to Mark’s challenge, not to mention parenting the other four kids, Chrissie was a low maintenance and easy-going child.

“When she was just entering school, Chrissie had a pixie-style hair cut and a deep voice,” Coe said. “So she always complained that people thought she was a boy. She was tall for her age, but she was also the youngest in her class, so she wasn’t yet coordinated. The teachers expected more of her because she was bigger and looked older than kids her age.”

The family of nine settled into the suburban life of Collinsville, and France settled into his position as the practical joker of the neighborhood. He and Coe were particularly good friends with the Cavanaughs next door. One Christmas, France and another neighbor, Duke, thought it would be entertaining to plug their Christmas lights into the plug at the end of Cavanaugh’s string. So they tunneled under the snow and plugged in. Then they got another cord and went to the Newton’s next door and plugged their lights in, but when they tried a fifth house, they blew the circuit. So France and Duke went to Cavanaugh’s house, and Duke engaged them in conversation while France reset the circuit.

“This went on for a couple weeks,” France said. “Everybody knew but Cavanaugh. Then one night Cavanaugh came home and found out that he’d been lighting the neighborhood. He was a little surprised.”

The neighborly fun continued throughout their time there, and was marked by summertime pool parties in the Cavanaugh’s backyard (one where France was pushed in with his business suit on, still managing to avoid spilling his drink), and living room dancing on winter holidays. As with the country as a whole, the Bettens enjoyed prosperity and growth.

Business Booms Too

On the business side of things during their time in Collinsville, France took a sales position at McCabe-Powers, a company that built truck bodies for the breweries in St. Louis. With the city of St. Louis as his territory, an energetic France truly began to hit his stride. He eagerly pursued new business regardless of where it was located, and before long, he was outselling everyone. As a clowning co-worker put it, “Betten, where the hell does your territory end?”

“I’d become interested in palletized beer truck bodies, which we built for the breweries in St. Louis,” France said. “I happened to meet a couple beer distributors who bought from the company, and they were really great people. I built a sort of following among these

beer distributors because I was pioneering, and I didn't realize it at the time, but that would serve me well.”

But after just a few years at McCabe-Powers, it became clear that there was a ceiling for successful salesmen. The commission-based pay system was working very well for France, who was becoming the king of commission.

“I sold myself out of a job,” he said. “I was getting \$300 a month with a three percent commission. The bodies were \$2,000, so I was making \$20,000 a year, which is like making \$140,000 [in 2007]. I had nobody to report to because it was a business I built within a business. So they cut my commission to two percent — a big pay cut. I was 35 at the time, and I thought, ‘If they cut me to just salary at 45, it’ll be too late to leave.’”

France and Coe knew that it would be difficult to survive on a bare minimum paycheck, especially with another new family member. They had already moved into a larger house in St. Louis, and their eighth child, Laura, was born while they were living there, on January 7, 1961.

As the baby and the youngest girl, Laura obviously received a lot of attention by default, but she was also a bit of a curiosity because she was the only blonde haired, blue-eyed Betten out of eight kids. “They all used to tease me that I was really the milkman’s daughter,” she joked.

But as a personality similar to her siblings emerged — strong willed and independent — it couldn't be argued that Laura was anything but 100 percent Betten. “Laura can be a charmer when she wants to, but she can be bull-headed too, like the rest of them,” Coe said. “And just about anything she starts, she finishes.”

Now with enough children to nearly form a full baseball team, and facing a pay cut, it was a good thing that France had built a following among the regional beer distributors. His name and sales reputation had made its way to Kansas City, where the Hesse Carriage Company had been courting him for a while to come and talk about joining their team. “I figured it was as good time to go talk,” France said.

As someone who was already employed, France had the upper hand in negotiations with Hesse, and he arranged a dream contract. Hesse agreed to provide him with the same annual income he was making at McCabe-Powers, but they added several incentives. One was a termination contract. They would put \$10,000 (about \$70,000 in 2007 dollars) annually into a holding account, and if France was terminated involuntarily in the first five years, he'd receive the money. After five years, whether the termination was voluntary or involuntary, he'd still receive the money.

“So if I were to stay there 14 years, it would total more than a million dollars,” France said. “It was a pretty unbelievable deal.”

And he'd also get to give himself the title "Director of Sales." Needless to say, France took the job, they packed up their eight children and moved the 270 miles across the state of Missouri to Leawood, Kansas, a suburban town about five miles from downtown Kansas City. It was the beginning of a new decade, and for the Bettens, the beginning of a long, upward journey.

For France, the era began on a somber note. His father, Frank, died of heart failure at a high school football game in California. "He stood up to cheer after a touchdown and slumped forward when he sat back down," France said. "He was already gone when my mother grabbed him to see what was wrong."

Coe's mother had also passed, so Frank became the second parent who would not get to see the height of the couple's success. Half way across the country in Kansas City, France obviously took the news hard. But comfort came from unexpected places.

France and Coe returned to Kansas City after attending the funeral back in Lebanon, but France didn't get to spend much time with his family because he had to leave for business in New York the following weekend.

"So on the Sunday after the funeral, I'm looking for a church," France said. "I was right downtown Manhattan by the Pan Am building, and the only church was a church in an alley. There were no more than 20 people inside at the mass. I went inside and sure enough, they start singing 'Holy God We Praise Thy Name.'"

This was a song that had special significance for France. When he and Coe were children, attending their own small town church back in Lebanon, once a year the congregation would sing with the choir on this song, Holy God We Praise Thy Name.

“Well my dad could not sing, but he could bellow,” France said. “And we also had a guy in the choir named Ice Hohrein. They called him ice because when he was younger he drove around in a horse and buggy and peddled ice for the iceboxes. Whenever it came that time of year to sing Holy God We Praise Thy Name, there would be a bellowing contest between Ice and my dad. As a kid, it was embarrassing.”

At the back alley church in New York, as the congregation began to sing the hymn, a surge of memories and emotions returned.

“I’m a-singing, I’m a-crying, I’m maybe even bellowing,” France said. “All the sudden, I hear the voice of Ice Hohrein and I think ‘My God I’m losing it.’”

France grabbed the back of the pew to steady himself, thinking that he was hallucinating voices from the past. But he turned around to look, and sure enough, there was Ice Hohrein from Lebanon, Illinois.

“I think that sometimes, God intervenes,” France said. “There I was crying and singing and thinking about my dad because he’d just died, and of all the churches in New York, there was Ice Hohrein from Lebanon, Illinois.”

Ice was now working for the state of Illinois as an auditor and was in town for the weekend, but on that day, he could have just as easily been an angel.

Chapter Seven: A Leap of Faith

With a stable, well-paying job and a guaranteed million dollar bonus at the end of 14 years, all France and Coe had to do in Kansas City was sit back and enjoy the suburban life of working and raising their children. Even Coe's parents seemed to be warming up to France the joker now that he was teaming up with their daughter to provide a good home, good food and a good upbringing to such a large family.

They had something very solid going, so they seemed to be past the days of taking risks and pushing the envelope in pursuit of bigger and better things. And then France met a man named Bernie Kaye.

"I was constantly in New York chasing the big orders for Hesse," he said. "And that's where I met Bernie."

Bernie Kaye owned a large company called Lease Plan International, by far the largest purchaser of beverage trucks in the country, and France closed a deal with him to buy 75 truck bodies from Hesse. As they began worked to negotiate deals together and got to know each other, Kaye took a liking to the salesman with the enormous family.

“Bernie never got involved with the details,” France said. “He was just the big man and would sit in to prove that he was the big man.”

On one of the most memorable visits, Bernie came to Kansas City with his sales manager and their customers from 7Up in New York on a Sunday night. France went to the airport to meet them. But the owner of Hesse showed up too.

“So I had to let him take over,” France said. “The boss was telling Bernie, ‘Bernie, Kansas has blue laws and there’s no place we can go get a drink, so we’re going to my house to get a drink.’ Well Bernie said, ‘I didn’t come here to see your damn house. I came here to see France and Coe’s kids.’”

