

Sterling and Emily Morriss

When I was growing up, one of the ties that my family had with the nineteenth century, was our Uncle Sterling. He was actually my father's uncle but we always called him, "Uncle Sterling." He usually seemed to be quite a crusty old guy who tended to be a "know it all" and difficult to like. He did not seem to accept children very well but he LOVED to talk. I think he finally warmed up to me because, when we were building my father's store, I was about the only one who would listen to him. I don't remember much about his tales but one contribution from him that I appreciate was that he taught me how to sharpen a knife really well.



Sterling Henry Morriss was the second of the five children of James Newton Morriss and Rebecca Culpin. He was named for his grandfather Henry Sterling Morriss. He grew up, in Keokuck, Iowa, Quincy, Illinois, and LaBelle, Missouri. The list below contains some facts about him, his older sister and three younger brothers.

Name	DOB	DOD	Lifespan	Spouse	Occupation
Mollie	1879	1912	33.626	Joe Reavis	House Wife
Sterling	1880	1960	79.633	Emily Edick	Bank Clerk
Wesley	1887	1948	61.106	Ivah Morton	Merchant
Charles	1889	1931	42.439	Mae Edick	Restaurant Supply
James	1892	1950	57.886	Lottie Beck	Electrician

Sterling's father was a bakery and restaurant owner. He was not what one might call wealthy, but he was industrious and able to make a comfortable living for his family. Sterling would have been required to help in his father's business as he was growing up. As far as I know he did not participate in any military service. He did farm labor when he got out of school then moved to Chicago, Ill. He married Emily Edick there around the turn of the century. A few years later Emily's younger sister Mae married Sterling's younger brother Charlie. Sterling worked at several different jobs including one as a policeman or security officer. He worked as a teller and clerk in a large Chicago bank for at least thirty years. When he retired, he moved to California for a short period of time, and then Sterling and Emily moved on to Tampa, Florida where they bought a house at 3204 Price Ave.

The picture of Uncle Sterling and Aunt Emily was probably taken in the early fifties. Sterling was somewhere around six feet tall and at that time probably weighed about 150 pounds. He was old and wrinkled when I knew him. He was always wheezing and coughing no doubt due to the two to three packs of Lucky Strike cigarettes that he enjoyed every day. When my father decided to move to Tampa and start a photography shop, he had very little extra cash. In order to make it work, he would have to build a suitable structure himself. Uncle Sterling was 73 years old that year, but he faithfully drove his Nash sedan over to our building site each day to help. At that time, I was eleven and in the sixth grade. Since we had just moved to Florida, I did not have many close friends. Every Saturday and as soon as school was out each weekday, I came home to help. My dad did not encourage my brothers to help him,

I guess because he considered them too small. I know he wanted me there because I could fetch things. I knew the names of all of his tools and had learned to identify nail gages, lumber sizes, and other building materials on sight. Uncle Sterling helped a lot with that part of my education.

My dad had a "Can-do" attitude that would have been hard to believe if I had not grown up in his house. He was over weight, I was a skinny little kid, and Uncle Sterling was a dried up arthritic old man. The three of us were constructing a concrete block retail store building on Bay to Bay Boulevard right in front of the whole neighborhood. It must have looked interesting if not down right comical to everyone who saw us. Many of them stopped by to visit. They had to be curious and besides they had traditions of "Southern Hospitality" that they felt obliged to project. As you can imagine, my dad had to do the lion's share of all of the work on that project. He did not have that much time to talk. That's where Uncle Sterling stepped in. I got to hear the man's life story over and over as he bored the populace of Palma Ceia. You would think that I would be able to remember more of it, but I'm not. I believe that he had several jobs in Chicago area restaurants when he was young. He claimed to have set up a company that did a lot of mail order business. He knew a lot about packaging, binding twine, glue pots and stuff like that. He also told everyone about periodically going to his doctor during Prohibition and having a glass of grain alcohol to prevent colds and flu and bad things like that. His big recurring tale was about how he was recruited to go to a much more lucrative job in the late twenties, but decided to stay with his more secure bank job. As a result he did much better during the depression than any one else. He spoke often about his life in Downers Grove which Uncle Sterling always pronounced, "Dahners Grove." He also talked about how wonderful things were in California. When he did, my dad quickly noted for whoever was present, that Uncle Sterling had the good sense to move to Florida when he could.

