

Dave Fitzharris's Story

Opening Night

Hello world, I'm here! After such a long time waiting backstage, in the dark, now it's bright lights and excitement! It's my debut, and I'm the *center of attention*. Hey, waitaminute, who are YOU slapping? And what are you going to do with that KNIFE??

March 22, 1944. St. Vincent's Hospital. Just a couple of miles from downtown L.A. (practically in the shadow of what is now the Music Center) I was born, the second son of Cletus James and Genevieve (nee Staley) Fitzharris, both aged 37. Third in line after Mary Susan and Timothy Leonard, then ages 4 and 3, respectively. Linda Maureen was still 3 years away.

Concurrently, in Chicago, the future infamous "P.I. To The Stars", Anthony Pellicano, made his entrance. Apparently, he's the only notable born on the same exact date, although I also share March 22nd with such luminaries as Andrew Lloyd Webber, Orin Hatch, Maximillian I (the Holy Roman Emperor) as well as my own congressman, Elton Gallegly.

Meanwhile, World War II ground on:

In Italy... The forces of the New Zealand Corps (part of US 5th Army) make a final attack on German-held Cassino. It fails. General Freyberg, commanding the corps, then calls off the attack. Allied troops are withdrawn from the most advanced positions and the remainder consolidates recent gains.

On the Eastern Front... The forces of 2nd Ukrainian Front (Konev) secure Pervomaysk, southeast of Uman.

From Berlin... The formation of a new Hungarian government is announced. It will be led by Field Marshal Szotjay.

In the Atlantic... German Admiral Doenitz orders all U-boats to disperse from groups and work singly. This decision represents the final victory of the Allied escort forces over the U-boats. The Germans have decided to give up on convoy attacks until new U-boat designs become available.

But after 6 ½ hours of labor, Mom could care less about the war. As she held me for the first time, what were her thoughts? Yes, all the fingers and toes are there. Two eyes, two ears, one nose. Seems to be perfect. But where did that *hair* come from?

Apparently, she decided it was "all good", and after her stay at St. Vincent's was over, I was bundled up and taken to Chino State Prison, where Dad was a clerk for the State Board of Prison Reforms. So much for my Broadway career.

Since my recollection of the early days is a little hazy, this is probably a good time to describe my progenitors.

Dad

Cletus James Fitzharris was born in Akron, Ohio on October 10, 1907, the son of James and Julia Fitzharris. James was an executive with Firestone Tire and Rubber, one of Harry Firestone's right-hand men. Harry sent him to California to establish a market for Firestone, opening tire service centers up and down the state. That's how the Fitzharris's migrated to the West Coast. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Dad grew up in Ohio and attended college at the University of Akron. He played football in school and had the distinction of playing on a team called "the Scoreless Wonders". They had the best defense in the league. They made it through the whole season without a *single point* being scored against them. Unfortunately, they also had the worst offense in the league and didn't *score* a single point, either, and they finished the whole season with a point record of 0-0. I know about this because, when I was in high school, he had received a newspaper clipping from a cousin describing that long-ago team. I took it to school to show my coach, who promptly lost it. It was one of the few times in my life that Dad really raised hell with me.

It was revelation. Dad, who had always been in complete command of his emotions, was displaying both anger and anxiety: alien emotions in my portrait of him. He was distraught over having to let his cousin know he couldn't return the news clip. I felt terrible about losing the article, but most about letting Dad down.

While at college, Dad held down a job at one of the Firestone tire plants, heaving heavy tire molds around in the hot factory. Later, he blamed that experience on a chronic back problem that plagued him through much of his adult life.

When he settled in Los Angeles with his parents and brother Jimmy, Dad was admitted to The University Of Southern California, where he earned a Masters Degree in Sociology. Subsequently, he did a stint in the Coast Guard and was the Director of the Boy's Ranch, in Chatsworth.