So Bernie, his entourage and France left for the Betten household and left his boss, the owner of Hesse, standing at the airport.

“We got home and one of the guys with Bernie from 7Up said, ‘These can’t all be your kids. There must be some neighborhood kids here.’” France said. “Well, Scott, who was only about ten years old at the time, heard that. And a while later he came up and said, ‘Mr. Betten, can I go home now?’ They really got a kick out of that.”

The working relationship with Bernie Kaye turned into a mutual respect and friendship, and Bernie began telling France that he should leave Kansas City and come to New York, start his own business and just handle the LPI contracts and supply them with truck

bodies. It was a serious offer, and one that France and Coe had to give some serious thought.

On one hand, it had been a year, and France only needed four more before he could get a huge chunk of severance pay even if he left Hesse voluntarily. They had a nice house, an above-average income that was secure and dependable, and their eight kids to think about. On the other hand, they had the word of a straight-talking business mogul and the promise of running a business themselves ... and something told France that there was the potential for greatness in New York City.

The safe decision, fully supported by Coe's parents, was to avoid risk and stay in Kansas City, at least until the five years were up. But if there's one thing France and Coe couldn't resist pursuing, it was the potential for greatness.

Rolling in Ridgewood

In the spring of 1963 the Bettens moved to Ridgewood, New Jersey so France could start his own business in New York.

"We left Kansas City with eight kids and a dog in two station wagons," Coe said. "It was a long trip."

One thousand two hundred miles to be exact, and once again, the Bettens were getting a fresh start in a new town. The village of Ridgewood is a historical place 17 miles

northwest of New York City. It's been established as a village since 1894, and the first house was built there in 1700. It would become the town that most of the Betten kids would think of as home, but first, there was work to be done.

“We had \$10,000 to our names,” France added. “Coe’s dad thought I was insane because he had heard of the deal I had at Hesse. And with such a big family, with so many expenses, Bernie could have easily manipulated me because I needed the income to survive. I knew that.”

As they started off, however, things were good. When they arrived, Bernie Kaye leased 285 trucks to Pepsi-Cola, a huge order, and France was the only person who talked to the purchasing committee to sell them the bodies. In fact, he had to use two of his competitors to complete the order.

The Hungry Soldier, Part Two

A twist of fate brought more fortune in the Bettens’ direction. France had only been in town a few months and although LPI was a big account, it was his only account. He’d hoped to change that by attending a soft drink convention in Atlantic City, but when he arrived, he found himself on the outside looking in.

“I felt just like a post,” France said. “I didn’t know anybody. But then I see a red-headed guy talking to a group of people and they’re all laughing with him and having a great time. It was Captain Lindquist, my army captain from boot camp, I was sure of it.”

France vividly remembered his experience with the captain, when he was brought to the CO's office for taking two trays of food, and how Lindquist had simply said, "You'll get more food."

France approached the man and asked if his name was Lindquist. It was. France asked if he was the Captain Lindquist who had been stationed at Fort Hood during WWII. He answered that he was. It was an amazing coincidence, 30 years and thousands of miles away from boot camp.

"So I told him the story, and he didn't remember it, but he loved it," France said. "And he knew everybody that was there. So he took me around and introduced me to the president of Coca-Cola, the president of Pepsi-Cola, to anybody who was anybody, telling his funny, hungry soldier story. Through him I met the editor of the biggest magazine, which unlocked a lot of doors. And just like that, I was in with the soft drink crowd."

Not that France really even needed connections at that point with Bernie Kaye sending loads of work his way. While delivering the 285 trucks to Pepsi, Kaye leased an amazing 525 trucks to Balantine Brewery. The deal was what they called an R, R, R and RP, for remove, refurbish, remount and repaint. It was going to take an amazing amount of work to do that on 525 trucks.

“They had a fleet manager, a gruff guy who reminded me of General MacArthur,” France said. “He told Bernie, ‘I don’t have the staff to handle that order.’ Bernie said, ‘There’s a guy who just moved to town, and he’s the only guy in the country I know who can handle it.’”

France did handle the order, and again dished out the orders to eight competing body shops in New York and New Jersey. And the work kept rolling in, from Bernie Kaye and from France’s own constant sales efforts. On one occasion, he was meeting with an executive from a brewery to convince them to buy the new doors that they had just contracted.

“The old doors were hollow aluminum, very prone to dings and dents,” France said. The new doors I had were all 3/4-inch plywood – a durable door. I had one installed and took it down there to show it to all these fleet managers. The executive EP was a big gentleman farmer, a strapping guy, and I took a sledgehammer with a pointed end, pointed to the door and said, ‘Beat a hole in that door.’ He said, ‘No, I don’t want to ruin your door.’ I said, ‘No, this is for demonstration purposes, go ahead.’ So he whacked at it and whacked at it. It took him about twelve shots to punch a hole in it. Then I said, ‘Now, hit your door.’ He dropped the axe, and said, ‘No, I’m not going to do that.’ He knew what it would do to it. We sold them 2,100 doors.”

With his dogged pursuit of business and the LPI account as a solid base, France soon had Fleet Sales Corp. rolling to greater and greater highs. There was so much to do that Coe

started to help France with the business, as if she didn't have enough to do with eight kids to referee.

“Now that I have [four] kids, I'm amazed at how she was able to raise all of us, give us all equal amounts of attention, run the house and help dad with the business,” Christie said. “He had an office in the basement and she would be down there working and then run upstairs to make us all lunch.”

At the time, France was so busy that he didn't think about it, but in later years, he reflected on the reasons why Bernie Kaye followed through in such an amazing way and dealt so straight. He decided that his advantage was his huge family.

Bernie could have cut my legs off, but instead, it just was unbelievable,” France said. “Maybe I stood out from other salesman because I worked hard and put in more hours, but basically, I think the biggest part of it was that he was fascinated with our big family. He and his wife couldn't have any children so he liked to come visit, and while Bernie was a ruthless businessman, in his own quiet way he was enamored by the Betten bunch and dumped business on me.”

Even so, many folks wondered aloud to France and Coe how they provided food, shelter and education for so many children. It was a feat that even strangers marveled at, like the time France was at a convention in Atlantic City, and was approached by a black fellow wearing a cowboy outfit who asked for a quarter because he was down on his luck. “I'm

sorry, mister,” France responded, “but I’ve got a wife and nine kids to provide for.”

“Well then God bless you!” the cowboy replied, giving France a quarter instead.

In addition to being careful with his money, France was known for striking bulk discounts on groceries and goods as often as he could. With such a large family to feed, he would approach managers about their best deals, and would often score some great bargains. At the Krogers in St. Louis, France arranged a deal with the manager to come pick up loaves of free bread on Saturday nights, before it was about to turn a day old, because the manager didn’t like to sell day-old bread. On another occasion, France bought out the entire meat section of a grocery store because he struck a good price. And he was always prepared for the bulk buy, with vast amounts of freezer storage back at home.

“I bet he saved thousands of dollars over the years doing stuff like that,” Rick said. “He started doing it because he had to, and just kept on doing it even when he didn’t.”

Chapter Eight: Prosperity – When the Compliments Come

It was in Ridgewood where the Bettens realized how far they had come from their small town background. They were running a booming business, owned an historic carriage house with 16 rooms and five baths, and had a fleet of street wise, independent and well-traveled children. The “village clown and his princess” were now king and queen of their own little kingdom.

And their achievements weren't going unnoticed. On one visit back home, a childhood friend and classmate in Lebanon raised a toast to France. “I'll say one thing for France Betten,” he said. “He married the prettiest girl in town and got the hell out.”

“Took me 25 years to get that first compliment,” France said with a laugh.

On another occasion, Coe's father, George, made a 2,400-mile trip out from Illinois to see their new castle. He got there, looking around with the analyzing eye of a homebuilder. A man of few words, what George did say spoke volumes to France. He said, “Well, you've done well.”

