

# **Life in the Crystal Mountains**

by

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# Chapter 1

# Forebearers

## 1.1 Forebearers

My paternal great grandfather, Joseph Schulz, was a draft dodger. He had five brothers, all in the army, and he did not wish to pursue this career, partly from disinclination to things military and partly because it was the Württemberg army, which was not destined to win in the upcoming war with the Prussians. He got some financial help from his mother, left the family homestead in Weldingsfelden über Künzelsau and went to Eire (Ireland). He spent 10 years in Eire and accumulated a wife there. It's possible their oldest child was born there but I don't know for sure. They then emigrated to the United States and he opened a blacksmith shop in Rosedale, New York, where my grandfather, William Schulz was born in 1876. The next child died very young, and partly because of this tragedy they once again pulled up stakes and headed for California. My grandfather remembered Rosedale well enough to recognize it when he and my father visited about 1948.

Joseph opened a blacksmith shop in San Francisco and made quite a good thing of it. He invested in stock and in those days the investors were liable for the debts if the company went bankrupt. It did, and he lost a lot of money, which accounts for his final words in this life. He spoke them to his son, my grandfather William; he said, "Bill, never buy stock!" and died. My grandfather followed this advice all his life. My father John, on the other hand, was fascinated by the stock market and would drive 50 miles to get a newspaper to read the stock quotations if we were on vacation.

Here is a story about Joseph that my grandfather William told me. One of the employees of the blacksmith shop was sick and, as business was particular brisk at the moment, William was drafted for duty. He thus missed school that day. The following day Brother Aloysius, the teacher, wanted to give him a beating for missing school the day before. My agile grandfather was able to outrun the brother, and went home and told the story to his father. The following morning Joseph accompanied William to school, walked into the classroom, grabbed Brother Aloysius around the neck, hefted him into the air in front of the amused students, explained to him that only he, Joseph, was allowed to beat William, and Brother Aloysius should delegate future beatings to Joseph. He then restored Brother Aloysius to ground level and walked out of the classroom. There were no more beatings for William by Brother Aloysius.

My grandfather inherited the blacksmith shop from his father, who died relatively young. It continued to provide a good living for the family though I believe these circumstances cut short Granpa's education. A particularly competent employee named Luke Milan, who was my father's godfather, ran the shop if my grandfather were absent.

At one point things were going so well that William decided to go hunting. He and some friends built a covered wagon, got themselves some mules and went up to Northern California for a year and a half hunting trip. They had a wonderful time shooting animals and eating them, drinking, freezing their butts off during the night and telling each other tall stories.

Naturally my grandmother was not too pleased with this trip, and it may

have been at this time that my father John developed the sense of responsibility that he showed later, since he was the male lead in the household for this time. I also suspect this may have been when relations deteriorated somewhat between him and his father. My father considered William irresponsible and William considered my father as overly serious and no fun.

When the Klondike Gold Rush was at its height (1898), William and a buddy took a ship up to Alaska just to look things over. They remained only a few days.

On one occasion while William was sitting in a bar, an older man walked in and bought a round for everybody. This turned out to be Wyatt Earp, a former frontier marshall and influence on early western themed films in Hollywood and one of the mentors of of Marion Morrison (John Wayne).

When the blacksmith shop ran out of horses thanks to the invention of automobiles, Grandpa closed it and sought another job. His wife was well connected to the San Francisco movers and shakers, and one of them got Grandpa a job as a gardner in Golden Gate Park. He worked at this till he retired, and took the retirement money in a lump instead of a monthly pension, which annoyed my father.

He lived with his daughters for a while but eventually they tired of the old man and he came to live with us. This caused some upset since a new room had to be built, but this is treated later. Grandpa and I shared some personality traits, like doing exactly what we pleased, and I must say it was nice to have a role model to contrast with my supremely responsible father, who made every decision based on what was good for the family and did almost nothing for himself. Grandpa taught me to care for my tools (my father left them lying where they were at the end of the job and Grandpa and I would put them away) and he taught me a lot of practical skills in metalworking and woodworking. I probably got along better with him than with any other member of my family. We were both fairly cheerful people surrounded by less cheerful souls. I teased him by pulling on the back of his suspenders, and he would good naturedly throw a monkey wrench at me. To keep himself amused he did the gardening around the house, which was helpful.

He had rather little use for education, and regarded my going to Harvard, and then graduate school, with deep suspicion. He felt I would be better off learning a trade. Which of course was exactly what I was doing.

He married a woman surnamed Paton, who was the daughter of Theophilus Paton, a man of some consequence in San Francisco. He had emigrated from Scotland to Austalia, but decided Australia was too dull and moved on again to San Francico. (I have a frying pan that says Sydney on the bottom, which may have made the trip with him.) In San Francisco he started a dairy in the Sunset district. This is now million dollar homes but in those days it was rural with sand dunes and grass for the cows. The dairy want on for many years, and in later times when the felt they needed a logo they commisioned my father to design one. So the dairy trucks sported a Zepplin in the twenties.

At one point Theophilus was diagnosed with bone cancer in the leg. He was in the hospital waiting for them to cut off his leg when the image of a one

legged dairyman struck him as unsuitable, so he found his clothing and snuck out of the hospital. He lived another 20 years, so the diagnosis may have been wrong.

William's wife (my father's mother) died rather early in my life, and I have only fragmentary memories, though I do remember one story well. My father would leave me with her for baby sitting purposes occasionally and she mostly let me wander around amusing myself. On this occasion she had bought me a small red plastic fire truck. I was playing with this while she was working in the sink, probably preparing dinner. After playing with it for awhile, I pushed it under a stool and said "it's all finished", being perfectly well aware that she would interpret this as meaning I had broken the truck. She said something like "You've broken it already", taking the bait. I said "No, it's just done for the day and has gone back to the fire house". This is the first time I can remember of tricking an adult definitely on purpose. Still gives me a warm feeling.

Not too long after this she was coming home with two bags of groceries, hauled them upstairs, felt a little tired, sat down and instantly died. I remember my mother telling me that she was gone and being fairly explicit about it, which was not the custom in those days. I understood completely.

No stories of my paternal great grandmother, Joseph's wife) have survived except her name, Mary Patton, and the fact that she was Irish. I believe that she was from Corcaigh (Cork).

My maternal grandfather, Vincenzo Romani, was from Italy. He was a man much beloved by all and ran a butcher shop in San Francisco at 2994 Mission Street. Why he left Italy is not clear; perhaps the village of San Marco in Tuscany offered little amusement. I know only one story of the Tuscany days; his father caught him sneaking out some food to help a poor(er) family in the neighborhood. His father told him he need not *sneak* the food; he should do it proudly.

For whatever reason he made his way to San Francisco where he had a brother. In later years the brother's son worked in my grandfather's butcher shop. The son was a person of limited patience, and annoyed the customers with his shortness of speech. One day an old lady was poking the meat with her fingers and he told her "poke your ass if you have to poke something" and my grandfather finally fired him. This caused a rift between the brothers and they never spoke again. Many years later the brother was dying from a fish bone lodged in his throat and my father frantically drove my grandfather to see him, but they got there too late.

My grandfather's Italian was considered very good by friends and family and he was one of the rare Northern Italians who used the past tense; normally Italians who live North of Naples use the present perfect for the past tense. Also of interest was that even relatives when addressing him people used the polite form, which was not common in San Francisco.

He was, according to my mother, the kindest and gentlest of men, and he only had to politely suggest something and she would instantly do it. He never spoke harshly or yelled. She was always supremely happy to do whatever he wanted. She usually reminisced about this when she was yelling at me for not



doing what *she* wanted with the occasional whack for emphasis. I privately thought it was too bad grandpa's approach was not hereditary. However, her descriptions of her father became the parental model that I myself used with my children. In later years I have wondered just how accurate a portrait she was painting, but there was a certain amount of corroboration from other relatives.

