SOME MEMORIES I HOPE WILL BE OF INTEREST TO MY FAMILY

May 27, 2017

After spending time at the WW 2 museum in New Orleans this week with Paula, Joe and Jennie, and telling them stories about our uncles, I decided it was time to start putting my memories in writing. So this is dedicated to my kids, grandkids and Paula. I hope you will all find some of it interesting.

Today I will start with my earliest memories but will jump around as I remember things, so this will not be in a pure chronological order.

I was born on December 22nd, 1942 (I don’t actually remember that). It was in our house on our 80 acre farm, not in a hospital. For some reason, the doctor told my mom that I probably wouldn’t live through the night. Apparently I was pretty sickly looking. Mom told that doctor he was wrong and she was determined to make sure I survived. She told me this story many times over the years and I think it made her protective of me forever.

During my early childhood years I did have quite a few ailments, but nothing really serious. One recurring thing was earaches. It seemed I had them a lot. When I would wake up I would call for mom and she said I would say “Moan Momma”. i.e. come on Mom. Then she would poor some kind of warm oil into my ear which I hated, but it worked. The other thing I had was toothaches. We didn’t practice very good oral hygiene and the only time we went to the dentist was to get a tooth pulled, so my teeth were pretty rotten. There were nights I didn’t sleep at all and mom sat up with me. We tried things like putting an aspirin right on the tooth, or in the cavity. Then when the tooth got really bad they took me to the horrible dentist in town and he would pull the tooth. I remember one time a tooth was really bad and they took me to a dentist in another town so he could put me to sleep. But the gas didn’t work 100% so I felt the full pain of the tooth being pulled. When we moved to Flint and my dad got dental benefits, I got my teeth taken care of but one of the negative things about that is the dentist immediately pulled all my back teeth, so I had to chew on my front teeth until I got a partial plate about the age of 24 or 25. It was when Dave and Laura and I were living with my mom after Nancy died.

OK, back to the beginning, beginning. As I mentioned, I was born at home, as were Joe and Jennie. George was the first to be born in a hospital. We lived on an 80 acre farm in Southeast Missouri, about 6 miles from the Mississippi river (I still remember how to spell that). It was very close to the Arkansas and Tennessee state lines. They call it the “boot heel” of Missouri.

The house where I was born:

The reason the farm was 80 acres is interesting on a lot of levels, including politically. My dad was born in 1906 so he was in his 20’s when the Great Depression hit. (I will go into more detail about my dad and his early life later). He was 30 and mom was 20 when they got married, so it was probably 1937 when he got the farm. President Roosevelt, as part of the New Deal, created the Farm Security Administration. They made land available to purchase so poor people, like my dad, could finance parcels of farm land. They sold them in 40 acre segments, so the farms were all 40, 80, 120, etc. The most popular choice was to buy two 40 acre segments to make an 80 acre farm, which is what Dad did. He was a Republican and mom later told me he was not a fan of Roosevelt and felt he was a Socialist. But she reminded him often that he wouldn’t own that farm if not for the President’s program. I think she won that argument. All my childhood I thought both parents were Republicans, but Dave found out when Mom was visiting us in California one year that she was a Democrat all her life so she and Dad cancelled out each others vote. But she didn’t want to embarrass Dad by letting people know she was a Democrat so we didn’t find out till much later. I will devote a lot of words to both parents later on, but my Mom was one of the strongest people I have ever known. One of the few real Christians I have ever known. That is, someone that behaves the way Christ did.

So, back to the 80 acre farm. Dad took great pride in the quality of his farm. Everything he did was precise. As I will describe later, he only had a 3rd grade education and could barely read and write. But he was frigging brilliant. One of the things I remember is how other farmers would stop their cars and complement Dad on how straight the rows had been planted. And they were perfectly straight. As I got old enough to understand that, I would notice other farms where the rows were very crooked. My belief is that the straight rows were important from a pride of workmanship but also from a practical viewpoint. Once he started plowing the rows (first with a mule and later with a tractor), it was easier if the rows were straight.

As I remember, the crops were divided into 20 acre plots. For sure the cotton was 20 acres because that’s all the government would allow in order to keep prices up. I’m not sure how Dad ever felt about that, but I don’t remember him ever complaining about it. (maybe Mom wouldn’t let him) We also grew corn, soybeans and something that became hay. (I obviously didn’t inherit Dad’s knowledge of farming). Of course the farm also included our house, a big red barn and some other buildings, so the other crops could not have been 20 acres each. Oh, and a big garden that I’m guessing was about an acre. There were also two other houses on the farm. One was about a quarter mile down the road and my Mom’s Dad lived there at one point. At the very back of the farm was a bigger house and I remember there were times people lived there and times it was empty. If my memory is accurate, I believe our cousin Barb’s family lived there at one point. They moved a lot, so there is a good chance they lived at that house at one point.

SIDE STORY: Barb’s Dad was George Fisher, but not from our Fisher family. Mom’s sister, Viola married a Fisher from another clan. (Boy I was confused for a long time how we had the same last name as our cousins but we were not the same Fishers.)We had another Uncle George, the war hero that I will write about later. Very, very different men. Anyway, Barb told me that one day she caught the school bus to school and when the bus dropped her off after school, the family had moved. She had no idea where they had gone. This Uncle George frankly was a lazy scoundrel that cheated people so people were always after him. (I guess I can’t let Barb read this now huh?)

The big money maker was cotton. We also sold soybeans but I don’t think they were nearly as lucrative as cotton. Same for the corn. The cotton gin in town was a combination bank and cotton gin. In the spring, they would loan Dad the money to buy seeds, and then when the cotton was picked and brought to the gin, he would pay back the gin the loan for the seeds. Spring and summer were especially lean times for us as there was no income, but when fall came around, the money would flow in and we could buy things. We were the only family I knew about where the kids actually got paid for the cotton we picked. Joe was a prolific picker and could make about $30 a week. A lot of money then.

SIDE STORY: Dad was a huge St. Louis Cardinals baseball fan. He used to sit and listen to double headers on Sunday while we begged him take us swimming. I got my love of baseball from him and Stan Musial was my hero. (While working for Xerox in 1978 I got to meet Stan at the World Series – one of the big thrills of my life). So, I remember really wanting a baseball glove so I could play baseball like my big brother. As I mentioned, things were really tight in the spring and summer but Dad told me when we started picking cotton he would buy me a glove. Sure enough, one Saturday morning he came to me and said we were going into town. Just the two of us so I had no idea what that was about. He took me to the Western Auto store (they sold everything) and bought me a baseball glove and a ball. To this day, I think that was the best gift I have ever received. Better than Christmas. We came home and played catch in the front yard. My guess is that Joe was there but I don’t remember that part, just the thrill of getting that glove.

From that moment on my life’s dream was to be a professional baseball player. I actually had a brief period where I was one of the best players in my age group. It was the summer between the 8th and 9th grade (more on that later). I was hitting home runs like crazy and was maybe the best player in the league. Then when I got to high school the pitchers were much better and I became a great fielding, poor hitting first baseman. Not a lot of demand for those in the major league.

Back to the farm. Our house, for many years, was only two bedrooms so Mom and Dad slept in one and all 4 of us slept in the other. Finally, when Jennie was about a teenager Dad built on a bedroom for her and also an indoor bathroom. For about the first 10 years of my life I had to use an outdoor toilet. So Joe, George and I then had a room to ourselves. Funny, but when we moved to Michigan my Dad bought a two bedroom house so we were back to that situation again. But there was a basement so George and I slept on bunkbeds down there and Mom and Dad slept on a foldout couch or Joe did some as I remember. He got married during my sophomore year in high school so that freed up some sleeping space.

With all the luxuries we have now, one would think that we felt deprived back then. Not at all. Don’t get me wrong, I loved that indoor toilet once we got it, but never felt I was being treated unfairly because I had to go out to the outdoor toilet or had to sleep in the same room with three siblings.

There is another memory about the shower we had out back, so I will need Joe and Jennie’s help here. It was a room next to the “Food Cave” and it had a shower. Not sure if that was always there or it was installed later. We also had running water in the house for all my memories but don’t know if that was the case when Joe was born. The Food Cave was where Dad hung meat but that’ all I remember about it.

There was a big tree in our back yard and George and I used to play under it for hours. They were building the levee along the river when we were kids and Dad used to take us over there to look at it. I was fascinated by the machinery, especially the “Dirtwagons” as we called them. We had toy dirtwagons, probably Mattel, and George and I would build levees under that tree. We also had tons of toy soldiers (got them every Christmas) so that was a great place for battles. I’m guessing we intermingled the dirtwagons and the soldiers with no knowledge of historical time frames.

SIDE STORY: This might possibly be my earliest memory, but I will describe one later that I believe fits that category. By the time the war was over in 1945 I was almost three. There used to be parades in Portageville, the town of 2,000 that was about 6 miles from our farm. My memory is of soldiers marching in the parade and me freaking out so much that my parents had to take me away from it. My guess is that this would have been pretty soon after the war ended so maybe I was 4. Apparently I hated war at an early age and that hasn’t changed.

EARLIEST MEMORY: Other than the possibility of the event in the preceding paragraph, this is the memory that is really etched into my brain. I wasn’t old enough to go to school (I started at age 5 so I couldn’t have been more than 5) and was with Dad while he was putting up a fence. Joe was in school so wasn’t’ available. He had dug the postholes and had the posts on a flat bed trailer. He would drive a few feet, stop the tracker, get on the trailer and throw the posts next to the holds. Finally, he said “Johnnie, you can drive this tractor and I will stand on the trailer and throw the posts off” (Or something to that effect). It was a little Avery tractor with a throttle on the steering wheel column so he sat me in the seat, told me to just hang on to the steering wheel and keep it straight. He set the throttle at a very low speed and I did it! Dad probably came to regret that because I was instantly hooked on driving. But Dad and I completed that fence!!

DRIVING: Some of this is going to be difficult for my grandkids to believe, but they trust their Abuelo, so they will believe it.

OK, so my first experience driving was when I was 5 as mentioned earlier. Well, from then on I bugged both Mom and Dad to let me drive whenever I could. One of the early memories is driving the tractor pulling the wagon as Dad and Joe gathered the corn. The wagon had a big side board and as they pulled the ears of corn off the stalks, they would throw them against that board and the corn would fall into the wagon. All I had to do was keep the tractor straight. Again, it had a throttle that was set by Dad. I don’t remember exactly when, but Dad upgraded the Avery to an H Farmall. Much bigger tractor with more pulling power. Most of my memories of driving are on that tracto

As I got older and big enough to reach the clutch and brake, Dad let me start plowing in the field. He started me out by letting me pull the disc which basically plowed under the cotton, soybean and corn stalks after they had been harvested. The idea was to plow them under so I couldn’t do them any harm. But I don’t think he ever let me plow the cotton, as that was the money maker crop.

By the time we moved to Flint when I was 12, I had been driving a tractor and a car for several years, so I must have been driving by age 9 or 10 at least.

In addition to driving the tractor in the field, I actually had a paper route for awhile. It was selling Grit Newspapers. Grit recruited kids with ads in comic books and that’s where I saw it. So, Dad let me go around the area on the H Farmall and sell these newspapers (By the way, Grit still exists today, but as a magazine). I think it was 25 cents. My first sales job!

This was also the time of the polio epidemic, so the March of Dimes was huge. In school they gave us these cardboard sheets that you could put dimes in so I also collected dimes for that when out selling the Grit newspapers. (More on the polio scare later)

So, I was an experience tractor driver by age 10 or so, but that wasn’t enough. I wanted to drive a car also. When Mom would drive to the store (one mile away). I would lean over and steer (that must have bugged the hell out of her). Then when I could reach the pedals, she started letting me actually drive. So I was driving to the store by myself before we moved. I am now going to share something that I have never shared with anyone, but it will illustrate that maybe letting a little kid drive alone is not a good idea. One night they let me go to the store to get something, and on the way I decided to see how fast the car would go. I don’t remember exactly the top speed for the car (I think it was the 46 Dodge by then), but I maxed it out for a moment. It might have been 100 miles per hour. I never did that again as it scared the hell out of me, but fortunately it didn’t end in disaster.

When we moved to Michigan I was 12 and of course couldn’t drive there so I spent 4 years not being able to drive. But, on the morning of my 16th birthday, I got Dad up early and we were first in line when the DMV opened. I was back in the saddle again.

SIDE STORY TO THE NIGHT I TURNED 16:

So, as I said, Dad and I were the first in line on December 22, 1958, to get my drivers license. By that time I had my first real girlfriend. Her name was Donna Holstein. I will keep the PG since the grandkids will be reading it, but suffice to say Donna and I were anxious to get some “alone time”. You know, to talk and stuff Alejandro and Isabel. So we made up this story for Donna’s parents that we were going to a movie, but what we actually did was go “park”. We found a side road out in the middle of nowhere and parked and listened to music for hours while we made out. (Used to call that necking). So when it came time to take her home, the battery was dead from playing the radio. Man, I was in a panic. Again, keep in mind there were no cell phones back then so no way to communicate. We were several miles out in the country on a deserted road. We walked back to the main road just praying a car would come by. Finally a car came and we flagged it down. It happened to be a kid that went to Donna’s high school that she knew and he had jumper cables. We got the car started and barely made it back to Donna’s house by the curfew. I think it was 11. Her mom was still up and started asking us about the movie. She didn’t just ask how we liked it she started asking us about the plot, etc. Fortunately, we had picked a movie to lie about just in case and were able to fake it. I’m guessing her mom actually knew what was going on and was just torturing us.

Since I am discussing Donna, I might as well go ahead and talk about her now. She was 14 and I was 15 when we met. I was near the end of my sophomore year at Mandeville and Donna was a freshman Grand Blanc, one of our rivals. One of my buddies, Bill Allison, was dating Donna and introduced us after a basketball game one night. Bill was older and joined the army. My buddy Steve Stevenson was dating a girl from Grand Blanc that was one of Donna’s best friends. Steve called me one Sunday night and said he was going to his girlfriend’s house and Donna was there. He said she remembered me and wanted him to bring me. So I went and it was in love before the evening was over. Donna was the first girl I ever REALLY kissed and we really hit it off. In the car that night, we heard the Four Preps singing 26 Miles. The song was about Catalina Island and we made it our song. Weird huh? I had no idea where Catalina Island was located. Paula and I went there last summer and spent New Year’s weekend there. So it took me 60 years from the time I heard the song until I actually visited there. We bought the CD and it’s in my souvenir case in my home now.

Boy, I was really crazy about Donna. Truly my first love. If she hadn’t broken up with my I probably would have married her. We dated a little over a year and I thought things were great. But one night I picked her up to go to the drive in. I remember that evening as though it happened yesterday. Mom, George and I had gone shopping at a grocery store called Hamay Brothers. It was a Friday night and we would go pick up my Dad’s paycheck during his lunch hour (He worked second shift then – 2:30 to 11 PM) and go grocery shopping. (More on that later). So I remember getting some snacks for the drive in as I didn’t have much money to buy things there. As soon as we got to the drive in and hooked up the speaker on the car window, Donna announced she was breaking up with me!! The reason: She was going to start dating Allen Welch, a punk with a leather jacket and a low rider car. She thought I had become boring and wanted more adventure I guess. I suppose I might as well be candid here. I was a virgin and was determined to save myself for marriage (Southern Baptist remember). Donna wanted to have sex but I refused. So she went in search for a guy that would do that. To my grandkids I will say, to this day I am proud that I stuck to my beliefs even though she broke my heart.

Donna’s parents adored me. I think they felt I was a good influence on Donna. Before I could drive or even after that when Joe or Jennie was using the car, I used to go to Donna’s house on Saturday night and watch TV till about 2 in the morning. There were times her Mom would actually get up and take me home, but I felt guilty about that and would usually just walk a couple of miles to U.S. 23 and hitchhike home so she wouldn’t have to get up. It’s hard to imagine now doing what I did then. As I said, I would walk back to U.S. 23 and set up my hitchhiking position right outside this bar. So I would usually get picked up by the first person that left the bar. I wonder how many drunks I rode with over that year or so.

BACK TO THE FARM:

It wasn’t unusual for kids to start driving early in that area because it was mostly family farms and was necessary. Joe did the same thing, which leads me to another driving story.

When Joe was 11, Dad sent him over to our Grandma’s house to pick up something, and Jennie, George and myself went with him. Can you imagine an 11 year old kid driving a car today with 3 younger siblings in the car? So, on the way back, Joe stopped at Talmadge Burgess store (more on that later). There was a truck there with watermelons on it. We had actually just bought a watermelon from that guy earlier in the day. Anyway, Joe misjudged the distance and ran into the truck, crumpling the fender on our 39 Chevy. I was 6 at the time and actually remember that. The 3 of us jumped out of the car and ran into the store to spend the nickel each of us had! Poor Joe. He was scared to death. A friend of the family, Ron Ward, (Who later moved to Flint and was a great softball pitcher there in the city leagues) took Joe home to get Dad. Dad’s first question to Joe was if anyone was hurt. He didn’t yell, just got in the car and went back to the store. (Later I will talk about how none of us can remember Dad every yelling at us, even when he was whipping us). They went back to the store, and Dad pulled the fender away from the tire so it could be driven. We all came out to go home and Joe started to get in the back seat. Dad asked “What are you doing?” Joe assumed Dad wouldn’t let him drive again. But Dad told him to get back in the drivers seat and drive home. Amazing huh?

This brings to mind a similar situation I had with Dad and driving. As mentioned earlier, one of the first things he let me do was pull a disc to plow under the crops after the harvest. What could go wrong? Well, he had taught me how to make a tight turn at the end of a row and go right back down the field next to that row. Here’s how it works: A tractor has 2 brake pedals. You can press on both of them so it stops evenly, or you can keep them unhooked and press on just one. That locks one of them while the other big rear wheel keeps going. So it turns a precise 180 degree turn. Well, I turned it too sharply and look over and that disc is climbing up on the wheel. Keep in mind a disc is a bunch of sharp, round plates, so it could have been a disaster. However, being the expert driver of age 10, I stopped it immediately, and walked back to the house. Just like with Joe and the 39 Chevy, Dad asked if I was OK and we walked back to the tractor. It was at the very back of the farm so I’m guessing the walk was about ½ mile. Dad was able to maneuver the disc off the wheel of course so I started walking back to the house, believing my tractor driving career was over at a tender age. Same thing as with Joe. He asked where I was going and said “Get back up there and finish this field.” He showed me what I had done wrong and I never had an accident again.

Here is a picture of an H Farmall:



SCHOOL YEAR: We didn’t have summer vacations in Hayward, Missouri. (That was our mailing address, but it wasn’t a town. The closest town was Portageville, about 6 miles away, with a population of about 2,000.