Somewhere in the middle of all that, he went out on a blind date with a lively, pert 5'2" fox named Genevieve. They must have hit it off, because Dad came home that night and announced he had met his future bride. So I guess there is such a thing as "love at first sight". Knowing Mom, it was probably "love at first smite".

Mom

Mom was born in Maryland, but the Staley's lived in Montreal, Canada. Grandpa Staley was born on Wolfe Island, located in Lake Ontario, near Kingston, Ontario, at the entrance to the St. Laurence River. It is the largest of the Thousand Islands. The Staley's

can trace their first recorded history on Wolfe Island to my great-great grandfather Martin Staley, who was married to Catherine Johanna Lambert in St. Andrew's Presbyterian (Presbyterian??) Church in Kingston on December 12, 1825.

Martin was actually born in the United States (probably the Mohawk River Valley, sandwiched between the Catskills and the Adirondacks in upper New York) to Jacob and Maria. He was the grandson to Marten Stahle (let's see, that would be my great-great-great-great grandfather, a United Empire Loyalist.



The Loyalists were folks who had settled in the 13 colonies but remained committed to the Crown. It is estimated that 10-15% of the population in the Colonies (about 250,000 people) were opposed to the Revolution. Many feared chaos would result from democracy. As one person put it, "Better to be ruled by one tyrant 3,000 miles away than 3,000 tyrants 1 mile away." After the Brits lost, these folks were hounded by the patriots. About 50,000 migrated to the British North American Colonies of Quebec and Nova Scotia. Apparently, Great-great-great-great Grandpa Martin was among them.

Grandpa Staley was a building contractor who made and lost more than one fortune. Mom had many fond memories of her years at The Thousand Islands. Her home there, which Grandpa built (?), was an impressive structure on the banks of the St. Lawrence River. A painting of it adorned our walls throughout our lives, and the house still stands, today. Those were golden days for the Staley's. Grandpa was Commodore of the local yacht club. Life was good.

Circumstance brought them to Los Angeles, too, however. Who knows why? Perhaps it was the lure of all that construction happening in the West. Indeed, they build a new home in Cheviot Hills, near the junction of the San Diego and Santa Monica Freeways. It was at that house that the reception was held for Mom and Dad at their wedding.

Mom attended and graduated from UCLA, a relatively rare thing for a woman to do in those days. Later, she joined the L.A. Chamber of Commerce, where her focus was on the garment industry. She was credited as being the first person to introduce California fashions to the East Coast. She was flying high, a bright career ahead of her.

Until Dad happened.

The policy at the Chamber was that no woman could be married. Go figure! Well, Mom got pregnant and made no bones about it. Her boss still kept calling her "Miss Staley", despite her wedding ring, her growing belly and the open secret that her name now was "Fitzharris". After she gave birth to Suzi, other women came out of the closet and admitted they were married, and the policy collapsed. We've come a long way, baby.

San Quentin

Shortly after I was born, Dad was recruited by Clinton T. Duffy, Warden of San Quentin for a position at “Q”. Duffy, who had originally been appointed for a 30-day assignment, wound up staying for 50 years as Warden. He wrote several books, one of which was made into a movie: “Duffy of San Quentin”. A second, titled “88 Men and 2 Women”, chronicled the executions over which he was forced to preside. It was a clarion condemnation of capital punishment by someone intimately – too intimately – familiar with it.

Duffy abolished corporal punishment, eliminated the dungeon, fired brutal guards, and forbade the use of whips. He discontinued stool-pigeon system and de-emphasized the use of solitary confinement. He also set up an honor system. Much of this was not looked on with favor from the law enforcement and criminal justice systems.

He recognized inmates were still human beings and provided them hope for the future. He believed inmates would redeem themselves if given the chance. He found a soul mate in Dad, and they became life-long friends. Clint often visited our home in San Rafael. He lent Dad his .22 rifle to teach Tim and me how to shoot; later he gave the rifle to Tim.