“Finally, in Ridgewood, New Jersey, 30 years and eight kids later,” France said. “The village clown had approval. I wish her mother would have been around.”

Although they could breathe easily financially, it didn't mean that France and Coe's life together became less exciting. They continued to pile up the funny stories, such as the case of mistaken identity in Miami. France and Coe were there for a national soft drink convention, and were hanging around in some high profile company, Jerry Stevens who was the editor of the largest soft drink magazine in the country, and a local senator. The men were also with their wives.

"Soft drinks is big because they sell a lot more trucks and use a lot more trucks than beer," France said. "So it was a huge convention, and that night we were going to cocktail parties, from one hotel to another. I wouldn't have been welcome just a vendor, but when you're with Jerry Stevens, you'd just walk right in. And their wives were dressed to the nines with all their baubles and beads and furs. Thank goodness Coe had a mink so she wouldn't look like their maid."

The three couples were heading to the Dorel Hotel, but couldn't all fit in one cab, so France and the other two men sent the ladies on ahead and said they'd meet them there.

"The cab driver that picked us up saw three guys with convention badges, so he stopped," France said. "He was from Brooklyn so of course he thinks he's got three marks. On the way to the Dorel, he looks in the mirror and says, 'Yous guys here, you wanna have some fun?'"

We said, “Oh yeah? What kind of fun?”

‘How about some action?’

‘Oh yeah, what’s that?’

‘Anything you want. White, black, Chinese, Puerto Rican, I’ve got ‘em all.’”

We jokingly turned to Jerry and said, ‘What do you think Jerry?’ And Jerry said, ‘Nah, I think we’ll just head to the Dorel.’

‘The cabbie said, ‘You don’t wanna have no fun? How about some gamblin’? Dere’s horses, dawgs, private cahd games.’

But Jerry said, ‘Nah, we gotta go to the Dorel.’

“Right about that time we get to the hotel and there’s hundreds of people out front on this big circular drive,” France said. “Where does the cabby stop but right in front of our wives? And we started making over on our own wives. ‘Oooh, I like that one in the middle.’ ‘No, I like the one on the end.’

The cabbie stops and looks at them and says, ‘Dem? Dem’s hookers, you can tell.’

That story made the rounds for a while.”

Another family favorite doesn't have to do with immediate family, but France's brother Fred – Uncle Fred to the kids. Fred was a Greyhound bus driver in California, and would often return home early in the morning after driving all night, where he would promptly fall asleep.

“That was frustrating for him if he wanted to get anything done around the house, because he mostly slept when he was home,” France said. “Well, he had this faucet that had been leaking for a while, but every time he got home, he just slept.”

Finally, Fred vowed to fix the faucet no matter how tired he was, and as soon as he returned from an overnigher, he set himself up under the sink with all his tools and supplies.

“Of course, he fell asleep,” France said. “But he didn't just fall asleep, and that was it. He spilled some of the plumbing glue he was working with and it dried and glued his head to the floor.”

When Fred woke up and found his head stuck to the floor, he yelled for help for several hours, but he lived alone, and when no one showed up, he did what he had to do: He pulled.

“It must have hurt pretty bad, because it tore out a big patch of hair on the back of his head,” France said. “He had a bald patch back there for quite a while.”

The decade of the 1960s was just as colorful for the country at large. Like France and Coe, quite a few families were having children in the forties and fifties, and many in this younger generation were embracing different values. The sixties became synonymous with the radical, experimental, exciting, subversive and rebellious. Old ways of doing things were questioned and a significant distrust in government was gathering steam. The American civil rights movement reached its climax, and feminism and a strong peace movement were on the rise. As the United States entered the Vietnam War, mostly young Americans organized large protests, sit-ins and free speech rallies.

At the same time, popular culture saw an explosion of rock n’ roll, folk and blues music embodied by bands such as The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix Experience, Janis Joplin and Joan Baez. The social scene was influenced by the emergence of recreational drug use and an influx of marijuana and psychedelic drugs, leading to a distinct new slang classification for the young people who embodied the subculture: hippies.

Clean cut, patriotic and Christian, France and Coe and their children were certainly not hippies, but they also began taking part in the creation of a nomadic subculture of their own during the sixties.

A Motorhome Family

In 1964, France and Coe started a tradition that would almost come to define them. They purchased their first motorhome and began taking long trips across the country, from Ridgewood to California and back for six weeks at a time ... with all the kids inside.

“We did it every year and we took a different route every time,” France said. “We got some wild stories. A lot happens when you’ve got eight kids in a 24-foot motorhome.”

It was a non-traditional way to travel, a very new thing at the time, and it even landed them on newspaper pages. In the summer of 1964, the South Bend Tribune in South Bend, Indiana sent a photographer to grab a photo of the RV bound Betten tribe. It ran in the paper the next day, and would come back to play a role in their lives more than 40 years later.

Throughout the sixties, the traveling crew consisted of France and Coe, plus Terry, Cheryl, Scott, Randy, Rick, Mark, Chrissie and Laura. And just for fun, France’s sister “Auntie” Kaye would occasionally tag along. By the time the older kids were in high school, they’d seen every state in the lower 48. And then came Brad.

Brad was born on March 9, 1968 in Ridgewood, NJ, when Terry and Cheryl were already in college, and Scott, Randy and Rick were soon to follow.

“We didn’t exactly plan to have Brad, but he was a happy addition,” France said. “He was naturally the prettiest baby because he was a Caesarian birth.”

Chrissie remembers pouring hot wax on her hand in an attempt to know what sort of pain her mother was going through, and as the youngest at seven, Laura was excited to have a baby brother. As for Brad, he learned to quickly adapt to the well-established customs of the large Betten tribe.

“The action was already going when I was born, so I was late to the party,” Brad said. “It was a lot like when you get on the bus late and all the seats are already taken. We also moved around a bunch.”

Maybe it was because of all that movement that Brad developed a very social personality. Like his father, he enjoyed talking with just about everyone, really enjoyed a good practical joke, and could spin an entertaining tale from a young age.

“Brad always tried to be mischievous and get away with things, but he couldn’t because his brothers had already done it all,” Coe said. “But he definitely had the attitude. I remember one time when he was about 10, he got lost from us on a navy ship tour in Mississippi. We looked everywhere for him, but couldn’t find him inside. When we came out, he was there waiting for us, and he said, ‘Oh, did you people get lost?’”

A large portion of the movement in Brad's life came from France and Coe's love of motorhome travel, and because they felt bad that Brad had already missed out on so much, they repeated many of the trips they'd already taken.

“After Brad came along and he heard all the other kids tell about Yellowstone and Jackson Hole and all these places, we had to turn around and do it all over again,” France said. “So we feel that we've seen it all twice, and we can really appreciate the beauty of this country.”

Of course, traveling with that many people in such a small space wasn't always beautiful, and that's where all the good stories happened. One of the funniest and most disastrous events happened on their first trip in the motorhome while they were in California visiting France's family. They'd left the motorhome in Santa Ana because of an engine problem, taking a quick trip up to see Yosemite National Park while the motorhome was in the shop.

“There was a holding tank release lever in the front of the coach,” France said. “We were in Yosemite when my wife realized that the holding tank was full.’ So I called up my brother Fred. I said ‘Fred, that holding tank is — he said: ‘too late.’”

The shop mechanics had already jacked up the coach and started to remove the engine. But it caught on the holding tank release lever as they were pulling it out. “Sixty gallons

of poo ended up right there in the garage,” France said. “They had to call the fire department. Sixty gallons is a lot of poo.”

The fateful holding tank story is also a reminder of how different the country was at that time. “There were no campgrounds back then, no sanitary dumping stations,” France said. “So you would pull off the road into the weeds and pull the holding tank lever.”

Although the Bettens never made the holding tank mistake again after that first year, they kept piling up the humorous stories.

“Randy caused more trouble than the other seven put together,” Coe said. “So we always had to have some punishment for him.”

