

Learning to Fly

Your life is not a dress rehearsal.

The night of September 1, 1950, didn't go quite as Joe McGraw had planned. The tall, thick-chested, burly young man was fresh out of college and couldn't wait to coach his first football game in the small town of Vinita, Oklahoma. He'd been the star of his own high school football team back in Texas. Now, at age 26, he was replacing Vinita High's winning football coach, who had brought two conference titles to the school. The pressure was definitely on. In Oklahoma—where football is king and boys proudly proclaim that they live and breathe the sport—winning is everything. And every game counts.

An hour before kickoff that Friday night, Joe's wife and high school sweetheart, Jerry, went into labor. The couple already had two little girls at home. This birth would finally bring them a boy, their firstborn son—the male child they, like most native Texans, had longed for.

At the town's tiny, 18-bed city hospital, Coach McGraw could do nothing but wait on the sidelines while his players readied for the big game. Fathers were not allowed in the delivery room back

in those days. The two little McGraw girls—Donna and Deana—couldn't even be with their mom and dad because children, and their germs, were not welcome on the maternity ward.

Game time quickly approached. In less than 60 minutes, the moment McGraw had dreamed of for so long would become a reality. But, because of the impending birth, questions plagued him. Would the Hornets have to play without their new coach? Might Joe actually miss the entire season opening game? And couldn't that new baby boy of his hurry up and make his arrival before kickoff?

As it turned out, Phillip Calvin McGraw, Joe's newborn son, had his own game plan in mind. In the first of many big entrances to come, he arrived in this world just 15 minutes before kickoff. As a result, his father missed his first game—the one he had looked forward to for so long.

"They [my parents] tell the story about how pumped he was for his first game," McGraw shares. "The kickoff was at 7:30 P.M., and my mother went into labor with me about an hour before that. He had to miss the game because I was born at 7:15 P.M. It was his whole life's dream, and I broke up his first football game."

Sue Sumner Secondine was among the few who got to hold the newborn future star. The local girl, who had just turned 16, was a nurse's aide at the Vinita hospital. Dressed in a white cotton uniform starched stiff as a board, the blond with the wide smile and pretty blue eyes hidden behind big glasses took temperatures and filled cups with water after school for 25 cents an hour.

She always made a point of checking on the babies of local teachers. After all, teachers are celebrities in small towns. Whenever a teacher or a teacher's wife had a baby, it was always special. But this baby was different. He was the *coach's* boy. "I look at Dr. Phil now and think, I held him as a tiny newborn," Secondine says.

When the four-bed maternity ward overflowed, nurses swaddled newborns and snuggled them in for the night inside dresser drawers in the nursery. McGraw may have spent his first night on

this earth sleeping inside a piece of furniture. Quite a humble beginning for Oprah Winfrey's favorite psychologist, the host of one of TV's most popular talk shows, and a self-help author whose every book has been a huge bestseller.

The grandson of a butcher, Phil McGraw grew up in small towns and soaked up the rural talk-and-walk that imbued his personality and became his famous calling card as a shoot-from-the-lip advice guru. He spent much of his youth and adult life following in the footsteps of his ambitious father—a coach turned oil business salesman turned psychologist. But in the end, the son soared higher. Throughout life, there never seemed to be a town big enough to hold the ambitions of a man who would one day become known to the world simply as “Dr. Phil.”



McGraw's family roots are sunk deep into the black waxy soil and sandy loam of rural Texas. Joe and Jerry McGraw dated and fell in love in high school in their small hometown of Munday, Texas. The town (population 1,500) sits on the rolling, mesquite-covered plains of Knox County in northwest central Texas, halfway between its bigger neighbors—Wichita Falls and Abilene.

Blessed with made-to-order soil for both farming and raising cattle, Munday's residents did both. Corn, wheat, and cotton could all thrive there. But by the 1930s, it was cotton that became the community's lifeblood. Like many of Munday's children, Joe and Jerry chopped cotton, a crop so vital that schools let out for two weeks during the harvest so youngsters could lend a hand in the fields.