Another story I remember is how he would sneak down the back stairs and disappear when my grandmother's relatives were visiting.

This is a convenient place to interpolate the story of my grandfather's nephew Mario. Arriving penniless like most immigrants, Mario saved his money and got into stock. Eventually this became his business, and he bought and sold on the San Francisco stock exchange until he had made a million, and then retired. Then came the crash of 1929, and Mario lost it all. Picking himself up, he went back to work and built the remnants of his fortune into another million and retired again. Things went smoothly until President Eisenhower had a heart attack, and there was a dip in the stock market. Fearing another crash, Mario too had a heart attack, but both the stocks and Mario recovered.

My grandfather Vincenzo got involved in stock in the twenties, and had built his portfolio up to about fifty thousand. Then came the crash. In the middle of dinner with his family he looked up and said, "Well, lost fifty thousand dollars today" and went back to eating. This would be equivalent to about seven hundred thousand in today's anemic dollars. He never mentioned it again. I have always admired this story and it has affected my lifelong attitude toward gain and loss.

In contrast to Vincenzo, it is perfectly clear why my maternal grandmother, Angelina Cameriani, left Genova in Italy; her father contracted a marriage with a man twice her age, ugly but wealthy. My mother objected and her father slapped her so hard she staggered across the room. She then conspired with her mother to emigrate to San Francisco where she had a married sister, and this plan was carried out. The sister and her husband thus accumulated a slave for their shoe shop.

One day my grandfather wandered in to get a pair of shoes. He was so taken by my grandmother that he bought several more pairs of shoes. Eventually he tired of shoes, or ran out of money, so he asked her out. She accepted and eventually they were married. My grandmother in the normal course of life spoke the Genovese dialect (Zenese in the dialect) while my grandfather spoke excellent Tuscan. He remarked to my mother that his wife couldn't speak Italian (Tuscan). She worked at it though; I have her dictionary. She also worked at learning English.

The older children spoke Genovese fluently, but my mother, having less time with Angelina and more with Vincenzo, spoke standard Italian.

They had five children; the first two were Charles and Joseph. Then with the arrival of the twins whimsy set in, and the twins were, of course, Romulus and Remus. Both were sickly and Remus died after about a year and a half. Romulus slogged on for almost a Century. He was never the most cheerful of men, and my grandfather would remark "Ecco Gioia" (Here's the happy one) when he heard him coming up the stairs.

My mother was the last of the five and the whimsy continues; she was named Leonelda Naomi. Actually the birth certificate says Naomi, and for all I know that may be what my grandmother meant. These names were so outré that when she went to school the nuns refused to use them and so she went through school as Mildred. In later life she shortened the first name to Nelda. Then name is Gothic in origin. (One suspects if there had been another son he would have been Attilio (Attila, like the Hun.))

When my mother was about twelve her mother Angelina became sick with cancer, and died a couple of years later. My mother was then faced with the job of eliminating a succession of housekeepers that wanted to marry my grandfather. She succeeded in this, but at the price of ending up doing the housekeeping for my grandfather and her three brothers. This had the bad effect of making impossible her dream of going to college, although it probably would have been possible. The problem was the social attitudes of the time, which were not enthusiastic about women's education. My paternal aunt, who wanted to study chemistry in college, was also stopped by these Taliban like attitudes. We often don't realize how recently this was the case.

## Chapter 2

# Childhood

## 2.1 Childhood

I was born in San Francisco on 10 December 1941. War had been declared against Japan but not yet against Germany. There were blackouts and my mother was very uneasy. Still, all went well.

I was not the first of my mother's children; my brother had been born the previous year, but had died withing a couple of days due to heart valve failing to close. This was a defect that a few years later could have been fixed. These circumstances colored my mother's view of life, and she went from a fairly happy person to a rather sad one.

I was a smart little kid; this was obvious to everyone at a very early age. This pleased my mother. My father had no experience with children and so just accepted whatever I did without making any judgements. In general I was a "good" little kid, and as long as I got my way was relatively little trouble. And from earliest infancy I usually found some way to get my way.

My early childhood took place against a background of the war. My oldest uncle died just before the war of colon cancer, and the shock of this killed by Grandfather. My surviving uncles were in the armed services. My uncle Romulus had a horror of mud, and so, wishing to avoid the always muddy army, he went to join the Navy. My father and a more distant relative named Roly, went with him to the recruitment office. They watched as he took the color vision test, and failed miserably, as I would do several decades later. The recruiter asked what my Uncle could do. He said he could cook. The recruiter then asked my father and Roly to leave, because they were making my uncle nervous, and he would take the color test again. With no witnesses, my uncle the cook passed the test with flying colors. Romulus became a cook aboard the *Rochambeau*, a French luxury liner pressed into service as a troop transport. It was slow, and could not keep up with the convoys, so it went back and forth across the Pacific and through the Jap submarines over and over. Fortunately they never were attacked. Since San Francisco was the home port for the *Rochambeau*, my uncle would show up from time to time looking fat, and would unload scarce butter and bacon and other stuff for the family from under his pea coat which he had liberated from the galley. Then he looked thin.

My uncle Joe was drafted into the Army. While awaiting deployment in Hawai'i he seriously injured his knee while playing baseball. His outfit was shipped out while he was in the hospital, and was wiped out to a man in Tarawa or someplace similar. Uncle Joe never did make his way back into combat, and spent the war in Hawai'i as a PX clerk. Always one to seize opportunity, he found a way to ship home a war bond to my mother every month. We never knew what he was into.

Before the war Uncle Joe had been a salesman for ties, going up and down the Pacific Northwest and as far inland as Idaho. He, like Romulus, was color blind, and my mother would arrange the ties by color before he left on the trip. He took orders from retailers for the ties, and was a master of "Just look how well the color goes with this shirt," totally faking it. I myself can see color, but it's muted, and I have never seen two colors clash in my entire life.

I mention that the name “Uncle Joe” made for a great deal of confusion for me, because at that time the Russian dictator Joseph Stalin was called “Uncle Joe” on the radio and referred to as such by many people in conversation. I did not understand until rather late in the war that there were two “Uncle Joes”. And because of the names “Uncle Sam” and “Uncle Joe” I often referred to Hitler later as “Uncle Adolf” on the grounds that there was little to choose between Hitler and Stalin.

Clothing was scarce during the war and my mother managed to score a sailor suit for me, which I wore often in those days when outside.

I was a difficult child to feed, especially at breakfast (a problem solved completely in adult life) and my mother tried to get around this by using a special dish, the “pink dish,” which looked to me just about the same as the other dishes of its type, since I had inherited the color deficient gene that my uncle also had. One day my mother broke the sacred “pink dish” and apologized profusely the next morning for serving my mush in the ordinary hued dish. I couldn’t tell the difference but was smart enough not to admit this, and probably extracted some concession for the change.

On the infrequent shopping expeditions we would take a “jitney” down Market Street to downtown. Jitney’s were large cars with pop up seats that took you wherever you wanted to go as long as it was on Market Street for a fixed price. We never rode busses or streetcars, always jitneys. Downtown was magical; high buildings and trees in the streets. It looks much the same today. I was really impressed years later by the similarity to the main shopping street in Naples.

We lived in an old house at 2994 Mission Street. It had a store below which had once been my Grandfather’s butcher shop. In my time there was a shoe shop downstairs. The upstairs had a huge kitchen in the back. In front of that was my room, then my parents room, then a front room, rather small. To the side of those rooms was a stairway to the street. When I learned to walk my father bought a gate for the top of the stairs. He figured out how to open it within 20 minutes, which my parents found both annoying and amusing. However I showed little interest in going downstairs so eventually they stopped worrying about it.