Randy’s old punishment had been to sit in the bathroom. But after buying a new coach they realized he didn’t mind the new bathroom because it had a window, and he could stand on the toilet and watch the scenery go by. So the new punishment was to go to the back of the coach and put his nose on the floor.

“One time, when Randy was there with his nose on the floor, he kept hollering: ‘It’s getting hot back here!’” France said. “And we kept saying, ‘Be quiet, Randy!’”

When Randy persisted that the floor was getting hot, France pulled the rig over and discovered that this was no ploy for attention. “The tailpipe had been bent up into the floor from backing into something,” France said. “There were ten-inch flames coming up. I told the kids: ‘As

soon as I get this thing stopped, you all run . . . and I managed to put it out. We didn't have water, but we did have beer.”

Like episodes in a long running series, the Betten motorhome stories are endless: There was the time they went to cut down a Christmas tree in Georgia and got the coach stuck between two trees. The tow truck driver wasn't going to allow them to ride in the coach while it was being towed, but France promised they'd pull down the shades, so he took them to the airport. Or the time Coe was driving through a tunnel in Pennsylvania and it sounded like someone was firing a machine gun at the coach, although the real explanation was they'd forgotten to retract the entry step.

A favorite is the story of Uncle Klem, a Vietnamese pot-bellied pig that was a Christmas present to France and Coe from the kids. “He was a real cute little pig,” France said. “He lived with us for a year. Either by coach or by plane, he crossed America three times. We had Klem in a little animal carrier out in L.A. We were walking past a bar in the hotel lobby and he started going ‘oink, oink, oink.’ There was a drunk in the bar who sat up and said, ‘My God, I hear a pig!’ He thought he was hallucinating.”

While the Bettens' stories are good for comedy value (and there are many more of them) France and Coe believe that all the motorhoming they did with their children had a very meaningful benefit.

“It’s such an educational experience, it’s so broadening,” France said. “There were no VCRs, no TVs, no video games. It’s the reason all nine of our kids are entrepreneurs today. They’re all outgoing.”

All the Betten children agree. “I was a novelty in school, all by myself,” said Brad. “The teacher would talk about places like Niagara Falls or Mount Rushmore or Yellowstone Park, and I had actually been to all of those places.”

In a letter to his parents, Mark Betten wrote, “I know now that we were so blessed by your unexplainable — yet slightly masochistic — desire to enclose us all in this new fangled travel machine and take us from coast to coast, time and time again ... I doubt that you could have imagined how much it would mean to us all so many decades later.”

“We were all in awe of this great country,” Scott added. “It was a history lesson better than any classroom.”

“I would sit in school and they would show a picture of something like the Washington monument,” Rick said. “And I would say, ‘So what? It’s got eleven hundred and seventy steps to the top and I’ve done every one of them.’ At the Statue of Liberty, they don’t allow you in the torch anymore. They don’t even allow you in the crown. I’ve been in both of them.”

Laura still remembers what her father would say whenever they stopped at a new place, “Go make friends.”

On the long drives across country, they would keep the kids entertained by playing games and making up contests. “To keep us busy, we’d get a dime if we could spot a VW bug, or a pig, or a black cow, etcetera,” Laura said. “There was always a big ticket item worth more, like a man sitting on the side of the road in a polka dot shirt selling watermelons with a three legged dog.”

To make it educational, France would challenge the older kids to read the encyclopedia about places they’d been and then pass an oral test for \$50. Cheryl remembers how she missed out on big bucks by mispronouncing Potamac. “We did a lot of singing, too,” she said. “Coming Round the Mountain was a favorite.”

When they visited Disney World, Coe dressed all the kids in red and white stripes so they were easy to find. To avoid missing shoe problems, she gave all the kids flip-flops with their names on them, which were to be deposited in a box by the door before coming inside.

And if that doesn’t cement their veteran status, their Family Motor Coach Association number does. It’s 905; they got it in 1965, just two years after FMCA was formed. The most recent FMCA numbers are well into 400,000.

The Bettens are proud owners of Monaco brand motorhomes — they’ve owned 14 in all — and they’re members of the Monaco Travelers owners’ club, a wonderful second family for them. They were able to share many significant moments with their Monaco family, including their 58th wedding anniversary with many motorhomers attending. As part of the celebration, the Bettens “kids” did some talking about all of their motorhome adventures. Laura took the stage and told the crowd a story that surprised even her parents. She said, “Late at night, when you thought we were all asleep, we could hear dad, serenading mom. Then she started leading the audience in the song ‘Let Me Call You Sweetheart.’”

“There were 140 people singing ‘Let Me Call You Sweetheart’ and everybody’s crying,” France remembers. “It was a sight.”

Talking To Toots

The motorhoming habits would also come to play a role in France and Coe’s relationship with a well-known New York restaurateur and saloonkeeper by the name of Toots Shore. Toots Shore’s restaurant was a place on West 51st Street where regular folks would sit side-by-side with political leaders, sports heroes and celebrities of the day, such as Joe DiMaggio, Mickey Mantle, Frank Sinatra, Walter Cronkite and Yogi Berra. The patrons would sit around a huge circular bar in the center of the house, and most of the time, the talk in Toots Shore’s was about sports – the celebrities were given their personal space and non-celebrities were welcomed just the same by the lovable, straight-talking Toots.

France and Coe found themselves in his Toots' good graces almost by accident.

"We'd just sit in Toots Shore's and watch the celebrities walk in and out," France said.

"One night we got to talking with the headwaiter and told him that we had a motorhome. It was just an old beater, but we let him take it on vacation for a weekend. He blew the engine, but he took it on vacation."

About a month went by before France and Coe heard from the headwaiter again, but when he called, he told them that Toots had broken his hip and had spent the last month in a hospital in Washington D.C.

"Toots employees were like his family," France said. "Every waiter in there could give someone a free drink if it was appropriate."

The headwaiter wanted to see if they could borrow the motorhome to head down and visit Toots. Of course, the generous Bettens said it was no problem.

"So they took off at four am for Washington D.C. loaded up with food and booze," France said. "When they got there, the governor of Ohio and the head of the NFL from Cleveland was in his room. They told Toots to go to the window and look down at the street. When he saw the motorhome, he said, 'Jiminy Christmas! I gotta check the cash register.'"

After that display of generosity by the Bettens, Toots took them under his wing and treated them like royalty. “We couldn’t spend any money in there,” France said. “We almost became celebrities. Toots was a great big hulk of a man, but he was the kindest person you ever saw. From then on, when he made his rounds, after he was done walking around visiting celebrity tables, he would come sit with us. And sometimes he’d bring celebrities, I can remember him bringing by Joe Lewis.”

For France and Coe, knowing Toots was quite an interesting glimpse into the lives of some of the most famous people of the day. For example, Toots had a close friendship with actor Jackie Gleason, and there were numerous stories involving the two men at Toot’s restaurant. “They would both try to out drink each other,” France said. “One night, Gleason got up to go to the restroom and fell flat on his face, passed out. Toots said, ‘Leave him lay, that will teach him to drink with the king.’ So people had to step over Jackie Gleason to go to the bathroom.”

Chapter Nine: Falling Down and Getting Up

Taking the risk to bring the tribe to New York really began to pay off financially in the late '60s and early '70s. What had started as one big contract with Bernie Kaye and LPI had grown into a multi-million dollar business spanning the country. By working from their basement office in Ridgewood and making sales trips across the country with nine kids in a motorhome, France and Coe had created Betten Trucks, the largest beverage truck body distributorship in the country. The recipe of creativity and tireless pursuit of business was working wonders.

“My father has more energy than anyone I’ve ever known,” Laura said. “I’m not sure I can ever remember a time when he said he was too tired to do something. I think that’s the biggest reason that he’s an amazing entrepreneur.”

One demonstration of France’s creativity came about while he was attending a beverage trade show. In a time long before cell phones, France realized that many of the attendees were waiting until the end of the day or leaving the conference centers to find a pay phone whenever they wanted to call home. So he decided to set up free banks of phone at the Betten Trucks booth, which was conveniently located away from the rest of the vendors where France had a grateful and captive audience.