The Depression and the Dust Bowl nearly destroyed the local cotton industry. Hundreds of acres of cotton fell out of production and farmers abandoned once-thriving farms. As the heavens rained dirt and their livelihoods fell apart, the people of Munday toiled hard to survive. “Times were tough for everybody, but we

had good times," recalls Raymond Carden, who grew up with Joe and Jerry McGraw in Munday.

Joe and Jerry's parents were uneducated, but well acquainted with the worth of an honest day's work. Jerry's parents, with whom Phil spent summers as a child, made a particular impression on their grandson. Mabel Stevens, or "Nanny" as the family called her, stood a spunky 4 feet 11 inches. She ironed other people's clothes to bring in money for the family. Relatives recall how she liked to dip snuff, and how she worked it so enthusiastically that it would roll down her chin. Still spry well into her 80s, Mabel was known to regularly hike up her skirt and crawl over barbed wire fences to pick plums for her homemade jelly.

Just 3 inches shy of 7 feet tall, Mabel's husband of 68 years, Cal, towered over her. Cal owned a business in Munday, and just about everyone knew him. He ran the local freight warehouse where Phil McGraw later worked summers helping his grandfather load and unload cargo. Longtime residents remember Cal for driving his flatbed Dodge so slow down Munday's main street that he tied up traffic. High school boys running alongside the truck for fun could easily keep up. McGraw's grandfather rarely had to replace his truck's tires because he drove so slow they never wore out. Those who grew up around Cal in Munday still joke about this.

Cal and Mabel definitely didn't have a "normal" husband-wife relationship. In fact, McGraw says he first began thinking like a psychologist during those summers he used to spend with his grandparents in Texas as a little boy. He watched them closely and took mental notes on their relationship, later using his grandparents as an example of how some couples successfully defy traditional models of a healthy marriage. As quirky as their relationship may have seemed, Mabel and Cal were happy, he observed.

"They probably didn't speak to each other more than twenty-five words a week," he says. "They did not sleep in the same room, and their only common interest was survival. But even

then I noticed that they did relate. No matter where we were or what we were doing they were physically very close and in most cases actually touching in some way."



Joe McGraw also grew up in Munday. He was named after his father, a butcher in a local grocery store. Growing up as the older brother to triplet siblings, Joe was just one of the boys in town. He and his friends passed their free time riding donkeys or playing hockey with a tin can and a stick in a vacant lot. One family member recalls that Joe earned the nickname "Spontaneous Combustion" when he nearly burned down the family barn.

Joe was different from many of the other boys he played with in that he was very curious about the world. In high school, "he was pretty good in his books," Carden reflects. "He liked to read. He read a lot . . . newspapers or anything."

Joe was also a jock at Munday High School. He played basketball, football, and ran track. In his senior year, he was already a big boy, standing just over 6 feet and weighing nearly 200 pounds. He was a running back with better than average speed on the football team. Carden was the quarterback, but Joe was the star of the team. In their senior year, they lost only one game to the team that eventually won the district championship. That was the beginning of a legacy of sports and competition that Joe would pass along to his only son.

Joe and Jerry got married before he shipped off with the Navy to serve in World War II. When he returned from his tour of duty, he announced to his family that he'd decided to go to college. Thanks to the U.S. government and the GI Bill, Joe and other returning soldiers could get money for college tuition and even a living allowance. Thousands of young men like him did just that.

No one in his family had ever gone to college, and the news exploded like a bomb. Uneducated relatives, accustomed to simply

working hard to make their way in life, ridiculed Joe for wanting to play student. Schooling seemed like a waste of time to them when he could just go out and get a real job. But Joe was determined. Even though no one else in his family had ever gone past high school, he knew that a college education was the ticket to a better life for himself and his new bride, especially if they wanted to get out of Munday. So he ignored the criticism.

The two left for Oklahoma, where the University of Tulsa had offered McGraw a scholarship to play football. He couldn't know it then, but he was also blazing a trail for his future son. In the years to come, Phil McGraw would follow the same path, attending the same college to play the same sport.



Joe and Jerry took their Texas ways and rural outlook on life with them to Oklahoma. People often said that both McGraws, but especially Jerry, had a lot of country in them. Even today, the bright lights of Hollywood and stardom that shine on her son don't hold a glamorous appeal for Jerry, family members say. Jerry ("Granma" to Phil and the grandchildren) is just a country girl at heart who still lives in Texas.