The kitchen was at the back of the house proper, but like many houses in that area there was a further unheated room on stilts and then a thin porch with stairs going down to the yard, with a switchback halfway down. The back room was a magical place, close kin to “the lumber room” in the Saki story. I didn’t get to spend much time out there but when I could sneak out to it I had a wonderful time. It’s possible my uncles slept out there when home on leave, but I never knew that.

The back yard was sand, weeds, and at the back was an old shed. This was another magical place. It was so old that there was moss growing on the wood. There was mostly just junk inside, like coal and wood. But I found it highly amusing. Eventually my father and uncles tore it down.

On one occasion it started to rain and I put a cat into the garbage can to keep it from getting wet.

Another time couple of boys a bit older than I was playing on the fence. I asked what they were doing and they said "None of your business." I understood the import of the statement immediately. However, when I tried using it on my mother there was trouble. Thus I learned the concept "appropriate expression."

When my mother was growing up her best friends were Dorothy and Fran. By my time Dorothy was rarely around, but Aunty Fran was a big part of my childhood. We were both obsessives, and I relate our first clash. When I "took my nap" (I don't think I actually slept much) the window shade was set at a precise height. On a rare occasion Aunty Fran was baby sitting and she pulled it down further. I protested that this was contrary to convention. She raised it a millimeter. I wanted more. She said "that's far enough." We then recurred through the loop, each time with her saying "that's far enough." It's a mistake to pull this sort of thing on an obsessive child and I always remembered the incident and regarded her as not completely trustworthy. This was unreasonable of me, as she loved me only 4% less than her own children, but these early things are hard to chip out of their stone.

When I was about four my father started taking me to watch the trains after he got home from work. Part of the reason for this was to give my mother a break from child care and give her the opportunity to prepare dinner. Pa liked trains. We would drive up a block or two to Geneva avenue and then go along it, park and walk over to the middle of a bridge that went over the train tracks. (Bridges that went over non-water in San Francisco were called viaducts.) The trains would shed their cargo somewhere else and then come to this location for engine servicing. There was a big round building with something resembling horse stalls in which the trains were placed for servicing. In the middle was a round movable platform. The engine would drive onto this platform, which would then turn so the track would line up with the track for the stall, and the engine would back into it. Since I was very young, and the view wasn't too good, it took a long time to dope all this out. This was one of those situations where my parents would vaguely point in some direction and say "see the X" without giving me much of a way of identifying the X from the background. I found this troublesome but if I asked for clarification all I would get is "the X, the X." Eventually I learned to say "Yes, what a great X" or something similarly appropriate and wait for time to clarify the situation. In the case of the Cow Palace, a San Francisco landmark, it took many years to drag it out of the surrounding buildings. Eventually they printed "Cow Palace" on it, which made the identification precise.

Another thing my father and I did, although he did his best to discourage it since it was dangerous, was to dink around with radios. He had gotten hold of some military short wave radio which he was trying to get working. It was very large. I hung around as usual hoping something interesting would happen, which it sometimes did, mostly sparks. I had enough experience with radios by this time to know that the chassis were harmless and the electricity hung around in the tubes and other things that stuck up from the chassis, and also the stuff underneath the chassis which was mostly a bunch of wires connecting the things upstairs to each other. Pa was ambivalent about having me around because of

the danger of electrical shock and the haphazard way I took orders. One day he was working on the big short wave radio, and I touched the chassis and woke up several feet away. My father was leaning over me and when I started to move he explained the concept of HOT CHASSIS. This was a theoretically good idea which was extremely dangerous in practise, and this might be the reason my father had scored this piece of danger somewhere. The idea was instead of having to conduct the elecricity with wires from place to place, just make the chassis itself "hot" so current could be picked up anywhere on the chassis; no need for wires to get it there. This probably killed a number of people before it was outlawed. Improbable as it may seem, I understood all this perfectly and in the future asked about hot chassis with each new piece of equipment.

In the latter part of the war I would occasionally sit on my father's lap while he read the paper. The print meant nothing (I was four) but I had some interest in the maps. My father, having no conception what was appropriate to my age (was I the first child he ever interacted with?) would explain about the troup movements in Europe. I remember mostly the maps of North Italy with arrows all over them.

As I was growing up if I did something judged negative my father would usually say "Act your age!" I eventually figured out the appropriate age was maybe 35. He simply had no conception of what was age appropriate.

When we moved to San Carlos my father sold the house. This was one of a long series of things my father later regretted. In some cases, like turning down going to Stanford in favor of a car, they were bad decisions but realistic in view of the fact that he hated school and studying. But selling the old house was a genuine mistake, as he got very little money for it and with a little belt tightening and some fast talking to the other heirs he could have held onto it. But he had a mortal fear of not having enough ready cash for any emergency. He had some reason for this, but still it was a genuine and realistically avoidable mistake. As we shall see I learned from this. In general it is a bad idea to sell property, as land is the only thing that's real; it's the only thing that lasts. Everything else can be just gone with the wind.

## 2.2 We move to San Carlos

After the war with Uncle Adolf the returning GI's enthusiastically participated in a new mass movement, the move to the suburbs. This was a tendency all across America. Suburbs were not new; there had been railroad suburbs in New York and Chicago, and even to a limited extent in San Francisco, for many decades. But the idea that anyone who was looking for a better life needed to move there was something that set in big time after the War. We moved there in 1946. I believe my mother was pregnant when we moved. My sister was born in Dec 1946.

On my first visit to the new house I walked into a room paneled in knotty pine. I announced immediately that this was my room, and since this was convenient for everyone so it became, for decades.

When we moved to San Carlos the place had not yet been thickly settled. There were a few older houses, which I think may have dated to the early thirties, in our area, but most of it was empty lots. Houses were built at a very rapid pace. Shopping was difficult when we first moved there because the nearest stores were almost a mile away. I remember my mother pushing my sister in the buggy while I rode along beside on a tricycle. One time the tricycle broke into two separate pieces. My mother put the pieces in the buggy with my sister, but I had to walk all the way home. I remember this because of having to do something I didn't want to do, but realizing that complaining would be no help; I could see there was no other solution and I must tough it out. It actually wasn't that bad, which surprised me at the time. My father got the tricycle welded together again fairly quickly.

Eventually a new grocery store opened a couple of blocks away and the walks ceased. My mother never walked anywhere without a good reason, which she attributed to having poor shoes as a child. This, in turn, she attributed to her mother being sick for most of her childhood and thus unable to get her good shoes. The whole experience made shoes a big part of her feeling of dutiful motherhood and my sister and I always had excellent shoes, mostly provided by Mister Mullaney, who moved from shoe store to shoe store after losing his own store in the downturn of the late 40s. We followed him from store to store for footwear. In later life Maria's mother provided good footwear when my own kids were young, and after that I made sure they had good shoes and still occasionally pay for better quality footwear for them, although they are now adults.

Now I must relate a sad tale from the early days of living in San Carlos. We would often drive into the city to see relatives, and on this occasion we went to see Uncle Romulus, who was now married and lived on Bowdoin street. There rides took about an hour each way.

I believe it was not too distant from the date of mothers day. We had a good time and on the way home I observed that there was a Father's day and a Mother's day so in common fairness there ought to be a Billy Day. My mother agreed, and since it was the first Sunday in May, we made up a little rhyme "The first Sunday in May is Billy Day." The following year I was excited as the



day approached and on that day I ran into the kitchen and announced to my mother that it was Billy Day. Blank incomprehension. I explained, including the rhyme. She told me not to be silly, and that was the end of that conversation. But it had an effect on how I trusted my parents and how I saw the world. I was probably born with a suspicious nature, and incidents like this were helpful in bringing it out.

I mention that my mother's use of the word "silly" here occurred on many occasions when there was something emotionally loaded on the table. She did not like to deal with such matters, and routinely dismissed my concerns with "Don't be silly." I eventually got the message, and kept my concerns to myself. This is not a good method to use if your kid happens to be a bit of a loner.