Dad was charged with the responsibility of Custody and Treatment, a rehabilitative concept foreign to prisons at that time. The “lock ‘em up and throw away the key” mentality was the prevailing sentiment in the United States, reflected in the tough-guy detective and gangster movies and radio shows of that era.

So the Fitz’s said goodbye to Southern California and family ties, and made their first trek to the North. This must have been sometime shortly after I was born, because I had my first haircut by a prison barber. I had been taken to the prison’s barbershop, but apparently I raised such a fuss they brought me back home, where the barber did his work under a tree in our yard. Cantankerousness came to me naturally, apparently.

Dad was high enough in the pecking order to warrant a houseboy. Ours was Chinese, who enjoyed making “fliced licee” for us. I was later told I loved the stuff, as I do now, but there was a 20-year interlude (from the time I developed food prejudices until I had the sense to try it again) that it was not on my “approved” list. More on that later. My only memory of that time was a stroll along a low wall overlooking the San Francisco Bay. It could have been Tiburon, or perhaps simply the parking lot where visitors park to visit inmates at the prison.



Actually, it's funny how the mind plays tricks on you. For years, I really believed my earliest memory was that walk along the bay. Until I recently uncovered an old picture buried in a big pile of pictures:



I guess I just probably remembered seeing the picture. Must've been before my haircut.

We weren't at San Quentin for long before Dad was tapped for a new role: Associate Warden at the California Correctional Training Facility (CTF) at Soledad. As the name implied, CTF was to emphasize training and rehabilitation. Dad was a natural for the position.

Linda was born in San Francisco on April 3, 1947 and CTF opened sometime in 1946, so Dad must have been doing some long distance commuting (and romancing) to make everything happen. All those cons obviously didn't take the gleam from his eye.

Soledad – The “Old” Prison

Our first home at Soledad was located at the end of a short street directly opposite the prison gates. On each side of the street were Quonset huts, buildings made of corrugated steel, shaped like barrels cut down the middle and laid on their sides. There were 19 of them, 10 on one side and 9 on the other. The last one was double-length to house the Fitzharris Family: Dad, Mom, four kids, and Moner. The huts are still there, today.



Moner was Mom's mother, who came to live with us after Grandpa Staley died. I don't remember him, but he had seen me, so he must have died around the time of our move to

Soledad. I'm not sure how Moner got her nickname, possibly an adulteration of "Mother".

Moner's real name was Elizabeth Blanche ("Bessie") Staley, born in Read, Ontario on November 4, 1875, daughter of John C. Hanley and Mary McGurn. She and Grandpa (Leonard) Staley lived on Wolfe Island and, after he died, she moved to Cleveland. After a few years, she relocated to Los Angeles

The Quonsets comprised the residential area for the CTF's original staff. At that time, the facility was for minimum-security inmates. In fact, the South Facility was initially used as a camp center, which explains why our earliest vacations included camping at places like Shaver Lake and Dinky Creek, near prison forestry camps. I recall going with Dad to one of those camps and seeing a large black man nicknamed "Superman" lift the back of a 2 ½ ton Army truck sufficient to make the wheels spin and dust fly when the driver put it in gear.

But the inmates were friendly and I never feared them. Sometimes they would call me "Carrot Top", which puzzled me, since the tops of carrots are green ...

The sounds, sights and smells of a construction project were wondrous to a little boy. There was much activity just up the street: wood being sawed, fires burning in steel barrels, piles of cinder blocks and other interesting stuff. In a tin shed just to the north of the residential street, I found a place to play. There were work clothes there, smelling of sweat and tobacco. I found a pouch of Bull Durham, roll-your-own, tobacco someone had left there. Which, being a good little boy, I didn't take. Besides, at say, 4-5 years old, I wasn't very good at rolling cigarettes.

I felt I had free reign of the place. It didn't occur to me that I was under the benevolent watch of inmates and guards, as well as my family.