We had two 6 week vacations. In the spring we had cotton chopping vacation and in the fall we had cotton picking vacation. Yes, that was the actual name of those vacations. We then went back to school in the middle of the summer, after the crops had been “laid by”, waiting for the cotton to open to be picked in the fall. There was no air conditioning then so the school was really, really hot in the summer. That part of Missouri gets very hot and humid in the summer.

COTTON CHOPPING:

I don’t know how much interest the people reading this will have in this, but I will describe briefly what I mean by cotton chopping. Once the field was prepared, Dad (or Joe, I never was allowed to do this) would drive the tractor and pull behind it a sower (sowing machine?) that would plant a solid line of cotton seeds. Tons of them with no spaces in between. So when the cotton would start to grow from the seeds it would be a solid row. You can’t let it grow that way as there wouldn’t be room for it to spread out, so the first time through would be to thin out the cotton. The proper space between stalks was the width of the hoe. It was designed to thin the cotton at exactly the right intervals. This first time through was really critical. You needed enough space but you didn’t want to cut too many stalks as it would obviously reduce the capacity. If I remember correctly, we weren’t allowed to do that first chopping until we got old enough to be trusted to thin it out properly. Once the first chopping was done, then we went back through on a regular basis to chop out the grass and weeds. At some point, the cotton would be high enough to plow with a cultivator on the tractor (mules earlier). That was obviously much more efficient as you could plow a field pretty quickly on a tractor, as compared to workers walking through the field with hoes. At some point, the cotton would be high enough where nothing else had to be done except wait until the boles opened for picking. It was called “Laid By”, meaning nothing more needed to be done. That’s the point where we would go back to school in the summer.

Me at age 7:

As written earlier, we didn’t have any money in the spring but in the fall when cotton was picked we actually had some money, and Dad paid us for the cotton we picked. So, while picking cotton is back breaking work, it sure beat chopping cotton. Normally we worked 6 days but I remember Dad letting us quit at noon on some Saturdays to go into town. Boy, those are some of the best memories of my life.

Going into Portageville on Saturday was the big social event for pretty much everyone. Mom would do some shopping and Dad would hang out on the street with other farmers, smoke, spit and exchange, well I’m not sure what they talked about actually. I am certain Dad told jokes as he had a million of them. Later, when I discuss my high school years I will talk about my buddies coming to our house to hear my Dad tell his jokes.

Honestly, I don’t know what Joe and Jennie did on those Saturdays, but I sure know what George and I did. Mom and Dad would give us a quarter to go to the movies. Usually a double feature, a serial (that was an ongoing series where the hero appeared to die at the end of each one, only to miraculously survive the next week), a newsreel, and a cartoon. So, the movie ticket was a dime, and popcorn, candy, and soda were a nickel each. So 25 cents went a long way then. One of my favorite things to do was buy a tootsie roll and take a bite and put popcorn in my mouth at the same time. So you get that salt/sweet thing. (I think I might do that the next time Paula and I go to the movies!)

During the fall when we had a little money, we would also sometimes go to the drugstore and get a malt or ice cream cone. There were actually two of these drugstores in town, both with soda fountains. To this day a strawberry malt is a taste of heaven to me. But, with a little money in my pocket, my favorite thing was the Dime Store. I guess the official name was 5 and 10 cent store, but we called it the dime store. A major part of my cotton picking wages went to buying balsa airplanes with a rubber band that turned the propeller. They would last approximately 10 minutes once we got home because I would keep testing the boundaries of that rubber band to get the most distance and, of course, it would break. So, until next Saturday the plane became a glider.

Fall in town was also a time for buying school clothes. Normally it was not something I cared about, except for one year. For the first few years of my life, all I wore were overalls. But I wanted to wear pants with a belt like my big brother, so one day my parents announced it was time to get some blue jeans. So that day was one of my favorite clothes shopping days ever. I’m not sure if they bought me a belt at that time as some pictures show me wearing suspenders. Either way, I was thrilled to be wearing big boy pants.

As a very young child, I was pretty skinny, but at some point started to gain weight and frankly became fat. The nickname my family gave me was “Fatty”. It really hurt and I asked over and over again that they stop calling me that, but they never did. To this day, when I gain weight I am extremely self critical and always work to get the weight off. Maybe they did me a favor.

Me as Fatty:

Later, when I get to junior high in Flint, I will talk about my transformation from a short, fat kid to a studly 9th grader.

Me as a freshman:

Back to the Hayward school years. I was only 17 when I graduated from high school, the youngest in my class. That’s because of a weird procedure the Hayward school had. If they deemed you advanced in some way you went from primer (kindergarten) directly to the second grade, totally skipping the first grade. So I was 6 years old in the second grade. So I entered my senior year of high school at the age of 16. It was a big mistake, as I struggled to get better than B’s and C’s until about my sophomore year. At that point they started a weekly eligibility rule for sports. If you got less than a C on anything that week, you were ineligible for all games that week. I played football, basketball and baseball and there was no way I was going miss a game! In my senior year I made the All County basketball team and was the youngest senior on that team. I could have had another year of eligibility if I had not skipped the first grade. That probably was the main reason I didn’t have a long career in the NBA! More on high school later.

To put this in perspective, it would be like Alejandro being a junior in high school right now instead of a freshman.

We lived about a mile from the Hayward Elementary school and a bus picked us up. I loved riding the bus, as I assume most kids do. They had two shifts as I guess they didn’t have enough buses. So they would take a load home and come back and pick up the second shift. For some reason I was always on the first shift. No idea what those kids did while waiting for the bus to come back.

My best buddy in grade school was Jerry Grimes. He wanted me to come spend the night at his house but Mom told me I had to learn how to tie my own shoes as she didn’t want Jerry’s mom to have to tie my shoes for me. So, I finally did it and got to spend the night at his house. (Jerry drowned several years later)

Speaking of tying my shoes, I tie them left handed. Actually, I do several things left handed, including eating. The reason I eat left handed is a painful story. When I was a baby I was crawling on the floor while my dad was cleaning the coal stove in the living room. We had a linoleum floor and a hot coal fell out of the stove. So I crawled over and put my hand right on the hot coal. They said I screamed and when I picked up my hand the coal was burned into the palm and Dad had to pry it off. The scar is still very visible today. Apparently I was at the age of starting to learn to feed myself and couldn’t use my right hand, so I started using my left. Then a few weeks later I was crawling again and the door blew shut and knocked off all the fingernails on my right hand. So I couldn’t use it for several weeks and developed some ability with my left hand. I wish it would have translated into becoming a left handed hitter. Most likely I would have had a long career as a major league baseball player. (Are you supposed to put smiley faces in a paper like this?)

As written earlier, our main profitable crop was cotton, but also raised soybeans and corn. We also had some livestock, mainly pigs. When I was very young, we had milk cows and I remember Dad trying to teach me to milk a cow but I wasn’t very good at it. Dad was not the most patient person in the world and would get irritated if we couldn’t catch on pretty quickly to things. I think Joe could describe that better than any of us as Dad had high expectations of his first born so Joe worked like a grown man at a very early age. But I remember him teasing Joe about not being able to do some of the things Dad could do, telling him a college education didn’t teach him to do some of the mechanical things.

Dad got rid of the milk cows later so I don’t have a lot of memories of them. It’s the pigs that I remember the most. We raised pigs both for our own meat and to sell them. When it got really cold I remember bringing them into the house to feed them. There is nothing cuter than little pigs running around and sliding on a linoleum kitchen floor. George and I would always pick out one each and name them and considered them pets. So when Dad got ready to butcher some, he would always ask us which ones we had named. He would then sell those so George and I wouldn’t have to watch our “pets” being shot and butchered.

There are two tasks on a farm that made me realize I wasn’t cut out to be a farmer. One was the butchering of the pigs. They would shoot them in the head with a .22 caliber rifle, then immediately slit their throats to bleed out. I watched in horror ever time but did watch of course. The other task was killing chickens for dinner. We had two types of chickens: Laying hens and frying chickens. They were truly free range as they ran around the yard. When Mom would be cooking chicken, she would simply walk out into the yard, grab a chicken by the neck, and wring it until the head came off in her hand. Anyone that knew our Mom would find it hard to believe she did that! So, one day I felt I could handle that task so Mom told me to grab a chicken and do it. It wrung the neck once, and freaked out and dropped the chicken. So now this poor bird is flopping around on the ground with a broken neck but still alive. Mom picked it up and finished the job. I never asked to do that again.

So we had fresh pork and fresh chicken a lot. Those chickens raised for eating never got very big as they were more tender when smaller. So Mom would fix several at a time. And to this day I believe her fried chicken is the best ever. She would fire up the iron skillet, put Crisco shortening in it, roll the chicken parts in dough and throw into the hot skillet. Man was that awesome! Then she would make gravy in that same skillet that was the best ever. So supper (we called lunch dinner then) would often be tons of fried chicken, gravy, biscuits and fresh veggies from our huge garden. All sorts of veggies but the one I remember the most is okra, which was George’s favorite. She would cut the okra, bread it and fry it. (of course it was fried)

Concerning the pigs, on the day the pigs were butchered we would start having fresh pork of all kinds. Pork chops, sausage, pickled pigs feet (I didn’t care for those), and Rocky Mountain Oysters (pig testacles) I also didn’t care for those even though I didn’t know what they were at the time. The other amazing delicacy was the cracklins. Basically, chunks of pig fat dropped into a boiling barrel of grease. Can you imagine anything worse for you? Well, they were also incredibly delicious.

The other type of chickens we had were laying hens, so we always had fresh eggs to go with that fresh bacon. Is it any mystery why Dad died at age 59 from a heart attack? That along with several packs of Camels a day for 40 years.

The pigs that bore all these little pigs that we ate or sold were these huge sows. There was a big mud puddle in the barnyard where the pigs liked to lie in. When the sows had babies, they were very protective and would try to bite you if you came too close. So, of course we would tease her and let her chase us. I’m not sure what would have happened if she caught us but I imagine it would have hurt.

Another animal I haven’t mentioned was a big jackass that did hired out to stud. Men would bring their mares and Jack, as we called him, would engage in some carnal knowledge with the mares. It was done in another barn in the back so we couldn’t see it but you could hear the mare and the jackass making these loud noises. Since my grandkids will be reading this, I will stop with this narrative right there.

But, do you know what you get when you breed a horse and a jackass? No, not Donald Trump but close. You get a mule. Mules are sterile and can’t reproduce so they are sort of their own species I guess. They used to be really important in farming for hundreds of years until the tractors took their place. We had mules when I was very young but I believe Dad had gotten rid of them several years before we moved.

Here is a picture of a jack that was about the size our ours:



The only other animal of note that I can think of was Joe’s Shetland pony. I think his name was Bob. I barely remember him because he died when I was really young. Joe just told me a gruesome fact I didn’t know. When he died Dad left him in the barnyard and the pigs ate him!

So, I am going to write a lot about both my parents as I go along, but this is the time to describe my dad’s parenting, my desire to be with my brother, and perhaps his poor judgement. One time Joe was leaving to go spend the night at a friend’s house and was riding Bob. I was following him because, as I said, I worshipped my brother and wanted to go everywhere with him. Joe kept yelling for me to go back but I wouldn’t, so he started throwing rocks at me. Dad saw it happening and yelled for Joe to come back. He told him to put Bob in the barn and then took off his belt and whipped Joe. He didn’t yell, just showed Joe he shouldn’t try to kill his little brother.

We have talked about our parents parenting style over the years and agree they were immensely fair. If we were doing something not acceptable he would tell us to stop and give us another chance. If we did it again, he would calmly take off his belt and whip us. He didn’t pull our pants down but boy it still hurt through our jeans. But, the master psychology ploy he pulled was when he would hand us a knife and make us go cut our own switch. We had this bush of some type right outside the kitchen window of our house. It had red bark, which is all I know about it. I remember really taking my time cutting that switch to delay the whipping, but I also remember debating with myself about what size switch to cut. Should I cut a little thin one that maybe wouldn’t do much damage? Or maybe a big one that he would be reluctant to swing very hard. Mostly I just remember being so angry with myself that I could be so stupid to have tested the boundaries. He was 100% consistent. Very fair though.

Now Mom on the other hand was pretty much a pushover. Perhaps the most loving person I have ever known so we didn’t want to disappoint her. But when we would misbehave she would tell us that she was going to tell Dad when he got home. We would then beg her to spank us herself because her spankings were with her hand and could hardly be felt. But the threat to tell Dad was real so she had pretty strong backing. I must admit I am much more like my mom than my dad when it comes to being strict with my kids. They turned out OK though in spite of my softness.

We didn’t have a TV or video games or anything like that to keep us occupied, but I don’t ever remember being bored on the farm. I mentioned the tree with the dirt under it that George and I played under for hours. Another thing we would do is have corncob fights. One team would get up in the loft and the other team would be on the ground. We would throw corncobs at each other. I don’t know if there was an endgame to this. Probably not. But I remember being hit on the side of the head and going into the house with the imprint of a cob on my head. I started by getting involved in the fights with Joe and his friends and that’s when I really got hurt. As I got older I organized my own.

There was one incident in the barn that almost killed me. I was having a birthday party and we were out playing in the hayloft. One of my buddies, Ardie Simmons, was very poor (They were sharecroppers), and he was jealous of the presents I got. (He told me that later as the motivation for what he did). There is an opening above the manger where you climb a ladder into the loft, and where they throw down the hay into the manger. Ardie pushed me into that opening and I landed head first. Dad had stretched barbed wire across the sides of the manger to keep the cows from getting the hay. I landed on that barbed wire face first and the barbed wire hit about an inch under my right eye. So the cut was pretty awful. I still have a scar there today. It knocked me out and someone carried me into the house and I woke up on the way. By the time I got into the house my eye had swollen shut and I was bleeding pretty profusely. Of course it scared Mom and Dad to death and they put me in the car and rushed me into town to the doctor. It took a bunch of stiches to close it up and he put a patch over my eye. He said one of the barbs stuck about an eighth of an inch from my eye and I was lucky not to have lost that eye. What is really amazing to me is that I didn’t break my neck.

There was some aftermath of the incident, both good and bad. The bad was that when Lloyd Simmons, Ardie’s dad found out, he beat him badly. Lloyd was a weird mean guy but really liked me. He used to tell Ardie right in front of me that he wished Ardie was more like me. What a jerk. On the way home from the doctor I asked Dad to go tell Ardie that it was OK, and I was not mad at him. When Dad got home from telling him, he told me Lloyd had already beaten him. Not the switch or belt that my dad used, but with his fists. I felt so badly for that kid on so many levels. They were sharecroppers and very poor but I really liked the kid. They lived about a quarter mile from us and used to hire out to pick cotton for us.

OK, the good part, on the way home Mom asked me if there was anything special I wanted since I was hurt so badly since we were going by Talmadge Burgess store on the way home. I told her strawberry ice cream, so we stopped and got some. To this day, when I’m sick or hurt, strawberry ice cream is my “go to” feel better drug.

Writing about this incident with Ardie, brings up some other memories of him. One has to do with the last spanking I ever got from Dad. I think I was about 10 and had gone a long time without being spanked as I finally figured out Dad meant everything he said. Well, one night Ardie was spending the night at our house and he and I were sleeping in the same bed. He was sleeping next to the wall and for some reason, kept kicking the wall. Dad heard it and yelled for us to stop. I pleaded with Ardie to stop but he did it again. This time Dad gave a second chance (I guess because it involved another kid). He said “If you boys do that again I’m bringing my belt in there”. Once again, I begged Ardie to stop as I figured I would be the one getting the whipping. Of course, he did it again. Dad didn’t say a word, just came into the room, turned on the light, pulled back the covers and whipped us both with his belt. If I remember correctly it was just one swat. Boy was I mad at Ardie.

OK, imagine in this era someone whipping a neighbor kid with a belt. Well, those times were very different. The next morning Dad took us to Lloyds house and told him what he had done. Lloyd said “Good for you John. I would have whipped him worse than that”. Dad knew what a mean guy Lloyd was and assured him Ardie had gotten enough. I never knew if Lloyd beat him for that but most likely he did.

Earlier I mentioned about the problems I had with my teeth and that awful experience getting the tooth pulled without being put totally to sleep. A few days later I was spending the night at Ardie’s house and woke up to Ardie screaming and yelling for his dad. They all came rushing into the room staring at me and asking if I was OK. I had no idea what was going on until I looked at my pillow and my hands covered in blood. There was literally a pool of blood that my head had been lying in. The quack dentist had not properly pulled had to put stiches in it. They broke loose in the night and caused the horrible bleeding. I’m pretty sure I got some strawberry ice cream out of that one!

In discussing Ardie and his family being sharecroppers I want to make something clear. While I described how we didn’t have much money during the spring and summer, relatively speaking we were probably at least sort of middle class for that era. We owned our own farm, had plenty to eat, got birthday parties thrown for us, and always got a lot of toys at Christmas. Many families in that area were sharecroppers or just workers that hired out their entire families in the fields to survive. Maybe that’s why I have such empathy for the farm undocumented farm workers in this country. They are basically the same people that we knew back then: Men and women just trying to figure out how to help their families survive. And, just like back then when the farm economy in Southeast Missouri relied on those workers, the farmers in Central California to today. Hard working, salt of the earth people.

This wasn’t Ardie’s family, but there was a poor family that lived in a house on the lane next to our farm for awhile. Families moved a lot so people would come and go, so I don’t remember the names. What I vividly remember is on Christmas day going over to their house to show a boy my age my new BB gun, and telling him all the cool stuff that Santa brought me. I then asked him what Santa brought him, and he brought out this little car made out of wood. It was obviously not even new. That’s all he got for Christmas. I felt so badly for him and felt like a jerk for bragging about all the stuff I got. But it was enlightening moment for me. Until then I think I saw our family as poor, or at least wanting for some things. In that instant when he showed me the little beat up car, I realized how blessed I was. Relative to his family we were rich.

CHURCH/RELIGION: Church was a big part of my life in Missouri. Mom was a very faithful Southern Baptist and took us to church Sunday morning, Sunday night and Wednesday night. Sunday morning was Sunday school, which was my favorite part of church (other than the socials which I will get to). We were taught from booklets published by the Southern Baptist Convention so there was a new lesson every week. That was pretty interesting and I looked forward to Sunday School. One of my favorite things were bible drills. You would stand in line with other kids with your bible and the teacher would call out a verse in the bible. Then the first one to find it would step forward and read it. It taught us the books of the bible pretty well.

Now, to be totally candid here, most of the rest of church was pretty boring to me. After Sunday School we went into the main part of the church to listen to music and then the sermon. Joe sometimes sang in a quartet and he was really good! So I liked some of the music. But, boy, I couldn’t wait until those sermons were over. Booooorrrrrrinnng!!! Then Sunday night we went back to something similar to Sunday School called Baptist Training Union (B.T.U.) It was pretty much the same stuff as Sunday School as I remember. Then back to listen to another boring sermon.

