



# AFTON VERL WHITMER

*April 24, 1917 - December 24, 1998*



## Historical Profile

Afton was born on 24 April 1917, in Alpine, Arizona to his Father Angus Van Meter Whitmer (38 years old) and his mother Jennie (33 years old) as the tenth of 17 children. His older siblings, Angus, Ralph, Cecil, Harold, Chuck, Genevieve, Ethel and Ray were 14, 13, 10, 8, 7, 5, 3 and 2 years old when he was born. One brother Lealand Claude died of whooping cough on 8 August 1906, before Afton was born. Another brother Ray V, who had been born in 1915, died of pneumonia on 3 May 1917, while Afton was still a baby. The year of his birth, World War I was raging across Europe.

According to David Keith Whitmer the Whitmer children were raised, "in the lusty rugged and amazingly beautiful White Mountains of Alpine, Arizona where the mountains reach 8,000 feet in the sky of neverland. Alpine is now a resort but in the early 1900s it was a very small place where farmers raised their cattle, vegetables and did whatever it took to feed their families. The Whitmer children knew the Blue well, a place where the cattle grazed in the winter. All the children were raised riding horses. It was a place where everyone had to work and work hard. Seventeen children were born here. Four died.

1918 brought the end of the war, but also the spread of the flu pandemic to the world, and the birth of another brother, Lawrence, to Afton's family. Then in 1921 a little sister Mary was born, as well Afton's future wife Lenora Lillian Biersdorff who was born in Seattle, Washington. Another little brother, Von, was born in 1922. Then in 1925 twin sisters Faye and Fern were born into the family. 3 years later in 1928 twin sisters Bertha and Blanche would be born but not survive the birth. These were the last of her siblings to be born to his parents. Afton was 11 at the time.

One year later, when 12 years of age, Afton and his family experienced the collapse of the stock market that would bring about the Great Depression beginning in 1930, greatly impacting the Whitmer family and their entire community sending several of his older siblings throughout the West in search of good work and requiring his large family to work together to make ends meet.

Afton's family were members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and according to his younger sister Fern's account, "Church and religion was our whole life. We all got up and went to Church. I don't know if I learned a lot. My parents were so busy I wasn't given much time. Church and Sunday School

on Sunday, Relief Society and Mutual on Tuesdays, Primary Wednesdays. Dances on the weekends. Family prayer sometimes around my parent's bed."

When Afton was 22 years old, World War II began in Europe, just two decades after the end of the First World War. It would become the most destructive conflict in recorded history. The United States tried to stay out of the war for as long as possible, but after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt was forced to take action and declare war. The U.S. joined the Allied Forces (including Great Britain, France, and the Soviet Union) in opposing the Axis Powers of Nazi Germany, fascists in Italy, and the Empire of Japan.

All men between the ages of 18 and 64 were required to register for a draft should the need arise. This would have included Afton and several of his brothers. He never did get called up as part of the draft and ultimately the Allied forces were triumphant in the war, as Germany's surrender was eventually followed by the surrender of Japan.

During the early years of the war 23 year-old Afton met, courted, and married 19 year-old Lenora Lillian Biersdorff on 24 September 1940 in Dillon Montana where the couple lived for the first several years of their marriage and began a small family. Montana provided a vast open landscape where most people were miners, farmers, and ranchers. They were spread out with neighbors few and far between. Dillon was located in the south-western most corner of the state and was founded as a railroad town in 1880 by the Union Pacific Railroad. The town's location was selected by the railroad because of its proximity to gold mines in the area and thrived on Talc mining, and ranching of both cattle and sheep.

Afton's wife Lenora was actually born to John Coleman and Anna Johanna Score (Skaar). She was raised by William and Annie M Beiersdorf (Biersdorff) who are listed as her guardians, but never adopted. When Lenora was approximately thirty-three her birth sister (Ruth Coleman Driscoll) found her on 2 April, 1954 by long distance phone call. Lenora went to Seattle where she met her brothers and sisters for the first time since her youth.