My sister was born in 1946 in the new house. When I first saw her I asked "what good is she?" Not an auspicious beginning. Since my mother had very little attention to bestow, I found the new competitor annoying and was not a good brother. Not a REALLY bad brother, but not good either. We could not have been more unlike. I was devious and dedicated to getting my own way. Helen was sweet and tried hard to please. No question which style evolution favored, since my mother was largely unpleasible.

When Helen was old enough to eat sitting up my parents dragged out my old high chair. This had rather a small tray, with very little in the way of edge. Helen routinely knocked things off the tray onto the floor which annoyed my parents. This was only one of a fair number of things which annoyed them; I mention it only as particularly representative.

Helen tended to be phobic and I kept her out of my room with the story that there were spiders in there, which was true. They mostly didn't bother me but would send her into hysterics. My mother was the same way and this is a fine example of learning phobic behavior. The two of them would yell for my father if they saw a spider, and, being somewhat fastidious, he hated the job of killing them. This got even more complicated later when I started suggesting that they be taken alive and placed outside. Eventually I largely took over this duty.

Although I mainly used my sister as a punching bag, there were times when I helped iron out difficulties between her and my parents, and I was instrumental in getting their permission for her to go out of town to Oregon for college. She still lives there.

In perhaps 1946 or 1947 there was a series of atomic tests in the South Pacific, the name Eniwetok comes to mind, although I can't necessarily pin this incident precisely to that test. A number of obsolete ships were part of this atomic test. After the test a surviving aircraft carrier was towed to San Francisco, I have no idea why. Reading in the paper that the ship was docked in San Francisco, my father and I drove up to the pier and examined the beast. The hull was mainly intact but the superstructure was all twisted and torn, and much of it was gone. We went in the daytime, and only hung around about an hour, so I never had the chance to find out if it glowed in the dark.

In the late forties some new fashions set in for Christmas trees. Up until this time everyone's trees looked more or less the same, but now people started to

have white trees and sometimes had ornaments all the same color. Tinsel became less fashionable. My family bought into the white tree, with the understanding that the tree could be used for two or three years. However, after buying the tree and installing it, my mother found that the painted tree did not smell like a Christmas tree should.

After Christmas was over and the tree was dismantled, my father took it to the garage and hoisted it up foot first into the attic. When the next year came around they seem to have forgotten it, or there was some other reason, and we bought a standard tree. The abandoned tree stayed in the attic of the garage hanging downward for about forty five years. If you touched it the needles would fall off, but left to itself it stayed remarkably intact. I would proudly display it to new friends to show that my family was not totally bound by middle class values, which was somewhat true. It was still there in the early 90's but disappeared at some unknown time after that.

I should clarify that our family's adherence to middle class values was spotty. My father's salary was good, but would not handle a new car every year. We tended to drive both the cars and the furniture into the ground before getting new stuff. Every once in a while the shabbiness would annoy my father (I don't recall my mother caring much) and we would get a new item, but mostly they just made do with what was there. Nobody felt much like wasting their time getting new stuff and there was always the problem of what to do with the old stuff that was being replaced, as my family was reluctant to throw stuff away.

In later years this shabbiness was a sore point with my sister but she made little fuss over it. In point of fact, it was always a mystery to me just where the money went. We ate like kings since my mother was a butcher's daughter, and we ate only the best meat, but otherwise we seemed to live a bit downscale from the other families in the neighborhood. We were also very heavily insured. But these things would probably not explain the lack of money, and it remains a mystery. I should mention that when anyone actually needed anything for school or religious activities or a doctor bill, the money was always there, so it was not a question of there being no money. It just hid in the background. On the other hand, when I went to college the expenses were handled out of incoming funds rather than savings, so it seems either there wasn't much put away or my father was reluctant to let it out of its cage. He loved money the way some people love art; he didn't want to do anything with it, but he enjoyed seeing the numbers grow. This was in later years when things were a little less tight.

A word of advice for any descendants reading this. My parents had their kids five years apart, which thus meant they would have only one kid in college at a time. This has handy aspects, and you should think about it.

After a year or so the house around the corner from us was bought by Louis and Helen Mergotti. Although Lui had an Italian last name and heredity, his father had decamped or died early, and his mother had married a Russian. There was a large Russian colony, referred to as "White Russians," in San Francisco. So Lui could speak a little Russian and understand a lot more, a talent it was

wise to keep hidden in those cold war days. Lui was a high grade carpenter, called a cabinet maker, a distinction my father always made and Lui almost never did. Lui had two kids, Gary and Sharon. More about them later.

One day Lui bought a new table saw kit, which meant he had to put the thing together. He was not electrically savvy and so called on my father for help. I tagged along. Lui, not an enthusiast for children, tolerated my presence. They could not get the saw to work; no electricity going to the motor. Hanging around in my usual way, I looked at the switch box and saw that they had wired it wrong. I said "you wired it wrong; you need to switch these two wires." Lui, by this time a long way into frustration, yelled at me to get the hell out. Meanwhile my father was looking at the box. "Wait Lu," he said, "I think the kid might be on to something." They rewired it as I had told them to, and it worked.

Another Lui story which he related often and with gusto was the well repair story. A piece of the well was about 5 feet down a shaft. A large nut had to be screwed onto a bit of threaded equipment poking up. Lui had the tool to screw it down, but could not get it started properly. He called my father. I tagged along, sensing amusement. After much fruitless discussion, the solution came to Lui. What was necessary was to lower a thin human being head first down the shaft, and have him start the nut. Lui had never been impressed by his own son's abilities, and anyway he was too fat. Seeing where this was going, I had a big smile on my face when Lui turned his fact toward me. My father put up a long fight against the plan, but it was the ONLY plan, so eventually, nut in hand Lui, who was strong as an ox, lowered me down holding me by the ankles. After a couple of tries I got it started, and even screwed it all the way down, but of course could not tighten it. I was pulled up and treated as a hero, while Gary slunk into the shadows.

Lui used these and similar incidents as dinner table conversation for the rest of his life.

At some point my mother at last gave me permission to cross the street, "Look Both Ways," and I was free to roam over a much larger area. I would head out the door, be gone for a couple of hours, and then show up again with "Hi Ma, I'm home." As long as I checked in every few hours she seemed comfortable with this arrangement. Even more important was to show up for meals. Failure to do so might well lead to awkward questions about just where I had been, and I was very careful about this.

Where I was was exploring. I wandered miles from home. I have always had a superb sense of direction and could easily retrace my steps flawlessly. In all the wandering only once was I a little unsure of the way home, and that lasted for only about a block. My mother never figured out that I went miles away and played in construction projects and other dangerous places, or that I went far into the unbuilt uplands to the West. Twice I had close calls. Once was climbing a tree in the hilly uplands, far from any civilization, when a branch broke and I had quite a fall, but nothing broke and I was able to limp home. I concealed any difficulties and was all right the next day. The second was half a block from home. I was playing in the construction site of the new Laurel

Theater and climbing up a freshly built wall. The cement had not hardened and a cinder block came away and I fell about four feet. What was really dangerous was that I didn't fall to the ground; I fell onto a system of parallel four by eights that were to be the support for the floor. If I had fallen *through* these boards, or if the falling block had hit me, I would have been seriously injured or killed. By spreading out my arms I was able to stop myself at the boards, and the block also stopped just by my feet. Again I limped home and was again able to conceal the damage. I hate to think of the amount of trouble I would have been in if my parents had found out, not to mention the poor precedent I would have been tasked with for years afterwards. Definitely a lucky escape.

I can date the preceding incident to 1948 because the first movie the Laurel Theater played was a John Wayne film directed by John Ford called 3 Godfathers. (The official title has the number 3.) I wanted to go on the first night the theater was open but my father disliked crowds and this crowd went around the block, so we waited a few days and then went. I still remember much of this excellent movie whose theme is redemption, the memory has been reinforced by at least one subsequent viewing.

