



A Refuge from Calamity: What Brought Me to Alaska

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My family; Stepmother **Ronaele Liston, Donald, Sr.**, Sister **Vanessa** and Brother **Dana Scott**.

This writer is the one with the obvious attitude.

The notion of “family” was foreign to me as a child.

Not until I took an **Anchorage Community College** class in Sociology did I understand that family is the *building block of society*. I remember being struck by that notion when I first heard it.

The circumstance of my childhood determined my understanding of family as: *Some people got it and some people don't.*

As a boy in Albuquerque, New Mexico I was raised primarily by babysitters. I had big blue eyes and a

contagious smile. Some of these caregivers came from the **Bernalillo County Correctional Center**. I learned things I didn't need to know at the age of 8-10 years old. For instance, I helped one of them tattoo the words "beer" over one breast and "wine" over the other. I still remember her name; Eloise.

She left an impression on me, too.



Donny's School Picture, 1961

My grandmother, **Alta Tichnor** was principal at the **Bernalillo Elementary School**[2] and provided plenty of athletic supplies and books for my use. My friends and I would place bases in a diamond around the Mescalero Road blacktop off Route 66. We took turns pitching, and batting, and shagging the ball when it was hit. We would throw the ball at the runner to get him out. I didn't wear anything but a pair of shorts and tennis shoes beneath that hot New Mexican sun.

On one occasion one of the kid's dad showed up and took the bat. He began to direct us to all get ready to go chase the ball for him. I marched up to him and took my bat back. In no uncertain terms I told him we were playing this game OUR way. The manner in which I held that bat showed him I meant what I was saying. He took his son and left.

I didn't take adult authority too seriously.

On another occasion I hit the ball through the picture window of the house. Before my parents arrived I popped some popcorn and went around the neighborhood selling it by the bag. By the time they came home I had a good start on my disaster fund.

My paternal grandfather, **Ray Liston** was born in a sharecropper cabin in Oklahoma. When he got my

grandmother pregnant out of wedlock, her family—including some strapping farm boys—persuaded him to do the right thing and marry my grandmother before my dad was born. That’s how my Old South family worked back then.

Grandpa seemed to be a bitter man, of slight build with a round bald head, and always wearing a hat. He lived for baseball, worked as a carpenter, and had lost the end of one of his fingers in a joiner. Grandpa rolled his cigarettes with that hand, using that shortened finger as if it had been especially cut for that purpose. I never got the feeling he liked me much, but I don’t really think he liked anybody much. He was like a cur dog that hung around the yard but didn’t want much to do with anybody.



Grandpa **Ray Liston** stands in front of the 1959 Chevrolet station wagon in which he drove us to Seattle from New Mexico.

My father had been born October 31, 1929—the week the stock market crash sparked **The Great Depression**. His unskilled parents could hardly feed themselves, so my father was passed around among family and friends through most of the years leading to his graduation from high school in Clovis, NM.

***The Great Depression* influenced everything my father did in his life until he died in 2014. I fear we have a few generations who have no idea what this kind of economic turmoil can do to the spirit of a country.**

One uncle I heard about who cared for my father was **Woody Witt**. He died at age 106 and was a featured attraction at many local parades in his Oklahoma town.

I guess this was a kind of family, but these people simply did what they had to do—not necessarily what they wanted to do—to survive.

These paternal grandparents, with my father and his sister, could have played the “Joads” in the movie version of **John Steinbeck’s** book *The Grapes of Wrath*. They were simple people driven off the land by the great dustbowl, and they escaped with everything they owned to make it as far as New Mexico.



Grandfather Ray’s shadow indicates his presence in this photo of uncle **Bill Liston**, grandma **Opal Liston**, stepmother, **Ronaele Liston** and the three of us at **Sea-Tac Airport** before our flight to Alaska. Bill is only a few years older than Vanessa.

My mother’s story is similar; her father contracted tuberculosis and was isolated in a hospital for that

disease. I never met him. Her mother, **Alta Ticknor**, was a school teacher who took her two daughters west. In New Mexico she was offered a job in an “Indian School” in Gallup, NM, but continuing to California anyway. When Grandma couldn’t find better employment opportunity, they returned to New Mexico. She had a long career in education in New Mexico and later in California.

Alta is reported to have helped establish the first Special Education program for the City of San Diego, CA.

Life for poor people, during this time in our history, was a thread pulled until something was found on the other end or it broke, leaving nothing. Families tended to be large to manage the farm, and everyone followed a certain code of mutual support through hell or high water.