6 months before the attack on Pearl Harbor on 19 June 1941, Afton's son William was born when Afton was 24 years old. One year later on 27 June 1942 he was joined by a little sister Lenora. The family remained in Dillon until the end of the war and then made their way down to Morenci Arizona where they had a couple more children including a son Alfred born on 2 May 1947 and a daughter, Shirley, born on 4 September 1948. By this time Afton was 31 years of age.

The next decade marked the dawn of the Atomic age at the end of World War II (1945), the Korean War (1950), a Polio Vaccine in 1953, and the Vietnam conflict stretching from 1955-1975. During this time Afton would see his father Angus Van Whitmer pass away at the age of 76. Afton would have been 38 at the time. Afton's mother Jennie would live another 11 years until 1967 when she would also pass away at the age of 83. The following year 1968 would bring the sad news of the death of Afton's second son Alfred in Thu Thien Ha, Nghia Binh, Vietnam at the age of 20. Afton was 50 at the time.

This was a time of great change in culture, in technology, and in global events. Martin Luther King would lead the nation in a civil rights movement. United States astronauts would land on the moon in 1969. Beginning in 1970 Afton would begin to see his siblings also begin to pass, starting with his sister Genevieve in 1970 at the age of 61, and his brother Angus in 1977 at the age of 74.

Five years later in 1982 his older brother Ralph would pass away at the age of 77 followed the next year in 1983 by his brother Cecil at the age of 75. Then in 1985 Afton received the sad news that his oldest son William passed away at the age of 43 followed later that year by the passing of Afton's sister Ethel who was 71 at the time. In 1987 his brother Chuck would die at the age of 76. Then in 1990 his youngest daughter Shirley Faye passed away at the age of 41. His brother

Harold also passed away that year at the age of 81. Two years later in 1992 his younger brother Von passed away at the age of 69. Then in 1998 Afton joined his siblings by passing away on Christmas Eve at the age of 81 in Safford Arizona. He was survived by his wife and oldest daughter both named Lenora.

## **Afton Verl Whitmer**

Nestled high in the colorful White Mountains of Arizona and hidden away from the hustle and bustle of the mainstream, the small community of Alpine beckoned to Angus Vanmeter and Sarah Jane Judd Whitmer together with their little family to homestead 160 acres of choice mountain land in the year of 1907. There the Whitmer family flourished and welcomed their 10th child of seventeen into their love and care on the 23rd day of April 1917.

Afton Verl Whitmer grew up during hard times, but yet they were good learning years hunting and Fishing, riding and herding, planting and harvesting, traveling and peddling, driving and repairing, building and accomplishing. He attended school in Alpine and St. Johns and after his 8th grade year, he decided to go to work to help his family financially, thus ending his formal education. Then he went to work on ranches for the U.S. Forest Service, and on road crews learning to operate heavy road equipment.

Afton married Lenora Lillian Beiersdorff in Dillon, Montana on September 24th, 1940. While in Montana Afton worked for the Union Pacific Railroad repairing tract, ranching, and building a dirt dam. A son, William Verl, and a daughter, Lenora Adele, were born before the cold winters of Montana drove Afton and his family back to the warmer Arizona climate and sunshine. Once back in Arizona, the experience he had gained got him a job as a Dodge Copper Mine at Morenci Dodge and Downs with strikes and shutdowns, yet through it all he raised his family there. The arrival of 3 more daughters, Eva Ann, Judith

Lillian and Shirley Faye, and another son, Alfred Van, brought to six the number of children born to Afton and Lenora.

As an employee of Phelps Afton always had a job, but there were constant ups and downs repairing and rebuilding cars and trucks. Afton became quite a mechanic and during his career at Morenci, he was also a train engineer, a guard and a foreman in the machine shop.

After Van and Shirley graduated from High School, he moved his family who were still at home to the Safford Valley and continued to work in Morenci until retirement in 1978. Before and after retiring to his small-time ranch South of Safford he found the time to build their home, work the land and raise horses, cattle, sheep, chickens, ducks, geese, rabbits, turkeys, dogs, cats, plus raise a garden and now help take care of and entertain lots and lots of grandkids and great-grandkids.

His title was a Boy Scout Leader in an L.D.S. Church troop and an instructor for the National Rifle Association. He was and is, when time and effort permitted, an accomplished Square Dancer, Instructor and Caller, having formed many of his own Clubs, teaching young and old alike.