Sometime around 1949 Pa's father got into a bad argument with my Auntie Jean, and she through him out. His other daughter would have no part of him, so he came to live with us. This precipitated a crisis, because a deal made long ago was that the two daughters would take care of Grampa for there rest of his life in return for my father giving up his share of the family homestead in San Francisco. When his sisters violated the agreement but would not come up with his share, a feud ensued which lasted, at least for the older daughter, for twenty years.

Grampa was given my sister Helen's room and Helen had to live in the Dining room until things could be rearranged. This took a while. My mother attributed some of Helen's difficulties to losing her room, but I'm not sure how much truth there was in this.

The solution was to build a new room on the back of the house. As long as a room had to be built, the feeling was why not make it a BIG room, and it is probably the biggest bedroom in San Carlos. It took my father a long time, perhaps almost a year, to build it. He did a fantastic job, with a lot of advice and a little help from Lui the carpenter next door. However, he eventually ran out of steam, so the room was connected to the rest of the house by going through the previously existing back bedroom. The technical term for this is "railroad flat." This was later one of Pa's long series of regrets, although as far as I can tell, house values are figured mostly on square footage so the railroad flat aspect of the house made little difference. My parents moved into the giant room and my sister moved into the their previous bedroom with the foot traffic running through it.

The building of the room necessitated the removal of an apricot tree in the back yard, sitting squarely where the room was to be. I was sent to the movies while they cut down the tree. This tree is connected to one of the most important lessons my parents taught me, which I now relate.

The Apricots of Yore

My parents believed that this tree now existing only in memory had produced apricots of a surpassing size and a juiciness found nowhere else in the world. Having eaten far more of them than they ever did, I can testify that though they were good apricots, they weren't anything that would win prizes at the Cannes Apricot Festival. For some reason I have never understood, they inflated these apricots the way believers inflate the memory of a dead prophet. The practical result of this was that they would never buy an apricot at the store, meaning I never got another apricot at home for the rest of my childhood. Since I really liked apricots, this was, to say the least, annoying, and in my opinion rather stupid. Because you couldn't get apricots matching the Platonic Ideal of an apricot, we'll just do without them at all.

Obviously I still carry resentment over this, but the much more important result was I learned that "The Best is the enemy of the Good," as the Ancient Greeks put it. We will return later to this important theme.

A related example of this is the endless search for the breaded veal cutlet. When we went out for dinner in those days my father usually ordered breaded veal cutlets. However, as time rolled forward, say from the late 50's on, the genuine cutlet was replaced by a patty. He didn't like the patties. So for the next forty years, every restaurant meal contained the following dialog. First he would search the menu and usually find the breaded veal cutlet. He would then ask my mother "Do you think it's a patty?" The answer was yes, it was a patty, which a reasonable person would have tipped to after, say, the first twenty years. But they always asked the waiter "Is this breaded veal cutlet on the menu a patty?" The waiter seldom knew, so it was off to the kitchen to ask the cook. Back would come the waiter with "Yes, it's a patty," and my father would order chicken. Thus it was till the day he died.

A coda to this tail is this: The search was not a total failure. About twice in a decade the answer would be "no, not a patty." Sadly, this was just frequent enough to keep the search alive.



## Chapter 3

# School

### 3.1 Primary School

I began school at White Oaks primary school in 1947. I was not enthusiastic. Up to this point I had been allowed to do exactly as I pleased, subject to the eternal demand of showing up for meals on time. My mother, due to the mild depression she suffered because of the premature death of my older brother, was content to let me range freely within range of her voice. She read to me at bedtime, but otherwise our interaction was all due to my effort.

School put an end to this freedom. It was about a third of a mile away and thus a substantial walk for a little kid. I tended to dawdle, look at stuff, etc. I was also a little sickly. I remained tardy and unenthusiastic and eventually my mother thought it was not worth the effort, so after a couple of weeks of Kindergarten, she withdrew me and I returned to freedom.

The following year, first grade, was different. They were more annoyed by the tardiness, and it was no longer voluntary, so I was stuck with it. I was bored and lived for the recesses. I hated the naps. But I survived, and was not terribly unhappy.

It was early apparent that I was born to be a loner. Being a loner is a complicated condition with many degrees and it is hard for parents and teachers to understand. I myself was never as much of a loner as my mother thought I was, but I was more of a loner than the teachers estimated. It's tricky.

An incident I remember from a very early parents' night, which neither of my parents was very enthusiastic about, was Dr. Sawin taking pictures with the lens cap on his camera. I thought that was sort of funny, but was not sure if it was wrong, so I asked his son about it the next day. There were no pictures; I had been right. Important to take the lens cap off.

It was clear from very early on that spelling and I were not going to be friends. Reading was also troublesome because of dyslexia, an illness which had not yet been invented. I took the Dick and Jane readers home with me and had to read them to my mother endlessly. I would do my best to memorize the text and usually remembered it right, but here and there they had used some alien expression and I would screw it up every time. My mother memorized the screw up places and was ready. She always yelled "Read what you see" which of course was exactly what the dyslexic child was doing. Ah the good old days.

Arithmetic was no picnic either. It was full of what are now called number facts which had to be memorized which wasn't easy but was boring. I managed to master addition without serious trouble, but was sick for a week or so during the beginning of subtraction, and thus had a great deal of trouble with it that lasted for years. This was mostly a matter of confidence because there was no additional work with subtraction like there was with Dick, Jane, Baby Sally, their dog Spot and cat Puff, who all got along better than anybody in my own family.

I don't remember being interested in Arithmetic particularly. Nobody ever presented a single interesting fact about addition or subtraction, although I did notice that order mattered with one and not the other. The first interesting thing was when my Aunty Helen, the smartest of the family, showed me the



casting out nines method of checking calculation. I was then able to check my work, and got better scores. I got good at writing the checks very lightly because for some reason the teachers dislike them. But I was grateful to my aunt for the useful tool, and also rather intrigued by why it worked.

My third grade teacher was Miss Martel. She was probably married, although of so stern a demeanor that it's possible she really was Miss. If I recall correctly we call them all Miss, pronounced like Ms. is nowadays. Probably a convention, but perhaps they really were not married. I remember they never mentioned their husbands.

At any rate, Miss Martel was tough even by the standards of the day. But it was like the army; if you gave no trouble and seemed interested you got along. As I recall, she was the first teacher that ever had anything actually interesting to say. In fact, she was in sort of standing ill repute for exceeding the curriculum handed down from the High Drones of Education and teaching extra stuff. We got along pretty well, but many of the other kids were scared of her, and some girls sniveled for the first few weeks. She was a dedicated teacher and seriously wanted us all to learn the stuff she thought important, even if the Drones didn't. I think she was probably a role model in some ways, though I never imitated her Germanic style. Incidentally Martel means Hammer in French.

There was one incident which I resent to this very day. We had to do some essay, I forget the topic, but mine contained the word "they" many times which I misspelled "thay". She took off points for every single misspelling, which I thought was unfair. Certainly the first one, but the subsequent ones were just due to consistency, which is a virtue. Now, 61 years later, I still resent it. On the positive side, I was always careful to avoid doing this with my own students.

Because I never had the slightest interest in sports it was always assumed that I was not good at them, which was not true. I was probably slightly above average throughout my school career, perhaps better than that in high school. I have the PE grades to prove it too. It was fun while I was doing it, but the minute it was over I lost interest. And I was seldom motivated to do more than the curriculum required, although there were occasional exceptions to that too. It is true that my sports interests were entirely participatory; if I wasn't actually playing sports held no interest whatever.

I went to White Oaks for the first three grades. In grade three I was very attracted by a girl named Helen, and told my mother I was going to marry her when I grew up. She did grow quite pretty later but nothing ever came of it.

