

# Only A Memory Away - The Dave and Vi Stogner Story

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## CHAPTER FIVE Fresno, California 1952-1962

While Vi talked, Marie poured the three of them fresh lemonade. She and Bethany were enthralled with the story of how Dave and Vi had met. Vi had told Marie part of the story, however for Bethany she was going into greater detail.

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I was very proud to be friends with Dave. I enjoyed hearing the stories he'd tell about the band. He was quite a jokester, so sometimes I wasn't sure if I believed him or not. I started going out to The Barn with my girlfriend to hear the band play. Sometimes, she and I drove to other towns to hear them, too. I became acquainted with the band members. I liked being around the band. It was fun and exciting. They knew Dave and I were friends, but my girlfriend was the only person I ever told about my feelings for Dave.

The next year I started working for Sun-Maid Raisins. We lived in the country not far from The Barn. My mother took care of my two boys while I worked. Dave was doing a remote radio show from Jack's Car Lot from 6:30 to 7:30 in the morning. I'd stop by to see him on my way to work. He'd play a song on the radio for me. Sometimes, I visited with him in Roeding Park or we'd meet somewhere for coffee. Occasionally, he'd bring me records or promotional photos. I didn't have a lot of free time and Dave was very busy, so mostly we talked on the phone.

In October of that year, my family and I moved to a new house in the northeast part of Fresno. It was about six blocks away from Dave's home. By then, my husband and I and a lot of our friends were going out to The Barn on Saturday nights. Dave always came down into the audience to talk, so he became acquainted with my husband, too. We had a lot of fun times at The Barn. Dave and I were good friends and we knew we "liked" one another.

One New Year's Eve, I invited Dave and the band members to our house after they finished performing at The Barn. I had prepared chips and dips and had a lot of drinks. Lefty Frizzell was the guest performer that night. Dave and Lefty were very good friends. When he told me he was going to bring Lefty with him to the house, I about fainted.

Lefty Frizzell did some kind of show! I was in awe of him. He was a sight to see

with long white fringe hanging from his white coat sleeves and down the side of his pants. He could just take your breath away, he was so handsome. When he did *I'll Love You A Thousand Ways* or *The Mom and Dad Waltz*, the people just went crazy. They loved him. Young girls fainted because they were so taken with him. His managers couldn't keep the girls away. Lefty didn't make it to the party, but Dave and the others stayed until four o'clock in the morning.

Then along came television. We had one of the first black and white sets, a Hoffman, I think. We had one even before Dave did. He was busy putting together a show for KJEO-TV. It was the only station we could get for a few months. This is what everybody watched, so it wasn't long until everybody knew who Dave Stogner was. He was also working part-time at a Shell gas station. I'd cook tacos and take them to him. He loved those tacos. I guess that's when he got the idea that I could cook!

I'd call into the radio station for contests that Dave would have. The prizes would be free passes to Riverview Park, albums, concert tickets, and things like that. Sometimes, I'd win. By then, he was calling me, too. He'd call and ask if I'd like to ride with him to put up posters for his shows in some nearby town, or maybe to take a drive out by the lake. I liked to go to the lake. It was very relaxing to just sit by the water watching the ducks, while he told me what he had been doing or about what he was planning with the band. Dave had his dreams and I had my daydreams.

By 1954, he was doing radio, television, concerts, personal appearances, and had big sponsors to take care of. When he was sponsored by Asher Brothers Shoes, he gave my boys each a pair of the cowboy boots with his name on them. The only thing wrong with those boots was the black marks they made on the floor. The boys sure liked them. They liked Dave, too, except for one thing. Every evening when Dave's show was on there was a cartoon show on the other channel. They would complain, "Do we have to watch Dave Stogner again?" They knew what the answer was, so they would go off to play while I watched the show.

In Kingsburg, Dave and the band were performing afternoon concerts in Oakwoods Park. It's a beautiful park with large oak trees, green lawn, and the Kings River flows by it where the kids could go swimming or rafting. He had guest performers there who were often folks from The Grand Ole Opry. It was a very popular place. This is where he learned that my mother was a good cook.

When my family went to concerts at Oakwoods Park with a big picnic lunch, my mother always made sure she had her fried chicken and potato salad for Dave Stogner. Once he had tasted her chicken, he always wanted to come over to our table to eat. My mother was crazy about him and his fiddle music. Her father had been a fiddle player, and she just loved that music. Sometimes, Dave would send out requests on the radio for Mrs. Waldman. That made her very happy. Of course, she still didn't know what good friends he and I were.

Dave and I knew we were getting into deep water and starting to care about one

another more than we should. We didn't mean for this to happen. It seemed we just couldn't control our feelings. Most everyone knew we were friends. The rest we tried to keep private. It felt good to be with Dave and it just felt right. It had been an unanticipated natural attraction, and it just seemed it was meant to be. Since we were both married and had children, though, we had very few choices about being together.

So much was happening at this time. Dave had become a very well-known entertainer. He had performed in Nashville and was making records. By then, he and his family had moved to a new house. It, also, was only a few blocks away from us. Our sons went to the same school and were friends. Both of our families were acquainted with each other, so it wasn't uncommon for Dave to stop by our house. We'd have get-togethers like barbecues or playing poker with the same group of friends. Dave and I just got used to everyone being together, but we still knew what we were feeling inside.