For all who know him, Afton was always willing to share his time, talents and means, and never hesitated to offer words of council and advice. He has worked hard all his life and it was not in his nature to back away from a good challenge which included hard work. The years may be slowing him down a bit, but he is still a great strength to lean on, and a staunch fighter at the young age of 69. In July 1968, Afton and Lenora had the privilege of being sealed for all time and eternity in the Los Angeles Temple.

In April of 1968 the family felt a great loss when Van was killed while serving in the U.S. Marine Corps in VietNam, and since the last Whitmer reunion another great loss was felt in the passing of William in January of 1985. Afton has a great love for his family and friends and is in turn surrounded by lots of his family who love and cherish him as their Patriarch, Husband, Father, Brother, Uncle, Grandfather, Great-Grandfather, neighbor and friend.

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## *Afton & Lenora's Family*

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**L - R: FRONT:  
BACK:**

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*Uncle Afton's wife*

**LENORA LILLIAN BEIERSDORFF  
(COLEMAN) WHITMER**



**33 Years Lost—*then Found***

**Have you ever wondered what it would be like to have your family find you after 33 years of separation?**

I have. This is my most unusual story.

I was next to the youngest of 10 children. My father being a jolly Irishman and fond of outdoor work was away from home a lot of the time. I was told some of the jobs he worked were on the Golden Gate Bridge in 'Frisco. So you see he did get rather a long way from his family and home, who were left in Seattle, Washington. I have been told that he was a wonderful father to us when he was home.

Our family had moved from Spokane to Seattle when I came along to bless the home. My mother finally greatly tired of having the full responsibility of such a large family and never knowing for sure when her husband would come wandering by, caused a sad thing to happen. One of my recollections of my mother was of a woman bending over a wash tub doing the family wash. I later learned she also took in washings to help out the family budget to cover the

cost of raising such a large group of children. Father sent money but not regularly, so she had to have a way to support the family.

Mother was never well. Maybe too large a load to carry alone and too much worry over "where is my wandering husband tonight." As time went on Mother's legs bothered her so much she could not get around other than on crutches. It was then she decided to put some of us smaller children out to foster homes. I, being next to the baby (at that time only 3 years of age) was first to go. What an ordeal that must have been for my mother! To have to give up one of her children! She told people who took me that they must promise to give me a better home and education than she could get at that time. This, they promised. I might say now that a girl could have had no better parents had she chosen them herself!

My foster mother had one child by a previous marriage, a girl sixteen years older than me. If a child could have been spoiled by love and attention, that child should have been me. Mother, (I will now mean my foster mother) and sis, as she taught me to call her daughter, spent all their spare time making clothes and dressing me just like a little lady.



And Daddy, did ever a girl have such a Daddy as mine!  
How his eyes sparkled when he handed me my first doll  
and watched me sit down in my little rocking chair to  
sing to my very own baby doll. His heart was captured  
and from that day on I was his baby. How he loved to  
show me off to friends and neighbors. Mother was never  
able to give him a child of his own but strangers never  
knew but what I was his own child.

It was Daddy who was there when I was sick and needed  
him. It was Daddy who waited out the anxious hours  
until I returned home from my first date. It was Daddy  
who gave me away on my wedding day. Then one year  
later he was the typically proud grandpa when I named  
my first child, a boy, for him. Daddy passed away in 1947  
when my fifth child, my second son, was just 6 weeks  
old. My husband and I were living in Arizona then. We  
made the trip home to Montana where the folks had  
lived since I was 9 years old. It was hard to get over  
losing Daddy but because I also had one of the sweetest  
mother's, a very dear husband and the dearest bunch of  
children on the earth, I made it.

But even with all this love being showered on me, my  
mother, daddy, and sister and later my husband and the  
dearest bunch of children, I still often had terribly blue  
days when I would wonder and yes, sometimes even cry,  
for I did want to know my own family.