I also want to mention that up to this point I had little interest in anything scientific or technical, although I did hang around my father when he mucked around with radios and TVs, without having a lot of interest. This changed on a certain day as Charles Sawin and I walked home past the old estate property. Charles' father was a doctor so he perhaps knew a little more science than average. He mentioned Dinosaurs which I folk etymologized to dinnersaurs. I asked my parents about them; they knew little. But there were books in the school library about them, and I got a few and pretty soon knew a fair amount about them, as the knowledge was back then. This lead on to an interest in astronomy, and that lead to atomic physics, and the science nerd was born.

The following year I changed schools. Grades four five and six were at different schools and I am no longer completely certain which school was which. I believe the fourth and sixth grades were at Central school. My memories of this time are weak. The school was old (later condemned due to earthquake vulnerability) and less attractive than White Oaks. Some of the time I rode my bicycle to school and others I walked. My mother went half crazy if it was raining and I had to walk the two thirds of a mile in the rain. I enjoyed it. California was going through rather a wet period in those years and it rained a lot. If the downpour was Noachian my mother would sometimes rev up the old DeSoto and drive me to school. She hated this, and so did I.

It was at this time that I started to read on my own. I had had a terrible time learning to read due to a) the dyslexia and b) the obscenely boring adventures of Dick, Jane, Sally, Spot and Puff, those denizens of the ideal suburban home with ideal suburban parents. However, I had made enough progress to begin to read books that had information I wanted and was available from no other source. This was made much easier by our weekly trips to the school library, which was a tremendous resource for me. I pursued the dinosaur hobby and branched out into astronomy. Also I discovered folklore. An early enthusiasm was Paul Bunyon. I took a while but I figured out that folklore was different from astronomy in the sense that different versions of the Paul Bunyon stories existed and it made no sense to try and identify the “true” version. I’ll always be grateful to Paul for teaching me this.

I found a storage cabinet with a broken latch and figured out how to open it, so this became a personal locker. I was the only kid who had one. One kid complained and the teacher fluffed him off. Nasty little whiner.

I had another run in with “number facts” as I had a great deal of trouble mastering the multiplication table. I used to make little multiplication tables on the side of the homework sheet until the teacher complained. Then I had sneaky ones. I could manufacture these in very quickly. Eventually I had up to 6 memorized and I myself saw that the lack of 7,8 and 9 was handicapping me in various ways, so I made a big effort and learned the rest. Nine was easy, 8 not too bad, but seven was a pain and took a couple of days to get it down.

By this time my inborn ability with algorithms was beginning to be useful; I could work multiplication OK, and I was as good as anyone else with long division because my slowness with manipulating numbers was compensated by my expertise at the algorithms. The astrologically inclined might want to attribute the algorithmic talent to my being born on 10 Dec. Carl Gustav Jacobi, a great master of algorithms and a personal hero was born on the same day.

The fifth grade was at a new school called Arundel I made new friends, learned how to play chess, was forced by one of the teachers to “play a game with a ball” at recess instead of playing chess, and spent a lot of time in the hills looking for lizards and snakes and appreciating botany at a very low level. Here I first heard a cicada, mistaking the sound for a rattlesnake and carefully backing away. Although I enjoyed being there I don’t have very specific memories, nor can I remember the teacher, although I have vague negative feelings.

The sixth grade was back at Central. The teacher was Miss Spieker. Opin-

ions differ about Miss Spieker. One of my classmates who lived with me for 5 years in the 1990s, loathed her because of her occasional bouts of hysteria and screaming. I on the other hand was fairly friendly with her. There were several reasons. First, she was strikingly handsome in my opinion. Tall, well built, slim but not skinny. Second, she was willing to let me make use of my knowledge to help the class. After a rocky start, she gave me the chance to add amendments to her lectures and I agreed to no longer directly contradict her. It was my first lesson in politics, and a useful one. Eventually she started to make use of my talents in areas where she was unsure of herself, like fractions or science, and this gave me my first experience in teaching a class. I was GOOD at it. And the kids were mostly good too. Perhaps I was easier to understand than Miss Spieker, especially in her areas of non-expertise.

It was true that she occasionally had a fit and screamed at us, but that was normal for adults in my experience. Unlike many of the children with more placid home lives, I never worried about it, even if I was the target, which wasn't often. Usually it was just a matter of us not paying attention or talking to each other a bit more than usual.

For most of the year she read us a story after lunch. It was "Nobody's Boy" by Hector Malot. However one day late in the year we did something to piss her off, and she quit reading the story along about the mine cave in. (I wondered what happened for about 40 years, until my kids got old enough to read it to, and then I found out.) I can't remember what we did to bring down this punishment, and she may not have explained it very well, which wouldn't have been unusual for her.

In spite of her deficiencies as a teacher I still feel rather friendly toward her and hope she had a happy life. As I mentioned, others feel differently.

It was about this time that I began to feel that Mathematics really had something to offer. We had learned the algorithms for addition, subtraction, multiplication and division, and I felt I had squeezed about all the amusement out of these that they had to offer. I had heard of algebra, and thought it was just another algorithm, and asked Miss. Spieker to teach it to me. She reared back in horror, squealing that she could NOT teach me algebra. I was supposed to take away the idea that it was much too advanced, but even then I suspected that once again I had found an area in which she was none to comfortable. The next day she taught me rounding off, as a booby prize. This was amusing for about 15 minutes, though it is certainly a useful skill. I tried looking up algebra in the class encyclopedia, but this was not too comprehensible, partly because of my misconception about what algebra WAS. I complained at dinner that Ms. Spieker refused to teach me algebra. I thought nobody payed any attention, but a day or two later Pa came home with a couple of algebra books. He had hated the subject himself, and was not going to involve himself in it again in any way, but if I wanted it he was willing to squander the fifty cents for the two books. I still have them.

It was obvious in about 5 minutes that algebra was not another algorithm for manipulating numbers, but on the other hand there was something hauntingly familiar about it, once you got over the part about it being letters not

numbers. (This was the part that had annoyed Pa, who could add columns of numbers in his head and enjoyed doing income tax forms.) I plowed through the books in a haphazard fashion over the next two years.

Another incident of this year is also amusing. My father loved war surplus stores and we often went to them on Saturday. Occasionally I found some piece of equipment, like a lens, that I could learn something from and Pa would buy it for me. Later, when I got good at bicycling, I would ride to the surplus stores myself. I had little money and so this was mostly browsing, although sometimes I could drag Pa back later and get the trinket.

But this time it was far more than a trinket. I had bicycled to a store in Redwood City and they had got hold of several barrels of books. I started digging through them finding nothing of interest until suddenly I found pure *gold*. It was a slim volume that was a Logarithm Table. Fascinated, I read enough to see that this was indeed gold. I reached in my pocket and there was nothing there but a nickel. A stupid nickel. I despaired. Clearly, like a ten dollar bill on the sidewalk, such a find would never remain until I could get back with Pa. I sadly hauled my treasure to the counter and asked the clerk, who was a huge hulk of a man, how much the book was. He looked at the book, he looked at me, and grunted "Oh gimme a nickel." Manjushri was looking out for me that day, and I hope the clerk ended up with the girl of his dreams, or five of them. I took the book home and mastered the whole panoply of things you could do with a logarithm table in a few days. In the end I figured out that I would never get away with using the table to do the pages of long division homework, although I would occasionally use it to check homework when something didn't feel right. I was also fascinated by using it to find square roots, and one day Pa came home with another algebra book which had the square root algorithm in it, so I had two methods.

Another important facet of the logarithm table was that it didn't give the exact answer; when you computed with logarithms the answers were approximations. I didn't much like this, but I was aware of it from one other place; changing fractions into decimals. Anyway, it's valuable to know that mathematics is not always exact, in some sense, and the logarithms taught me that.

