

PRAIRIE LAWYER



THE LEGACY OF MIKE AND MARTHA KLINE

WHEN MIKE KLINE WAS ABOUT 14 YEARS OLD he traveled across central Nebraska to visit his aunt, Hattie Jones, who had a farm near Clay Center. This was his first acquaintance with the area that would be so important in his later life, and the first time he met the young lady, Martha Beyers, who would be even more important. His first infatuation was not with her, but that changed dramatically over the next few years, Martha Kline recalled.

“When Mike was a young man, eighth or ninth grade, he had an aunt that lived on a farm in Clay Center, and he would come over here and he was my age. He got acquainted with the young kids and I got to know him then through a friend of mine. Then, later,



after he graduated (from high school in Burwell), they were thinking about the draft and all that. He didn't know whether he wanted to go to college or not. His uncle Ray had a café, a truck line and a hatchery (in Clay Center). He asked Mike to come up and work for him between the three businesses.” For a period, Mike also helped run a pool hall.

Mike had grown into a young man with classic, square-jawed good looks, a well-rounded person who played the drums in the band in high school and competed on the

town baseball team with the other young men around Clay Center. Martha Beyers had developed into a bright-eyed young lady with a humorous turn to her lips. They were attracted to each other immediately.

Young Mike and Martha



Top Photo, young Martha Beyers (Kline), center ... with her parents, Charles and Clara Beyers.

Mike, photo at right, graduated from Burwell, Nebraska, High School. Behind him in this cap-and-gown photo is the Standard Oil truck that his father once drove.

“He was just as good inside as he was handsome,” Martha recalled.

They began dating and, very soon, it was obvious that this would be a serious relationship. After a year and half they decided to get married. However, the ceremony would take place far from their homes in Nebraska.

While Mike was working for his uncle in Clay Center, his parents – Lester and Elenore – had relocated to Santa Ana, Calif., with Mike’s sisters Marian, Jane and Deanna, a trip so many Midwesterners made in an effort to find a new life in the wake of the Great Depression. Starting in the 1920s, members of Mike’s family on his mother’s side, the Middletons, had moved to Santa Ana and labored as migrant workers in the San Fernando Valley in central California. Elenore Middleton’s eldest brother had built a house in Santa Ana, and Elenore’s parents lived there. As Mike entered his late teens, his father was working in Santa Ana delivering ice to people’s houses from an ice house on the Coast Highway. The family later moved to Long Beach.





The move to California wasn't permanent. Mike's parents continued to shuttle back and forth between California and Clay Center for about ten years, finally settling in Laguna Beach, California, and staying there after 1951. In Clay Center, various Klines – including one of Lester's uncles, Lester and his brothers Roy and Leo (known as "Brick"), for several years ran a beer joint known as Kline's Tavern. In California, Lester took a job as a fireman in a gated community on the south end of Laguna Beach. He and his wife's brother Bill took care of all the firefighting for the community, and even occasionally had to kill rattlesnakes that invaded the property. The job was a good one for Lester and made it possible for him and his wife to buy a home in Laguna Beach.

Then Lester's father David, who still was living in the area of Burwell, died of a heart attack while fishing. Mike's parents returned to Burwell for the funeral. This was the first time Martha met them.

"I thought they were great people," Martha recalled. "He (Lester) was a kidder. She was a very attractive woman and he was a nice-looking man. He liked to kid girls. He



Elenore and Lester, top photo, are shown in later years at their California home.

Elenore and Lester Kline, photo at left, loved Nebraska, but the call of California brought them to the West Coast.

*Young Martha and young Mike,
photo at right, in Clay Center.*

*Frequent trips between Ne-
braska and California, far right
photo, took Mike and Martha to
the Denver area in Colorado –
before World War II.*



continued that way all through my married life . . . When Mike asked me to marry him, they asked me to go with them when they went back to California.”

For Martha, the trip to California – the first time she had been out of Nebraska – was great fun. She and Mike and his parents packed into a car and made the long drive, stopping over along the way.

“We went through Colorado and stopped at some friends that Mike really liked,” Martha said. “(This couple) had no children and she wanted Mike to come over. She was just like a second mother to him.

This friend (the father) was in World War I and he had a tin mirror that he gave to Mike, saying, ‘That brought me home and I want you to wear it.’ So he had it around his



chest. It looked like metal, but it was a mirror.”

In California, Mike and Martha lived with his parents for three or four months.

“His mother and I were just like sisters,” Martha said. “We got along really well.”

Mike worked in a gas station as they planned their wedding in late 1941. Their lives together seemed to be unfolding in an orderly fashion, but events on the other side of the world would change all that. A clash of superpowers would reach out to touch Mike and Martha.

Japan was seeking to become a great power through flexing its military muscle, expanding into China and triggering conflict there. In 1940, Japan had invaded French Indochina to control supplies reaching



The couple’s California wedding cottage, above.

Martha and Mike, photo at left, in Southern California.

China and to improve its own access to oil and rubber in Southeast Asia. Japan feared its effort to conquer Malaya and the Dutch East Indies could be scuttled by the U.S. Navy if America took a hand in

what was shaping up as fight that might involve many nations across the globe. Japan vowed to strike first.

Early on the morning of Dec. 7, 1941, Japanese war planes swept down on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, and attacked the U.S. warships moored there. The attack sank four American battleships and damaged four more. The attackers also sank or damaged three cruisers, three destroyers and one minelayer, destroyed 188 aircraft, killed 2,402 and wounded 1,282.

Mike and Martha heard the news from Mike's father.

"We went for a drive to pick up some mistletoe and, when we came back, he told us they had declared war," she said. □