“The free phones were a huge hit,” he said. “We had clients lining up to use them, and they were really appreciative. While they were standing there in line waiting, they were right in front of the booth so we could talk to them about Betten Trucks without being pushy.”

Whatever tactics France used, they all seemed to be working, and even some of the Betten kids were getting in on the business. Terry, Scott, Rick, Randy, Cheryl and Brad all worked for Betten Trucks at various times.

“For the most part, though, I think we were all too bull-headed, just like dad, to be able to work for him too long,” Brad said. “But still, whenever we moved, we moved as a group.”

In 1969, the Betten group (even those in college or military school) moved from New Jersey to Miami, Florida. “I got a big contract down in Miami with Royal Crown cola,” France said. “They were a big company and it was an important lease contract for 180 truck bodies.”

Knowing that France would be in Miami almost on a full-time basis to take care of the RC contract, Coe suggested that they just move the entire family down, so they did.

They continued to prosper in the sunshine state, and while their upbringing would never allow France and Coe to become overly frivolous spenders, they did enjoy the luxuries of

a beautiful home, top quality cars and motorhomes, as well as a private company airplane in Iowa.

After five years in Miami, the successful business prompted another move to Ames, Iowa in 1975. Randy was working with his father and mother now, and with 800 trucks on a two-year lease all around the country, they decided that they needed a central location to service the trucks before leasing them out again.

“We found a complete, 50,000 square foot renovation facility in Ames,” France said. “It even had a show room.”

A teenager, Laura was not happy with the decision. “I went there under protest,” she said. “From Miami to Iowa? I remember saying that I didn’t even know Iowa was a state.”

But it was a state that was central to the beer industry, and Ames was a town that immediately embraced Betten Trucks. This was no longer a husband and wife operation, or even a family operation. It was a nationwide distributorship with many employees, millions of dollars of inventory and several different facilities.

“We were set in Ames,” Rick said. “Reputation within the beer industry is huge and my dad had built a great reputation. He had a full army of friends. It was almost like we could have coasted through on name recognition alone.”

France and Coe had moved from the realm of “mom and pop business” to corporate mergers. In the late '70s, France made the decision to buy out Remke, a national transportation company with offices in Detroit, Cincinnati, and Florence, Kentucky.

“We were sitting at the top of the world in our industry,” France said. “We were selling 40 percent of the beverage trucks in the industry.”

France and Coe had climbed a long ladder from their days in Lebanon to the heights of success, and it seemed that they'd get to enjoy the view and coast into early retirement, but in a flash, they found themselves struggling to hold on to their financial success.

Betten Trucks had been affected by the national energy crisis in the 1970s, but they had survived. While many other countries were developing a middle class in the 1970s, the United States already had a middle class, and this decade marked a time of economic recession for most people in the U.S. A large factor in this economic slow down was the drastic increase in the price of oil, first as a result of the OPEC oil embargo of 1973, and then as a result of unrest in the Middle East and a national panic in the United States in 1979.

Things were not easy for Betten Trucks because of paying much higher transportation costs to ship truck bodies, so when huge interest rates came along in the early 80s, just as Betten Trucks had invested in expanding, it was enough to crack the foundations of the company.

“We had a lot of inventory, which was one secret to our success,” France said. “If you were a distributor and you had a truck go down, you could call us and tell us exactly what kind of truck you needed and what you wanted the paint job and the decals to look like, and we could find that model in our used inventory and get it decaled and at your front door in 24 hours, even if it was a thousand miles away – and we could do it for less than anybody else.”

Providing that kind of service meant owning a large inventory of used beverage trucks, so when the prime interest rate reached an unprecedented 22 percent, it was bad news for Betten Trucks.

“When distributors needed a new truck, they would go to their bankers to get financing,” France said. “But their bankers were telling them not to take a loan at 22 percent prime, telling them to wait until it came down. So all at the same time, all the distributors stopped buying from us or updating or adding to their fleets.”

This left France and company with some very large bills to pay, and only a trickle of the revenue stream needed to pay them. “We had too much inventory and no one could get a loan to buy trucks. I’d just bought Remke and spent myself poor. We were overextended and had \$8 million worth of inventory,” France said. In addition, with many more people involved in managing the company now, France was not aware that some of the bookkeeping had been fumbled, which brought additional heat from the IRS.

“It only took 11 months to lose five million dollars,” France said. “We had 400,000 square feet under roof in five facilities in four states and we lost every square foot. We had hundreds of employees and eventually dwindled down to a dozen.”

The domino effect was too strong to stop, and France and Coe lost everything they’d earned in order to cover the financial losses. The buildings, the trucks, the airplane, the cars, and eventually Coe’s dream house — they were all casualties of the downturn.

Adding insult to injury, the new employees that France had acquired in the Remke deal, they were not happy, and had a laundry list of complaints against the previous management. They were also being courted by the labor union, and almost as soon as Betten Trucks bought the company, the employees went on strike. France was wary of the union and in 1979 and decided to move to Florence in order to deal with the volatile situation.

“I wanted to show them that I was an honest owner and that I would deal with them fairly, but I didn’t want a union involved,” France said. “I’d rather sit down face-to-face with my employees individually and address their concerns that way.”

Although France wasn’t allowed to have any direct contact with the employees during the weeks when the union was in negotiations with them, he threw a party to demonstrate his goodwill. When the employees voted on whether to unionize, it seemed that they

believed their straight-talking new owner. The vote was against the union. However, the union had the right to call a re-vote, which they did.

“Now, when you have a union vote, all of the employees who have quit or were fired, they can come back and vote,” France said. “So even a disgruntled worker who was fired because he never showed up, he could come back and vote against you.”

The re-vote went the other way, and the employees voted to unionize. Knowing that they couldn’t meet the union demands in an already tight economic situation, France closed the plant. The losses continued to pile up from there.

For a 12-year-old Brad, the only one left at home, it was a very difficult change. He was especially affected by the loss of the house, which happened when a renter discovered the Betten’s financial woes and purchased the house out from under them.

“It was a hard time,” Brad said. “But I also learned a lot through the whole experience.”

France and Coe were able to demonstrate to their youngest child — and to everyone who knew them — just how to handle things when life doesn’t go your way. For the Bettens, it was simply a matter of getting back up, dusting off, and moving on.

“My mom handled it in her usual quiet, strong way, completely committed to her family,” Brad said. “My dad handled it in a classic way, too. He said, ‘If I’m going to be poor, I’m going to be poor someplace I like.’”

France and Coe were not fond of Kentucky from the minute they moved there, and so they made a decision to head toward one of their favorite destinations over the years, Orlando, Florida, where Terry was living nearby with a family of his own.

The first house that France and Brad found in Satellite Beach, Florida seemed like a good place to them, but when Coe found out about the street name, she said ‘no way.’

“It was on the corner of Florence Avenue and Florence Court,” Coe said. The last thing she wanted to think about was the town in Northern Kentucky they’d just left. “So we found a house on a different street.”

Florida was a place where most of their children had moved, where they could be with their family, and there was no couple with a better understanding of the strength of family.

“They say that people are like trees,” France said. “You can’t tell their true size until they’re down.”

Chapter 10: Facing Tough Times Together

There were several times when France and Coe, their children and their loved ones had to demonstrate their true size, but they also marvel at the good fortune they've received when it comes to health and longevity.

“One thing that amazes me is how little tragedy we've had to endure,” France said. “This family hasn't had to deal much with death. I'm grateful for that blessing.”

Out of all nine children, 28 grandchildren and 20 great grandchildren, there was just one untimely death. It did bring great sorrow, but once again the family members rallied around each other and grew closer together. In 1977, Randy and his wife Rita were living in Aimes, Iowa with two children: a toddling boy, Shawn, and a baby girl, Jamie. Things were going well for the family – Randy was working with France at Betten Trucks and business was good.