I never wondered why any of this stuff worked; I accepted it the same way I accepted that the sun had 9 planets and Mars had two moons and the Diplodocus had an extra brain at the base of its tail. The logarithm table had some explanation of the background but it was a little heavy for a sixth grader.

What kept me at it was the feeling that this stuff a) was critical for deeper understanding of the science stuff I was interested in and b) the feeling that there was just incredible *power* in this stuff. I suppose it's much the same with any shaman.

I had heard of Einstein because he was credited with the atomic bomb (actually designed by Hans Beta who had no interest in taking credit for it), and somewhere I scored a copy of *The Meaning of Relativity*. In those days I woke up with a sore throat most mornings and if I wanted a break from school I would tell my mother about it. It usually went away by about nine o'clock. I realized the situation was precarious and was careful not to abuse the scam.

But the new Einstein book was justification enough, and I happily sat on the bed trying to read it. Hopeless. No Calculus. I got a few ideas, possibly wrong, from the first few pages, but the one thing I did get clear from it was the sigma notation for sums, which I immediately incorporated into my repetoir. Feeling the lack of Calculus I made some efforts in that direction too, annoying the lady at the public library, but this was beyond my talents too. Another day.

Seventh and Eighth grades were at Tierra Linda. This was also a new school built to accommodate the fecundity of the returning GIs and their wives who had largely put off (purposeful) reproduction during the war.

The “Tierra” puzzled me because there was enough Italian floating around the house that I knew it should be Terra, and in fact I always called it that, as did many others.

My seven grade teacher was John D. Arms. He was my first male teacher and a really nice person. He also was reasonable about using my newfound talents as a teacher, although I probably did less teaching in his class then I had under Miss Spieker. He did not intend to remain a teacher; he wanted to write, but since the Internet knows nothing of him I guess he was never successful at it. Too bad. He liked history and he made a big point of history NOT consisting of good guys and bad guys, as it had up till now, but of opponents who, for the most part, should be thought of in an objective manner. He also taught us that good literature could be made out of history and illustrated this concept with examples when he could. The whole class liked him and he had almost no discipline problems. He was the first teacher that treated us like human beings rather than animals who needed to jump through the appropriate hoops. He would have made a great college literature teacher and perhaps he eventually did. I hope he ended up doing something he enjoyed.

I made two friends during the two years at Tierra Linda; John Cool and Richard Epstein. John Cool was first. We were drawn together by an interest in science. There was a tiny creek running along at the far end of the playground, and Cool and I spent most of the recesses and lunch doing engineering works, mainly dams, with this creek. This was my first experience with the power of water. Although it was a tiny creek, nothing we could do would hold it back for very long. No matter how big the dam we made, eventually it would fill behind it and then wash the damn away. We finally put a spillway in the dam with a bit of tailpipe and then the dam lasted till winter and rains.

In the process of our excavations, along came Richard Epstein, another person with science interests. He asked what we were doing and in one of the happiest inspirations of my long life I said we were looking for a prehistoric animal, a dinosaur in fact, called a *Neophyus ephonishus*. Epstein, always somewhat gullible, bought into the story, which I could easily embellish due to my dinosaur expertise. Cool, who was fairly quick, played along perfectly. We had Epstein washing rocks looking for the elusive bones. Every once in a while, to keep scam going, I would identify some whitish rock as the sought for bone. We even permitted Epstein to be the custodian and he carried a little bottle of these “bones” around in his pocket. We kept this going for an amazing length of time, perhaps a couple of months. Eventually Epstein grew suspicious and

figured out we were scamming him. He didn't take it too badly.

John Cool and I made history at Tierra Linda by being the only kids who ate OUTSIDE all year long, no matter what the weather. We both had sandwiches and cupcakes which we disposed of with dispatch and then turned to our many projects for the rest of the lunch period. Occasionally it was necessary to stiffen John's spine when the weather became especially tempestuous, but with a little encouragement he never caved in.

John Cool moved away (his father was a store manager) after grammar school. I missed him. Because the name is common I have never been able to trace him.

Richard Epstein went to Carlmont High School as did I. We became competitors for the math/science laurels. I won hands down, and Epstein eventually became a Social Science wonk for the State of California. He had a tendency to be unlucky, and trouble keeping his mouth shut, and I don't think things went that well for him. He was about the only other coin collector I knew when I was young, but he never made much of a success of that either and traded off his silver dollar collection to a magician for a magic trick. This involved handcuffs, and nobody would ever believe the handcuffs were real, so there was no great call for his trick. The irony is I think the handcuffs were real.

My eighth grade teacher was Mrs. Marx, who had more in common with Harpo than with Karl or Groucho. She was more or less competent, but not exciting in any way. She was math-challenged, so once again I was able to do some teaching. In this class, and occasionally in some of the previous ones, I occasionally did some tutoring for the kids that had trouble with math. I was always glad to hand out answers too, or check mine against other peoples'. I should mention that I was not quick at calculation, though I was generally accurate, though not perfect. From time to time Mrs. Marx would send kids to me to see if their answers were right. In hindsight I find it interesting that the answer books were so accurate, since they are anything but in college. Mrs. Marx became pregnant early in the year and we lost her about two months from the end of the term. Although I did not think of it at the time, I now find it odd that she never brought the baby for us to see. The substitute was again OK, but of little interest.

My studies in algebra had progressed through linear equations, even two by two systems, and I quietly used this expertise to unerringly solve the word problems in the eighth grade math text. Algebra reduced the most difficult word problems to complete triviality, but I had been down roads like this before and I guarded the methodology carefully. Here is the trick; you solved the problem algebraically (trivial) but *without* doing any arithmetic simplifications. When you had solved for  $x$ , you had it in terms of all the original numbers. You then wrote this down on the paper and proceeded to do the arithmetic. It looked like magic the way I would pull all the numbers out of the problems and line them up in improbable combinations which then spit out the right answer. Mrs. Marx would look at the work and wonder how the trick was done, but never asked for fear that I would explain, and she wouldn't understand. No African shaman ever guarded his methods more carefully, because I thought I was cheating.

At that time to graduate from grammar school it was necessary to pass a test called the Constitution Test. We studied for months. It was so simple we could have studied for hours and passed it, but I suppose there was prestige for the higher ups if everyone in the school passed, and they were determined we would. It was about the basics of American Government, and so a useful exercise, if a bit anticlimactic. Everyone I knew, or even was dimly aware of, passed.

We had quite a little graduation ceremony at the end of grammar school. We dressed up and sat on bleachers and the happy parents looked on. We sang a number of songs associated with the West, one of which was in Hawai'an. I didn't sing, as I threw off those around me due to tone deafness, but I can still remember a few words of the Hawai'an song and bits of some of the others. We all had a pretty good time with it.

Looking back over grammar school I should mention that I was occasionally a discipline problem in a minor way, both from restlessness and talking out of turn and from mild annoying behavior involving hair pulling etc. It was the greatest tragedy of those years that we no longer had inkwells, having switched to leaky ballpoints, so it was no longer possible to dip girls' pigtails in the inkwells. A few of the less progressive teachers did teach us to write with ink pens, but so seldom and in such tightly controlled situations that there was little amusement to be had. Discipline problems were rare since we were all properly brought up middle class white kids, so I was probably one standard deviation out from the norm in this. My sins were relatively minor and I rarely went to the principal's office; mostly I spent time in the hall, sitting on the floor daydreaming, which is pretty well what I did in class anyway. If the weather were not too bad I'd be sent outside. Leaning against the wall dreaming of hiking the distant hills.....

There was always a problem for me in the arbitrariness of the rules. Things would be OK one day and forbidden the next, at the whim of distant figures who I always suspected were little smarter than trees. The injustice of the whole system rankled.