Wednesday night was Prayer Meeting, perhaps THE most boring thing I have ever encountered. We were all in there together so there was no special thing for kids. I’m not sure what the purpose of that was but I’m guessing there was probably more praying going on Wednesday nights since they called it Prayer Meeting. Now, one cool thing that would sometimes happen is that we would go into Portageville to a restaurant called Rusty’s. I think we probably got malts or sodas, maybe a burger. Now, when I say WE, I mean it was a case of me begging my big brother to let me tag along with him and his friends. Sometimes Mom would make him take me. One of Joe’s best friends was George Swift and George’s brother was about a year older than me and we hung out at times. His name was Eli, and he was sort of disabled. Joe can help me here, but I remember Eli walked with a limp so I don’t know if it was a birth defect or from polio or something. But we were pretty good buddies and would gang up on Joe and George Swift, begging them to take us to Rusty’s.

There were two church events which I really liked. One was vacation bible school. I think it was during cotton chopping vacation because I remember coming in the house from the field, cleaning up and going. So getting out of the field was the best part. But it was also pretty fun. There was arts and crafts, games, etc. Probably a lot of bible study and praying too but I don’t remember that part.

The other thing was R.A. camp (Royal Ambassadors). The boys went to a camp for several days and did really cool stuff like play softball, put on plays, etc. Joe and I went but I can’t remember if George went or not. It was one of those events my big brother couldn’t keep me out of because Mom and Dad wanted me to go. One camp stands out because I remember writing a letter to Uncle Nobe, my uncle that lived in Texas. I got a hit in one game (The only one I ever got at camp) and wrote to him about it. More on Uncle Nobe in a bit, but there was another camp that stands out for not so good reasons. Earlier I mentioned my bad teeth and toothaches that I got. Well, one year at camp one of my bad teeth started hurting really badly as soon as we got there and it was awful the entire camp. I couldn’t sleep the entire time so that camp was not so much fun. Actually, I think that’s the time they took me to that quack dentist that pulled the tooth without putting me to sleep, and I subsequently almost bled to death at Ardie’s house.

Dad rarely went to church and it wasn’t until I was an adult that I learned the real reasons. First of all, he respected Mom’s faith and made us go to church with her three times a week. Believe me, I tried plenty of times to talk my folks into letting me stay home with Dad, but it never worked. He fully backed her in every way, including her church going. What I learned later is that Dad at one point went to church with Mom when they were first married, but the deacons would come back during the invitation (That’s when the preacher steps down from the pulpit, the choir sings some traditional hymn, and he tries to talk people into accepting Jesus as their savior). Dad was a proud, independent man and made up his own mind about things. OK, we later learned that behind the scenes Mom was more powerful than we knew at the time, but most of the time Dad made up his own mind. These deacons would come to where Dad was sitting (Or standing during the invitation), get down on their knees and pray for his soul. It embarrassed the Hell out of him. (OK, maybe they didn’t since he didn’t come forward). He told me that outside of church some of these guys cheated on their wives, cheated in business, and drank like fish. He couldn’t handle the hypocrisy and just stopped going to church. But I didn’t know this was why he didn’t go until many years later. All I knew as a kid is that he supported Mom in her desire to have us go to church.

Although he didn’t go to church, Dad sometimes had a good relationship with the preachers. One in particular was Ben Rowell. He was a really young pastor and this hot wife named June. He met Dad and really liked him and would come visit him. I remember one day he stopped by to see Dad and he was plowing in the field and couldn’t stop to chat. So he invited the preacher to stand on the tractor and talk while he plowed. And get this, Ben would use some of Dad’s jokes on Sunday morning! Although a Southern Baptist preacher is in the business of saving souls, I’m pretty sure Ben wasn’t really worried about Dad’s. If there is a Heaven, both my parents are there. If they aren’t, it’s not a place I want to go anyway.

My parents were as honest and moral as I believe it’s possible for a person to be. There are a bunch of examples I could give but one that comes to mind about Dad also involves an accident. Earlier I talked about how anxious I was to get my drivers license when I was 16. I was also bugging him to get a new car. The 56 Ford he had bought when we left Missouri had rusted out (They put salt on the roads in Michigan for the snow and ice which rusts the cars) and was in bad shape. So, he finally traded it in on a 59 Chevrolet Bel Air. I was thrilled. Well, at the time I had a girlfriend in Fenton, a town about 13 miles West of Flint and a big rival of our school. My buddie Steve Stevenson also had a girlfriend that was the best friend of mine. My girlfriend’s name was Charlotte Montgomery. So Steve and I took the brand new car out to pick up our girlfirends to go to the A & W. (That was one of the hangouts in Fenton). On the way home Charlotte was bugging me to let her drive. I finally gave in, but not only did she want to drive, she wanted her girlfriend to sit in the front with her. So Steve and I sat in the back seat. We were out on a country road (What could go wrong there, right?) and she went around a curve (It was a gravel road) and lost control and ran right into a tree. No one was hurt but the front end of the brand new Chevy was crushed. I mean she hit it right head on into the middle of the hood.

Now, this is the part that I am not proud of (Actually not too proud of letting my 15 year old girlfriend drive my Dad’s new car either). Somehow we got a ride home. There were no cell phones obviously so I don’t know how we contacted anyone. Dad got off work at 11 so Steve and I were sitting in the living room with Mom waiting for him to come home. I told Steve we had to lie about this and tell my dad that I was driving. I knew that if I told him the truth he would tell the insurance company the truth and they wouldn’t cover the accident. The damage was about a month’s wages for Dad and there was no way I was going to let him pay that. So, he walked in and looked around and asked what happened. I told him and of course his first question was if anyone was hurt. His next question to me was “Johnny, you are a good driver so I can’t believe this happened. Did you have both hands on the wheel?” Of course, both of my hands were in the back seat. I believe it was the only time in my life that I lied to my parents, but I felt I had no choice but to protect Dad from his own honesty. Again, he didn’t yell at me, just made plans to go get the car and get it fixed and that was it. Years later, he and I went to the South Flint Plaza to pick up Mom from work at Kresge’s. Out of the blue he said, “By the way, I know you weren’t driving the night of that accident. You were just too good a drive for something like that to happen.” I responded by telling him I was concerned he would tell the insurance company the truth. He said: “You’re damn right I would have”. Amazing man.

POLIO SCARE:

I mentioned earlier about the polio scare and March of Dimes. We were given these cardboard collection board that you could fit dimes into. There were all sorts of campaigns in school and pretty much everywhere. When you went to the movies they would have a March of Dimes film showing people in iron lungs and then stop the film, turn on the lights and have people walk down the isles with buckets collecting money. I mentioned earlier I collected dimes by driving around on the H Farmall.

Our parents wouldn’t let us go to the movies for a period during the scare, concerned we would “catch” polio. There was a brief period where they thought bananas caused polio, so we couldn’t eat bananas. It was a scary time but fortunately the March of Dimes worked. Dr. Jonas Salk discovered the vaccine to prevent polio so it was over. Did you know he didn’t patent it? He wanted it to be available to everyone and passed up billions of dollars. Can you imagine that today?

TALMADGE BURGESS STORE:

The country store owned by Talmadge Burgess (He later bought out farm) was where everyone bought groceries, gas and pretty much all necessary items to live that we didn’t raise or grow ourselves. It was also the social center of Hayward. You could definitely make a movie around that store. Talmadge would give people credit lines so they could charge things during the spring and summer when there was no revenue coming in, and then they would pay off in the fall. Dad used this for necessary things but we could not charge things like sodas, candy or ice cream. Sodas, candy and ice cream were mostly a nickel each. You could walk to the back of the store to the soda machine. You would open up the top of that cooler and pull the soda down the track and pull it out. We called them “sodies”. The favorites were Dr. Pepper, RC Cola and Nehi grape or orange. The store also had gas pumps so people could buy gas there. We had a gas tank on the farm so I don’t think we ever bought gas there. Not sure so Joe could comment on this. As I mentioned candy was a nickel except for Mounds and Almond Joy, which were a dime. That’s as much as it cost to get into the movies! To this day I think about that when I see a Mounds or Almond Joy.

SUNDAY AFTERNOON BASEBALL AND MY FIRST SALES JOB:

So, just like “Field of Dreams”, Joe and Dad carved this baseball field out of a pasture next to our house. I don’t know how he did it, but Joe and his buddies organized Sunday afternoon baseball games there. If you have read “Painted House” by John Grishom this will be familiar. Frankly, I don’t remember a lot about the games but what I do remember is making a profit on those days. Sodas were a nickel each but you could buy a case for a dollar. There were 24 bottles in a case. I talked Mom in to taking me to Burgess grocery and I would buy a case for a dollar and come back and sell them for a dime each. So that was a profit of $1.40! That was a lot of money for me then.

Another memory of those games is a black kid that was the brother of someone playing. He was about my age and he and I played during the game. I’m sure people looked at us strangely as this was the time when blacks had to sit at a different place in the theater and couldn’t sit inside at the Dairy Queen.

SEGRETATION:

So, the memories of this kid leads me to talk about how things were for black people back then. Because it was just the way it was I never thought about it, but once we moved to Michigan and I looked back, it was amazing as to how blacks were treated.

I mentioned earlier that blacks were not allowed to come into the Dairy Queen and other restaurants. There were take out windows that had a sign that said “Colored Only”. So they had to order their food and pick it up there. When we went to the movies they had to buy their tickets at a window to the side of the theater and had to sit in the balcony. In the town, there was an area called “Nigger Town” where they had to stay except to come into town to shop. There were water fountains for whites and colored people. It’s almost beyond my comprehension now to think that we didn’t have a problem with that. But I don’t remember my parents talking badly about black people and never saw them being treated badly. But later Dad talked about the police chief named Jodie Moore. He would routinely beat up black people. So I never had any real association with blacks other than that kid I mentioned earlier. The schools in Missouri were segregated so I never saw any direct bad treatment. Even when we moved to Michigan our area was lily white. We had one black player in our whole league

So jumping ahead again, let me tell you about when I realized black athletes were amazing. In my senior year our team was pretty good. We were one of the best teams in our league. Denny Seigel and I were both All County, which means we had two of the best ten players in the league. Well, one day our coach, Charlie Wallen, told us we were going to scrimmage against the junior varsity of Flint Central. We were offended that our coach would have us play a junior varsity team! So, we go play them and they were better than any team in our league. We could hardly score against these incredible black kids. They kicked our butts! I came back being so happy my parents bought a home in the suburbs where I got a chance to play. Had I gone to one of the Flint city schools I never would have even made the team.

One of the real shames of that area is that most of those kids never had a chance to play college basketball. The major colleges then only recruited white kids so these amazing players from places like Flint never had a chance to play college ball.

STAN THE MAN:

Dad was a huge St. Louis Cardinals fan and so of course I became one. He used to listen to the double headers on Sunday and I can remember times we wanted to go swimming but would have to wait until he was through listening. He had a couple of favorite players, Stan Musial (Stan the Man) and Enos (Country) Slaughter. Stan became my hero and if I remember correctly, George really liked Slaughter. Musial was one of the great hitters of all time but more importantly to me was the type of person he was. A devoted family guy and great teammate. Get this: In his entire career he never once argued with an umpire. Not even once looking back at the ump if he called a strike that was obviously a ball. (I didn’t exactly learn that style from him as a fan!) I read his life story and have the book that Dave bought me if anyone is interested in learning more. In the book there is a story about a game where he hit a line drive down the right field line that was obviously fair and he went into second with a double. But the umpire called it foul. As soon as he called it he realized it was a mistake but there was no replay back then so there was nothing he could do to change it. He went over to Stan standing on second base and apologized for the mistake. Musial said to him “No problem we will just do it again”. So he went back to bat and on the next pitch hit the ball in the same spot and ended up on second with a double. You think maybe the umps loved this guy? What a contrast to the Demarcus Cousins type players of today that complain on every call. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we had just one player today like Stan Musial. So, as I mentioned earlier, you can imagine the thrill of meeting him at the World Series in 1978.

Stan Musial and the Cardinals leads me to talk about the first real vacation I can ever remember our family taking. We were working in the field and Dad came out to talk to us. He told us that the next week we were going to St. Louis on a vacation to visit some of Dad’s relatives. He looked at me and said “And Johnny, you are going to get to see Stan the Man. We are going to a Cardinals game”. Wow!!!! I don’t remember how many days it was until we left but it must have seemed like years to me because I was so excited.

St. Louis was 200 miles from where we lived and there were no freeways back then, just a two lane highway so it took an entire day to drive there. But I didn’t care as that was the coolest thing we had ever done as a family. We stopped and ate at restaurants! Rare for us back then. Flying to Hawaii first class now can’t compare to how great that trip was. We were all so excited.

Of course a big part of the anticipation for me was going to see Stan the Man, but also just to go to a big city. When we got there is was incredible! Four lane streets! Never had seen anything so cool before. Another great memory of a first for me was when we went to lunch at one of the department stores that had a lunch counter. (That was common back then). I think it was Woolworth’s.) The memory is what they ordered for me: A club sandwich. The most awesome sandwich I had ever seen. Probably the greatest meal of my life. This sandwich had bacon and turkey and cheese, and get this: Three slices of bread. Cut into four pieces. I thought it was for all of us but it was just for me. And potato chips!! I have eaten in a ton of 5 star restaurants all over the country and in a couple of foreign countries, but I don’t think I have ever loved a meal as much as that one. Isn’t it funny the little things that make such great memories?

So, the game. Remember I had told you about Dad buying me the glove, so naturally I took it with me. On the way to the game I asked Dad if Stan was going to hit a home run that day. He said “He is going to hit one just for you Johnny.” Of course you know what happened. Stan hit a home run and to this day I’m convinced it was just for me. When I met him in 1978 I told him about that and he said, “Of course I hit that home run for you John. I knew you were there.” Pretty cool huh? Another moment burned into my memory was when we walked up the steps to the seats and I saw my first major league baseball field. What a beautiful site! All I had ever seen were the little scrubby fields we played on and Joe’s field in the pasture. Every time we go to a major league game now I think of that moment when we first enter the stadium.

I don’t remember a lot of details about that trip other than what I have written so I would invite Joe, Jennie and George to fill in any details they can remember about it. There were 6 of us in the 53 Chevy so I’m guessing they had to sit someone between George and me to keep us from fighting over territory.

The only other sort of vacations I can remember was visiting Dad’s cousin that lived in Cairo, Illinois. Later I will discuss the month long vacation we took across the country after we sold the farm and moved to Flint.

MARCHING BAND:

In Missouri they started teaching us how to read music at a very early age. I believe it was about the 3rd grade. We played these flute type instruments. Some of you will remember what they were called. Joe played the trombone, Jennie played the clarinet, and I played the cornet. The cornet is very similar to a trumpet. Joe’s best friend, George Swift, played the cornet and I thought it was a cool instrument so that’s what I took up. Although my folks didn’t have much money they bought us those instruments and encouraged music. They also bought a piano and Joe and Jennie took lessons.

Our school was K-7 or K-8, not sure which, but they had a marching band and you could play in it starting in the 5th grade, so I joined. Probably my favorite part was the uniform. They were blue and had the leather belt and leather thing that went over your shoulder and a really cool hat. Very military looking. We marched in events such as the Soybean Festival and the Cotton Festival. Major stuff like that. I did that through the 7th grade but when we moved to Michigan my buddies told me playing in the band was only for the dorks so I quit. So my next musical adventure will be when I learn to play my banjo that is now 24 years old.

RADIO AND TV:

We didn’t get a TV until I was probably 9 or 10. Again, Joe and Jennie might remember the year. Until then it was strictly radio. I remember listening to shows like The Lone Ranger, The Shadow, Green Hornet. Also Jack Benny, Fibber McGee and Molly. Oh, Inner Sanctum was another one. It was really cool sitting and listening and using our imagination about how things looked.

We used to stand in front of a store in Portageville and look at TV in the window. You could barely make out the images. Mostly just snow. Then Uncle Raymond, our rich uncle, got one and we used to go to his house to watch. He also had air conditioning, which was awesome in those hot, humid summers in Southeast Missouri. They used to have boxing on a lot. If I remember correctly, there were Friday night fights sponsored by Gillette. Dad was a big boxing fan. Wrestling was also becoming popular and Uncle Raymond and Dad used to argue about it. Uncle Raymond thought it was real and Dad knew better.

Then, we got a TV and it was awesome. Shows like Superman were on I remember. On Saturday night everyone gathered around to watch The Hit Parade. They had the top 7 popular songs of the time. Some I remember are “How much is that doggie in the window.” (I know huh?), “Oh My Pa Pa”, “The Green Door” (That became a famous porn title later). We would wait breathlessly to find out what was number 1 that week. Actually, we could figure it out based on what had not been played yet. But they had real live singers that were regulars like Dorothy Collins and Gizele McKenzie.

Eddie Fisher had his own show for awhile. I looked it up and the show was 15 minutes long. He was married to Debbie Reynolds and they were THE couple at the time. He then left her for Elizabeth Taylor and his career was basically over.

A lot of people liked the Lawrence Welk show that I think was on Saturday nights, but I hated that show. But there weren’t many choices. I think we only had one channel in the very beginning. Later you could get all three networks but I’m pretty sure it was just one. The station signed off at midnight and they showed this test pattern all night long.

The only thing I didn’t like about having a TV is that our parents wouldn’t let us go to the movies for awhile since we had free TV. I don’t remember how long that lasted but eventually we got back to the Saturday movies.

OUR FAMILY:

Before I go any further, I want to discuss our family in more detail and what I remember about them. It might give some additional context to the stories as we go along.

I have written quite a bit about our Dad already but will fill in some more details here, before talking about Mom and then other relatives.

Earlier I discussed how Dad bought the farm on the Roosevelt plan but haven’t said much yet about his earlier life. So here goes.

**John Fisher** (I am not technically a junior because Dad didn’t have a middle name and I do) was born in New Harmony, Indiana in 1906. New Harmony is now a National Historic Landmark (I just looked it up). Paula and I are planning a road trip in the Vette at some point so I am adding this to the list of places I want to visit. Lots of historical buildings and history there. If possible I would like to locate the place where Dad was born. Any help from Joe and Jennie with this would be appreciated.