In fact, Randy had been so busy that he and Rita hadn't really taken an extended vacation by themselves since they'd been married. Jamie was eleven months old, so they hired a nanny and headed to France's condo in Orlando for some relaxation.

“Terry [the oldest child] was the first person to find out that something had gone wrong,” Randy said. “And he had just left the condo, so when he showed back up at the door, and when I saw his face, I knew. I knew that something was very wrong.”

Terry took his younger brother aside and told him the news that he had just learned: Jamie had died in her crib.

“I think that was the hardest time we’ve ever had to go through as a family,” Laura said. “Randy knew that he had to get Rita home to family before she learned that she lost her baby. He didn’t want to tell her in Florida, so he got them on a plane back to Iowa the next day.”

Their flight was delayed and they were stuck in Chicago, but Randy called a friend, who was president of Anheiser Busch, and he sent his private jet to get them home. When they arrived back in Aimes, France and Coe and the rest of the family were waiting. Randy took his wife upstairs and told her that they had lost their baby girl.

“We were all downstairs to be there for her,” Laura said. “And the sounds of a mother mourning for her baby — well, I just can’t imagine what that was like for either of them.”

Jamie’s passing was diagnosed as crib death, no wrongdoing had caused it, although that certainly didn’t make it any easier to understand. Still, the family came together in

healing as they had always done, and Randy had the full support of his parents, his five brothers and three sisters and all of the extended family.

“Taking care of each other collectively, as a group, that was something that we had always done,” Cheryl said. “There was so many of us, that we always had a big support system.”

Time brought peace and new blessings. Many years later, the family would once again have a Jamie Betten when Randy’s first child Shawn named his own child, a baby girl, after his sister Jamie.

Cheryl’s Close Call

It was also many years later when severe and random illness struck the immediate family. In August of 2003, at the age of 54, Cheryl contracted the West Nile virus from a mosquito bite. It was a small thing that led to major complications.

Initially, she got very ill and was placed in the hospital -- West Nile is a potentially deadly virus and had already killed more than 500 people since 1999, so doctors took Cheryl’s case very seriously. Of course, her four sons and daughters were there for her, as well as the extended “big support system.”

Cheryl’s sisters Laura and Chrissie arrived by plane the next day, and Coe and France and the other Betten children were immediately making plans to follow. Cheryl was

conscious but very sick, and the doctor told Laura and Chrissie to ask the rest of the family not to come. “He said, ‘There’s nothing that more family can do for her at this point,’” Laura recalled. “He said, ‘Her body just has to fight it, but you can’t let her think that she’s dying, and more family will do that.’ But until he said that, every single member of the family was on the way to the airport.”

They followed the doctor’s advice, but the virus seemed to be winning. Cheryl’s condition worsened and she fell into a coma. The doctor now advised that it was okay for more family to come, so Coe and France came up in a motorhome, and brother Rick took a plane.

Cheryl’s doctor told the family that they had two options, they could choose to go with the traditional method of treatment, or allow treatment with an experimental drug called Interferon. It wasn’t yet fully proven and had the risk of dangerous side effects, but they thought it might work.

Initially, Cheryl’s grown children had deliberated and decided that they didn’t want to give their mother the experimental drug. But Rick had been successfully treated before with Interferon, and convinced Cheryl’s children to consent to the treatment. Cheryl was given the treatment and it worked. She was one of only two people who lived out of the test group of West Nile patients, and the only difference was that she and the other survivor had been given Interferon.

“That’s when I went, ‘You know what? That’s why God brought Rick up,’” Laura said. “Because they had already decided not to give her the experimental treatment.”

“We thought that we might lose her,” Coe said. “She was in that coma and they had administered last rites, but she came out of it. We stayed up there [in the coach, in hospital parking lots] for three months.”

Even after Cheryl came out of the coma, she was in very rough shape. Doctors thought that she might be disabled for the rest of her life, so Coe and France stayed to help with rehab.

“I actually don’t remember any of the illness,” Cheryl said. “All I knew was that I was very sick, but the hospital stay, I don’t have any memory of that at all.”

Even after she was released from treatment, it took almost two years before Cheryl was able to walk independently, but eventually, with the help of her family she had a complete recovery.

“When we knew what we were struggling with, we all came together immediately like the United Way,” Laura said. “Everyone chipped in what they could financially or with their time to help her out.”

France had a close call of his own at the beginning of 2006. He was hospitalized and placed in the intensive care unit after a severe reaction to medication. Doctors were not hopeful for a recovery and told the family to prepare for the worst. Once again, the Bettens gathered for support in a time when death seemed imminent, but France regained his health.

Chapter 11: Rebuilding

While they thought they would be retiring in their mid-fifties, France and Coe found themselves broke and starting over in the business world. Throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, they went back to work, resurrecting Betten Trucks.

Most of France and Coe's life together paralleled the overall pattern of life in the United States. They buckled down in the 30s, stepped into their own in the 40s, boomed in the 50s, were finally able to relax a little in the 60s, and then came on challenging times again in the late 70s and early 80s.

But during the late 80s, they broke rank out of necessity. In a country all about big business and mega-corporations, Betten Trucks was once again a smaller "mom and pop" operation, and instead of focusing on mergers or acquiring other companies, they were back to the business they knew best, used beverage trucks, re-developing their niche, exploring entrepreneurial ideas and renewing business relationships. It was those strong relationships and friendships that France and Coe counted as among the most important blessings.

“We were so blessed that we gravitated toward the beer business,” France said. “They have a bad name at the retail level, but on a wholesale level, they have to be super clean, moral and gregarious people because they are so heavily regulated. They are the most wonderful people in the world – if I had to choose between doctors, lawyers and beer distributors ... I’d take the beer distributors.”

In addition to the assistance of friends in the beer distribution industry, it was their own wealth of knowledge and experience that helped France and Coe emerge from all of their setbacks.

“Used trucks brought us back,” France said. “We knew the used truck business better than anybody. We could get them painted and to a distributor faster and cheaper than anyone else.”

For a time, when Brad was in his late teens and early 20s, he worked with his father, delivering trucks and developing ideas. “It really made an impression on me that my parents got back up after getting kicked in the teeth,” Brad said. “To start over after you lose everything – that’s not easy. I liked working with my dad, but I was just as bull-headed, like all of us who worked for him, so it was only for about five years.”

France relocated Betten Trucks to Indian Harbor Beach, Florida (where it remains in 2007) and with Laura off to college working on a law degree and all the kids out of the house except one, Brad found himself getting a hands-on course in how to run a business.

During that time, Brad started as Terry, Scott, Rick and Randy had started before, and delivered a lot of trucks. “On college break, any time you had a break, you were taken care of, but you didn’t have free time,” Brad said. “That’s when you worked, and we all have tales of crossing the country for Betten Trucks. I remember doing five trucks from Chicago to Melbourne in four days. I’d drive and sleep on the fly. My last year working, I flew 100,000 miles on one airline and drove almost 100,000 miles delivering trucks.”

By the 1990s, Brad had left the company for college and Betten Trucks was back on solid ground. France moved into a position of semi-retirement with the company, still keeping an eye on operations without being actively involved in the day-to-day operations. At that point, France and Coe went back to doing a lot of motorhoming again. Eventually, their unusual and entertaining travel stories made it to the pages of national RV magazines three times, including a cover spot on *Family Motor Coaching*, the largest motorhome magazine in the industry.

In August 2006, the nine Betten children commemorated their parents’ 60th wedding anniversary by planning a secret Life Celebration — a three-day re-creation of their infamous motorhome adventures. Because of the age difference, it was the first time ever that all nine children and their parents had taken a trip together. The Betten nine orchestrated a weekend away to a Florida island house, complete with a motorhome trip with 13 people on-board, including France’s sister Auntie Kaye and a magazine editor writing an article on the reunion.

