

“Growing Up with Audie Murphy”
By J.P. Sloane¹

Looking back with warm-hearted memories of a time when I was growing up at our home on Stern Avenue in Sherman Oaks, California, I cannot help but think of all the wonderful times my family and I shared with the Murphy family. Uncle Audie and my folks had a lot in common. My father and mother, who were pioneers of radio and television, were entertainers like Audie. They hosted their own show called "Memory Lane" where they sang the standard hits of their generation. To their fans they were known as "Television's Singing Troubadour" Jimmie Jackson and "Television's Hollywood Hostess," Anita Coleman. My earliest memory of the Murphy's was when Uncle Audie and Aunt Pam lived in Van Nuys. Their home backed up to another good friend of my family, race car driver Johnny Parsons who went on to becoming winner of the 1952 world famous "Indy 500." The Murphy's later relocated a few miles away to a lovely home in Toluca Lake on a picturesque golf course only minutes away from Universal International Studios where Uncle Audie made films. I understand that it was only recently that the family sold that warm and beautiful home.

As a young boy, there were many times I would “run away from home.” What prompted me to do so is now veiled in the mists of time, but one thing is clear—I would set off straight away to the Murphy’s home where Aunt Pam would bring me into the kitchen and feed me something good while Uncle Audie, unbeknown to me, would be in another part of the house calling my folks reassuring them not to worry, that I was safe and okay. After a few days had passed Aunt Pam, who always spoiled me, would take me shopping and buy me something nice before taking me back to my home.

Uncle Audie and Aunt Pam had two wonderful boys, Terry and Skipper. I was ten years old in 1952 when Terry was born; two years later Skipper was born. Skipper was formally named James Shannon Murphy a name of which my dad heartily approved, since his name was James too. Incidentally, my daughter’s name is Shannon. Although there was a large gap in age between the Murphy lads and me, I do have fond memories of them both. When I was over at their house, I would sometimes see them playing with Uncle Audie’s war medals which they would have scattered all over the house! One day my dad got a call from the Murphy’s asking if my mom could come over to their home. Little Skipper (the youngest) had fallen down while playing on the stairs, hurting himself very badly. Mom rushed over and stayed with Terry while Uncle Audie and Aunt Pam took Skipper to the doctor. Our families were very close and always there for each other.

Years later when I was a teenager, Uncle Audie had been in Japan filming “Joe Butterfly.” There he met a young Japanese girl whose father was an RAF fighter pilot in WWII who had died and left Caroline and her mother orphaned and widowed. Uncle Audie and Aunt Pam sent for Caroline to be their ward and live with them. Caroline helped with the boys and was a very lovely and gentle young girl. We were about the same age and became close friends and even dated a few times, although not anything serious. Years later, Caroline’s mother, who was very

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petit and demure, came to the United States, and they were able to get a lovely apartment together in Los Angeles. Caroline did several movies, two of which were "The Nun and the Sergeant" and "Confessions of an Opium Eater." Some of the numerous television series she appeared in were "77 Sunset Strip," "My Three Sons," "I Spy," "Gidget" and many others from the 50s through the 70s. Sadly, I lost contact with her in my early 20s. She was truly a very dear friend.

Whenever Uncle Audie was visiting our home, he would usually be very quiet and just sit in the kitchen booth and watch mom cook or talk with dad. He always seemed a little shy, yet Uncle Audie had a wonderful sense of humor. When I was around eight years old, I had just learned how to talk like Donald Duck by allowing air to pass over my back teeth. With a twinkle in his eye Uncle Audie asked me, "Can you say frustrated duck?" Of course, that was almost impossible to do but I tried real hard! I remember he had the biggest grin on his face as he watched me struggle trying to say "frustrated" in duck talk! Even though Uncle Audie was quiet, he wasn't a party-pooper either. He knew how to be a good sport. There was the time at Universal Pictures when they were having a studio party complete with a stage and musicians. Everybody kept teasing Uncle Audie to "come on up and sing." Finally, he said, "Okay, I will if Anita comes up and sings with me." My mom agreed, and they did a little duet to everyone's delight!