When I was born in the early 1950s, my father was following a family tradition of taking whatever work he could find and making every penny count. But my parents were married too young and by the time they had three babies to care for their marriage was over. Having children was one thing, supporting them in an unfamiliar social contract was quite another.

Added to this painful dynamic, was my father’s insecurities and self-loathing as a laborer going nowhere. Soon alcohol provided the propellant for an explosion. One drunken night included an assault of my mother and resulted in separation and ultimately divorce.

Whatever “family” might have been suggested by this short-lived marriage and propagation of children was thereby shattered forever.

My mother was not equipped to raise three children and work to support a household financially. She tried, but the task was impossible as her angry ex-husband monitored her every move and made sure “his” son was confused about adult problems beyond a child’s experience or understanding. As that eldest son, I called Dad after one week when Mom had disappeared with a man she had been seeing. They had moved on to California—*the Mecca of displaced dust bowl misfits*.

Dad worked as a “telephone man” installing rotary dial instruments on which people dialed up and talked to each other. He paid child support, had a nice bachelor pad, and a 1958 MGA sports car. It had only two seats.



This is the make and model of car with which Dad picked up his kids from an orphanage.

Upon picking us up—me, my sister and my brother—Dad gained temporary custody in the absence of

our mother and took us to his efficiency apartment. We also piled into that car a basset hound and a cat among the few belongings we could take away from our now deserted Mescalero Road Albuquerque home.

Were we now a family?

The attorney said “no.” I was part of the conversation when he said our mother would soon be notifying Dad of her address in California to which she expected the children she had legal custody of to be sent. Dad later revealed to me that he had threatened to kill the man my mother was seeing before they disappeared. With that in mind, could our mother have had ample cause to desert us to find happiness away from all the pain she had endured in New Mexico? Would she have tried to get us back had our father not succeeded in gaining employment and moving us to Alaska?

I don't think so.

We never saw or heard from our mother, with very limited exceptions, until I looked her up and called her myself after nearly 30 years. I wasn't angry anymore but my new wife, Cathy, encouraged resolution of this void in my heart. As a result—on my 40th birthday—my mother and the half-sister I had never known visited us in Juneau! It was an awkward but wonderful reunion. My new sister and I were strangers with a link to the past. Same bloodlines different life experiences.

Is family any association of people that certain parties want to aggregate and call family?

Some are small, some are large, and some are extended beyond the place in which most members reside. Is that it?

I have learned through the wonder of FaceBook, from a fellow Liston—whom I would likely have never known because he lives in Texas—that the Liston family can be traced back to about 1021, *with the birth of **Negel de Listona**, a Norman Knight.*[3] Reportedly Negel was with **William The Conqueror** in 1066 during the Norman invasion of England. Negel died in 1086 having already changed the spelling of his name to **Nigel de Liston**. Thus, he is credited with being *the first Liston in history and father to all living Liston's today* according to Jeff M. De Liston. The Liston's De Liston FaceBook page even lists a Liston prayer (in Latin and English) believed to have been issued around 1023.[4][5]

Listons from all over the world are friends on this digital gathering place. Through it, I have learned a lot about the dimension of my extended Liston family as one of many building blocks in the family of humans on planet earth.

I had already learned the hard way that family is something to cherish and celebrate.

References:

[1]An earlier version of this story appeared in ECHO Magazine, March 15, 2018.

[2] Bernalillo Elementary School today

<https://www.bernalillo-schools.org/o/bes>

[3] Facebook page of Jeffrey De Liston

<https://www.facebook.com/jeff.m.liston>

Lo, There do I see my Father. Lo, There do I see my Mother, my sisters and my brothers. Lo, Do I see the line of my people, back to the beginnings. Lo, they do call to me, they bid me to take my place among them, in the Halls of Vallhala, where the brave may Live, Forever

A Liston's Payer, 900AD.

[4] <https://www.facebook.com/listons.liston>

John De Liston was a Knights Templar in the late 1190s he returned from the Holy land to Scotland to a place Called **Over New Liston** where he built his church. He named it **Temple Liston** a town grew up around the church and was called the town The village of Temple Liston until the 1300s when the Pope outlawed the Knights Templars. The town changed its name to Kirkliston, Scotland **John's De Liston's** church is still there to this day and is still called Temple Liston.

I **Jeffrey De Liston** am a direct Descendent of **John De Liston** I put the De back into my name to honor my ancestors. If you're Liston family came from Scotland or Ireland you are also descended from **John De Liston** this goes for almost all the Listons who are in America today Canada, Australia and the Philippines. Oh one more thing if your Liston family is from England you are descended from John's brother **Simon De Liston** so you see we Liston's are all part of the same Liston family.