*SIDE NOTE: Our most famous distant relative is from Indiana: William Henry Harrison, the 9th President of the U.S. He is famous for a couple of reasons. One is that he was a famous indian killer. Not too proud of that! He was a general that was a leader of ridding the Northwest Territory of Native Americans. (You know, the people that actually owned the territory). The Native Americans were not happy about their land being taken from them so there was a big uprising led by the chief Tecumseh. Harrison defeated Tecumseh at a place called Tippecanoe, which made him famous. I have read a lot about that battle and Tecumseh almost defeated Harrison’s troups. Harrison was known for sitting up on a hill overlooking the battle and not really fighting, but he was a great politician and used the victory as a slogan when running for President. You might remember: Tippecanoe and Tyler Too. Tyler was his vice president running mate.*

*He also tried to get slavery approved into the territory even though it was outlawed. Nice guy huh?*

*The second thing he is really famous for is giving one of the longest inaugural speeches in history out in the freezing weather. He caught pneumonia and died about 30 days later. The shortest stint as a president in history.*

*Here is how we are related. He was Dad’s grandmother’s cousin. No idea how distant that makes us, but from what I know about him it can’t be distant enough.*

Dad’s father was Frank Fisher and his mother was Ivie Wade. That’s how I got my middle name. He had four brothers: Raymond, Alvin (Toots), Noble (Nobe) and George. I believe he had a sister that died as a child. (Joe and Jennie help me out here). Frank Fisher died when Dad was 16 and brother George was just a baby. All the other brothers got married and went out on their own. (More about why Uncle Nobe left at a young age later – something I just learned a few years ago). Dad was left to take care of his mother and his little brother. When Dad died at age 69 Uncle George told me that he had just lost his brother and his Dad.

Dad worked at several jobs to help support his mother and brother: Truck driver, house mover, field laborer, and cotton gin employee. He was fiercely devoted to his mother and Uncle George. Before he met Mom, he was engaged to another woman. Apparently she didn’t want Ivie and George living with them when they got married. So, as Dad relayed this story, one night they were on a double date in town and he told the guy driving to stop the car. He told the woman he couldn’t marry her as he was going to take care of his mom and little brother. So he got of the car and walked home and never looked back. He was a decisive guy! When Mom and Dad got married his mother and George lived with them.

Because he had to work all the time, he rarely went to school so by the time he was 16 he was still in the third grade. It was a one room school house and he just became embarrassed to go. So he quit, but became adamant that his kids would get a good education. His statement to us was “Make a living with your head, not your back.” It took me 10 years to complete my bachelor’s degree and there were times I wanted to give up, especially after Nany died. But his desire for us to get an education always brought me back and drove me to finish.

This part might make you cry, because I tear up every time I re-tell this story that Dad told me. He said he loved school and didn’t want to quit but just had no choice if he was going to take care of his mom and brother. One day he was plowing in a field with a mule pulling the plow. The field was next door to the school. When the kids came out for recess right next to the field that were laughing and playing. Dad said he stopped and just cried for a long time because he so badly wanted to be with them. Some might say that loyalty to family was just the way it was back then, but not necessarily true. His brothers all left and went out to pursue their own lives and left him with the responsibility. I loved all my uncles but with the exception of Uncle George, never had the same kind of respect for them that I did for Dad. Not that they were bad guys. They weren’t. It’s just that Dad’s sacrifice and loyalty to his mom and little brother was extraordinary.

For those that think unions are not necessary, I offer this story. Dad was working at the cotton gin and making 19 cents an hour. You read that right - 19 cents an hour! The only money he kept for himself was to buy tobacco and rolling paper. The rest he gave to him mother. He and another man were at the end of the process in the cotton gin where they tied steel bands around the bales. It took a lot of strength to do this but Dad figured a way to make a little more money. So he went to his boss and said if they would give him a raise to 25 cents an hour, he could do both jobs. It would save the gin having to pay two men. His boss asked “You mean you could do both jobs by yourself?” When Dad said he could, they fired the other guy, had Dad do both jobs but didn’t give him a raise. He needed the job badly so there was nothing he could do about it.

So, how did Mom and Dad meet? She tells the story of her and some girlfriends sitting somewhere and Dad and some other young men came walking by. I guess Mom knew who he was but I think maybe he didn’t know her. Dad was a really handsome guy (So Paula you know where I got my good looks from) Actually, I think George looks more like Dad than any of us. Still has all that hair. So she said to her friends, “I am going to marry that John Fisher.” And she did. He was 30 and she was 20. If you haven’t seen the picture that Kimeron made copies of when they were that age you need to see it. What a beautiful couple they made.

To be totally honest, I think Dad probably was quite the man about town before he met Mom. I know he drank some and he had a tattoo on his forearm. He had it tattooed over so you couldn’t really see what it was, but I think it was a woman. I remember one time we found a can of beer somewhere when we lived on the farm. No idea where it came from, but Dad opened that beer and slugged it down all at once. Either he or Mom made the comment that he used to do that a lot more. But that was the only time I ever saw him drink alcohol.

He remained very close to his Mom until she died and to Uncle George his entire life. I will discuss his reaction to Uncle George missing in action (twice) later when I go into more detail about him and his heroics.

**Opal Lee Crowell** was born in New Madrid, Missouri in 1916. Her father was a photographer and a woman chaser. Her parents got divorced but I’m not sure how old Mom was when that happened. I have a few memories of my grandfather as he lived in one of our houses for awhile and I remember when he died, but not much else. But I do remember grandma. We called her Grandma Adams as she had married Homer Adams. We called him Mr. Adams and I think that’s even what she called him. She was a grouchy old woman (we thought she was old of course) but had a big heart. Mom told a story of her hitchhiking from Arkansas to Missouri and I think it was probably after the divorce. So she was tough. She died in 1964 and we all went to Missouri for her funeral – the last trip our family took together. Dad died in 1965.

I talked earlier about parenting style and how Mom wasn’t quite a strict as Dad, but we had some respect for her that I don’t think any of us took advantage of her (not TOO much at least) She was so loving and gentle but also strong. Earlier I discussed how she was actually a Democrat all those years and none of us knew it because she didn’t want us to see any disagreements between them. She loved Dad as much as a woman can love a man I believe, and she let Dad handle most of the discipline, but there was a line that even he couldn’t cross. The only argument I can ever remember between my parents, was because of something that happened at the supper table one night.

Mom was always encouraging Dad to think bigger when it came to farming. She knew he was one of the most skilled farmers in the area and was able to make a good profit from the land he farmed. But as mentioned earlier, farmers were restricted with how much cotton they could grow on 80 acres. So she encouraged him to think bigger: Either lease some land and farm it or sell our farm and buy a bigger one. He was apparently close to buying a bigger farm so we would be moving. I remember thinking it would be cool to move. But Dad was very cautious and the idea of making such a big move was stressful for him and he was pretty emotional. So one night we were eating dinner and George was fooling around at the table and Dad reached over and slapped George in the face. He had never hit any of us in the face and had never even used his hand. Always a belt or switch. Well, Mom was really angry with him and I remember him sleeping on the couch for awhile and they hardly spoke. Again, the only time I can remember them fighting or arguing.

Mom had three brothers, W.A., N.P. and Lloyd. She had also had three sisters, Viola, Francis and Jean. Francis and Jean are still living and Aunt Viola died a few years ago at age 95 I believe. More on my uncles, especially N.P. later.

She was 20 and Dad was 30 when they got married and I wrote earlier how she set out to nab him. Viola married George Fisher, but not Dad’s brother. A different Fisher clan altogether. Very different men. Francis married Ancel Spencer and Jean married Junior Adams.

MOM’S SIBLINGS:

Aunt Viola was the oldest daughter and I believe maybe the oldest child of Grandma. She married George Fisher and they had a lot of kids. I believe a total of about 16. She was a hard working, very devout Southern Baptist woman. Uncle George was a lazy freeloader that couldn’t, or wouldn’t hold down a steady job. They were always poor but moved to Michigan in the early 50’s and he got a job working in the auto factory. For a change they had it pretty good because auto workers made pretty good money. Apparently Aunt Viola was happy in Flint. Then one day Uncle George came home and told her he had quit his job and they were moving back to Missouri. I remembered the day they returned with all their belongings. It was a scene right out of the Beverly Hillbillies. Uncle George was always complaining about some health issue and too sick to work. Dad couldn’t stand him as he could not tolerate laziness. Uncle George traded goats and things to make a living and the kids all worked in the fields for other people. They picked cotton for us actually.

When I got older Mom and Dad shared with me some interesting stories about Aunt Francis and Uncle Ancel. They lived in Haiti (pronounced Hay Tie), a few miles from us. One day they abruptly moved to Southern California. Later I was to find out it was because Ancel was fooling around with the wife of another man and left town to avoid being shot. They were a good looking couple and were pretty wild I guess. Drinking and dancing and other non Southern Baptist activities. Later Francis became a born again Christian and spent year trying to save everyone’s soul. We visited them in 1955 when we took the family cross country trip and it was cool. They lived in a nice new house in Compton. At that time Compton was a nice middle class city. Now it’s known as a gang related awful place to live. They had 3 kids I think but the one I knew best was John A. I guess he was a junior but everyone called him John A. We were the same age and pretty close as kids till they moved. We also visited them in 1967 when Mom, Jennie, Jana, Dave and Laura and I made a cross country trip. Aunt Francis still calls me on my birthday as it was the same day they got married. Sweet lady.

Aunt Jean married Junior Adams, the son of Grandma’s husband – her step brother! Boy my family was scandalous huh? Junior joined the Navy at a young age and spent his entire career there. They lived in Pensacola Florida and we visited them during our trip in 55. Mike Adams, our cousin, came to Flint and lived with Mom and me for awhile after Nancy died. He was drafted and was in the infantry in Viet Nam. He and I wrote during that time and I wish I have saved those letters. He was sure he was going to get killed but made it back, but was really changed. I think he was pretty screwed up for awhile but found Jesus and that became his primary focus in life. He is retired and living in Arizona.

I never knew Uncle W.A. (I can’t remember his real name so Joe and Jennie help me here). He was killed in WW2, in the Pacific Theater. I think Guadalcanal or Iwo Jima. He was 18 years old.

Uncle N.P. I did know well. His name was Nelson Pullum Crowell. We visited him and his family in 1955 on our cross country trip and then again when Mom, Dave, Laura, Jennie and Jana and I took a trip out west. He was a really cool guy. Very hip, very funny and very smart. He worked in some sort of security job at the Air Force base in Ogden, Utah. On one of our trips I asked what level of education was needed for that job and he said most of the people in his department were lawyers or at least had college degrees. I don’t think Uncle N.P. even finished high school so I asked him how he got the job. He said “I guess they sort of assumed I had a college degree because I told them I did.” He bluffed his way into the job and was so smart they never knew he didn’t have much formal education.

Before I describe how he was a hero on the war, I will share some things about him. Most of these are stories that Mom or Dad told me. Dad loved Uncle N.P. and the feeling was mutual. When he was a teenager during the depression the Roosevelt administration started the Works Progress Administration, known as the WPA. While Roosevelt was a liberal Democrat, he didn’t like just giving money out to able bodied people if they could work, so he signed an executive order putting over 3 million people to work. They did things like build bridges, hospitals, schools, etc. They even had writers and actors put on government sponsored plays! The Golden Gate and Bay Bridges were built during this time as well as the Tower Bridge in Sacramento. They also had the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and it’s possible Uncle N.P. worked in that organization. The CCC built over 800 parks and planted billions of trees. So her worked in one of those. They both had the same goal of putting men to work and helping build the infrastructure of our country.

So, anyway, he was sent to Utah to work for one of these organizations and ended up living there for the rest of his life. He told stories of the discrimination he experienced trying to find work later because most of the companies would only hire Mormons. He said the companies would have signs on their doors that read “Non LDS need not apply.” The official name of the Mormon church is Latter Day Saints.

He met Mary and fell in love and got married. She was Mormon but he hated the church for a long time and wouldn’t go to church with her. But later in his life he became a Mormon and I believe it was just to have peace in his family.

He went into the army (not sure if he was drafted or enlisted) and was an infantryman serving in the European Theater. The story I remember best is this one. One day his squad crossed a bridge and the Germans blew up the bridge behind them and started shooting at them. It was a trap obviously. So the Americans had to jump in the river and swim back across or be killed. One of Uncle N.P.s buddies got wounded and couldn’t swim, so he took him on his back and swam back across the river and saved his life. All in his full clothing and gear. And he was a little guy, about 5’ 6” I think. Amazing what that generation did isn’t it.

Dad called him a banty rooster. A banty rooster is a little rooster but very cocky. That was Uncle N.P. But I don’t think I would call him cocky, he just had to develop a strong self esteem to survive back then. I guess he was quite a fighter when he was younger and had somewhat of a temper. Dad told the story of one day Uncle N.P. was sitting at a traffic light and as soon as it turned green the guy behind him started blowing his horn. He got out of the car, walked back to the guy and motioned for the guy to roll down his window. When the guy did, Uncle N.P. punched him in the face, walked back to his car and drove away. I probably heard Dad tell that story 20 times over the years because he thought it was a perfect description of what he was made of.

Then there was Uncle Lloyd. I don’t know how to fairly describe him here and don’t want to label him here. But he had a tough time talking to people and used to sit and talk to himself. I guess as kids we thought he was retarded but that’s probably not really the case. Being cruel as kids can be at times, if one of us did something dumb, one of us would say “OK Uncle Lloyd.” I remember him reading the bible a lot and he was a really hard worker and Dad hired him a lot to chop cotton and pick cotton. I remember he wore leather knee pads and picked cotton on his knees. Of course we all made fun of that but looking back it was probably a smart way to do it. Bending over all day was probably not as smart as using knee pads. He lived with Grandma until she died and then he went to live in a home. I remember visiting him when we made a trip back to Missouri with Mom and it was sad. The place was kind of a dump and he lived in a tiny room by himself. He wore coke bottle thick glasses and, as I said, read the bible a lot. But he never bothered anyone and was a good man I think.

DAD’S SIBLINGS:

Uncle Raymond, as I mentioned, was a contractor and we thought was rich because they had a TV and air conditioning. During the winter months Dad worked for him as a carpenter and was a good one. Maybe some of this is a young boy’s admiration for his Dad, but I think he could do almost anything: A great farmer, carpenter, and father. Uncle Raymond was a real Type A person and died in his 50s. His wife, Aunt Grace, grieved her entire life and never dated or married again. Our Mom didn’t date or get married either but it was very different. When I asked her many years later why she didn’t date or get married she told me she was very content with the years she had with Dad. She said to me: “There is only one John Fisher. Except for you Johnny.” I think that is so cool that their life together was so fulfilling for her that she had no need to do it again. Plus, of course, Nancy died a year later and she had to help me raise Dave and Laura. I shouldn’t say “had to”. She loved being there for the kids and me.

Uncle Nobe was a fascinating guy. He moved to Texas when he was 18 and it wasn’t until just a few years ago, I found out why. I was on Ancestery.com and a woman in Missouri contacted me and told me she thought her husband might be my cousin. Sure enough, it was Uncle Nobe’s son. They had done the research through Ancestery.com and found out his Dad was Noble Fisher and then she found me. We ended up emailing and talking on the phone eventually and she finally put him on the phone. She called him “Fisher” and said he had been told all his life that his father had died and his mother wouldn’t tell him anything about him. So apparently Uncle Nobe got this girl pregnant and took off for Texas. He was always somewhat of a hero to me and now I’m not so sure how I feel. Maybe it was mutual and she didn’t want him around, but I suspect he just took off. I don’t know if Dad knew about what happened and I tend to think he didn’t as he probably wouldn’t have approved. But, even though he moved to Texas I was pretty close to him and we would write letters back and forth. He had a daughter, Shirley and no boys so I think he enjoyed the relationship. See, Dad told me Uncle Nobe was a great baseball player and was good enough to play in the majors but never got the chance. Now I wonder if that’s because he took off to hide out in Texas? Anyway, since I wanted to be a baseball player when I grew up, Uncle Nobe was a natural hero for me. Plus, get this: He was a cowboy! OK, at least he wore cowboy boots and a cowboy hat when they would visit us and he had horses and cows. When we visited them in 1955 he really did have a small ranch with a few cows and had horses. We went to this horse show while we were there where Uncle Nobe and Aunt Phylis rode their horses in some sort of contest. During the intermission we got to ride the horses around the ring. One of the highlights of that trip for me. I am going to cling to the belief that Uncle Nobe and that girl reached an agreement of some sort and that he didn’t just leave her. That will help me keep this almost mystical vision of him that I had as a kid.

Uncle Toots (Alvin) lived in Flint from before I was born. As did all the other brothers, he got married at a young age and left home. I assume he moved to Flint right away. He worked for General Motors and retired and moved to Arizona later. He was married to Aunt Margie and they had one child, cousin Frank.

He was a huge sports fan and followed my athletic career very closely, especially basketball. Frank had been a very good athlete at Mandeville, my high school, and graduated in 1956, four years before me. Frank went to Western Michigan and became a teacher and a coach. He married Sherrie, a nurse and they had two kids, Lance and Dana, that were almost exactly the same age as Dave and Laura. They got tired of the cold weather and moved to Phoenix. Uncle Toots and Aunt Margie moved there when he retired. Frank died in 1998 and I lost contact with Sherrie and the kids. As I write this I have decided to try to find her and see how she and the kids are doing.

During much of high school, Dad was either laid off from GM or was on sick leave so we didn’t have much money. GM paid everyone on Friday and Uncle Toots would stop by after work and give me one dollar. Now, that doesn’t sound like much, but gas was about 20 cents a gallon and hamburgers were 15 cents, so it helped. When he got sick in 1974, Frank called and said Uncle Toots really wanted to see me before he died, so I flew to Phoenix but he had died before I got there. Nice man.

Now, Uncle George, the war hero. I have written earlier that he was just a baby when their dad died and Dad was 16 I think. He was one of the smartest, accomplished men I have ever met. And just cool. Really cool.

My earliest memories of him are from when he would visit us in Missouri when he was living in Michigan. I believe he lived in Pontiac, not Flint. He had a new car and a beautiful young wife. I don’t remember her name right now so need my siblings help again. He was really handsome and they were a beautiful couple. I don’t remember a lot about her but don’t remember her as being particularly nice. My impression was that Dad and Mom didn’t like her that much as I think she treated Uncle George badly. They ended up getting a divorce and he married Doris who was not very attractive but he loved her. For those that have read “A Painted House”, there is an uncle just like this that visited them in the book. By the way, I highly recommend that book for anyone but especially if you want to get an idea of our lives on an 80 acre cotton farm in that era.

He later moved back to Missouri and opened a business where he did heating, plumbing, electrical work, etc. He was multi talented and could do almost any type of skilled labor. We briefly had a 4H Club and he taught an electricity class and I took it. We learned a lot of useful things and, believe it or not, some of those things I still know how to do today. For example, he taught us how to take the rubber or plastic covering off the end of electrical wires and then splice them. Several years ago, Paula and I were visiting her mom and George in Riverside and I fixed some outdoor lighting for him by splicing some wires. I learned that in Uncle George’s class. We also made lamps out of tree branches. Now, I haven’t used that skill since then but you never know when the opportunity might arise!