The Quonset's leaked, at least ours did. After all, it was no more than a double-length tin can, caulked with tar at the seams. And, I guess rust must have eventually created other spots for rain to seep in. I remember Mom walking through the house during a rainstorm, with pots and saucepans, placing them strategically under drips. Then, when the sun came out, someone from prison maintenance would show up with a pot of tar and daub some on the offending spots.

The entrance to the Quonset was on the side of the house, opening into the living room. The kitchen and dining area were to the left, and the bedrooms were to the right. Along the front of the house was a long hall, with the bedrooms open onto it. The Quonset had a brown, linoleum floor on a cement slab. The long hall with its smooth surface was the perfect venue for Suzi to practice her roller-skating, which she did regularly.

First along the hall was Moner's room, where she retired habitually after dinner. She did this both to let the family with time to ourselves, as well as for her prayers. Dad later called Moner a "living saint". She was quiet and very devout, and probably had much to do with our nightly ritual of saying the rosary as a family, on our knees. Only Moner was allowed to sit.

Next along the hall, was Mom and Dad's room. The only time I remember entering it was when I had a nightmare: I dreamed Jesus was trapped in hell with the devils and couldn't get out! Maybe I had just learned The Apostles' Creed and was struck by the phrase "He descended into hell, on the third day he arose again from the dead ...". I was so upset I climbed in their bed with them. That's the only time I ever recall doing so.



At the far end, in a "T", were the "kids' rooms": Tim's and mine in the front, Suzi's in back, separated by a laundry room. Tim and I shared a bunk bed: he always got the top bunk. The bunks had a blond wood frame supporting a single layer of metal webbing, anchored with heavy springs around the sides. A fairly thin mattress lay on top.

Consequently, the whole affair sagged when even a smallish boy would lay on one of the beds. Of course, that made Tim a tempting target from below, and the imp in me would sometimes prompt me to put my feet on the sagging lump above me and push quickly upward. Sometimes I'd do this several times in quick succession, causing a trampoline effect. Of course, if I didn't stop when Tim made dire threats that I would suffer the consequences.

The consequences could take a number of forms. One of these was a pin-down. He would get me on the floor, sitting on my stomach, his hands pinning my wrists to the floor. Then he would drool over my face, allowing his saliva to hang over me in a string, before he sucked it back in. He would make a game of seeing how far he could let the string extend before sucking it back up, enjoying me squirm underneath him. From my perspective it was like seeing the drip of doom hovering over my face.

Another consequence was the dreaded sock in the shoulder. Tim would make a big display of clenching his fist, then sticking the knuckle of the index finger out a bit, as

though it were the lethal point through my punishment would be administered. Sometimes, when he would want to keep me in check when parents were around, he would simply make the fist with the extended knuckle. We both knew what it meant.

Naturally, I was not without resources. When Tim would administer his consequences, I would run to Mom. Since Tim had three years on me, Mom felt she had to protect me. She was the Great Leveler, my trump card that kept Tim from getting carried away. It was also fun, sometimes, to “tell” on Tim when he was “doing something wrong”. Tim would also try that on me when I was the perpetrator, but Mom would admonish him for “being a tattletale”. When he would complain “... but Dave told on *me*”, she would reply “He was just reporting.” Even as a kid, I didn’t see the justice in that. Maybe that was my first lesson in justice: it isn’t always just.

I remember the laundry room well. We had an old washing machine that sloshed back and forth. It had a ringer on top, for running the wet clothes through before putting them out on a line to dry. Or, when the weather wouldn’t cooperate, we had collapsible wooden clothes racks that Mom would hang our clothes on inside the house. That washer was dangerous. There was no lid, and no way to keep little hands out of the washer during the spin cycle. My friend, Don Scanlon, lost a finger in such an occasion. And of course, we’ve all heard the expression “Don’t get your tit in a wringer.”

Mom always seemed to be washing clothes, and one of my earliest memories was going to sleep to the comforting sound of the washer, sloshing back and forth. Followed, if I was lucky, by the distant rumble of a passing freight train or the Starlight on its way to San Francisco, with its haunting whistle.

