

The Golden Eagle Café, 1932 • Colusa, California

On a crisp fall morning after Mass, Carl and Lawrence Clemens perched on the swivel stools at the Golden Eagle Cafe. The brothers made small talk with the proprietor, Mrs. Nellie Chatfield, as she served their usual Sunday breakfast of fried bacon and eggs. And then Babe walked in. Mrs. Chatfield's sixteen-year-old daughter seldom showed up any morning before 10:00. She liked to sleep in.



Babe and her mother, Mrs. Nellie Chatfield, at the Golden Eagle Café, circa 1932. Unknown man at right.

Lawrence and Carl came to Colusa in August, 1932, to work on the construction of the new weir. Employed by Frederickson & Watson Construction Company and traveling from job to job, they roomed in boarding houses wherever their work took them. They became Sunday morning regulars, and Babe always waited for them before making her entrance down the stairs. She sat at a nearby table while her mother cooked her a steak, rare. Lawrence sat at the end of the counter, eyeing her. Babe was sharp-tongued, fast-talking, quick to flirt, and even quicker to laugh. He thought she was one snappy girl.

Of the two lanky men, Lawrence was the talker, and he was the one who bantered back and forth with her, laughing and telling stories. Carl said little when Babe was nearby; he may have been twenty-six, and seven years older than Lawrence, but he still had the innocence of a farm boy.

The brothers missed their family and home-cooked food. They liked coming to the café and they liked Mrs. Chatfield. She reminded them of their mother; she too believed in God, hard work, and common sense. They respected that in a woman. In return, Nellie Chatfield admired the men, especially Carl. He was Catholic, dependable, quiet and kind, and he didn't smoke or drink. This man was a good prospect for her daughter. He would be a decent addition to the family. Yes, Carl Clemens was a grand choice in Nellie Chatfield's book. If only she was younger.

Comfortable around Mrs. Chatfield, Carl and she discussed the heat and the bugs, the differences between hay and rice farming, and went on and on about Longhorns and Leghorns. They could talk about almost anything. It was Babe he was tongue-tied around. His sweaty palms wouldn't come out of his pockets when she was near, his long legs stayed wrapped and glued to the swivel chair post, his large feet locking him on.

Even though Lawrence thought Babe was spoiled, getting up late and being waited on hand and foot by her mother, he was drawn to her. She was not like the Catholic girls back home, not like any girls he knew. She seemed older, bolder, and more outspoken. But Lawrence didn't interest Babe—Carl did. Carl, who didn't say a word to her, who could hardly look her in the eye, who bowed his head, lowered his lashes and twiddled his thumbs whenever she came near. But Babe wasn't used to being ignored. She set her sights on this good-looking Minnesota farmer, determined to have him, and went after Carl like Annie Oakley roping a rodeo calf. He never even felt the branding. Too shy and naive to make a move on his own, he was roped and tied before he hit the ground.

Lawrence, upset about their impending marriage, did everything he could to talk his brother out of it. "This woman is not going to be good for you," he warned. "She's not the kind of woman to marry. She'll only cause you heartache and trouble." Carl turned a deaf ear.

And so, within six months of meeting one another in the Golden Eagle Cafe, in an early morning Mass at Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church in Colusa, my father married my mother.

As it turned out, Lawrence wasn't jealous. He was right. ■



Noreen "Babe" Chatfield, Colusa, 1933