The den mother of my oldest son's Cub Scout troop asked me if I could arrange for them to be guests on *The Dave Stogner Show*. Dave put them on, of course. He interviewed the boys so they could talk on television. They were such happy little boys. That was very exciting for them. He was always so thoughtful and considerate.

In the spring my boys started Little League. I was always involved in their activities. Their Uncle Harry was the coach for Michael's team. Dave's boys played, too. Dave was president of the Little League Association. He and Harry had become best friends. Harry just idolized him.

Dave had such a variety of activities, there was bound to be somewhere I could go so I could see him. I had even gone to the Hard Top races a couple of times when he and some other DJs drove the warm-up races before the main event. All during the time the crowd was entering, his recording of *Hard Top Race* would be playing over the loudspeaker. It was just too loud for me there, though. He won a race once and received a trophy. It has a little old-time racecar on the top, and his name is engraved on it.

Dave was best friends with Billy Vukovich, who was a professional race car driver from Fresno. Billy was killed during the Indy 500\* race at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway on Memorial Day, May 31, 1955. He and Dave had just had lunch together the Friday before.

\* *In 1955 this race was known as Indianapolis International Motor Sweepstakes.*

Dave was very broken up over this. I felt so sorry for him. There was nothing I could do to console him because I was in the hospital at the time recovering from surgery. All the nurses were listening to the radio to hear about Billy. I talked to Dave on the phone, but didn't see him for about three weeks. It wasn't uncommon for him to go off to be alone during times when the pressure on him was too great. I think this was one of those times.

Another very hard time for Dave was when his mother, Mary, passed away. He just adored his mother. She had lived in Hanford and he had stopped by often to visit her. Sometimes, he'd have the whole band with him and she'd cook for all of them. There were a lot of people at her funeral at the Lisle Calaveras Chapel.

My mother didn't know her, but out of respect for Dave she and my stepfather went to the funeral. She took a beautiful bouquet of flowers that she picked from her own flower garden. I also attended the funeral because I knew how bad he was feeling. I wanted to be near him. I cooked food and called some of the band members' wives and asked for them to send food to the house, too.

Life goes on and Dave was involved in it full force. We couldn't be open with our feelings, so we'd grab the moments as they came. At The Barn sometimes, he'd come down off the bandstand to dance with me. On New Year's Eve it became a tradition for women to run up on stage to kiss the musicians, including Dave. Once I joked with him about all the women he could choose.

His response was, "You don't understand, do you? There isn't another woman in the world like you. You're so kind, good and loving."

I guess we knew by then that we had fallen in love with each other. Of course, we talked about what it would be like if we were together. There was nothing we could do, though. He had his family to take care of and his career to manage. I had my two sons to raise. We knew our priorities. There were even times when I'd try to stay away from him. Then he'd call or come by to see me, and it would start all over again.

I still have gifts that he gave me during those years. They weren't big things, but they were very meaningful. For one of my birthdays, he called me and said he'd like to meet me that evening. When I was with him, he handed me a beautifully wrapped little box. I took the wrapping off and opened it. Inside was a bottle of perfume that I liked to wear. He also gave me a very beautiful card that he signed, "All my love." I still have that little bottle and the card. Another thing he did was to sing songs on his television show that were especially meant for me.

I gave him little gifts, too. I gave him a cigarette lighter once, and then for Christmas one year I gave him a tie clip with matching cuff links. They had music notes on them with a little ruby on one end. I bought them secretly at Baldwin's Jewelry in Fresno. I know he wore them because I saw them in some of his promotional photos.

Once we drove up by Friant Dam where the water flows over to the San Joaquin River. On the way he stopped by a little grocery store. He went inside and came out with baloney and bread. He told me that now I knew how he and the band members ate when they were on the road. He was always so humorous. The dam area was a very beautiful spot with picnic tables and places to walk. We spread out a blanket under a shade tree and just enjoyed each other's company.

Sometimes, he'd sing to me on these occasions. He was so opposite of what I had experienced in a relationship.

At times, though, Dave was under a lot of pressure. He was trying to do so much and be his own business manager, too. By 1958, he owned and operated a gas station along with everything else. He did a good business because everyone knew him. They wanted to buy their gas there so they could talk to him. I'd go over there to buy my gas and, at times, take him something to eat. If I went near closing time, we were able to visit. He said it felt so good to be able to talk to me. He said he could talk because he knew I wasn't going to repeat anything he told me. I think I helped him by giving him a person outside the business just to talk to.

On Mother's Day, May 23, 1961, my mother passed away. I had a very difficult time with that. At the funeral, the doctor gave me a shot to help me get through it. My brothers were very worried about me. Changes were happening in Dave's life, too. We couldn't help each other. I remembered one time he said, "Don't throw us away." I never did, but he moved away in 1962. I seldom saw him after that. Situations in my life were hard for me, but giving him up was even harder. I was thirty-four years old and, other than the love I had for my two sons, I was empty.

*All my life I've lived in sorrow/Our love was never meant to be/Alone  
I'll face each new tomorrow/Everything Happens to me/You could  
never be my darling/Your not what you use to be/Now you've gone  
and found another/Everything Happens to me/Now you've left me  
I'm so lonely/My heart is filled with misery/You'll always be my one  
and only/Everything happens to me.*