Uncle George loved to drive fast and always had a fast car. As I wrote earlier, I was driving at a very young age and remember driving a 53 Ford station wagon he had that had a V-8 and was very fast. Chevrolet didn’t come out with a V-8 until 1955 so I had never driven one before. While I am not 100% sure of this, I think he might have driven in some stock car races at one point. Either way, he always drove fast and it’s possible that’s what killed him. He died in a horrible car accident in 1973 or 74. They said he ran a red light at a high rate of speed and hit another car. Aunt Doris thought he might have had a heart attack but they never knew.

He later moved his family back to Pontiac Michigan so we got to see a lot of them over the years. It was during this period where I got to talk to him and learn about his military experiences. The week that I really peppered him with questions and learned a lot of the details about the war, was when Dad died. He and Doris stayed with Nancy and me so I had a lot of one on one time with him. When Paula, Jennie, Joe and I were in New Orleans this year, they both mentioned they didn’t know the details that I knew. Now I remember it was that week where I learned so much from him.

So, here are some of the memories of my Uncle George, the war hero. He went into the Army at a young age. I’m guessing 18. World War 2 was raging so they were sending soldiers into battle very quickly without a lot of training. He was in the Army Air Corps and was a tail gunner on a bomber B-17. Here is a picture of where he sat:



As I mentioned, the army was rushing young men into combat without a lot of training, including never having a practice parachute jump for men flying bombers. I don’t know exactly which mission, but their plane was shot down. Dad got a telegram that he was missing in action, but the crew parachuted behind German lines but were able to make it back without getting captured. Can you imagine jumping out of a burning plane with all the shrapnel flying around you, without ever once even practicing? But, of course, what choice did they have.

Then on his 47th mission (They were supposed to be rotated home after 25 missions so I don’t know if that happened and he was on his second rotation), they were shot down again behind German lines. Only this time they were captured by the Germans and he spent the rest of the war in a German prison camp. I remember Dad saying he thought this time that he was surely killed. Our brother George was born during this period and was named after Uncle George.

I will talk about what I remember about his stories of the prison camp in a bit, but first some other memories about the missions. The first one was about his position as a tail gunner. Those planes had several positions for gunners. There was one on the bottom of the plane, one on top and one in the front. And, of course, the tail gunner, which was Uncle George’s position. He told me on one of the missions he and one of the other guys decided to switch positions that day just for the fun of it. They were attacked by German fighters and his buddy in the tail gunner’s seat was killed. I guess you would have to say that was fate huh?

On another mission Uncle George got to actually drop some bombs and for a few days he thought he might become world famous. Before a bomber returned to base, they were required to drop all of their bombs because of the danger of crashing with bombs on board. So if they had completed their mission but still had bombs on board, they would pick a place to drop the extra bombs on while returning to base and the bombardier would let the other guys push the button (or whatever they did). So on this trip it was Uncle George’s turn. The bombardier picked a target that he knew was enemy territory and they dropped the bombs there. It was always a requirement to document exactly where they had dropped them and when they got back to the base and checked the location, they found it was one of the places that was believed to be one of Hitler’s hiding places and there was speculation he might have been killed with those bombs. Hitler was not heard of for a few days and there was hope that our uncle had killed him. They actually kept the crew grounded for a few days as they thought they would end up being targeted by the Germans if it was learned they actually did it. But, of course, Hitler showed up so Uncle George’s brush with fame was short lived.

So, German prison camp. Contrary to what happened to a lot of prisoners of war, especially prisoners of Japan, Uncle George said it wasn’t that bad. He said also they could tell we were winning the war because the guards became nicer and nicer to them as they hoped the prisoners would put in a good word for them once the war was over. Uncle George also didn’t lose a lot of weight like many prisoners because of candy. See, the Red Cross was allowed to ship cigarettes and candy to the prisoners. Since he didn’t smoke, Uncle George traded his cigarettes for candy, therefore getting more calories. That also tells you how addictive smoking is doesn’t it? To give up food for cigarettes is pretty crazy but it worked for our uncle.

The prison camp was liberated by General George Patton, so Uncle George was obviously a big fan. I don’t remember any details about the liberation so I don’t think it was probably that dramatic. The Germans knew they had lost the war and most of them weren’t Nazis anyway and were forced into the military. By the end of the war, Germany was drafting kids as young as 13 so I imagine many of them were happy to see the Allies win.

Another interesting thing he told me was what he was told about torture. He said the German guards told him they were advised that if they were going to be captured, to try to be captured by the Americans. The reason? Americans didn’t torture prisoners like the Russians and Japanese did. So, they would often tend to surrender quicker as they knew they would be treated fairly. That also led to better treatment of our own soldiers that were captured just from a sense of fair play – man to man. When you hear politicians like Cheney and Trump advocate torture, it’s important to remember the impact it has on our own soldiers as well as just being immoral and illegal.

INSERT FROM JENNIE:

Rather than try to fit this back in right now, I am going to insert some information that Jennie sent me after she read some of the earlier writing. I had mentioned the time that Dad hit George (my brother) and he and Mom had their only fight. So I was either wrong about it being their only fight, or both things happened at the same meal, but here goes. Our house was only two bedrooms so all 4 of us slept in the same bedroom. When Jennie was 9 Mom was really pressing Dad to build on to the house so she could have her own bedroom. They were discussing it at the dinner table and Dad said he didn’t have the money to add on the room and didn’t want to borrow it. Mom started crying and said “I guess Jennie will have to sleep in the same room with the boys until she is grown.” That night at bedtime, Dad went to Jennie and said “Jennie, you are to sleep with your mother tonight.” The next day he went to the bank to borrow the money and built on the room for Jennie and an INDOOR BATHROOM. Jennie said she loved that room and was SO proud of it. Me, I loved that bathroom!

Here are some other things Jennie sent me:

1. Dad had a 6th grade education and Mom went through 11th grade. I remember him talking about being embarrassed because he was so old and bigger than the other kids because he just couldn’t go to school many days as he had to work.
2. The school in Hayward went to 10th grade and then you had to go to Wardell for the last two years, which Joe did. I think it was about 15 miles away wasn’t it Joe?
3. Uncle George was a POW when George was born in 1945. Jennie said Dad walked the floor and cried and cried. I don’t remember that as I was only 3 but Jennie said she will never forget it. The only thing that I think was different than what Jennie remembers, is that when Dad was crying it was because he had been notified Uncle George was missing in action for the second time. Dad thought this time he was killed for sure. I tend to remember Dad talking about being relieved when he found out he was a POW.
4. Saturdays in town. I wrote earlier about George and me going to the double feature and getting popcorn, candy and a soda for 25 cents. Jennie said when she was younger Grandma would take her to town and take her to a particular restaurant for a hamburger and chocolate milk. Jennie doesn’t remember the name but Joe don’t you think it was probably the City Pig? I remember they had great hamburgers with slaw on them. When Jennie got older she said she and Betty Gordon went into town together and went to the dime store, drug store and clothing store and had a ball. That dime store was just the best!
5. Jennie remembers uncle W.A.s funeral with the 21 gun salute. She said she remembers them handing the flag to his wife. I didn’t know he was married as I thought he was so young when he went into the army.
6. The food cave I mentioned earlier: Jennie said Mom kept dozens of jars of canned goods in there. She remembers hours of breaking green beans on the back porch. She doesn’t remember Dad keeping a lot of meat in there. Joe, do you remember?

More on our grandma and grandpa from Jennie:

Our grandpa (Mom’s Dad), Nelson P. Crowell, lived on our farm at the time of his death. I have some memories but not as many as Jennie or Joe I’m sure. I do remember he was bald (So that’s how I got this way!). He divorced our grandma and remarried but I don’t remember ever meeting the second wife. Apparently, Grandma was very jealous and accused him of cheating on her all the time, so his story was that if he was going to get accused of something he might as well do it. I know, pretty lame rationalization huh? He was a photographer and had a studio in Portageville and Jennie and her friend Betty Gordon used to go visit him there. He had a picture of his other family there and Jennie was always asking him about it. He dressed very nicely all the time, and I do remember that part.

We all loved our grandma but boy she could really be gruff. I remember there were times when people would be having a conversation and if it was something she didn’t agree with she would just grunt something like Humpf! And Uncle Lloyd would be involved in a conversation with himself at the same time. Her husband, was Mr. Adams. Yes, that’s what we called him and I think that’s what Grandma called him as well. All I remember about him was that he had no teeth, chewed tobacco all the time and appeared to be about 120 years old to me. Grandma had a big heart and loved her family. She just had a hard time expressing it I think. It’s amazing how different she and Mom were. Mom was so gentle and accommodating and non-judgmental, and her mother was just the opposite.

Apparently, Dad and Grandma didn’t get along that well. I didn’t know that until I was older and Dave and Laura and I were living with her. During those years she shared a lot with me that I didn’t know before. Anyway, she told me that her mom and husband didn’t get along that well, but that when we were leaving to move to Flint, Grandma did something that melted Dad’s heart. He loved chicken gizzards. The church held a going away “social” for us and Grandma made a big batch of gizzards just for Dad. Mom said that meant a lot to him as it was sort of a peace offering.

After we moved to Flint, we would occasionally go back to Missouri to visit and would stay at Grandma’s little house in Old Hayward. By the way, she had a big feather bed we would sleep in so listen to John Denver’s song about Grandma’s feather bed if you get the chance. Well, we would go visit and, being on vacation, would want to sleep in, but Grandma would wake us up at dawn and have a huge breakfast on the table – eggs, home made biscuits, bacon, sausage, pork chops, gravy, potatoes. (This is making me hungry). So we would get up, eat the big breakfast, and go back to bed. She would get so irritated with her lazy grandchildren.

A really crazy coincidence occurred after Grandma died. Aunt Viola and Uncle George and a couple dozen of their kids moved into her house. Well, our other Uncle George (The really cool one) lived about 100 yards down the road from them. So there were two George Fisher’s living in that little neighborhood, not even related, but both related to us. Weird huh?

LEAVING MISSOURI:

I have mentioned “A Painted House” before and highly recommend everyone read this book if you have not already. Laura read it first and recommended I get it. It’s amazing how similar the situation in that book was to my life as a kid. The setting in the book is an 80 acre cotton farm in the same part of the country. It is set in Arkansas but not that far from our farm as we were very close to the Arkansas border. It is a novel loosely based on John Grisham’s childhood. The kid in the book reminds me of myself at that age a lot as does the family. And, at the end of the book they move to Flint, Michigan.

So, here is a description of how that all transpired.

Earlier I wrote about how Mom wanted Dad to either buy a bigger farm or lease some land as she knew he was a great farmer but understood it was always going to be a struggle to ever get ahead on 80 acres, especially since the government limited the amount of cotton that could be planted. And it was true they struggled to get ahead although Dad was one of the best farmers of that time. But the big farmers were taking over where they had the critical mass of land to produce a lot with the efficiency of scale. Then by the early 50’s, machinery was starting to take over more and more, which made it even more difficult for the small farmer as things like the mechanical cotton pickers were just too expensive to buy for just 20 acres.

Again, much of this I learned from Mom when the kids and I were living with her after Dad and Nancy died, but she shared with me her frustration with Dad’s stubbornness to expand. For those of you that knew Mom, you might find it hard to believe she was the aggressive one behind the scenes, but she was. Because of his lack of education, Dad didn’t have confidence in his business acumen. He was confident, and proud, of his ability to get the most out of the land, and to plant that perfectly straight row. But he could barely read and write and was scared that he might lose everything if he got too aggressive. But Mom told me she really believed in him and pushed him to do more as she saw the end of the 80 acre farmer coming rapidly. Also, by the early 50’s the auto industry was providing good paying jobs and thousands of people were leaving farms and moving to Michigan for a better life. Financially at least. I learned from her later that she was somewhat envious of people like Uncle Toots and Aunt Margie when they would come to visit as they had a nice car and house and no debt and no stress of possibly losing their farm. So, for years she was encouraging Dad to sell the farm and move the family to Flint or somewhere he could get a job and we could all get a good education.

Now, with this situation as a backdrop, let’s talk about Mom’s health. She had asthma her whole life and was sick a lot but it was getting worse every year. She was in and out of the hospital and I remember her being in an oxygen tent that last year in 1955. So, one night at the hospital the doctor told Dad that if we stayed on that farm Mom wouldn’t live another year. He didn’t hesitate then.

Talmadge Burgess, the rich owner of the grocery store and owner of thousands of acres of land, had been after Dad for years to sell him our farm. Of course, Dad had no intention of doing it until that night in the hospital. Talmadge wanted the farm for several reasons. One, it was prime farm land and in great shape. Another factor was the water. Apparently good water was not common and our well had great water. The third factor was the location of our house. Talmadge loved where it was situated with the big tree, etc. and wanted to build a home there if he bought the house. (He did just that and built a big, beautiful brick home and moved our house down the road a bit).

So, the next morning after the conversation with the doctor, Dad stood out front by the road as he knew Talmadge drove by our place every morning on the way to the store. Dad waved him down and told him he was ready to sell the farm. They shook hands on it and Talmadge paid him $32,000 cash for the farm, buildings, house, equipment (I guess our two dogs as well). That was $400 an acre. Can you imagine $32,000 for all that? I paid $406,000 for my little house that is about the size of the chicken coup on that farm.

Now, this was the fall of 1955 and Joe had already graduated from high school and left for Flint to work at General Motors and go to college. So Mom and Dad had decided to move somewhere Mom could survive and Arizona was one of the places they were considering. But they also knew it had to be a place where there was work for Dad so Flint was a consideration.

With the $32,000 in the bank, Dad started shopping for a new car. He had never had a new one before so this was pretty cool. I remember him bringing home several new cars to test drive, but he finally settled on a 56 Ford two door hardtop with a V-8! Black and white as most of the cars were two colors during that period. One of the popular colors for Fords in 1955 was pink and black, believe it or not. But, for some reason Dad decided on the Ford. Looking back, I don’t know why he didn’t get a four door with more room since we had six people in the family, but I didn’t care because that was an awesome car.

So the five of us headed for Flint in the new Ford to pick up Joe and take a cross country trip to see the country and visit relatives. We got to Flint and visited with relatives (Mom had a bunch of relatives there as well), but the day before we were going to leave on the trip, Mom and Dad started reconsidering the trip and thought the practical thing to do would be to just settle in Flint, have Dad get a job and all just stay there. I remember being heartbroken that this fabulous trip might not happen after all. When we went to bed that night, Mom and Dad were still deciding. When we got up the next morning they announced we would take the trip after all. Dad said later he knew it was literally a once in a lifetime opportunity for the family to do something like this, and he was right.

Now all 6 of us crammed into that 2 door Ford and took off Westward. I think in the beginning the idea was to also find a place that would be good for Mom’s health, but by then I believe they had pretty much decided Flint was going to be where we landed. Going through Arizona, Mom had an asthma attack so that pretty much ruled out moving there. Plus, in 1955 Phoenix had no industry and only had maybe 100,000 residents. No opportunity. After we moved to Flint, Mom got excellent treatment and basically was cured of her asthma. The doctors ran allergy tests and guess what one of the things she was allergic to? Dust! I’m guessing we had a lot of that on the farm!

To this day I am so happy they decided to take that trip because I still have so many great memories. I asked Dad years later if he regretted spending the money for the trip and he said he absolutely was happy we made the trip. So we headed West, staying in motels and eating in restaurants. I don’t know if I had ever stayed in a hotel or motel before then, but it was so cool. As we got further West and it was warmer, George and I always bugged Dad to stay at a place with a pool, which he tried to do when possible. One hotel had a vibrating bed that cost a quarter and that was amazing as well.

Uncle N.P. lived in Ogden, Utah so that was the first relative we visited. We visited a bunch of national parks such as Bryce and Zion, which are located in Utah and visited the Great Salt Lake. It was the first time I had ever seen mountains. Wow. Aunt Mary was Mormon, as I have mentioned before, and we went to church with them and I went to Mormon Sunday School. Remember I had been going to a Southern Baptist church my whole life and thought that anyone not a Baptist was weird, so I expected it to be like a cult meeting. But, it was just like the Sunday School classes I had always attended. We talked about Jesus and how everyone but Christians was going to hell. You know, all that positive stuff taught in Sunday School.

From Utah we went on to Southern California to visit Aunt Francis and her family. They lived in a big new house in a city called Compton. At that time it was a nice, clean city with new homes. Now, it’s a crime ridden, gang infested sewer of a city. Really a shame. We did a lot of the tourist stuff such as Hollywood, but the big event was Knott’s Berry Farm, which had already been around for years. They gave us a choice of going there or this new place called Disneyland, that had just opened a few weeks before. The choice was Knott’s Berry Farm and to this day I wish it had been Disneyland so we could have said we were there the first year it opened.

From California we headed to Texas to visit Uncle Nobe and family. We went through New Mexico and saw Carlsbad Caverns, which was cool. Earlier, I wrote about Uncle Nobe the cowboy and getting to ride the horses at the horse show. That’s the main thing I remember about that visit.

I don’t remember the rest of the trip that much so would like to have Jennie and Joe add some memories here. I think we went through Florida to visit Aunt Jean and Uncle Junior. We did visit them that year but I’m not sure it was that trip. Also, not sure if we stopped in Missouri on the way back to Michigan but think we did.

So, we got back to Flint after an amazing trip back and forth across the country. I am so thankful our parents went through with that trip as there are so many memories. But, they decided Flint was where we were going to make our new life and the next part of this will be about Flint.

Joe got his job back at General Motors and enrolled at Flint Junior College. Jennie enrolled at Mandeville high school, I started 8th grade at Carmen and George went to grade school at Fenton Lawn. I don’t know exactly where everyone stayed but George and I stayed for awhile at one of Mom’s relatives, Uncle Roy. Then for awhile Mom, Dad, George and I stayed at a motel type place until we bought our house.

Remember I wrote that we sold the farm for $32,000? Dad had paid cash for the car and spent a lot on the cross country trip, and Dad didn’t have a job. So they wanted to buy a house that wouldn’t take too much of their cash. We had 2 teenagers, one becoming a teenager (me), and a grade schooler so we really needed 3 or 4 bedrooms, but they were too expensive. They also had already enrolled us in school and wanted to keep us in that district. Uncle Toots lived in a neighborhood right next to Mandeville called “Little Missouri” because so many people from Missouri and the south lived there. So they paid $8,400 for a 2 bedroom house at 1071 West Whittemore, a few blocks from Uncle Toots and one block from the high school. Here is how they stuffed 6 people into that little house: They bought bunk beds and put George and me in the basement. Jennie of course got her own bedroom, and they bought a fold out couch for the living room. I think while Joe was still at home Mom and Dad took turns with him sleeping in the other bedroom and on the couch. Joe went away to Michigan State later so that gave Mom and Dad the bedroom on their own.