Uncle Audie was also a man of principle. He did not smoke and when a lucrative contract to endorse cigarettes was offered to him, he turned it down. When asked why, he simply said that smoking was bad and since kids looked up to him, he wouldn't do anything to lead them into something that wasn't good for them. Don't you wish we had heroes like that today?! It was not always just about hanging out or joking with Uncle Audie; like all of us, he had his problems too. I remember one particular New Year's Eve. My family did not plan anything that evening; they were planning on bringing in the New Year in a quiet reflective manner. It was very late, around midnight, when the phone rang. It was Uncle Audie. He apologized, saying he knew we were having a quiet evening at home this year and that it was late, and asked if they would mind if he came over for a little while. He arrived a short time later, knowing he was always welcome in our home. He never told my parents why he wanted to come over and they never asked ... he was family.

Audie co-wrote a song which may give a little insight into this man's soul. It was a song entitled, "Shutters and Boards," and the tag line has stayed with me all these years. It says, "Shutters and boards cover the windows of the house where we used to live." I can relate to that song. I think all of us may have some shutters and boards covering the windows of the little rooms hidden deep inside our minds. Sometimes they are there to keep people from looking inside, and sometimes they are there for us to hide behind; but sometimes the little rooms we have boarded up are there to keep those painful memories at bay. I really loved Uncle Audie and Aunt Pam. They met when Aunt Pam was a flight attendant and Uncle Audie was on one of her flights; they fell in love and were married. Aunt Pam was part Cherokee and I always thought of her as a beautiful Indian princess! The truth is, I think I had a schoolboy crush on her!

About 13 years before Aunt Pam died, my father came across her at the Veteran's Hospital in Sepulveda, California. He thought perhaps she may have had Alzheimer's disease because she

did not seem to recognize him or remember any of the good times our families had shared. How sad! At the time, my father was beginning to show a rapidly developing major loss of mental capacity which, in a very few years, led to his not being able to remember anything either and he passed away in 2002. I was glad to find out later, after Aunt Pam had passed away, that she did not have Alzheimer's disease and the reason for her being at the V.A. was because she was working there caring for and fighting on behalf of the many veterans who needed her help. I am quite bewildered, even to this day, why Aunt Pam did not, or would not, recall the wonderful relationship between our two families, despite the passing of time.

The very same year my dad died, Aunt Pam was 79 years old. That was also the year the Veterans Administration was trying to cut cost and considered, maybe because of her age, Aunt Pam to be "excessive staff." When the rumor about her pending termination got out, a massive protest was triggered in front of the Sepulveda Veteran's Hospital, which made news paper headlines. Those protests resulted in this beloved lady being assured her job was safe and that she would be allowed to carry on her mission for the heroic men and women she so dearly loved! Aunt Pam continued full time at her post until 2007 when she retired at the formidable age of 87 after 35 years of service. In retrospect had I know my father was mistaken in his assessment of Aunt Pam's mental facility and why he saw her at the Veteran's Hospital, things might have been different and I could have seen that dear lady once again; regrettably it was never meant to be.

My mother and father got a divorce around 1969 and because of that traumatic event, we lost our beloved home on Stern Avenue in Sherman Oaks, CA. My dad designed and had that house built when I was five years old, just after WWII; it is a loss that I can't seem to shake and strangely haunts me to this very day. The good thing for my mom surrounding all of these painful events was that she eventually met a wonderful man who loved her and my kid brother and happily remarried; yet Uncle Audie, who was like my mom's younger brother, always kept in touch.

Before the sun came up on the morning of February 9, 1971, my mother stood at the door saying goodbye to her new husband of only a few years. As he was leaving, he paused and turned partially around as if to say something, but because he was running late he appeared to change his mind and perhaps thought they could talk that evening. A short time later, around 6:02 a.m., a 6.7 earthquake hit the San Fernando Valley where we lived. All of the telephones and power were knocked out. The San Fernando Valley was devastated. Mom believed that her husband was probably over in the next valley by now and because of the assumed devastation from the earthquake, knew it would probably be a few days before she would hear from him. Later on that day, after the power was restored, she (like millions of others) was glued to the television set. The news was gruesome. The first deaths reported of that terrible earthquake happened to one poor guy and a passenger who were driving in a small pickup truck that had the misfortune of passing under the I-14 freeway in Los Angeles County when the quake hit. All you could see was the cab condensed into about 14 inches with an arm hanging outside of the cab with a wristwatch that had stopped at the exact time of the earthquake. My mom was a very loving lady, and she prayed for several days for those men and their poor families. Several days later she heard a knock at the door. She opened it to see a policeman standing there. He was sorry to have to inform her that her husband was killed when the earthquake hit and he and his partner