In 1964, a photo was taken of eight Betten children, Auntie Kaye, France, and Coe outside their “new-fangled” motorhome. It appeared in the *South Bend Tribune*. The Betten children decided to recreate that photo (plus Brad) 42 years later. But they didn’t stop there. They kept the gathering from France and Coe as a surprise, telling their parents that they were sending them on a vacation to Rome (although they meant “roam.”)

Of course, the kids didn’t tell their parents what the real plan was, trying to fool them by putting them aboard a private airplane for a short ride on the tarmac, but they eventually carried out their plan to get everyone inside the 40-foot motorhome.

The entire gang of nine got on board with their parents and Auntie Kaye, dressed appropriately in the same clam diggers they had been made to wear as children, as well as “Betten Bunch” jerseys, numbered according to place in the family progression. Along the way, on the short road trip to Stuart, Florida, they sang all their old traveling song favorites and shared their best road memories. Upon arrival, after a minor misunderstanding between the motorhome and the entry gate, the 42 year-old newspaper photo was recreated.

There was no way everyone was going to sleep in the motorhome, so for “secondary” accommodations they rented a beautiful private home on an island, complete with personal catering staff and live entertainment. There was a Betten fishing contest, the ol’

egg cracking competition, the traditional whiffleball golf tournament, and they made France's infamous vacation meal, Mulligan Stew. The favorite game of the weekend was Liar's Dice and they initiated a few newbies into the scissor game of "crossed or uncrossed."

Over the course of three days, along with ample amounts of celebration, the nine kids presented their parents with many more gifts and surprises, including edited DVDs that had been made from 200 rolls of old 8mm family films and put to music. As the images of motorhome adventures across America flashed on the screen, the family came together to reminisce and count their blessings. There are scenes of the many destinations they visited on those cross-country trips: riding horses in Yosemite, pointing at the faces of Mount Rushmore, driving through Redwoods, watching Old Faithful geyser, feeding a wild bear cub, which made the magazine editor wonder how all of the Bettens managed to come out of their childhood alive, much less with all their fingers and toes.

One section of the DVDs that brought the biggest laughs was set to the song, "All My Exes Live in Texas." As the song played over the speakers, the screen flashed images of all the Betten children's ex-husbands and wives.

"All of the kids have been through divorces, and it could have been awkward if just some of the exes were in the DVDs," France said. "But to have a parade of clips like that with that song playing in the background – now that was funny."

For France and Coe, the entire weekend was a blissful experience that not even the Pope could inspire — only family. “They fooled the fooler,” France said. “It’s amazing.”

“Our parents always went all-out in the things they did,” explained Randy. “So we’re going all-out for them.”

Coe and Christmas

When looking at France and Coe Betten as a couple, it’s easy to see France, the bold and gregarious storyteller who likes to talk and has learned the art of self-promotion through a long career in running his own business. It’s not so easy to see the more reserved Coe, who appears more serious and doesn’t seek out the limelight, and even when the limelight is on her, she is sparing with her words.

But for her children and those who know her, Coe Betten provides the strong, unseen machinery that keeps everything together – she is the family’s bonding force. When asked to describe their mother, Coe’s children often speak with a combination of awe and tenderness.

“She is just commitment, tireless commitment,” Laura said. “She has a huge heart. ‘Mom’ is the best description of her because that is who she is. Her very breath is for her children every single day. Family defines her.”

“[My mother] is as hard as a cottonball,” Scott said. “She has a stern demeanor but inside she’s just as soft as can be.”

“I don’t know how she was able to divide her time and her love so that all of us were made to feel special,” Cheryl said. “I have four kids and nine grandkids and I can’t make everybody feel like she made us feel.”

Rick remembered an early experience that illustrated how his mother shaped his goals and his perception of the world.

“In grade school they would pull each child out and there would be an interviewer trying to get a psychological profile on you,” he said. “One of the questions was, ‘What do you want out of life?’ I thought about it. I never needed shoes. I never needed socks. I never needed anything. My answer was, I wanted to have enough ability financially and emotionally to give my children what they wanted, but only when they needed it. My second number was to find a wife that was as strong as my own mother.

“She is so enormous in her small stature,” Rick continued. “She is patient, caring, loving, and plain gorgeous from the inside out, because she comes from there, from the heart out. She never made any of us feel like number two pencils.”

“She ran the household, she took all that laundry down the chute, she put it out on the line, folded it, put it out for us by name, that’s a lot of laundry, that’s a lot of meals,” Randy added. “But she also ran the business with my dad. She is a whole lot of a mom.”

Any mention of Coe is also bound to bring up the mention of Christmas, because, although all the holiday traditions are big in the Betten family, Coe is known for the amazing amount of energy she puts into Christmas. It has almost become mythical.

“I like to joke that, between Thanksgiving and Christmas, I could have an affair because I don’t see her,” France said. “She’s just not around. I get lonely!”

With such a large family to shop for, it would be easy for Coe to buy bulk gifts or throw concerns of equity out the window, but she didn’t.

“She was so amazing at having presents for everybody,” Chrissie said. “We all had the same number of presents and the same dollar amount spent. And she would make herself crazy to do that. I can’t imagine buying presents for nine people and making sure we all got what we wanted and that the same amount was spent for each of us.”

For Laura, one of the biggest things that her mother instilled in her around holidays was a sense of tradition. It’s something that she now shares with her children.

“One of our cherished traditions came out of mom needing to even out the dollar amount for the girls, so she bought each of us a five dollar angel bell.” Laura said. “Then she continued to do that each year for 31 years.”

One game that became a tradition at Christmas was Secret Elf. Each family member would draw the name of another family member out of a hat. They were that person’s secret elf and for the next week they would have to do nice things for the other person without being caught.

“So if I got your name and you went to go take a shower or go to the bathroom, I’d sneak in and make your bed,” Laura said. “When Christmas came, we all had to say what our secret elf did for us and then we’d get an award for whoever was the best secret elf.”

The Flaws of Family

Unless it’s a fairy tale, no story of a flawless family would ring true, and France and Coe Betten certainly make no pretenses at having created a flawless family. When asked about their family, the nine children have no hesitation in thinking of the flaws.

“We are all ultra-independent, anal a-holes,” Rick said. “Bull-headed and stubborn, just like our parents.”

Being the oldest Terry was often naturally looked to as a leader, especially with such a wide gap in age from youngest to oldest, but as the rest of his brothers and sisters came of

age, Terry found that everyone wanted to lead, or at least, everyone wanted to tell everyone else what to do.

“They’re all headstrong,” Terry said. “Put them all in a room and ask them to make a decision, and you’ll have eight different decisions.”

“There’s not a follower in the bunch,” Mark adds. “It’s just like when we make Mulligan stew, everybody wants to stir because everybody thinks they know the best way to do it.”

For the Betten women, while they agree on the family assessment as fiery and domineering, they also bring a different perspective to the matter. The social norms their parents grew up in contributed to a male-centered view of the world, and as the United States changed, granting women different roles, so did the Bettens, but early on, the sisters say they felt a slightly different status.

“We were a very chauvinistic family,” Laura said. “The girls were raised serving the brothers, literally waiting on our brothers. That obviously changed, but it made an impact.”

Laura pointed to the story of her enrollment and graduation from law school as an example. Before she went, she felt that her father was indifferent and her mother was somewhat confused. “Mom could not understand why I wanted to go to law school,” Laura said. “[Her thinking was,] ‘You have a husband, you stay home.’ That just made

sense to her. But when I graduated, dad sent the goofiest graduation cards to me from everyone who had ever known me. And when it was all said and done, he said to me, ‘I’m so proud of you, I can not believe my daughter is a lawyer.’ I was so excited to have my father’s approval, but it didn’t quite ring true, and then he finished the sentence. ‘If only you were a boy.’ And I thought, ‘Yes, that’s my dad. He is proud of me, he just wishes I was a boy.’”

Laura thinks that France’s mother, her Grandma Betten, was a big reason for her drive to be self-directed. “She grabbed my ear on that at a formative age,” Laura said. “She had also been subservient to her husband, but he died and she was on her own. I can remember her coming in and talking to me at night and telling me to make my own rules.”