Now, when I say George and I slept in the basement on bunkbeds you might be picturing a nice finished basement with carpet, sort of a rec room? Not hardly. It was a basement basement. It had a big coal burning furnace that had been converted to either gas or oil, and it was loud and bright. Every time it would come on at night it would wake me up. But I never thought about it one way or the other. I loved that house and had no idea I would be moving back there 11 years later with my own kids.

As I wrote earlier, Dad didn’t have a job when we moved to Flint but assumed he could get one at one of the GM plants. However, every time he went for his physical at the plant, his blood pressure was too high and they wouldn’t hire him. When he would go to the doctor his blood pressure was normal so there wasn’t much the doctor could do. Apparently, the pressure of getting a job caused his blood pressure to go up during the physical. Somehow, he finally got hired as a janitor at the V-8 plant. Here was a man with tremendous pride as a self made farmer, having to clean up after other people. But he never complained about is as far as I know. In fact, he would tell us about the compliments he got about the great job he was doing.

While he was grateful to have a job, the income became inconsistent due to layoffs and his becoming ill. At that time, General Motors used to shut down for what they called “Changeover”. They used to make dramatic changes in designs in the cars every year or so and therefore had to make major changes in the machinery in the factories. So they closed down while these changes were made and they didn’t pay people. So that made things tight for us. Then Dad started having health problems. Our family has a history of quack doctors and the family doctor at the time was a D.O. (Osteopathic Doctor) who diagnosed him with bursitis because of the severe pain in his left shoulder. One of the things they tried was a cortisone shot right into the bone in his shoulder. My Dad was one of the toughest men I have ever known but the shot made him cry. Back then they used these huge needles and didn’t do anything to deaden the shot. I have now had a lot of cortisone shots in my shoulders, wrists, etc and they were relatively painful, but not then. Another remedy this doctor had was to give him nitro glycerin tablets.

Finally, out of frustration he went to a real doctor who did an EKG and they found his heart was enlarged to about 50% the normal size and that he had a lot of scar tissue indicating he had either had one major heart attack or several smaller ones. So the pain was from heart attacks, not bursitis at all! On top of that, the worse possible thing they could have done was nitro glycerin for his condition. The real doctor was so alarmed he put Dad right into the hospital and wouldn’t even let him walk out and put him in a wheel chair. He said it was a miracle Dad hadn’t already died. He then died of a massive heart attack on October 3rd, 1965 sitting at home alone on a Sunday morning while we were all at church. There is no doubt in my mind that if he had been going to a real doctor earlier that would have diagnosed his condition he would have lived much longer. One year later, on October 3rd, 1966, Nancy went into the hospital to have tests run and died 4 days later. Quite a year.

So back to our finances. Because of the inconsistent paychecks, things were tough financially during my high school years, especially my junior and senior years. Joe had gotten married by then and Jennie had graduated from high school and gotten a job as a secretary, so they weren’t as impacted by this as George and me. As growing boys, we ate a LOT!. Every morning before school Mom made a big breakfast for us and then 2 or 3 sandwiches each for lunch along with healthful items such as Twinkees, Hostess Snow Balls, or cupcakes. We probably drank a gallon of milk a day, especially during football season. The school also furnished free cheese as part of some federal program, so we would take the sandwiches, dessert items, and grab handfuls of the cheese. If there was any extra money they gave us money for milk and I would drink 4 or 5 cartons. I think the milk was 2 cents. George played football and basketball and I played those sports plus baseball. More on that later. So we burned a lot of calories.

Dad got paid on Fridays and he worked second shift for much of that time, which meant he went to work at 2:30 in the afternoon until 11 P.M. His lunch hour was from 6:30 to 7 PM and on Friday, the three of us would meet him at the gate to get his paycheck and head right to the grocery store. (The symmetry has just now dawned on me as I write this. As a young man Dad handed over his paycheck to his mom every week to take care of her and Uncle George. Here he was now in his 50s doing the same thing for us. His life was dedicated to taking care of his family.) The reason we met him at the gate on Friday to get that check was that there was no food in the house by Friday. We would start running out of food on about Wednesday every week and very often had French fries as our main meal on Thursdays as potatoes were relatively cheap. Like everything else she cooked, Mom made awesome home made French fries. So we went to Hamady Brothers and loaded up on groceries on Friday night and had a feast when we got home. One of those Friday nights stands out in my mind in particular. We had gotten the check, gone to Hamady Brothers and loaded up. I had a date with Donna to go to the drive in that night so I asked Mom if I could get some snacks to take, and of course Mom being Mom she said yes. I don’t remember everything I got but I do remember getting a couple of bananas for some reason. Donna and I get to the drive in, hook up the speaker on the car window, and she announces to me that she is breaking up with me to go with the hood with the low rider car. It was right out of the blue as I had no idea it was going to happen. After the initial shock, I put the speaker back on the stand and took her home. On the way home I threw the bananas out the window I was so frustrated and heart broken. Alejandro and Isabel, this message is for you: I got over it. You will have your heart broken, probably more than once, and you will survive it.

Mom ended up getting a job at Kresge’s in the South Flint Plaza and that helped smooth out the finances somewhat. When Dad was laid off or on sick leave he started to cook and I believe that was something new for him. But he wanted to contribute as much as he could. He was very depressed at times when he was on sick leave and felt he was letting the family down. There were times he would go sit in the basement by himself because he couldn’t face anyone out of guilt. Here was a man that had busted his ass his whole life to support the people he loved and yet felt guilt that he was letting us down. None of us certainly felt that, but I do understand how he could feel that.

To summarize this section, I look back on those years in high school where finances were tight and I had one dollar a week to spend at times, as some of the best years of my life, not with any anger or frustration or regret. Most of my friends were at least slightly better off than us as their dads had worked at GM for many years and weren’t laid off as much or on sick leave, but no one cared about that. One of my best friends was Dave Hildebidle. He lived in a big beautiful home on Lake Fenton and his dad was the plant manager at the V-8 plant where Dad was a janitor, so our fathers literally had the highest and lowest jobs in the plant. But it didn’t matter to Dave or to me. And Dave’s dad was really a cool guy. He really liked Dad and would stop by and talk to him at work a lot. The other guys were in awe that the plant manager knew him. I think those were probably pretty cool moments for Dad. What they talked about of course was their boys playing football and basketball together at Mandeville. Dave was probably the best natural athlete in school and by my senior year I was the star on the basketball team, so both fathers were pretty proud of course.

Before I move on with more detail about high school, I want to note that not all the doctors in our family were quacks. Mom found one that properly diagnosed her asthma as being caused by allergies. I mentioned dust earlier but they also found out other things such as sage, which was used in her amazing iron skillet cornbread. She never did eat her own cornbread after finding that out. But, the doctor started giving her shots to counteract the allergies and she stayed away from the things she was allergic to and pretty much became cured. She got healthy, and even gained weight. Dad would brag about her weight gain all the time as he knew it was a sign of her finally being healthy. Now, bragging about your wife’s weight gain is true love, isn’t it? Not to mention being dangerous!

Living one block from the high school was so incredibly great. In fact, I think the decision to buy the house that close to school shaped much of who I became, especially as an athlete. When we moved to Flint I was 12 year old and fat. As mentioned earlier, my own siblings nickname for me was “Fatty” so my self esteem was not great. If my own family made fun of me you can imagine how I was treated by 12 and 13 year old boys. I went out for the eighth grade basketball team and could say here without lying that I made the team. The thing is, everyone that went out made the team. I was one of the shortest and fattest kids in both the seventh and eighth grade. In fact, I might have been the worst player in all of the junior high when the season started. One of the most humiliating periods of my life was having to shower with the other boys after practice. Not only was I fat, but I had boobs and just hated going into the shower. It probably won’t stretch the imagination of anyone reading this to figure out that things that were said to me and about me. With this as a backdrop, let me explain how living a block form the school changed my life. Every moment the gym was open I was there playing basketball. When it was closed I would go over to Uncle Toots house and play on the basket they had on their garage. When it was winter I would shovel off the driveway and shoot hoops. But, the gym at the school was available a lot so that gave me the opportunity to play and get better – and to get thinner.

By the end of the eighth grade basketball season I had started to grow taller and lose the baby fat. Some of that was just natural growth but a lot of it was the millions of calories I burned playing basketball in that gym. Then the summer between the eighth and ninth grade the gym was open 8 to 5, 5 days a week and I was there! I played summer league baseball but when I wasn’t doing that, I was in the gym playing basketball – by myself learning to dribble and shoot or in pick up games with other boys. Very often when the gym closed I went over to the outside baskets at the grade school and played until dark. By the time school started in September I had grown several inches to about 5’ 10” and had lost all that baby fat. Some of the kids I had not seen over the summer couldn’t recognize me. I went out for football in the fall and then as soon as that ended I went out for the junior varsity (JV) basketball team. Now at that level not every one made the team. Lots of kids wanted to play so they had tryouts and most of the guys got cut. But I made the team! Some of those boys that had made fun of me in the eighth grade got cut and I must say I got a certain amount of satisfaction out of that. But I just frankly out worked them and that has been how I have succeeded in everything since then. As Paula and my kids know, no one to this day works harder than I do. That’s not a boast, just a fact, and I believe that comes from what I learned by what hard work brought me when I was 13 years old.

Because the coaches were probably still in shock from seeing how I had transformed from grade 8 to grade 9, they still didn’t give me the opportunity to play much early on in the JV season. But I worked so hard in practice and was getting better than some of the hot shot players that they finally had to start playing me. I was actually better in games than practice as I loved the pressure of playing in front of crowds and by the middle of my freshman year I was first string. The same habit of playing 8 hours a day continued the next summer and by the beginning of my sophomore year I was the leading scorer and captain of the JV team. For the tournament at the end of the year they brought Dave Hildebidle and me up to the varsity. By my senior year I was the leading scorer and made the All County team. That means I was one of the best 10 players in our league of about 11 or 12 schools. And I was barely 17. None of those guys that made fun of me accomplished anything in basketball. In fact, none of the guys that made fun of me were even on the team by our senior year. My real friends that had stuck with me when I was short and fat were still by friends as seniors.

Although I played football and baseball as well, and was first string on the varsity my senior year in those sports, my real love was basketball. In fact, if I had it to do over I probably would not have played football and used that time to get in shape for basketball. While I loved basketball and really didn’t like football. Our coaches were mean and old fashioned and we only won one game our senior year. We did have two 0 – 0 ties, our first and last games of the season. So good defense lousy offense huh? I enjoyed playing baseball and was a great fielding, lousy hitting first baseman. But basketball was my true love. I went to Adrian college and made the JV there my freshman year. More on that later.

In addition to the advantages of being able to use the gym a lot, living a block from school had lots of social advantages. Our house was always open to any of the kids that wanted to come over after school. So after practice you could usually find a hot euchre game going on at the Fisher’s. (I still haven’t been able to get Paula to love that card game – she doesn’t know what she’s missing). My Mom would make gallons of Kool-Aid for us while we played and talked. Now, I’m not talking about that wimpy, sugar free stuff. I’m talking about several cups of real sugar in each jug. It was one of the things we could actually afford as it was 5 cents for a package. I think it made a half gallon. When I get together every year in Vegas with a few of my friends from high school, someone always brings up the good times at Fisher’s house after school. Wonderful, wonderful memories. So Alejandro and Isabel, you two have the same opportunity as Abuelo as you live across the street from your high school. I need to teach you how to play euchre! Right Paula?

While the opportunity to play cards and drink gallons of Kool Aid was a draw, the real attraction in coming to the Fisher’s was my dad. He could tell jokes for hours – literally for hours. He had an amazing memory for every joke he had ever heard, and loved repeating them. When he wasn’t working second shift he would be at home usually and invariably after practice one of my buddies would yell out in the locker room, “Hey Fish, is your Dad home? Let’s go hear his jokes”. Of course I had heard them all about 1,000 times so it wasn’t as exciting for me, but I loved the fact they wanted to go spend time at my house with my parents. And they all loved Mom. (Everyone that ever met Mom loved her of course). If you think that was just the way all parents were in the 50’s it’s just not true. Jerry Tebo was my best friend in high school and lived on my street about 5 houses away. I don’t remember even ONE time in high school that we went to his house after practice. So all parents weren’t like mine.

At one of my high school reunions, I think the 40th, I was staying with Mom’s apartment and several of the guys – Cottrill, Hildebidle, Tebo, Stevenson stopped by to chat. She was so happy as it brought back the wonderful memories she had from those years. So it wasn’t just cool for me, but having all those kids around was a great experience for my parents as well. I must admit at this stage of my life I miss having friends like that. Maybe no one ever keeps that going but because I have been devoted to my family and my work for so long, I haven’t made any effort to keep friendships active or develop new ones. It’s not that I don’t have a lot of acquaintances, because I do. But with the exception of Dick Cottrill and the few that meet once a year in Vegas, I really don’t have anyone that I can truly consider a good friend. So I couldn’t get a good euchre game going even if I wanted to!

Now, I didn’t just play sports and hang out with my buddies, I did have some girlfriends after Donna broker my heart. I wrote about Charlotte Montgomery that wrecked my Dad’s car earlier. She went to Fenton high school which was 13 miles from our school. There was a school called Lake Fenton that went through the 9th grade and then they came to Mandeville. Even though Fenton was only a couple of miles from them, they came to our school. I never knew for sure why they did that but I’m guessing it’s because we were the richest district in the state because we had GM plants and a shopping center in our district so the tax base was high.

There were two really cool things about the 10th graders when they showed up at Mandeville – lots of cute girls and some really good athletes. We looked at them as the rich kids from the lake and compared to most of us they were. I mentioned my friend Dave Hildebidle that lived on the lake and his dad was the plant manager at the V-8 plant. There were a lot of those types of families there. Hildebidle and I became friends pretty quickly and much of that was because we were two of the better athletes in the school. Not to mention two of the most handsome boys 😊

But, to me, the real addition to our school from that group was Sandy Stewart. She was pretty and had a great body. Most of the boys lusted after her, including me. But it was well known she already had a boyfriend, Stu Jennings, who had graduated four years earlier from Mandeville. He and his brother were in the process of building a very successful trucking company so he didn’t have much time to spend with Sandy. But during our sophomore and junior years Sandy and I were just friends and she hadn’t dated any of the boys at Mandeville because she already had a boyfriend. I was dating other girls after my breakup with Donna but none on a regular basis. It was pretty much just friends hanging out together.

Then in our senior year I had become something of a celebrity at our school. I already wrote about being the basketball star, which was a big deal at our school. Then I got the lead in the senior play. So I was pretty hot stuff I guess, but didn’t have a girlfriend. Then one night at the end of play rehearsal, my best friend, Jerry Tebo, came up to me and said that Sandy wanted me to be her date to go to the Detour Drive In with Jerry and his girlfriend, Kitty Whalen. See, Sandy and Kitty were best friends and Jerry and I were best friends. I thought he was kidding at first because Sandy was considered untouchable – Because of her looks and because of her boyfriend. Her parents were also wealthy. So, here is what had happened. Sandy felt she was missing out on all the fun stuff during her senior year because Stu was working 7 days a week building his trucking company and she never had anyone go to take her to any of the events taking place our senior year. She decided to pick one of us out of the herd to be her “boyfriend” for the rest of the senior year and she picked me. Looking back later it was pretty obvious it was because of my high profile and my involvement with all the fun things going on – basketball star, lead in the senior play, best looking, etc. (I won’t put smiley faces behind all these as you all know I’m kidding). So that night she decided to hook up with me. So she, Jerry, Kitty and I went to the Detour Drive In (If you have seen Happy Days you know what it was like) to get something to eat in her Dad’s new Pontiac Bonneville convertible. (Did I mention they were rich?) I was broke as usual so I borrowed a couple of bucks from Tebo (He had a part time job during school because his folks made him). There was no way I was going to let this rich girl pay for my coney island.

From that night on through the senior prom (And one more event I will talk about later) Sandy and I were an item. I was the envy of most of the guys for a few months there. She invited me to her house a lot to watch TV or have Sunday dinner with her folks and we double dated with Jerry and Kitty a lot. It was a magical time. She would wait for me after the basketball games. We had dances after the Friday night games. This went on through the senior play and the basketball season. Then it came to an abrupt (sort of ) end when we lost by one point to one of the top rated teams in the state in the quarterfinals. The night before we had come from behind to beat Grand Blanc, one of our rivals, and I was the star in that comeback. Sandy picked me up at the school when the bus got back and we had a great evening. She was talking about the upcoming summer where we would take her Dad’s boat out on the lake, etc. Wow! Keep in mind I had just won the game for us, the first district win in the history of the school. The next night we lost the heartbreaking game but she wasn’t there. I called her when I go home and she was as cold as ice. She was through with me as my celebrity status had come to an end. She shunned me for the next couple of weeks and I thought it was over. Then one day I was walking down the hall between classes and she came up to me, put her arm through mine and acted as if nothing had changed. She then asked me to sit with her in the assembly that had been called that afternoon. No one knew what it was for, but Sandy got it out of Charlie Wallen, our basketball coach – the assembly was to announce that Denny Siegel and I had made the All County basketball team and they were presenting our silver necklace with a basketball to us. Making the All County team was a really big deal back then and having two players from the same team was unusual so they had a special assembly to announce it. Well, although Sandy had ignored me for weeks, she couldn’t pass up the opportunity to be seen with me while I was getting the recognition. All day she would meet me outside my classroom and hold hands with me. I was in Heaven and thinking “This girl has finally come to her senses.” It was just to be in the spotlight one more time with me. She invited me to her house that night, which she had not done in a long time. When the coach presented me with the basketball necklace, he whispered in my ear, “Fisher, I had better not see Sandy Stewart wearing this tomorrow.” Well, guess who was wearing it the next day. Plus, she had given me a hickey that was visible above my collar and I think it was just to show the coach she controlled me.

That lasted a couple of days until the excitement wore off, she gave me back the necklace and started ignoring me again. This time I thought it was certainly over and felt used and vowed I wouldn’t let her take advantage of me again. Well, she had one more use for me before it was all over – the senior prom. A few weeks went by during baseball season (None of the kids cared about our baseball team) and I was thinking about who to invite to the prom. Then one day, Sandy does the same routine – meeting me outside my classes, holding hands, etc. Then invited me to her house again that night and once again, being the total naïve sucker thought she was just missing me and had finally come to her senses. Guess what was on the agenda that evening? She coyly asked me if I had a date for the senior prom so I took her of course. That was our last date.

After Sandy I didn’t have a girlfriend until I met Nancy. More on that later.

At some point in high school I realized I wasn’t going to become a major league baseball player and decided I wanted to be a teacher and high school basketball coach. I pursued that dream for several years but later realized I couldn’t support a family on what teachers were making then, and became a business major. But, at the age of 17 I graduated from Robert N. Mandeville high school in June, 1960. I think I was 10th in my class out of about 110 kids. My last two years I was pretty much a straight A student because of that eligibility rule I wrote about earlier.