Some parts of school made absolutely no sense. Spelling for example. English is the worst spelled major language in the world, and I had a terrible time learning to spell since I thought it was all arbitrary and stupid, and I had no inborn talent for it. It amazes me that some people do; they can easily learn that quay is pronounced key and should they ever find themselves on one they can spell it years later. Of course people have always felt similarly about me and mathematics. Every once in a while the teacher and my mother would gang up promising whips and cattle prods if the next test was as bad as usual and then I would exert myself and learn another 30 words. I feel this early trauma was important in the lack of love for English that I felt later in life. I'm aware that many people love the language just as I am aware that many people see color in the painted desert, but I can relate to neither. And, I hasten to add, is it language itself. I am very fond of both German and Chinese, and I love historical (diachronic) linguistics.

Though grammar school was always mildly unpleasant, some parts were

better than others and it did start me off on my teaching career, and I learned some of the basics of stand up delivery. The major problem was boredom. Things were about to improve a good deal in high school.



## 3.2 High School

I began high school in September 1955. This was a new kind of experience. While teachers in primary school had occasionally been helpful, their abilities to help had been limited. In high school the teachers were often able to answer my questions. This was nice.

Another new thing was moving to a new classroom every hour. There had been a little of this in eighth grade, but very little. I found it amusing, and it was very helpful to be able to move around every hour, since I had always been a little restless. There were several minutes between classes. The teachers were inclined to be vicious if you were “tardy” and filled out forms to turn in to subcommandant Griffen, and if you got too many tardies in a semester it affected your grade. I soon learned to judge the time of arrival to within five seconds (without a watch) so I never wasted any of the break time, arriving as the second hand was seconds from the deadline. You were also expected to pee during between class travel. Many of the teachers used this time for smoking a cigarette, referred to by them as a “nicotine fit.” Most adults smoked in those days.

I cannot remember what I signed up for every semester but here is the first semester :

beginning algebra  
general science  
english  
German  
orientation  
physical education

Orientation was a sort of life preparation/advisement class. For a change, none of the classes were boring and I enjoyed them all. Of course I enjoyed some more than others. A very important event happened on the first day of class; I sat down in General Science (in that class we had assigned seats I think because the teacher, George Guy, had difficulty remembering our names.) Across from me was a boy slightly larger than me with very short crew cut. This was Robert B. Dean. We became friends very quickly and have remained close to this day, exchanging daily e-mails and helping each other over life’s humps.

The teacher for General Science, George Guy, also became a lifelong friend and I spoke about him at his memorial service when he died about 2005. He was a dedicated and interesting teacher but some enemy had put a geas on him and he could make an experiment work only occasionally. He was really a biology person so it’s perhaps not surprising that many of his physics demonstrations did not work well. Anyway, it was clear what was supposed to happen, as he explained it (several times) in advance, so we just mentally adjusted our observation to what should have happened, and no harm was done.

I give my favorite example. There is a standard experiment at this level involving two hemisphere that are put together with a seal between them. The

air is then evacuated from the resulting sphere, and air pressure holds them together. Science books in those days often included a picture of two horses trying to pull the (large) hemispheres apart and failing. George's were smaller. Anyway, after all this hype, including the picture of the horse, he evacuated the sphere with an air pump, explained how hard it would be to pull them apart, attempted to do so and succeeded with a very little effort and a tiny pop. The failure was due to a leaky seal, but we pretended for days it was due to his great strength.

I note in passing that George Guy was the person who suggested I go to Harvard. I mentioned this at home and a few days later my father was observing a construction site and lying there was a pamphlet describing Harvard and the application process. Pa knew Karma when he saw it, and jumped on the wagon. But this was a couple of years later.

The algebra teacher was Mr. Bradshaw, a nice guy whose specialty was the swimming coach. In those days quite a number of coaches taught math; I don't know why. Perhaps coaches were common and math teachers rare so a minor in math was helpful to a coach's career. Once I got the textbook I spent a few days devouring it. I knew most of it already, the big exception being quadratic equations. I already could factor, so I learned completing the square and the Quadratic Formula and that pretty well finished the first year. After the first 5 weeks or so, Bradshaw was aware that my time was not being used optimally and I was jumped up to Algebra II, a junior course. The first part of the course was largely review and I read through it filling in any gaps and then settled back to learn the rest of the course as we went along. Mostly it was easy, but it was new and I enjoyed every minute of it. The teacher was Mr. Crawford, an ex-Navy man (and still in the reserve and still very gung ho). He was nice enough if you were competent but not very forgiving to those whom the material challenged, no matter how hard they tried, which bothered me a little. I felt he was a shade too black/white and the world would be a better place if he saw a little more gray.

Douglas Crawford became extremely important for me because he sensed that I wanted more than just algebra and trig and he also sensed some opportunity for himself. Our mutual needs collaborated in arranging for me to study Calculus for an hour a day in his office while he counselled students. This was in my sophomore year. He arranged with Stanford for me to take their final and bank credit against the time I would attend there. Both the calculus and the counseling were educational. I made rapid progress in Calculus since I now had someone I could ask when I didn't understand something, and between us we would work it out. I got through about four college semesters in two years, and I did *every* odd problem in Harold Maile Bacon's book *Differential and Integral Calculus*. The book and I were a good fit; we liked about the same amount of rigor. I had a couple of other books too that I occasionally looked in, the one by Brown being the meanest with epsilons and deltas all over the place; I wasn't ready for that.

I think I probably did around three times the normal amount of problems for a Calculus student, and I did them very well, because it was all such great

fun. This was a great help when I had to teach Calculus; I had seen all the problems before. In fact from the beginning I could work them in my sleep.

What Crawford got out of it was a thorough review of Calculus for himself. He was thinking of moving up to the Junior College level and thus needed to review this material.

Now, for fun, I want to recount a counseling session in Crawford's office. This student who had little interest in academics had managed to get a job in the afternoon which started much earlier than school let out. He wanted his schedule arranged so that he could leave during lunch hour. Crawford explained that a) he was jeopardizing his future by not getting as much education as he could and b) it was against the law. To each of Crawford's arguments, presented many times each, the kid had one reply, which was "Yeah, but I gotta work in the afternoon" and nothing would shake him in this. Crawford could expel him, or set the police on him, but there were no other choices because the kid had to work in the afternoon. I never found out the final disposition of the case, but I told the story to my mother and from then on for the rest of her life she used the phrase "Yeah but I gotta work in the afternoon" to express the idea stolid stupidity.

I learned a great many secrets sitting there listening to the pregnant girls and other troubled students. Coming from an Italian family it never occurred to me to blab any of it to anyone. We Italians are born to *Omertà*.

I feel a great debt of gratitude to Bradshaw and Crawford for being willing to go to the trouble of bucking the system for me. I was able to start in the fourth semester of Calculus when I eventually got there, and I already knew a lot of that too.

German and Latin were taught at Carlmont by Mr. McCormick, and this was my first experience with a truly *rigid* teacher. I suppose he had learned his teaching style from some particularly rigid Catholic School, and he then applied it to us. Perhaps in a language class this is not the worst style possible. He was not a bad guy provided you never questioned his authority or contradicted his teaching, two things he considered fairly identical. I have no idea what he was like in Latin, but in German he was dedicated and got the job done, although our accents were perhaps not spot on. High School language courses in those days were fairly slow, so learning the grammar was fairly easy. I have always had trouble with learning vocabulary, but like I said it was gentle and I kept up fine. He did a good job with the grammar, although he was always frustrated by our complete non-grasp of English grammar, so he had to teach that as well as the German grammar. Since English is much looser than German, there were many opportunities to plague Mr. McCormick when he tried to give us the rules of English grammar. We all adjusted to his Fascist style (many had parents who were little different) and with occasional exceptions I enjoyed the class. Of course the Fascist style meant the class played endless tricks on him and parodied him but he mostly took it in good part.