Strength in Numbers

When it comes to the Betten family’s strong points, there are many, and even some of the weaknesses (such as assertiveness) can be counted as strengths, depending on perspective. One perspective that was always a part of the family but far enough away to have some distance, was that of France’s sister Auntie Kaye. The way she saw things, her brother’s family was a fascinating and dynamic whirlwind of activity and energy.

“I loved coming to visit them or traveling with them,” she said. “There is never a dull moment – and when you’re with them, there is always something going on.”

As for her brother France, Kaye wraps him up in one phrase, “Always to the rescue. Whenever anyone in the family needed help, he was there,” she said. “When our sister Mary moved to New York and was on her own, he gave her food. When my niece was going through a divorce and needed help, who was there but my brother France. It just goes on and on. He is very generous.”

The main strength of the family that Kaye and every one of the Bettens points out, is how they all take care of each other. “If anyone is in trouble, the next day, the rest of them will be there to help,” Kaye said. “I always admired that.”

“When you have nine people, even if we don’t all get along on a daily basis, if somebody needs help, there’s no hesitation,” Scott added. “There’s a lot of strength in that.”

At some time or another, they have all experienced the “United Way” effect that happens when there is a need for help. Whether it’s the loss of a child or financial challenges or relationship troubles, the Bettens rally around each other. When Randy’s family lost their baby girl, he had a team of ten others there to help, not to mention extended family.

When Chrissie fell upon hard times, the rest of the Betten tribe helped her get back to solid ground, her brothers taking it upon themselves to fill in as temporary “house” husbands – one to help with her sons, one to help with transportation, one to help with finances, etc.

“It’s also a very forgiving family,” Rick said. “When you mess up, they’ll give you some s--t, but after that it’s in the past.”

One question that makes all the Betten children laugh: What it would have been like to be an only child. “Are you kidding? With them as parents?” Brad said. “Being the only one to entertain them? It would be a nightmare.”

Some of them joked that it would be extremely peaceful, but when the joking is over, all of the Bettens agree that they wouldn’t have it any other way.

“I can’t imagine what it would have been like to be an only child,” Mark said. “That’s like asking what it would be like to be a martian. I just cannot fathom it.”

Chapter 12; Twenty-first Century Bettens

The Betten family tree at the beginning of the second millennium is almost biblical it has so many branches. France and Coe, or “Nana and Pepe,” have become not only grandparents, but great-grandparents many times over. Here’s the picture as it looks in 2007:

Their first child, Terry, and his partner Carol live in Melbourne Beach, Florida. Terry owns a pool business and has three grown children: David, LeeShea and Carrie. David lives in Largemont, New York with his wife Karen and three kids, SheaAnn, Jack and Rori, while LeeShea and Carrie call Florida home.

Cheryl lives in Omaha, Nebraska, and has an impressive crew that includes four grown children: Kimberley, Brett, Shana and Jesse. Kimberley and her husband Rick live in Corning, Nebraska and have six children; Jordan, Rebecca, David, Madison, Anna and Calissa. Brett and his wife Michelle live in Montana and have three kids; Wesley, Jackson and Katia. Shana and her husband Adam live in Nebraska.

Scott lives in Miami and runs a real estate business with his partner, Joanie, while his son Derek lives in Orlando. His daughter Brittany lives in Colorado with her fiancé Ross.

Randy has a trucking company and lives with his wife Liz live in Naples, Florida. The seven children of their family include: Shawn, Jamie, Jaden, Brooks, Chantelle, Jessica and Morgan. Shawn, the oldest, has four children with his wife Cheryl: Jenna, Zach, Kyle and Jamie. They live in Haddonfield, New Jersey. Jaden lives in Naples, Florida and also has two children, Autumn and Trinity. Chantelle lives in Slinger, Wisconsin with her kids Justice and Versailles.

Rick also lives in Naples, Florida with his wife Jan and four children in their teens and twenties: Michael, Steven, Ricky, and Katelyn. He also owns his own business as a home building contractor.

Mark and his wife Claudia live outside of Tampa Bay and have two young girls, Blaise and Brooke. Mark is a professor of communications at the University of South Florida.

Chrissie lives in Satellite Beach, Florida and has four boys in their teens and twenties, which in itself is like running a full-time business, although she is also a licensed massage therapist. Her sons are Phillip, Patrick, Nicholas and Anthony.

Laura and her husband Bill live in Indian Harbor Beach and have a girl, Olivia, and a boy, Trey. Laura is a practicing lawyer and professor of law and Bill owns Southern Janitor Supply, a chemical and paper supply company.

Brad and his wife Kate also live in Melbourne Beach. Brad has his own real estate business there.

“I think it’s worth noting that [all nine sons and daughters] are so entrepreneurial and outgoing,” France said. “And I’m sure that has a lot to do with all the traveling they did as children.”

All Together Now

In June 2007, there was another large Betten family gathering in Indian Harbor Beach, but this time it was attended by nearly the entire clan of over 70 children, spouses, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. It was also the first time in family history that this had ever happened – some of the cousins and second cousins had never met before. To commemorate the occasion and celebrate Coe’s birthday, the Bettens rented out nearly all of the rooms in the Oceanique beachfront resort.

For a full week, the Bettens celebrated as only the Bettens can celebrate. They started off with a Luau, featuring a limbo contest for the kids and the live entertainment of talented ventriloquist Peggy Miller and her feisty alter ego doll Willie as “Willie and Co.”

LeeShea Betten gave all nine families different colored T-shirts, marking them as the Red Team, the Blue Team, the Pink Team, etc. The teams all exchanged swaps, special mementos that would provide tangible reminders of the reunion. They also celebrated Coe's Christmas, a tribute to Coe's favorite holiday, complete with a decorated Christmas tree. Inside the ornaments were photos of each person who attended the reunion.

Among all the games, lunches, and dinners, other activities included body surfing, swimming and a boat building contest where each Betten team was only given cardboard, plastic, tape and a ruler to make something that would keep one person afloat.

The organized activities kept everyone engaged, but the real beauty of the gathering was in the bonds that formed, especially for the younger generations. "My grandson David says his new favorite team shirt is his Red Team shirt from the reunion," Cheryl said. "That speaks volumes for a kid his age. And my granddaughter Maddie has already called her cousin Patrick and written to her cousins Blaise and Brooke. It was so special to me to be able to share my family with my children's families."

Reflecting on a Legacy

Memories and stories are almost endless when considering two lifetimes that span more than 80 years, a marital union beyond 60 years, the adventures of raising nine children and traveling across country, and the continuing action associated with the many Betten in-laws, grandchildren, great-grandchildren and friends. For France and Coe, it is obvious that they take pride in their family, but that pride is paired with gratitude and endless

thanks for the blessings they have received and the good fortune that has landed upon them.

If it's true that the world we see as individuals is merely a reflection of what's inside, then it might come as no surprise that France and Coe and their children independently answer one question exactly the same: Deep down, are people basically good and worthy or are they rotten?

The details vary, and some aren't as concise, but as Coe puts it, "All people are good." It's a value that she and her husband have passed down, and it may have something to do with the good fortune that they have enjoyed.

Occasionally known for speeches, France encapsulates his thankfulness with a little more verbosity than Coe. He jokes about reaching the end of his years in life, and how he sees the inevitable passage that awaits everyone.

"I don't want people to mourn us when we pass," France said. "I want people to celebrate. In a way we've lived many lives, and they've all been good. Our first life was raising nine extrovert kids, living together and making all sorts of friends as a family. The second life was creating a successful and enjoyable business and getting to know the fantastic people nationwide who came through that. We've also had a life of traveling as motorhomers, spending years doing it with our kids and then another 15 years with an adopted Monaco motorhome family. And each of the recent reunions have even felt like

lifetimes of experience. So that makes about five so far: five great lives. Some people don't get to feel like they've even had one good life.”