If I was going to be a high school coach, I thought it was important to play college basketball. The sensible choice for college would have been Flint Junior College because it was much cheaper than going to a four year school, and especially a private one. But Flint JC had great players and there was no way I could have made the team. In 1960 very few black players were being recruited for college and the Flint schools turned out many, many great athletes. So junior colleges got most of them. Flint JC went to the national finals several years in a row. Great players. Although I was one of the top 10 players in our league, our coaches didn’t do anything to help us get connected with colleges. Now, the all conference players have college coaches scouting all the time and they get offers. It just didn’t happen then unless you were really great. The only one in our league that became a big time college athlete was Paul Krause. He was All State in football, basketball, baseball and was the state champion on 4 track events. An amazing athlete and really good guy. He ended up at Iowa on a football scholarship and ended up being an all pro defensive back. He is still the all time leader in the NFL in interceptions. We only lost to them by 2 points my senior year and they ended up going to the state semifinals.

So, back to my situation. Fred Shoemaker was an All County player from our school who had graduated two years earlier with Jennie, in 1958. He went to a small private college, Adrian, in Southeast Michigan and had made the team. He told the coach about me and I was invited down there for a tryout. The coach liked me and said while he couldn’t offer me a scholarship my freshman year, he might be able to do so later if I was good enough. Now, keep in mind I was barely 17 years old with no one to guide me in these types of decisions. In hindsight, I should have taken a year off, played city league basketball and shopped around for colleges. But I was thrilled the coach wanted me so I got a student loan and enrolled at Adrian. It was a private Methodist school of about 800 students with a good academic reputation and expensive. The student loan only got me through the first semester. (It took me over 10 years to pay it off).

Fred Shoemaker’s father, Carl Shoemaker, owned the most successful gas station in Flint at the time and called to offer me a job for the summer so I could save money for college. No doubt it was because Fred asked him to do that. So I went to work pumping gas that summer and it was one of the hardest jobs I have ever done. Back then, you not only pumped gas but you also cleaned the windows all the way around on the cars. The station was located right off the new expressway and was busy all the time. I worked 10 hours a day, 6 days a week that summer and it motivated me more than ever to get a college degree. Most of the guys working there had been there for years and I didn’t want to end up that way.

Remember the financial situation of my folks? They literally had no money to help me with college and I never asked them for any. I knew I would have to make it on my own so I was able to save enough money that summer to buy some decent clothes for college. The minimum wage was $1.25 then so working 60 hours or more per week was pretty decent money and I saved most of it as I didn’t have a girlfriend and not much of a social life with all the hours I was working. I still chuckle thinking about what Dad would say when I would come home on a Saturday night with my paycheck and not go out. He would say “If I had $60 in my pocket at age 17 I can tell you I would be out on the town.” Pretty funny huh?

So, with my new clothes and a few bucks in my pocket, and my tuition and room and board paid for with my student loan, I headed off for Adrian. I think Mom and Dad knew I would be back after a semester or two, they didn’t try to dissuade me from going. Of course, I pictured myself getting a scholarship the second year and becoming a college star just like I had been in high school. Boy, was I in for a wakeup call!!

Before I describe the basketball experience, let me talk about some really good things that happened at Adrian. I was put into a brand new dorm and when I signed in, they asked if I would be willing to room with this guy named Larry Inouye, a Japanese American from Hawaii. They said they had been asking boys all day and no one wanted to room with him. Adrian had exactly one Asian (Larry) and one black student (Vince, our basketball star) in the entire school so although the term right-wing hadn’t been invented yet, it was a right-wing environment. He was also 5 or 6 years older. I said “sure” and Larry became my roommate. I thought it would be really cool to room with someone of a different race and it was cool. His father was a doctor and Larry was a pre-med student but at age 23 was only a sophomore. Apparently he liked surfing more than his studies, so his dad sent him to a small college in Southeast Michigan, far from the ocean. Who knew that almost 50 years later I would fall in love with a woman from Hawaii and learn to love the place myself?

Most of the guys in the dorm were jocks and Larry was considered kind of a nerd (that word had not been invented yet either). But I invited Larry everywhere we went and the guys ended up really liking him. Usually he didn’t go with us as he studied all the time. I think he wanted to get his grades up quickly so his father would let him come back to Hawaii. I remember coming home from basketball practice, studying for a couple of hours and then go to bed as I had a 7 AM class. Larry would stay up until the wee hours studying pretty much every night. Now, I do have one regret I need to share about Larry. When it came time for the Christmas break, I asked Larry if he would like to go home with me to Flint and he accepted. So he went with me and hung out with me and my high school buddies for a couple of weeks. When we got back to school, he sent my folks a thank you gift and gave me a gift. He then told me he was getting ready to ask me to go home with him for Christmas and his folks had agreed to pay my airfare!!! I asked him why he didn’t tell me and he said his parents told him it would be rude to turn down the invitation so he accepted mine. So, Paula, I almost went to Hawaii before you did.

I mentioned going out with my buddies in the dorm and we did some. But Adrian was full of rich kids who had money to spend and by about half way through that semester my summer savings was pretty much exhausted. I remember one Saturday night a bunch of us had gone to a movie and stopped at the Big Boy on the way home. I was broke and think I ordered a Coke or something. But what I remember is that several of them ordered onion rings and I don’t think I had ever had one before. I didn’t have any money to order them but the guys offered to share. I ate one and thought it was amazing. Just one though because I didn’t want them to think I was actually hungry. Right then I vowed to someday make enough money to buy onion rings any time I wanted them. Maybe it’s why to this day I love onion rings.

There were not a lot of times when I went out with the guys because I went home on weekends pretty often as I got homesick a lot. The way I got home was hitchhiking. Flint is about 90 miles from Adrian and I would head over to the expressway after my last class on Friday and would get picked up pretty quickly. My folks would bring me home on Sunday usually so I didn’t have to hitchhike back to school.

One of the nights out was memorable, however. There was a girls detention center in Adrian (prison basically) and one weekend they put a flyer up in the dorm that we were invited to a dance at the prison on Saturday night so a bunch of us signed up and went. What an experience! These were some tough looking young ladies. Honestly, I don’t remember for sure, but I don’t think anyone danced. I know I didn’t. We pretty much stood on one side of the room, the girls on the other side, and stared at each other. One reason was that during the evening, someone in our group started spreading rumors about the girls having knives hidden on them, that some were in for murder, etc. So we kept our distance.

The dorm life was fun though. As I mentioned, it was a lot of jocks and we would have bull sessions on a regular basis in one of the rooms. As the guys got to know Larry better, we would often have the sessions in our room as Larry had a lot of interesting stories to tell about Hawaii. One of the guys on our floor was a real entrepreneur and became a barber, giving haircuts for 25 cents. Up until this time I had a flat top from about age 8 or 9 but this guy butchered it so badly that I ended up with a different style called a Princeton. The coolest guy in the dorm was Vince, the only black guy in school. Vince was the star of our basketball team and became an All American at the small college level. He was a senior but was probably 24 or 25 because he would have to drop out for a year an work to save money to come back for another season. (And I thought they were going to give ME a scholarship?) But he was a cool, big city guy (Detroit I think) and had stories of growing up in the inner city that kept us on the edge of our seats all the time.

Back to basketball and my original reason for going to Adrian. As I mentioned, I went there with the intention of eventually getting a scholarship and hopefully being a star like I was in high school. Well, I walked into practice the first day and discovered that not only was I not the only all conference player there, but everyone was at least all conference, and some were all state. Vince was an All American and Adrian was ranked number 7 in the nation in the NAIA small college division. This was 1960 and other than Paul Krause, I had never seen anyone dunk a basketball. (Our entire league only had one black player in high school – Paul was white and really a rarity, a white guy that could jump). Adrian’s varsity team played “Sweet Georgia Brown”, the Globetrotters theme song, and almost every player on the team could dunk. So they would do these dunk exhibitions during warmups while playing that song. When I left Adrian after one semester they were still undefeated and ranked in the top 10 in the nation. I did make the junior varsity and played quite a bit and would score once in awhile so I was proud of making the team. Our junior varsity was also undefeated. Now, remember I wrote earlier about how I chose Adrian? If I had just done some research there were colleges in our league where I could have made the varsity as a freshman. Both the varsity and our JV team were beating teams by scores like 110- 40 just about every night. Our JV could have beaten most of the varsity teams in the league. If I had done some research and gone to one of those schools, most likely I could have gotten a scholarship. Of course, researching then was different than now. There was not internet and short of driving around several states scouting teams, I had no way of knowing that I could have made those teams.

At Christmas I told my parents I would be dropping out of Adrian at the end of the semester and come home to enroll at Flint JC. The last day of the semester we had a game and the JV coach knew I was leaving so he let me play a lot that night. Several of my buddies (I think it was Cottrill, Tebo, Maletic and Steve Stevenson, but not certain) came down to pick me up and they watched the game. I think I scored about 10 points or something like that so they were impressed their buddy was a college player. So I showered, put my bags in their car and headed back to Flint.

BACK HOME IN FLINT AT AGE 18:

So, my buddies and I drove back to Flint after my last college basketball game singing along to the radio. The song I remember is “There’s a Moon Out Tonight” by the Capri’s. Here is a link if you want to hear some really great music: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nVAZ5O0WXYA>. They don’t make music like that anymore 😊

As soon as I got back to Flint I enrolled at Flint Junior College, with my dream of being a teacher and basketball coach still alive. But, I needed to make some money so I got a job busting tables and washing dishes at The Kewpee hamburger place in downtown Flint. Bill Ward, a family friend from Missouri, was the night manager and gave me the job. I made the minimum wage, $1.25 an hour. The cook later quit and I got promoted to that job. The Kewpee had the best hamburgs (That’s what they are called in Flint) and still do although now the chain is called Halo Burger. This is when I started gaining weight again as my job was to fry the burgers and man the French fry cooker, which was right behind me. So, when things were slow I would reach over and eat fries out of the fryer. One of the people told me that fries were really good dipped in mayo, and boy were they right! So I gained about 20 pounds pretty quickly.

I was taking almost a full load at Flint JC and working 6 days a week one week and 7 days the other week, so I had every other Sunday off. Then Bill got a job at Chevrolet and they promoted me to night manager. I got a huge raise to $1.50 an hour! My life changed forever one night when this cute little thing walked in for a cup of coffee. She had dark hair, olive complexion and a great body. And she knew all the staff really well. They were all saying “Nancy, it’s great to see you again.” I asked how they knew her and they told me she used to work there and was the best worker they ever had but she had left to work as a waitress at a restaurant where she could get tips. She started coming in on a regular basis and I flirted with her every chance I got and finally got the nerve to ask her out. She was almost 4 years older than me and just laughed it off in the beginning. Then they talked her into coming back to work there and I got to see her everyday during the shift change. Nancy worked from 7 in the morning till 5 and then our night crew took over at 5 and worked until 1 in the morning. So I got the chance to ask her out every day, but with no luck.

Then one Sunday night when I was working at the Big Kewpee (the Little Kewpee was closed on Sunday so we worked every other Sunday at the Big on) there was a call on the pay phone and one of my crew said it was for me. It was Nancy and she asked if I wanted to come take her for a ride in the rain after work. I said “no way!”). Just kidding of course. So I picked her up after we closed and we went to a drive in to get a late dinner and the rest is history as they say.

We started dating and it became serious pretty quickly and within a few months we started talking marriage. But there were some obstacles. Our age difference wasn’t really an issue any longer but religion was. Nancy was Catholic and I was Baptist. When we started talking marriage neither of us would agree to have our kids raised in the other religion. We were ready to break up and she told me it would be OK for our kids to be raised Baptist after all. I believe much of it had to do with her mom and grandmother being Methodist so she didn’t really have anything against protestants. Her dad was the Catholic one and he was an alcoholic jerk that used to beat her mother and her brothers. She hadn’t seen him in years so his influence had worn off.

While we were dating some things happened that later I would look back on and understand the connection to her death. She was in the hospital several times with kidney and liver problems, which turned out to be the result of the Lupus she had obviously had for years.

The quandary I found myself in was whether to be honest with my parents about wanting to get married at 19. I decided not to tell them and to this day regret that decision. They were very hurt when we eloped, so I wish I would have done that differently. Although they were hurt by how we did it, Mom and Dad immediately took Nancy into the family and loved her.

We got married August 17th, 1962 and Dave was born September 30th, 1963. We were renting a little apartment in Flint and one day I ran into Larry Gordon, one of Jennie’s classmates. He was a real estate agent and told me he could get us into a house that was affordable and he did. We bought a 3 bedroom, one bath house on Manor Drive in Grand Blanc for $9,200. The payment, with taxes and insurance included was $84 a month and we really agonized over whether we could afford that payment. But we did and that is where Dave and Laura was born. Laura was born May 7th, 1965.

Nancy and I loved that little house and it was even more special because our kids were born there. (Not in the house of course). She had it fixed up very nice, or as nice as we could with what little money we had. I had left Kewpee, even with the wonderful career I would have had as the night manager, and got a job on the assembly line at the Chevrolet V-8 plant, where my dad worked. But it was second shift (2:30 till 11 PM) which meant the best part of the day and the best part of the evening were tied up. So I applied for a salaried job at the Chevrolet plant downtown. The personnel manager was Bill Mohan and he had been a referee in our league and knew me pretty well. So I bugged him and bugged him until he hired me as a mail boy in the mail room/printing department. It was actually a paycut at the time but I really wanted a salaried 8 to 5 job.

The mailboy job was really cool. I would go out in the morning to deliver and collect mail at all the plants there. Then another trip in the afternoon. It was called Old Chevrolet and was downtown (sort of) Flint. They made 6 cylinder engines there and several plants surrounded the main assembly plant where they made all of the components that went into the engines. At first I walked the route and they later got an electric cart that I rode in. I got to meet tons of people and really enjoyed it. I was making $327 a month and was working in that department when Nancy and I got married. I brought home about $125 every 2 weeks and remember our house payment was $84 and I had a $60 payment on my Corvair. So half of bring home went for those two payments.

Nancy was really good at budgeting. We had agreed she wouldn’t work after becoming a mother so that was the only money we had coming in. She had a budget of $25 a week for groceries and one day said to me, “This is ridiculous to be spending this much on food. I can get this down to under $20 a week.” And she did. She bought a little plastic clicker that kept track of what she was spending. If the grocery cart went over $20 she would start putting things back on the shelf to get under $20. We ate a lot of condensed Campbells soup! I had decided I wasn’t going to stay fat after gaining all of that weight I had put on with those French fries and mayo, so I bought a fitness book that John Kennedy had published and started working out at night and counting my calories. By the time Nancy died in 1966 I was back to my high school weight of 165.

Back in those days if you were Catholic and married outside of your religion you were ex-communicated so Nancy was no longer a Catholic, but I don’t think it ever bothered her. She started going to church with me on a regular basis and I think she actually enjoyed it. On Sunday, October 3rd, 1965 we went to church and then everyone was going to Mom and Dad’s to eat, which was a pretty normal thing. But she needed some extra diapers or something for Laura and we had to go home first. I waited in the car while she went in the house to get those things, and she came running out and said “Hurry, I think your Dad has died.”. Someone (Jennie I think) had called while she was in the house to tell her that Dad had been taken to the hospital with a heart attack. When we got to their house we got the bad news. Dad was buried on October 6th, 1965, Mom’s 49th birthday.

It was around this time that Nancy started developing health issues again. She went to the doctor often with kidney problems but the biggest issue was pain in all of her joints, which got progressively worse over the next year. Dave was 2 then and Laura was about 5 or 6 months old. Her back, knees, elbows and hands became extremely painful. I remember in the morning I would get up for work and very often Dave would hear me and come jump in bed with his mom because I insisted she stay in bed as long as possible since she wasn’t sleeping well with all the pain. When Dave would jump in bed Nancy would ask him to pull the covers up because it was too painful to grip them with her hands. When she would get out of bed she couldn’t even stand up straight until about noon each day. The doctor kept telling her she just had arthritis, but I was always skeptical because she was so young. Of course it turned out to be that she had Lupus all that time.

The thing that sustained her throughout this was her love for her children. God, she loved those kids and loved being a mother. Even through the pain she wanted to try to have another child but the doctor recommended she wait. Although she only got to be a mother for 3 years, she was wonderful at it. She loved them passionately but also was pretty strict in ways. I remember when Laura got teeth and she started biting Dave. One day Nancy bit her back. Not hard but Laura never bit him again! She told me once that as they grew up it was more important that Dave and Laura respected her than how much they liked her. She would have been very proud of how well her kids turned out.

By the summer of 1966 her illness had really progressed and she had developed a butterfly shaped rash on her face. I later learned the word Lupus is wolf in Latin, and it comes from the look of the rash on the victim’s face. Yet the stupid doctor didn’t recognize an obvious sign. The pain and stiffness got worse and worse and I begged her to let me get help with the kids. Mom and Jennie would have helped her in a heartbeat but she wouldn’t let me tell anyone about her illness. She wanted to take care of her children without any help. Perhaps too much pride huh? The rash on her face started going down onto her neck and shoulders and on Saturday, October 1, 1966, I took her to see her doctor. Once again, he said it was arthritis but had no idea about the rash, so he referred her to a dermatologist who was next door to his office. We had the kids with us and we took the referral slip the doctor had given her and went to the other doctor’s office and dropped off the paper with the receptionist. She said they would call the next week to set up an appointment. Before we could get to the car she came running out and said the doctor wanted to see Nancy right then. He had diagnosed her Lupus just from reading the symptoms on the referral slip!! We went back in and the doctor looked at her and instantly said he wanted to put her in the hospital to run tests and he scheduled her to go in on Monday, October 3rd, exactly one year from the day Dad had died. She was so thrilled to finally get her condition diagnosed so she could get cured.

So, this time I had to call Mom for help because I was working and going to school and with her being in the hospital someone had to stay with Dave and Laura, so of course Mom came out Monday and stayed with them. This part is extra sad to tell. When she checked into the hospital they had her in a semi-private room with a woman that was really ill. Nancy whispered to me “I hope no one dies while I am in here.”

I stayed with her until I had to go to class and then came back after class to see her and she was in good spirits except for missing her kids. She insisted I go to work the next day and also not miss any of my classes. So I went to work and then stopped to see her before going to class. She had already developed a bad cough and was coughing up blood so I skipped my class and stayed with her. That evening the dermatologist stopped in to check on her and looked very worried. When he came out he said he was ordering penicillin because she had already caught pneumonia. He then told me she had Systemic Lupus Erythematosus (SLE). I tried to ask him questions about it but he said the most urgent problem was the pneumonia and we would worry about the Lupus later. I remember writing the name down and was going to go to the JC library to look it up. I went back in to see her and she told me to go home to be with the kids even though I wanted to stay. When I got home, I told Mom how worried I was. Keep in mind Mom and the rest of the family had no idea she was ill at all.