Though Phil McGraw now lives far removed from his humble past—making his home in a multimillion-dollar Beverly Hills mansion and hobnobbing with celebrities—he goes out of his way to portray himself as just a good ol' country boy.

On a trip to Tulsa for a Junior League fund-raiser in 2002, the man who is famous for take-no-prisoners, in-your-face confrontations waxed uncharacteristically sentimental: "This is the heart of America," he told his audience. "This to me is the grassroots of America. People here know the value of a dollar, the value of hard work, and the value of family. This is where you can keep your feet on the ground. I'm proud to be from here and [to] have grown up here."

Joe struggled academically at the University of Tulsa, earning poor grades in almost every subject. He flunked out of his sociology class, got a C in general psychology, and barely graduated with a 2.008 overall grade point average. He got a mere three A's during his undergraduate years—in football, physical education, and a teaching class. Despite his disappointing grades, Joe was awarded a degree in education in 1950 and took the coaching and teaching job in Vinita, one of the oldest villages in Oklahoma. Vinita, Dr. Phil's birthplace, sits on Route 66, "America's Main Street," in former frontier country in the northeastern corner of Oklahoma.

Settled through the sweat and effort of cowboys and Cherokee Indians, Vinita was built along a railroad. In fact, it was the railroad companies that determined the askew placement of streets. Trains still frequently rumble through the town with throaty whistle blasts, blocking lunchtime traffic as they pass through.

"There isn't a true north and south, west and east street in town," says Sue Secondine, who still lives there. "Vinita doesn't run straight with the rest of the world."

Vinita is an oddly befitting hometown for a man who has carved out his own unique celebrity niche. In the early 1950s when the McGraws came to town, farming, oil, coal, and cattle were the town's main industries. Vinita was a lively little place then, with two dime stores, dress shops, shoe stores, small cafés, and three movie theaters. "The streets were full of people, especially on Saturday when the farmers came to town and did their trading," Secondine remembers.

The town hasn't grown much since the McGraws lived there, but the dress shops and dime stores have been replaced by small businesses like the Shout and Sack Deli, Happy House Fine Chinese Restaurant, and Loco Joe's Automobiles. Vinita is now home to several Fortune 500 factories and a minimum-security state prison.

Besides being a stop along Route 66, Vinita's main tourist attraction is the so-called world's largest McDonald's—29,000 square feet of Happy Meals and Big Macs that span the local slice of turnpike. The self-proclaimed World's Largest Calf Fry Festival and Cook-off, held every September, is Vinita's other claim to fame.

Though many of Vinita's residents know that Dr. Phil was born there, they don't make a fuss about it. By contrast, another Oklahoma native, cowboy humorist Will Rogers, is a special favorite son. Rogers has his own historical monument at one of the town's entrances and the turnpike and annual rodeo are named after him. Rogers attended college in town and still has relatives nearby.



Vinita High had a long tradition of successful sports teams before Joe McGraw came along. The school boasted state championships back to the 1910s in softball, baseball, football, and even women's basketball. Photos of the town's championship teams are preserved in glass cases at the town's Eastern Trail Museum.

As high-profile and important as the football coach's job may have been, there was little money in it for Joe. When Phil McGraw was born, his family lived in a tiny, frame house in a tidy neighborhood on the right side of the tracks. The house on South Scraper Street still stands today next to the Vinita Flag and Apron Company, maker of American flags and those colorful work aprons worn by employees at chain discount and home improvement stores. But none of the current neighbors seem to know that a celebrity was born on their street.

"Dr. Phil grew up like a lot of us," Secondine says. "It was a strong family. He grew up knowing what the world was about. I don't think he had anything handed to him on a silver platter. You grow up here knowing the value of a dollar."

At the old high school, which has since been replaced by a newer building, Joe also coached track, taught marriage and family classes, and put his psychology education to work as a guidance counselor. The yearbook describes his duties as “personal problems,” which he helped many of his students solve. “He had a profound influence on everyone, which I didn’t realize until later in life,” says Eddie Berry, quarterback of Coach McGraw’s team.