The back of the Quonset had a lawn. Beyond the lawn was a berm formed from the dirt dug out of an irrigation channel bordering the residential area. Beyond that were open fields available for planting. There was also a dirt area in our backyard, which, for some reason contained a hole large enough for a couple of kids to fit in. We covered it with plywood and it became our first “fort”.

Immediately beyond the berm at the far end of the Quonset, and separated by a row of eucalyptus trees, was a group of temporary shelters for migrant workers, “*braseros*”, who stayed long enough to help with the harvest, then moved on to the next farm. The shelters weren’t much more than sheds. They probably didn’t have plumbing or heating. This wasn’t prison property, and the strange people living there were a source of both mystery and dread to me.

Once, Tim and I decided to run away. We got as far as the irrigation ditch, where we hid for a while. But we weren’t about to cross over into the labor camp. Besides, it was almost dinnertime, so we aborted our mission. Much later, Tim admitted that Mom told him to humor me, then suggest aborting the mission. I was played!

An early memory of the Quonsets was the death of Moner. It was April 12, 1949, so I was five. According to Suzi, Mom came back from picking her and Tim up from school, to find Moner collapsed in the kitchen. She herded us outside and called the hospital. All I remember was an ambulance coming to the Quonset, two attendants wheeling

Moner out on a gurney, and we kids crouched behind the bushes “guarding” the ambulance. Mom accompanied Moner on the train back to Los Angeles, and Dad looked after us. Suzi’s memory was of Dad cooking “Toads In A Hole” (holes cut into bread, an egg poured inside, and the whole concoction fried in a pan).

Another early memory was the death of Susan Messarole. She was Tim’s age, I think. She had been sick for a while, and one day they sent her away. She never came back. Leukemia. That became a word that conjured up fear ever since.

About a mile away from the Quonsets was the prison dump. Another hole in the ground, but this one much larger. I could barely see it from our house, across the fields, and to this day think of it as the visual measure of a mile. For some reason, Tim and I thought it would be a good excursion, and this, too, was supported by our parents. In fact, we were outfitted with provisions. Dad rolled up an old Army blanket, looped the roll, tied the ends together and hung it diagonally across my body from the shoulders. Tim carried the foodstuffs. And off we went, walking down the dirt road. We made it there, looked at the dump, ate our picnic, and headed back. I wonder how many eyes were watching our progress on that hike, the first of my life. I was probably 6 or 7 at the time.

Without video games or even television, we made our own fun. There were barrels made of heavy cardboard, used for packing whoknowswhat, which fit perfectly on a Radio Flyer wagon. That became a covered wagon making its way across the prairie. Or we would take turns climbing inside the barrel while others rolled it down the street.

That was also the street where I first learned how to ride a two-wheeler. It was the usual trick: Dad steadied me on the bike as I pumped the pedals and he trotted with me. Or so I thought. When I finally looked around, he was 50 feet behind me and I was a bike rider!

We had friends our age on the street; mine were Bill Schneckloth and Donny Scanlon. On warm summer evenings, we’d invite someone over to our house (or vice versa) to “camp out” in the backyard. We’d sleep in a tent if our parents were ambitious, or just in a sleeping bag. Sometimes, one of us would get scared or mad, and go home. Usually, there were only two of us, so that would end the activity for the night. If we were able to fall asleep, we’d wake up in the morning with our bags covered with dew and the grass smelling loamy, damp and sweet. We’d go into the house where we were greeted with a breakfast of pancakes and bacon. No wonder I worked for IHOP.

Our electronic entertainment was the radio: The Shadow, Ozzie and Harriet, The Lone Ranger, Sky King, Roy Rogers, and, of course, Hopalong



Cassidy. I was a big Hoppy fan and, one Christmas, Santa rewarded me with an official Hoppy outfit, right down to his trademark longhorn skull neckerchief slide.