were passing under the I-14 overpass. Her husband was the man whose arm was sticking out of the truck with the stopped wristwatch. My mother was devastated. A few months later, near my mother's twenty-first birthday, Uncle Audie (concerned for her) called to let her know that he was out-of-town on business, assuring her that he would check in with her as soon as he got back. On May 28, 1971, only three and a half months after the tragic loss of her husband and just one week after a lonely birthday, Uncle Audie too would be violently taken from us and to make it all the more heart rendering. It was the Memorial Day Weekend, a time when our nation mourns the loss of those we loved.

Regrettably, I was unable to attend Uncle Audie's funeral. However, because of my good friend Stan Smith, I was able to attend Aunt Pam's funeral. When Stan heard about the passing of Aunt Pam on April 8, 2010, he was kind enough to immediately let me know. It is because of him that I am able to share with you the details of that sad, but beautiful service.

The funeral was held at "The Old North Church" at Forest Lawn Memorial-Park, Hollywood Hills, California, on April 16, 2010. This remarkable reproduction of the fabled Boston Church of Paul Revere fame was a fitting setting for friends and family to gather and give their last respects to that genteel soul who, like Paul Revere, gave so much of herself for her country. Pam Murphy invested over 35 years of her life to unselfishly serving our veterans at the VA hospital in California's San Fernando Valley.

The church seats 244 people; it appeared that all the seats were filled. Among those in the Chapel ranged from pre-teen to octogenarians, and people from every ethnic and socioeconomic background. One very special attendee was a precious little lady who I remembered as having served over fifty years ago as the Murphy's house-keeper at their Toluca Lake home. That's quite a testimony and shows the effect that Aunt Pam had on all who were privileged to know her.

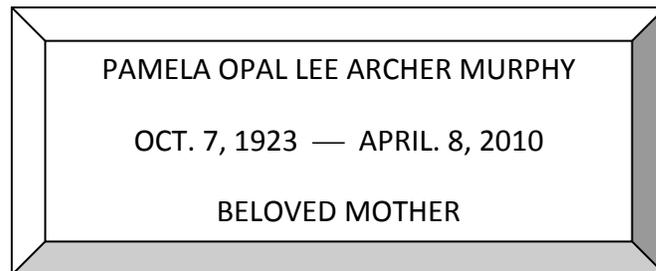
Pastor Thomas W. Wallace conducted the celebration of Aunt Pam's life, pausing from time-to-time to gather his composure in an emotional and loving tribute to his dearly deceased friend. Several of the guests gave personal insights into the life of Aunt Pam as they shared her influence in their lives. It seems that she left everyone she knew a little better for knowing her.

One very moving and undeniable tribute to Aunt Pam was all of the various veterans paying their last respects on her passing and by their collective presence, showing their appreciation for all that she had done on their behalf. Their attendance and tears spoke more magnificently than any words.

The altar was strewn with beautiful sprays and baskets of flowers which the attendees walked solemnly past at the conclusion of the service. As the guests proceeded respectfully by the closed casket on their way out of the church, they were greeted by Pam's two sons, Terry and Skipper Murphy, who were most congenial, conducting themselves with grace and honor as they stood near their beloved mother's casket. Next to the Murphy's were two lovely ladies from the Archer family, who were representing Mrs. Murphy's paternal family.

It was really good to see Terry and Skipper again after all these years and briefly share a moment with them. The last time I saw them, they were just kids. Time has been kind to them both, as they have matured into the kind of gentlemen that are worthy of the extraordinary legacies bequeathed to them from both their prodigious mother and their father.

I asked Skipper if he would prefer to be called James or Jim. He smiled at me and said that his friends still call him Skipper. I also inquired if either of them had kept in touch with Caroline, but they too had lost contact with her years ago. Thus a bitter sweet reunion came to an end. The internment was a private family affair, also conducted by Pastor Wallace. A dignified and simple headstone marks the place where Aunt Pam has been laid to rest it simply reads:



A great generation is slowly fading silently into the shadows of bygone days and we, who are left longingly gazing after them at eternity's edge, are left with a feeling of apprehension and a sense of melancholy because of it. So it is, that those whom once we were blessed to hug, are now embraced by history.