

# “Growing Up with Audie Murphy”

## By J.P. Sloane<sup>1</sup>

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 were also entertainers who were pioneers of radio and television. 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 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, Racecar driver Johnny Parsons, who would go onto becoming the winner of the 1952 world famous "Indy 500." The Murphy's later relocated to a lovely home in Toluca Lake on a picturesque golf course just a few minutes away from Universal International Studios where Uncle Audie made films. I understand that it has only been 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 and 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 course, my dad heartily approved of (dad’s name was James too and 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. Sometimes when I was over at their house I would 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. It seems that little Skipper (the youngest) was playing on the stairs and fell down 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.

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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 that had died and left Caroline and her mother orphaned and widowed. Uncle Audie and Aunt Pam sent for Caroline to come and be their ward and to 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 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, one of which was "The Sergeant and a Nun." Sadly I lost contact with her in my early twenties.

Whenever Uncle Audie was over at 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 did have a wonderful sense of humor. On an earlier occasion when I was around eight years old, I had just learned how to talk like Donald Duck by passing air over my back teeth. With a twinkle in his eye he 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 with 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; he had his problems too. I remember one particular New Year's Eve. My family did not plan anything that evening thus brought the New Year in with a quiet reflective manner. It was very late, around midnight when the phone rang. It was Uncle Audie. He said he knew we were having a quiet evening at home this year and that it was late, but would they mind if he just 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.

I am reminded of a song he co-wrote 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 goes, "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're there for us to hide behind, but some of 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 an airline stewardess 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! If the truth were to be known, I think I had a schoolboy crush on her!

Several years ago, my dad came across her in a nursing home in Northridge. She had Alzheimer's disease and did not recognize him or remember any of the good times our families had shared. How sad. My dad, as well, 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.

My mother and father got a divorce around 1969 and because of that traumatic event, we lost our beloved home on Stern Avenue. 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 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.

It was early in the morning of February 9,th 1971 before the sun came up when 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 must have thought better of it. Anyway they could talk that evening. Later around 6:02 AM in the morning 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 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 were glued to the television set. The news was gruesome. One poor guy and a passenger were driving in a small pickup truck that had the misfortune of passing under the I-14 freeway 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. They were the first deaths reported on that terrible day. My mom is a very loving lady and she prayed for several days for those men and their poor families.

Then came 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 had had an accident. It seems her husband and his partner was killed when they were driving on the 405 freeway and passing under the I-14 overpass when the earthquake hit and it collapsed. My mother was devastated. A few months later, near my mother's birthday, May 21 Uncle Audie, who was very concerned about mom called her to let her know that he was out of town on business but assured her that he would call and checkup on her as soon as he got back. On May 28<sup>th</sup> 1971, only three and a half months after the tragic loss of her husband and just one a week after a lonely birthday, Uncle Audie too would be violently taken from us and to make it all the more heart rendering this was the Memorial Day Weekend when our nation mourns the loss of those we loved.

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. And so it is, that those whom once we were blessed to hug, are now embraced by history.