

Frank's story of coming to the Kern River Valley:

"In 1963 I believe, when I was seven, my mother Nelda brought my sister Francine and me for a visit to my paternal Grandmother's homestead. The homestead was a mining claim along the lower Kern River, on the side where the old road runs.

On a trip into Bodfish, she met a fella who owned a bar. They started corresponding, and a year later ran off to Virginia City, Nevada and she came back as Mrs. Nelda Bartell. My stepfather Ernie was a gem, and soon we moved to the Kern River Valley.

My two older sisters, Cheryl and Janis, had already left the nest, so it was my mother, Francine, and myself that made the move. The Kern River Valley in those days was pretty simple and straight forward, a place where a ten year old walking with a German Shepherd (Trudy) and a .22 rifle never got a second glance.

My mother was soon working as a waitress, then started managing local restaurants. Ernie had left the bar business and had a successful water well drilling business. Francine soon married, so for a while I lived like an only child.

Over the years, many of my family members followed our lead and came to live in this magical valley. Nelda's brother, Bob Shrode (a General Contractor), came first, then her sister Marcy, and finally her oldest brother, Elton "Bubba" Shrode (retired). Elton was a Marine and an artist, and his paintings still adorn the walls at Nelda's Diner.

While those of the greatest generation were coming, there were arrivals from the next generation also. Slowly but surely, all my sisters came, with their families, and made their homes here.

Soon after everyone got here, I entered the Air Force and was gone from 1975-1980. While in the Air Force, I married the love of my life, Donella Douglas, who had grown up in Havilah, just over the hill from Lake Isabella.

With an empty nest, Nelda and Ernie took a chance, got a second mortgage on their house and put up one of Ernie's drilling rigs for collateral and purchased a restaurant known simply as "The Diner" which then became Nelda's Diner. This was in 1976.

Soon, my sisters Cheryl and Francine, my aunt Gertie, and a steady stream of Nelda's grandchildren all took their turn working at Nelda's. Another of Nelda's employees, Pauline Douglas, was my mother in law. She was also an artist, and her paintings also grace the walls of Nelda's.

I finished my Air Force enlistment in 1980, and my wife and I came home. Nelda's had already become quite well known, and Donnie began working there, first as a waitress, then a cook, then manager until 1995 when Donnie and I started our own restaurant, Frank's Diner, in the neighboring town of Wofford Heights.

Francine and Cheryl had already had their own restaurants for some time, so at one

point, there were four independent restaurants in the Kern Valley owned by my family. Locals jokingly called us the "Bartell Cartel".

Francine tired of the business and went back to school to become a teacher, but Cheryl and I soldiered on.

Then, in 2001, Nelda decided to retire, and Donnie and I closed Frank's Diner and took the helm at Nelda's. When we came from Frank's, we brought many new menu items, and probably the thing we are most known for - our menu of over 100 milkshakes.

At the time when Nelda gently passed away, there were 5 generations of our family living here in the Kern Valley. My two "kids", Joe and Amber, work at Nelda's, and our grand kids help out from time to time.

Cheryl's kids and grand kids have worked at her place, and she is now a great grandmother in addition to being a GREAT grandmother. Our little Kern Valley family that started with my mom Nelda, sister Francine and I has grown to the point that I don't think I could accurately number it. For one thing, it is constantly growing.

Are we one of the pioneer families of the Kern Valley? Probably not, we didn't get here until the '60s. But we fed 'em all, we knew 'em all, and we are proud to feed and know their kids, grandkids and great grand kids. Not to mention all the visitors and all their descendants! .

Donnie and I take great pride in keeping the legacy of Nelda's going strong. And no, we'll never change the name!"