Former Vinita students remember Joe as a strict man with a kind heart. He greeted students in the halls with a smile and liked to tease the girlfriends of his players. Berry recalls how the coach took his team members on a field trip to Tulsa where he introduced the boys to football players and coaches at the university where he had once played ball. The small gesture was a big deal to the boys from Vinita.

But Coach McGraw had a tough side, too, that his players did their best to avoid. He was a blunt, no-bull, no-nonsense leader on the field. Tom Clanton, who also played football for Joe, remembers his coach’s tendency to fiddle with the stem of his watch when he talked, a sure sign that he was thinking hard about something “and you better listen.”

“He was somebody you respected,” remembers Clanton, gray-haired now, yet still tall and slim—just like he was in high school when he wore jersey No. 41 and his friends called him Tommy. “He [Joe] told it like it was. He would never lie to you.”

Girls tended to have a different reaction to Coach McGraw. “I was scared of him,” Secondine says. “He was a big man. He was kind of gruff. I was in his study hall and I minded my Ps and Qs. I was a little old country farm girl and I was scared to death to get into trouble. He didn’t take any guff off the boys in there either. He ran a pretty tight ship.”

Not so tight, though, that he couldn’t proudly invite his players over to view his newborn son. “I guess the last time I saw Phil McGraw he weighed about eight pounds,” Clanton remembers.

His family has run Clanton's Café on Route 66 in Vinita for four generations. An eight-foot-tall red sign outside with white letters spelling "EAT" beckons hungry passersby. People from miles around visit the restaurant to enjoy its chicken-fried steak—fresh cut and hand-breaded, never frozen.

Inside, diners sit in maroon vinyl booths surrounded by darkly paneled walls that display framed photos of the town and the famous folk who have stopped by from time to time. Ronnie Dunn of the country and western duo Brooks & Dunn courted his wife in the booths there.

Clanton, recently retired from the restaurant's daily operations, wouldn't mind adding a photo of his high school coach's famous son to his collection on the café walls. It would take a place of honor alongside pictures of Mickey Mantle, who was raised 30 miles up the road, and another famous local—King Tut, the bull from the Elizabeth Taylor movie, *Giant*. "If he's half the man his dad was," Clanton says of Phil McGraw, "he's a pretty good man."

In Joe's first year, the team posted a losing 2–8 record, but Berry says the season was no reflection on the coach's abilities. He did the best he could with the players he had. Joe never had much of a chance to improve on this record. The McGraws didn't stay in Vinita longer than a couple of football seasons.

Berry and his teammates never knew why their coach left town so soon. They had no idea they lost him to a siren call. It came from the oil industry, which was just beginning to boom in the Southwest.



During World War II, oil exploration and field development slowed considerably because trained workers were in the armed services and steel was more urgently needed for the war effort. In the postwar years of the 1950s, the markets for oil and

gas boomed, prompting a surge in drilling as companies began opening new oil and gas fields. These growing oil companies needed workers.

Lured once again by the possibility of a more lucrative living and better lifestyle for his young family, Joe left teaching and coaching for a job in this new, exciting field. Some of the best advice his dad ever gave him, Phil McGraw says, was to “create your own experience. Make a decision and pull the trigger.” That’s exactly what Joe did.

Living by what he preached, Joe pulled the trigger on yet another career path. He took a job as a salesman for an oil equipment company. The demands of this position required him to shuttle his family back and forth between towns in Oklahoma, Texas, and Colorado. Like the vagabond children in a military family, Phil McGraw, his two older sisters, and his one younger sister, Brenda, spent their childhood moving from homes on one dusty road after another.

Joe fathered his children the same way he coached the players on his team. He was a tough dad at home whose high expectations forced his son to grow up earlier than most children do, according to Phil McGraw’s friends, who wonder whether he lost out on a real childhood because of it.

As the only boy, Joe’s son had to do a man’s share of the work in contributing to the family’s well-being, whether it was mowing lawns, delivering newspapers, or eventually helping Joe in his new sales job. “We grew up in a lot of small towns . . . just trying to get by,” McGraw says. “We were just really scrapping around for anything we could. We just did what we could to gather up enough money to get by on.”

As tough as his father may have been, McGraw received a lot of loving from the women at home. His older sisters adored their only brother, and McGraw says that he was treated like a prince. They took him to school with them when he was 3 because they

didn't want to leave him at home. Off he went, carrying his own little sack lunch. "He was the one and only and they just idolized him," mother Jerry says.