I give honor to my Ancestor **John De Liston**

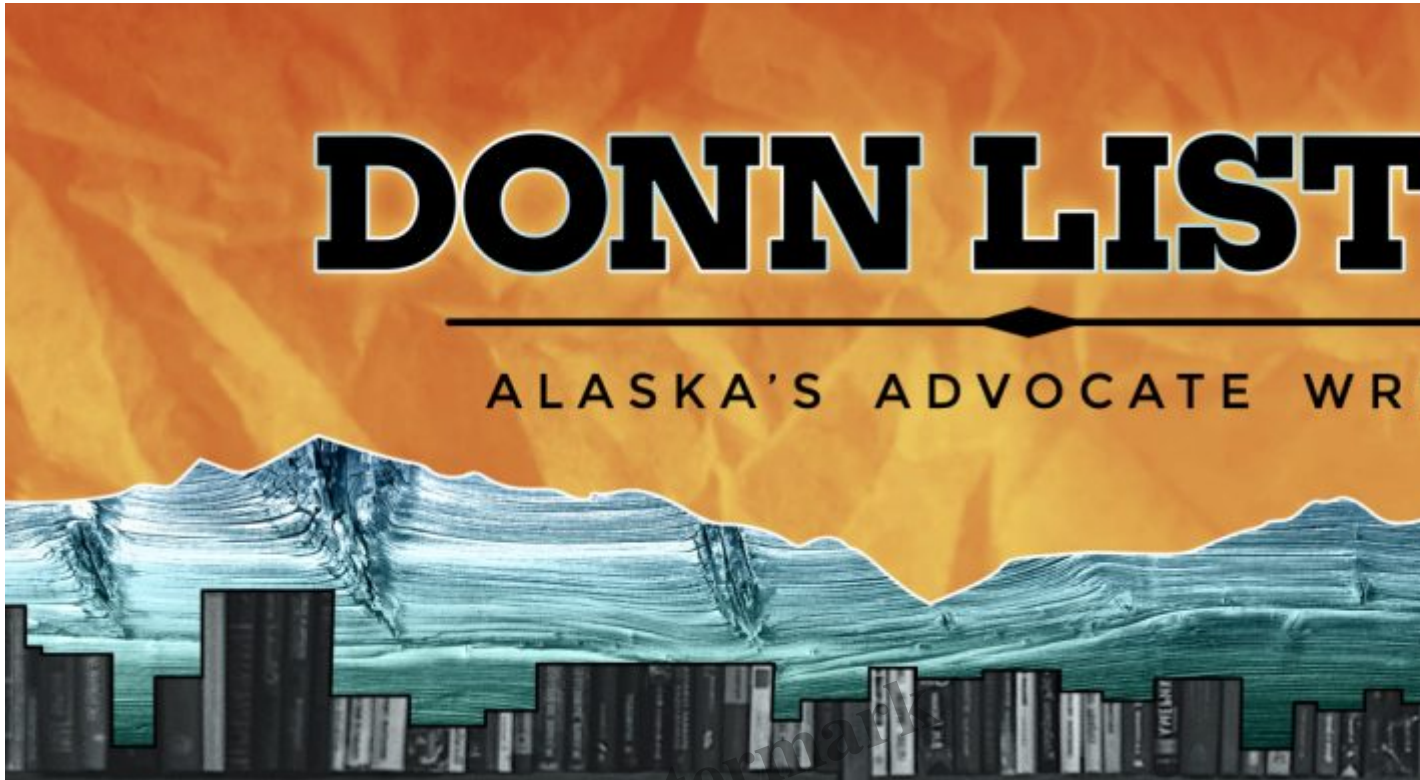
Inside all the armour is a man ready to fight for HIS FAITH IN CHRIST knowing that no matter the outcome of his struggles CHRIST will judge him on judgement day and the RESERECTION of all the dead, those who died FOR CHRIST and in CHRIST'S service will hear the words

" I know you "

[5]Who Were the Knights Templar?

<https://www.history.com/topics/middle-ages/the-knights-templar>

The Knights Templar was a large organization of devout Christians during the medieval era who carried out an important mission: to protect European travelers visiting sites in the Holy Land while also carrying out military operations. A wealthy, powerful and mysterious order that has fascinated historians and the public for centuries, tales of the Knights Templar, their financial acumen, their military prowess and their work on behalf of Christianity during the Crusades still circulate throughout modern culture.



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