Aunt Emily was 3½ years younger than her husband. She very quiet and proper. I did not think she liked us boys at all. We were always noisy, dirty and rambunctious and she was the exact opposite. It isn't fair to judge her this way but much of our failure to communicate was due to her appearance. She couldn't help it, but she always looked like she was smelling something rotten. That always seemed to set the tone for whatever she had to say. For several years our family brought Aunt Emily to Church with us every Sunday morning. You can imagine the commotion of my mom getting the six of us kids up and fed and dressed and into the family station wagon. My dad drove and picked up Aunt Emily, returned to pick us all up, then we got Grandmother and all drove to church. We all should have gotten to know her better than we did. I can only remember that Aunt Emily spoke slowly and softly. I remember she held a very low regard for the Southern custom of eating black-eyed peas. She called them "Cow Peas" and was sort of aghast that people actually ate them. That kind of thing was impossible for me to understand. My grandmother was much more of a commoner and easier to relate to. Somewhere back then, Grandmother got inspired to somehow get Uncle Sterling to go to church. She worked on him for several months. This was an example of an irresistible force meeting the immovable object. Just like in football, good defense usually wins. We were not aware of all of it but I know my dad really enjoyed listening to my grandmother's account of the ongoing campaign. As soon as he would let her out of the car, he would start chuckling about what she had said about "her mission." One comment that sticks is my dad saying, "Uncle Sterling isn't going to church, it's against his religion to go to church!" That was the way my dad saw it and he was right.

I mentioned that Uncle Sterling showed me how to sharpen a knife. Sometimes on Sunday afternoons we would go over to grandmother's house for dinner. Aunt Emily and Uncle Sterling would often come and join the group. They really must not have disliked kids as much as we thought they did. Attitudes about smoking were very different then. In our family it would have been a great sin for any of us to smoke, but it was tolerated in others much more than now. Even grandmother had ashtrays in her house

for guests who smoked. Even so, Uncle Sterling usually went out on the front porch to smoke. To us boys, a Sunday afternoon at Grandmother's was BORING! We would go and play in her small front yard or big front porch. There was Uncle Sterling doing the exact same thing that we were: escaping from Grandmother's house. When he did this he whittled. First he'd pull up a chair sit down and take out a cigarette. He always had a little box of matches, not a book of matches or a lighter. He'd slowly light up then he'd dig his knife out of his pocket and smoke his cigarette. Then he'd pull out an old rag, in which was wrapped a very well worn whetstone. Next he'd cough a little bit and light another cigarette. He'd open his knife and spit on the stone. Then he'd hold the knife at an angle of about 15° to the stone as he rubbed it in a tight circular motion. When this was done on one side he'd light another cigarette and do the other side. After his knife was honed to his standards he would dig out a small piece of pine wood that he brought, and slowly shave thin uniform chips off of one edge of it as he smoked another cigarette. I never knew of him carving any object. He just converted a little piece of one by two into a pile of wood chips. My dad might come out and talk to him while this was going on. This all seemed like the most senseless thing I could imagine. It could also have been a fire hazard, but my great-uncle Sterling was nothing if not careful.

When he was finished, or perhaps when he was out of cigarettes, Uncle Sterling would go get a broom and sweep up the mess. If my dad was around he would make one of us boys help. I think I was the only one of my brothers and sisters that he ever referred to by first name. I was Jimmy the others would be sonny or kiddo or something like that. Uncle Sterling once told me that the most important thing about the sharpening process was keeping the knife at the same angle as you proceed. He must have known what he was talking about. He said he could shave with his knife, I am sure he would have demonstrated that if anyone had expressed any disbelief. My dad said he always used a straight razor and knew the art of sharpening very well. To this day, when I have to sharpen a knife or chisel I can not help but remember Uncle Sterling. It really is too bad that I was too young to know him better. I'll bet there were many other things I could have learned from him.

Uncle Sterling's health gradually deteriorated but it did not keep him from his smoking. He got emphysema and had to be hospitalized in the mid fifties. When they released him from the hospital my dad would have been glad to drive him home, but Sterling insisted on a ride in an ambulance. I remember Aunt Emily commenting on him just having to have his "little boy thrill" of riding in an ambulance. He sometimes had an impish mischievous nature, but he never became senile. In spite of his years of heavy smoking, he lived for nearly 80 years. He eventually had to return to the hospital and after a stay of several weeks he died on August 18, 1960 of acute coronary thrombosis, arterio-sclerosis. Vascular disease, and severe chronic emphysema. Aunt Emily moved out to California so she could be closer to her daughter Ethyl. She died there at the age of 88 on August 24, 1972. That was the very same day that her sister Mae died.
