

Guy Immega

RECOLLECTIONS



Pandemic Year 2020

Vancouver, BC

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Guy Immega
3668 Blenheim Street
Vancouver, BC
Canada V6L 2Y2
guy.immega@kinetic.ca

NOTE TO READERS

These anecdotes are true, with minor embellishments, but not a complete life story. Each vignette can stand alone – feel free to hop around. There are gaps in the chronology and I’ve omitted most personal events. But I must acknowledge my wife, Gayle, the love of my life – her support makes everything possible.

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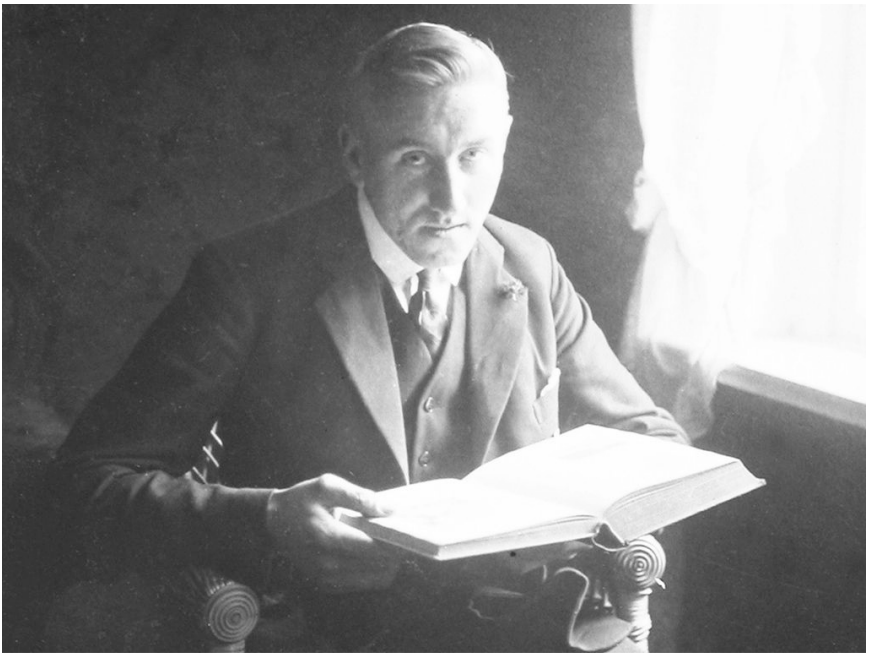
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Chapter 1

RATTLESNAKE ROMANCE

My father, Theodor Gerhard Immega, was born in 1905 in Ostfriesland (East Frisia), a poor rural corner of northern Germany. When he was four, his



**Theodor Immega 1926 Germany
1905 — 1985**

mother Taetjelina died (in childbirth?). When he was six, he fell from a horse-drawn wagon and

broke his neck. He wasn't paralyzed but his cervical vertebrae fused - for the rest of his life, he couldn't turn his head left or right. Paradoxically, his terrible accident opened up the world for him.

Since Theodor was unsuited for farm work, my grandfather enrolled him in technical school. He was the only child of the blended family of seven



Gerd Broer Immega 1872 – 1937

children (my grandfather, Gerd Broer Immega, remarried in 1912) to receive an education.

As a child, Theodor survived an unloving stepmother (his older sister Anna took care of him), the privations of World War I, the 1918 flu pandemic, and poverty. Germany experienced hyperinflation in 1923, as it struggled to pay war reparations. Father told of rolling wheelbarrow loads of money to the store to buy food.

He trained as a blacksmith, hammering ornamental iron, and worked on a team to bring electricity to his hometown of Holtland. He also received his inheritance – a strip of land one meter wide and 30 meters long, suitable for growing cabbages. In 1929, at age 24 with no money, he abandoned Germany for the United States. His two older brothers, Ude and Broer, followed later.

Within a year of his arrival in Wisconsin, the Great Depression hit. Theodor didn't speak English and worked cutting carbon brushes for electric motors. His landlady evicted him because he could not wash the black soot from his face and hands, or from the sheets. Desperate, he took a job as a janitor and steam engine mechanic at Yerkes Observatory in Wisconsin, near Lake Geneva.