McGraw developed his now-famous tart tongue early on, not surprising considering the sense of entitlement the family bestowed on him as the only son. At age 3, he tried to teach one of his grandmothers, who was visiting, how to turn on the family stove. "He couldn't speak very well," his sister, Deana, recalls. "Finally, our grandmother said, 'Son, I can't understand a word you're saying.' Phil said very clearly, 'What, are you an idiot?'"

Before he was even in nursery school, McGraw was already telling it like it is, or at least how he saw it. "I think he has a lot of his dad's no-nonsense," says Secondine. "One thing I like about Dr. Phil is that everything is pretty much cut-and-dried."

That approach scores a lot of points with the kind of folks McGraw grew up around in Texas and Oklahoma, many of whom display the same regional tendency to cut quickly to the chase. They put a lot of stock in plain speaking and folks who don't varnish the truth. The only difference between them and McGraw is that McGraw is now making millions doing it.

He's always been a smart boy. "When Phil was little, he was basically just serious like he is now. He was determined with everything that he did. He was very intelligent," says sister, Deana.



As a youngster, and some would say later in life as a grown-up, McGraw's tendency to find trouble got the best of him. He was a Boy Scout for all of two weeks before being kicked out of his troop for throwing rocks at cars. His mom, the troop's leader, had to continue on without him.

He was never much interested in school either. It just didn't excite him. His mother recalls a visit from one teacher who said that little Phil needed to be challenged because he was so bored in school. "They suggested the piano, then they said after he learned

it he'd never play it again because he was that bored with it. He'd conquer it and he would be through with it."

But there was one place McGraw was never bored. Like sports, flying would become another lifelong passion. Always aiming for the stars in one way or another, Joe was an avid pilot who somehow managed to work flight time into his day jobs. Flying was nearly second nature in the McGraw family. According to family members, one of McGraw's sisters could also fly a plane and two of his sisters married fellow pilots.

For McGraw, flying became such a guiding influence that whenever he talks about the most influential people in his life, the list always includes his father and two unforgettable pilots who crossed his path.

McGraw was a grade-schooler in the late 1950s when he met Gene Knight, a flying bootlegger. At the time, the McGraws were living in rural Oklahoma, where many counties were "dry." Because liquor sales were illegal, bootleggers like Knight were in constant demand. He made his living flying whiskey around Oklahoma. McGraw was in awe of this man who had such a great affinity for life. Knight was someone who loved his job and was so obviously fulfilling his passion. "Son, if you're not having fun," Knight was known to say, "change what you're doing!"

Joe McGraw was one of Knight's regular customers. On Saturday afternoons he and Phil would drive out of town and meet Knight in the middle of a big cotton patch, where McGraw remembers that even the local sheriff sometimes helped the bootlegger unload his cargo.

In McGraw's little-boy eyes, Knight must have been as dashing as Errol Flynn, tall and handsome in a leather flying jacket. One day Knight offered to take him for a ride in his old rattletrap plane. "As soon as we were airborne, I told myself, 'I'm gonna be a pilot,' and just as soon as I came of age, I got my license. I have been flying my entire life, a direct result of Gene Knight's influence," McGraw says.

By age 12, McGraw could handle the controls so competently that his father let him fly with him to deliver equipment to oil fields in Colorado. "I spent a lot of time with him flying in and out of those mountain landing strips up there," McGraw says. "I can remember going with him at 2 A.M. and we'd load something in the back and off we'd go in the dead of the night into the mountains . . . that's where I learned how to fly."

Later in life, McGraw took more lessons from a flying cowboy named Bill Solomon, a man who impressed him as one of the most sensible, down-to-earth people he had ever met. Even when he was talking about flying, Solomon seemed to be imparting lessons for life.

Solomon taught him that "when you are airborne, what you've got is yourself. You'd better depend on who you are. If you're in trouble, some guy 30 miles away in a radio room on the ground won't save you. It's you and the airplane. You'd better know yourself and you'd better depend on yourself."

McGraw, a man who has said with no apology that he considers himself the most important person in his own life, took the lesson to heart.