The next morning I called into work and told them I was going to go to the hospital first and would be late. When I got there, Nancy was in an oxygen tent as the pneumonia had really taken hold. The resident doctor took me out into the hall and said “Mr Fisher, you should call her family.” I fainted right there in the hall. Until that moment I still had hopes that this was going to be fixable. So I called her family and they started coming down to Flint from Standish, where most of them lived. I stayed at the hospital that night and slept on a cot next to her bed. The next morning the rest of her family arrived, including her estranged father. After they left her bedside, she asked me to bend down so I could hear her, and she whispered to me, “I am dying aren’t I?” To this day I don’t know if I was lying to her or just didn’t believe it could be true, but I replied “Of course not, they are all just worried about you.” But she knew better. By Thursday evening her temperature was 106 degrees and she was no conscious any longer, so the last words I ever spoke to her were a lie. I don’t know if I have ever really forgiven myself for that. But, there aren’t any manuals on how to handle the love of your life on her death bed. At least none I had ever read.

Again, I slept (sort of) on the cot in her room. The next morning her quack doctor come to visit and briefly checked on her. I followed him out in the hall to try to ask what options they were going to try. He made some sort of weak excuse and hurried off down the hall. The next thing I saw was a bunch of doctors and nurses rushing into her room. I went in and stood at the foot of her bed and the resident said to me, “Your wife is taking her last breaths.” And she died right in front of me.

***UPDATE ON UNCLE W.A.*** : Jennie supplied me with some additional information on our Uncle W.A., who died in WW2. He was married for one month to a woman named Hazel and she was pregnant and later had a daughter named Willa Fay. I now remember meeting her when we were kids.

What I remember most vividly the moment Nancy died, was thinking about Dave and Laura and that they would never see her again. I pretty much lost it at that moment and it was the first time I had cried that week but at that moment it seemed as though my life would never be good again. There were family members all around but in particular I remember Joe being by my side and guiding me out Nancy’s room. But I went from feeling completely devastated to pretty quickly thinking again about the kids.

Dave had just turned 3 one week before she died and other than when she was in the hospital having Laura, had never spent a night away from him. When she said goodbye to the kids on Monday when we left for the hospital it was unthinkable that it would be the last time they would ever see her. So I began thinking about how to handle the situation. Again, Joe was there to give me a lot of guidance and comfort and I’m pretty sure I was following his advice at that point.

It’s funny some of the details one remembers during times of tragedy, but one of the things I remember vividly was how beautiful that day was. That is the time of the year when the leaves are turning in Michigan and I remember seeing all those colors as we left the hospital. It was sunny and warm and just a perfect day. As we approached our house on Manor Drive, there were lots of people there and the kids were playing in the font yard. When I got out of the car Dave came running over to me and I picked him up. Whether it was my own instincts or Joe guiding me I’m not sure, but I had decided on the ride from the hospital that I was not going to cry in front of the kids. There was no way they could comprehend what was happening and the sight of their dad crying didn’t seem to be something that would be useful at that moment. So I really sucked it up and just was determined not to cry. But when I picked Dave up, it was one of the most emotional moments of my life and I couldn’t look at him. He was talking to me and I had to stare off into space to hold it together. He knew something was wrong and took my face in both of his little hands and turned my head so I had to look at him.

Another vivid memory I have of that week was a day or so later (Jennie I don’t remember exactly when Jack came back, so fill me in here) and I was out in the back yard with lots of relatives while the kids played. Remember, this was decades before cell phone and Jack was gone to Wyoming on his annual hunting trip, so he had no idea Nancy had died. So, I remember looking up and seeing Jack walking toward me in the back yard. Typical Jack, he didn’t say a word at first, he just grabbed me and hugged me harder than I have ever been hugged. Jack and Nancy really loved each other and Jack loved me of course. Looking back, I think that might have been the moment when I knew I was going to be OK. Jack just had this quiet wisdom and compassion and I was filled with his strength and love.

Much of the next few weeks from that day is blur to some extent. I do remember some of the funeral home, but it was so surreal still. I decided to have a closed casket for couple of reasons. One was that the rash on Nancy’s face had gotten pretty bad and she had a lot of pride so I decided it best to just keep it closed, except for family. Secondly, selfishly I didn’t want to go through the ordeal of looking at her every time someone came in. After attending so many funerals since then I think it’s sort of a weird tradition anyway.

As I wrote earlier, Jennie and Mom were there to help me. I don’t know what I would have done without them. I was working full time at Chevrolet as a suggestion investigator and going to Flint J.C. at night. I ended up dropping out of that semester as it was a little difficult to concentrate. I did enroll the next semester though and graduated with my AA the next June.

At first Mom moved in with the three of us, but it became a real hassle for her because she was working at Kresge’s and her church was very close to her house. She still lived in the house she and Dad bought in 1955. So, after a few weeks we moved to Mom’s house and I rented out mine. It was actually a good financial deal for me as I rented it for $125 a month and my payment on it was only $84 or $85 a month.

Since Mom and I were both working and I was going to school, Jennie took the kids to her house a lot. Jana adored Dave and Laura so she loved having them around. When Jana died it was almost like losing a sister for Dave and Laura because they spent so much time together for the next few years.

Now, keep in mind I was still only 23 years old when Nancy died and turned 24 on December 22nd, a few weeks afterwards. So I made some choices that a more mature man might not have made. One of those was I started dating just a few months after Nancy died. I later regretted doing that as I felt it was disrespectful to Nancy’s memory. Now, it was pretty tame dating. Her name was Carol Houghton and she was in my Historical Geology class at Flint J.C.. I think about 3 years younger than me and really beautiful. She had been in one of my other classes at J.C. before and when I dropped out of the class when Nancy died, word got around and she came up to me on the first night of the class to tell me how sorry she was. We became friends and after a few weeks I decided to ask her for a date, and she said yes! Boy, was I nervous. Nancy and I had been together about 5 years so I was clueless. But, I decided to take her to a movie and dinner. We went to see “The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly”, one of Clint Eastwood’s first “Spaghetti Westerns”. You all know that I am a popcorn nut so that’s what I ordered at the movie, but Carol wanted Jordan’s candied almonds. No idea why that stands out except they were expensive! By then, movies were no longer 10 cents. They were 90 cents!

We then went to dinner at a popular place (can’t remember the name now – burned down later). Jennie, it was out on Flushing road so you might remember the name. I thought it would be cool to surprise her about the restaurant because it was sort of exclusive so I wouldn’t tell her where we were going. (Quite the Man About Town eh?). Well, I made a wrong turn (No GPS then) and couldn’t find it, so I had to tell her where we were going so she could direct me, which she did. Now, here comes the really stupid part. When the waitress asked for drink orders she ordered a drink I believe as she had just turned 21. Well, since I was this suave, debonair stud, I couldn’t just order my usual Pepsi, so I ordered a scotch and soda. (I had seen it in movies). It was the first real alcohol I had ever consumed. It was awful and I couldn’t even drink it. She noticed and said “Do you even drink?” I had to come clean and tell her I was just trying to impress her. She actually thought it was a sweet gesture but assured me I didn’t have to drink to impress her again. I didn’t drink again until I went to work for Xerox in 1970.

I dated Carol a couple of times, very casual friendship type of thing. I was in another class with her the next semester, psychology. She told me one day she was moving to California for awhile, which I thought was strange. Finally she told me she was pregnant and was going there to have the baby and then come back. (It wasn’t mine). Back then abortion wasn’t legal and it was not acceptable for girls to have babies if they weren’t married. Amazing to think how cruel those norms were then isn’t it?

As written earlier, I had moved from a job on the assembly line to a salaried position at Chevrolet. Finally, I got a promotion to the suggestion department, which was one of the best jobs I have ever had. By the way, just today I learned that my boss, Dave Donakoski, died a few weeks ago. He was one of the best people and best bosses I every had. Great guy. I was working in the suggestion department as a suggestion investigator when Nancy died and they were great to me during that period. Most memorable is what happened when they found out I didn’t have any life insurance on Nancy. At that age who would have thought that was even something to consider? Well, at the funeral home I signed an agreement that I would pay for the funeral. I think it was something like $1,400, which was almost 3 months salary for me. I had no idea how I was ever going to pay for it, but what choice did I have? Of course I took a few days off work after the funeral and one day a friend of mine, Al Brown, that also worked in the suggestion department, came to visit me. He handed me an envelope with enough cash to totally pay off the funeral. I was pretty well known at Chevrolet because I went around to all the plant investigating the suggestions so Al and some of the other people in my department put the word out that I didn’t have insurance, and people responded and paid off the funeral. I think that act of kindness has a lot to do with my generosity now. As you all know, I tend to be generous with everyone in my life, especially now that I’m making great money. If someone was going to bail me out at a time like that, it’s the least I can do to help those around me as much as I can.

A little bit more about the suggestion department. General Motors had them in all the factories. There were 3 part carbon forms employees could fill out and send to the suggestion department. As an investigator, I would take the form to visit that employee and get more details on the suggestion. There were several plants in the complex so I got to go around to all of them and meet interesting people. If the suggestion was adopted, the employee would get anywhere between $25 and $6,000. It was a very effective process as lots of improvements, from safety to improved productivity were made. After a couple of years I got a promotion to the position of calculating the value of the suggestion. Most were $25 to $100 but once in awhile someone would come up with one that saved money. The award was 1/6th of the first years savings. So if they saved the company $36,000 the first year, they got $6,000. So I would go work with engineers, foreman, plant managers, etc. to determine the savings and then calculate the award. It was really cool when I was able to present a check for thousands of dollars. There weren’t a ton of $6,000 checks but probably a dozen or so during my couple of years in the job.

Then one day my boss, Dave Donaksoski, called me in and said I was to go over to the personnel building to take some sort of test. I asked what it was and he said it was an aptitude test to be a programmer. I asked “What’s a programmer?” He wasn’t exactly sure but said it had something to do with computers and Chevrolet was really growing that department and wanted to find some people already with the company that were capable of programming. Up until that point they had hired college graduates with computer background but felt it would be good to have Chevrolet employees that knew the company. A couple of weeks later Dave called me in and said I had passed the test with high scores and was being offered a promotion to computer programmer with a good raise. I think it was about $100 a month more, so pretty good.

Here was my dilemma, I was just finishing my Associates degree at Flint J.C. and wanted to go full time to get my bachelor’s and had been accepted at Eastern Michigan University. My plan was to take an educational leave, go full time and finish in about 18 months. In fact, I had already worked it out with Joe and his wife Sandy for the kids and I to go live with them as they lived in Ann Arbor, about 8 miles from the EMU campus. So I was torn. I was taking my last class at J.C. in accounting and I had a really cool, young professor. So the day of the offer I had his class and asked to speak with him afterwards. I told him about the offer to be a programmer but that it would delay getting my degree. He told me not to hesitate but to take the programmer promotion and do it for one year, then go get my degree. He told me the training I would get in programming would be the equivalent of an M.B.A. from Harvard, as computers were the future of the world. (Pretty savvy guy huh?). So I did just that. I took the job, got all sorts of training and delayed going to Eastern full time. They sent me to a bunch of IBM courses in Detroit.

Then, in 1969 I went to Eastern full time and lived with Joe and family for one semester. But, the kids and I missed Mom so after one semester we moved back to Flint with her. I was substitute teaching by then and one day I got called to sub at Mandeville Junior High. It was my high school but by then was a junior high. I checked in at the office and in walked Rudy Mora, my 8th grade teacher. He said, “Fisher, what are you doing here?” When I told him that I was subbing he offered to let me be their number one sub so during my last semester at Eastern I subbed Monday, Wednesday and Friday there. I carried 18 units but they were all on Tuesday and Thursday. That worked out really well as I was making $25 a day, or $75 a week. Rolling in the dough!

During the time as a programmer at Chevrolet I met a woman that was a key punch operator, Kay Hartley. I asked her out and we ended up dating. She saw the type of father I was and really wanted to marry me so I would be a father to Bobbie Kay, her daughter. I won’t go into a lot of detail her other than to say I ended up giving in to the pressure and asked her to marry me. But I knew it was a mistake and broke up with her.

Then, during my last semester at Eastern Michigan I interviewed with Xerox and got offered a job in Milwaukee as an administrative manager. So I went there with the plan (not much of one) to find someone to take care of the kids while I worked. During that time single dads were unheard of and there was not much in the way of official child care. I didn’t ask Mom to go with me as I didn’t think it would be fair to ask her to leave her friends and family. Years later she told me she wished I had asked her to go. I know you aren’t supposed to have regrets, but that is one I have sort of held on to. But, as things have worked out, life is good.

While I was looking for someone to watch the kids I would call home and Dave and Laura would ask me “Daddy, did you find anyone to babysit us yet?” Heartbreaking. So while going through this, Kay called me. She had gone to Florida on vacation with her brother’s family. Her timing was great. I was worried about the kids, feeling guilty for being so selfish about my career, and told her we would get married. She flew to Milwaukee from Florida and we found an apartment. We then went home to Flint and got married. The only reason I married her was to have a mother for Dave and Laura. I never loved Kay but decided that wasn’t as important as my kids having someone to take care of them. While we were dating Kay was really nice to Dave and Laura. We got married on a Friday night at our Baptist church and Kay and I went on a short weekend honeymoon to Windsor Canada. Actually, on the way over, we went to a Tiger game and then on Sunday morning I talked her into going to a Tiger double header. Denny McClain was pitching that day after being suspended for gambling.

So, we got back to Flint and Kay immediately changed. She started treating Dave and Laura very differently than when we were dating. She totally fooled me! I don’t want to spend a lot of time on this as I there is no good reaon to criticize anyone.

But, my career with Xerox really took off. We moved to Milwaukee in to a nice apartment and I loved my job. I was making $600 a month with Chevrolet and Xerox paid me $900 a month. A 50% raise!! I did well as the Assistant Branch Administrative Manager (ABAM) and after about 8 months there my branch manager called me in and said there was an opening in the Lansing Michigan branch for the Branch Administrative Manager (BAM) job. I drove over to Chicago where the branch manger in Lansing was doing the interviews. The region office was there. I impressed him enough where he gave me the job and we moved back to Lansing. I was so happy to be back home within less than an hours drive from my family in Flint and Ann Arbor.

My branch manager was Wayland Hicks, one of the best bosses ever. He was born one day before me so was the youngest branch manager in all of Xerox. I did really well in that job and Wayland got promoted to the Region Service Manager job. He called me at home one night and said he wanted to move me to the Branch Service Managers job (BSM) in Lansing. It was a promotion so I took it. I ended up doing well in that job as well and then one day my new branch manager called me in to his office and said Bob Croft, who was the Branch Sales Manager in Lansing when I first came there, was not the Branch Manager in San Francisco and wanted me to come there to take over the Branch Service Manager position. They were having a lot of labor problems and the Teamsters was trying to unionize them. Xerox didn’t want to have the branch employees unionized and wanted someone that could come in and handle the situation. So I went out and interviewed and moved to that job.

We ended up buying a house in Fremont, which was on the BART line. I was able to make the service employees happy and our branch went from last in the nation to first during my tenure. So, 16 months later I got promoted to to job of manager of all the L.A. branches for service. So we moved to Mission Viejo and I really liked the job and living there. My operation then went from last in the nation to first so I got put on the promotion list to be a branch manager. The branch manager position was the most prestigious in the company. There were only 91 branches so those jobs were rare. So, one day my boss called me in and said they wanted me to go back to be the branch manager in San Francisco. That was my dream job! Bob Croft has been promoted to headquarters in Rochester NY and the guy that replaced him was from Utah and was a racist. Not a good fit in San Francisco with the most diverse employee group in the country. So I went back there in my dream job and we turned all that around and I got an award for the best affirmative action plan in Xerox. To this day I’m proud of that. Also, they did an annual morale survey and in my first year there we got graded with the biggest improvement in one year in the history of the survey.

When we moved back to the Bay Area we bought a house in Crow Canyon Country Club, a brand new development. A 3,000 square foot, 5 bedroom place that we paid $161,000 for. Amazing huh? But it was in a gated community and to their credit, Dave and Laura didn’t like living there that much. I think this might have been my first glimpse that my kids were liberals.

The kids had really liked Mission Viejo and were upset we were moving again. Dave was getting ready to start his freshman year for football and both kids liked their school. Plus, I had moved them several times already. So, I promised them that we would be in San Francisco until they graduated from high school. I told my boss to keep me off any promotion list as I wanted to stay in the San Francisco job for 5 years. He promised me he would do that but of course didn’t keep his promise. After great success in that job I was promoted to the Region Service Manger job. In Santa Ana! But since I had promised the kids we didn’t move. I commuted to Orange County during the week and came home Friday afternoons and went back Monday mornings. But, there was no way I could maintain that so I ended up leaving Xerox in 1981.

A friend and fellow branch manager (Boston) Steve Albano, had been contacted by Ricoh to open a dealership. Ricoh was a big copier manufacturer (Still are) in Japan and they decided to come to the U.S. with their own brand. They had made copiers under the brand Savin until then. So, on a trip that we had won to Monterey in 1981, Steve told me about the opportunity and I ended up leaving Xerox to open a dealership in the Bay Area.

I am going to pretty much skip over the details of what happened with that dealership other than to say Ricoh put us in a partnership with a guy that was a crook. Really. So I ended up leaving that job and going to work for Friden Alcatel as a Region Manager, working for Bob Croft, who had brought me to San Francisco in the meantime.

During the time between the end of my ownership in the Ricoh dealership and the job with Friden, I had met Kimeron Haas and fell in love. After dating for about 3 years, we got married. At this point in my life I didn’t want any more kids as Dave and Laura were in college and Kimeron had never wanted kids. So I got a vasectomy to make sure it wouldn’t happen. Then, after 3 years Kimeron changed her mind and decided she wanted to have a child. So, I went through two reversal operations and Shelby is the result. One of the best decisions of my life!

Kimeron and I were actually married about 18 years. We separated in 2002 while living in Vacaville. About 3 or 4 years later I joined Eharmony and I think all of you know the great result of that decision. I had a lot of matches and dated quite a few women but didn’t introduce any of them to Shelby until I met Paula. Paula and I were on the Eharmony site for several weeks and I finally talked her into a dinner date. We have never dated anyone else since.

Looking back on my life, I have made a lot of bad decisions, at least it appeared to be so at the time. But, right now, look at my life. I have three wonderful children that are all amazing adults and I have the two best grandchildren in the world. I am crazy in love with Paula and now I have my health. And, I have a career that I love and make more money than I could ever have imagined. The next 30 years should be fun.

Love to all the people in my life reading this.