Theodor expanded his duties at Yerkes, repairing and aligning spectroscopes, work he

loved. Director Otto Struve noticed his abilities and selected him to join a team from the University of Chicago that would construct the new McDonald Observatory in the Davis Mountains of West Texas.



McDonald Observatory 1939 Struve Telescope

During World War II, with his fused neck bones, he wasn't eligible for military service. Instead, he spent the war years isolated on Mt. Locke, working as a technician at the observatory. As a German in

the United States, he maintained a low profile (although he was 6 feet 3 inches tall).

To earn extra money, Theodor caught live rattlesnakes, to be sold and milked to make antivenom. He used a fishing pole with a hook dangling near the snake's head. A sharp tug under the jaw - and the writhing rattler ended up in a



Milking Rattlesnake Venom

gunnysack. Dangerous work. He earned a reputation as a fearless snake wrangler.

During WWII, my mother, Mary Nell ("Marinel") Summerhill, was a student at Sul Ross College in

nearby Alpine Texas. Born in 1917 to teacher parents, she dreamed of being a painter.

She took a part-time job as botanical illustrator for the new museum at the college. As part of her



Marinell Summerhill Immega in 1938
1917 — 1999

work, she rode horseback into the high desert, collecting wildflowers and cactus specimens (and Comanche arrowheads). While on a foray, she

discovered a crazy German fishing for rattlesnakes in the desert.

This unlikely couple, with few social opportunities during the war years, seized their chance for a future - they married in 1941. Marinel's



Grandmother
Zora Tyner Summerhill
in 1944

mother, Zora Summerhill, was horrified that her daughter would marry an enemy German. He was 36 years and she just 24, a 12-year age difference.

My future father and future mother spoke different languages and followed different religions. He was a reserved European and she was a warm Texas lady. They compromised – they



**Marinel, Neal & Guy
Syracuse, NY ~1950**

spoke English, became Presbyterians, and never talked about politics – and made a life together.

After the war, my father took a job as an engineer in Syracuse, N.Y. working for Willis Carrier, the inventor of air conditioning. I was born there in April 1945, two weeks before WWII ended in Europe. My brother Neal arrived three years later.

My southern mother hated the snow, so the family moved to St. Louis, Missouri, unknowingly into the middle of a Jewish community.

Always out of time and place, far from pre-war Germany or rugged West Texas, they withdrew from the world and into themselves, insular and private. We did not entertain or socialize. As a busy boy, I shrugged off the oddities of my family.

In St. Louis, my mother qualified as a teacher and taught elementary school after I left for college. Always an artist, she continued to paint watercolours of nature scenes.

My father, now called Ted, made his career as an engineer at Emerson Electric, working on secret defence projects in the aerospace division.

For several years, we had a large black-and-white photo of the front landing gear of the B-58 Hustler – a supersonic bomber armed with nuclear weapons – in the stair landing to our upstairs bedroom. My father was the lead hydraulics

engineer. To me, it was the most beautiful aircraft ever built. I still think so.

Nobody explained the *Strangelovian* connotations, but one day I realized that this needle-nosed jet might mean the end of the world, if the Cold War turned hot. As a child, I felt both pride and terror, conflicting emotions that shaped my adult life and linger today.



B-58 Hustler Nuclear Bomber

Once, on a family trip to Texas, we visited the museum at the Johnson Space Center in Houston. During the visit, we looked at a Gemini spacesuit worn by astronaut Ed White during the first NASA

space walk of 1965. My father pointed at a metal disc on the chest of the suit. "That's mine," he said, with a note of pride. "I designed the umbilical cord connector. It has automatic valves to seal the suit if the cord gets cut."



Ed White 1965

I understood what he didn't say - that this complex component required absolute perfection. Could I meet that standard?

Ed White later died in the tragic Apollo fire of 1967. Perfection can be elusive. Knowing that my father's design flew in space inspired my later aerospace career, working on autonomous Space Station robots.

In 1970, two weeks before Theodor was due to retire, Emerson Electric attempted to lay him off - to avoid paying his pension. His boss refused let him go, averting disaster. Soon after his last day of work, the accumulated stress resulted in a stroke (he was a lifelong smoker).

Theodor recovered somewhat and wrote a Genealogy Record in 1973. He and Marinel returned to Texas but he declined and moved into in a care home.

Except for the word, "No," Theodor didn't speak during his last years until he died in 1980 - a sad end to a life that spanned from horse wagons to the space age.