You see I could remember my family and some of the  
times in Seattle with all of those brothers and sisters  
who were so much older. I had no one to play house and  
enjoy my dollies with me. Every night as I knelt at my  
mother's knee to say my prayers, she taught me to ask  
my Heavenly Father to look after my real mother and to  
see that my brothers and sisters would be taken care of.  
She also taught me that I must not think unkindly of my  
own parents because I did not know the circumstances  
and would not understand them if I did. For this, I thank  
her because it made finding me, by my family, mean so  
much more.

It was on April 2, 1954, that I received a long distance  
call from Seattle, Washington in which a man's voice told  
me that he thought I was his sister-in-law, and would I  
speak to his wife, my sister, Ruth!" Well, I am afraid  
we didn't get too much satisfaction from that call. The  
papers said that we cried \$8 worth of tears. That was one  
day that I can never forget. I was able to find out that one  
of my brothers, my oldest sister, Amanda, and my father  
were gone to the life beyond. But I believe on that day,  
they were happy for us.

The next day Ruth called me again. We were both  
more composed this time and we were able to start  
plans for one or the other of us to get together. When  
her husband again took the phone and asked me to  
accept money for a plane ticket to Washington so  
that I could meet all of the remaining family. I could  
hardly wait until my husband returned from town so  
I could tell him of Joe's plan.

At first he hesitated about my going alone so far way  
from home and into strangers one might say. But I cried  
and laughed so much those days. I told him the plane  
ticket and the trip would seem to all of us who had been  
separated all these years like the birthdays, Easters and  
Christmas' we had never had together as children. Then  
realizing what the trip would mean to me, and to our  
family, he gave his consent for me to go. It was the first  
time in our 13 years of married life that we would ever  
be apart but he went with me in spirit and in love every  
minute of the time I was gone. There were so many new  
experiences that week, the first time I had ever ridden  
on an airplane, leaving my family so far away, the first  
time in years that I would see my real mother, brothers  
and sisters. They told me that they wondered each 8th  
on my birthday where I had been taken and where I was.

Would I turn from her all of these years and go back to the  
mother who had given me birth? It was such an unusual  
happening. The editor of the little county newspaper  
and his photographer were with us at the airport to see  
me off that day, getting the story and taking pictures

of all my children and my husband and me as I left to see my lost family. I was met in Phoenix by my foster mother and my foster sister. They were both overjoyed at the thought of my being found after all the years by my own family. Looking back now, I can understand a little of what my foster mother went through that day. She should have known one cannot change one's whole way of life so quickly even though it was thrilling to meet my people, the woman who raised me and whom my children lovingly called their grandma, was the only true mother I have ever known.

I arrived five hours late at 4:30 a.m. in Seattle. Lots of people were worried about me because I was so late. I was met at the airport in Seattle by Ruth, her husband, Joe, my brother, John and Evelyn, the youngest sister who recognized me first even though she had not seen me since we were practically babies. As I came off the plane, she exclaimed, "There she is, the lady in the green coat." The only person missing was the mother I had come so far to see. In all the excitement I was unable to learn from Ruth why mother was not there.

Later at her home, where I was to stay while in Seattle, Ruth told me that after searching for me for 15 years she would not call me the day before she did in her search for me. At one time they had even found a woman in Philadelphia with the very same name as mine. So Ruth had not told mother that she had at last found me, for fear it would be the wrong person.

My brother had taken me to mother's home but she was not there as she lived all the way across town from my sister, Ruth. I met her the next day. Ruth phoned her the next day and mother came out to Ruth's home. I met her at the door. At first she did not know me, then as realization came to her that I was the little girl she had left with others so many years ago, she took me in her arms.

I spent the rest of the day listening to mother and Ruth tell about things that had happened before and after I left the family. We finally all got together again at my brother-in-law's home. My brother-in-law did not know she was coming. He had already gone to bed. Grambling, he got dressed. Ruth asked him to look around and see if he could see anyone different than usual. He looked at everyone and then his eyes came back to me, "No!" he said. "It can't be." He took me in his arms and said, "After all these years I have another birthday present. It is a little early this year but it is still the most wonderful birthday present I have ever had."

I wonder if Cinderella was so confused and happy as I to be home again with my family and mother because the woman who raised me was still and always would be mother to me, and to realize that now I had three wonderful families of my own. My foster family, my husband's and now my own family.