When we were on long trips, we would listen to a radio show until the signal faded into static. Finally, Dad or Mom would change the station to a chorus of moans from the back seat.

Another Christmas, a few years later (but not many ... and not enough), Mrs. Claus made the mistake of leaving a bow and arrow set under the tree. We're talking metal-tipped arrows, here. With points. It was bad enough when I got tired of aiming at the target in the backyard and decided to launch one over the Quonset. I went around to the front and found it embedded in our lawn. Not in someone's head, fortunately.

The real trauma happened a few days later. A block or so away from the residential area was an industrial compound that had, for some reason, yet *another* hole, this one about 3 feet deep and 10 feet in diameter. A bunch of us were playing there when Tim showed up with my bow and arrow. He demanded that we all crouch down in the hole or he would shoot an arrow at us. Bill Schneckloth, always pushing the envelope, decided to pop his head up anyway. Tim, intending to scare him by shooting over his head, managed almost a perfect hit: right in the corner of Bill's eye! Fortunately, he missed the eye and the arrow didn't enter the brain. All Bill got was a very red eye ... and I think Tim got a very red butt.

I remember encountering Tim at the Quonsets shortly after the accident and before all hell broke loose. I still remember the look in his face. I always looked up to Tim, despite the sibling rivalry, and I felt his pain. Which reminds me of the time Tim wasn't feeling well, and Mom started looking for her trusty enema bag. This seemed to be the answer to most stomach aches and fevers. Knowing how much Tim detested enemas (as did I), I hid the bag. Of course, I folded at the first stern word from Mom, and Tim got his enema anyway. But I tried. Sorta.

Soledad Grammar School

My educational career began with Mrs. Grundy's kindergarten class. This was located in a temporary building, separate from most of the other classrooms. Its crowning glory was a small merry-go-round located in the back of the classroom. It would hold 3-4 kids, and was pedal powered. I thought it was really neat. I liked Mrs. Grundy and the finger painting and the naps on the floor. But halfway through the school year, I was pulled out and put into first grade. With my March birthday, it was a bit of a toss-up as to which grade was appropriate for me. Mom opted for acceleration, and, in retrospect it worked out, but she second-guessed the decision for the next 20 years. Maybe it was because I never outgrew my naps.

Most of the next 6 years is a blur, with occasional moments of clarity.

Such as: at the start of each school year getting outfitted with a new set of clothes. But still outgrowing my socks, which, despite the fact they were the new nylon stretch ones, would tend to ride down under my heels.

Such as: Standing in the rain, protected by my bright yellow raingear, galoshes and a rain hat that snapped together under my chin. And puddles with rainbow slicks caused by droplets of oil from the cars. And crusts of ice on the puddles in the winter that you could break by stepping on them.

Such as: Riding on the school bus and mugging at my reflection in the glass. I thought I looked like Bing Crosby, when I crinkled my eyebrows together and looked crooner-like (maybe it was the big ears). Or just leaning against the window and let my head bumpity-bump as the bus rolled along.

Such as: learning to read with Dick And Jane. And Spot. Run, Spot, Run.

Such as: the old desks with tops that lifted up to access a compartment for books, initials carved on the lids and built-in inkwells. And the opportunity to actually put ink into them and use a nib to write.

Such as: the day I was asked to stand up before the class read a name of the state, and called it *Ar-Kansas*, to the merriment of the rest of the class and to my embarrassment. Sensitive kid.

Such as: the day we had a track meet, and I had my blue Cub Scout bathing suit on. As I got ready for a sprint, putting my feet in the toeholds dug into the dirt, my anxiety got the better of me and a dark wet stain appeared on the blue silken surface of the bathing suit.

Such as: the 1952 Presidential election, when the schoolyard broke into demonstrations, with half the kids chanting “We Want Eisenhower!, We Want Eisenhower!” and the other half chanting “We Want Stevenson!”. And none of us really knew what was going on.

Such as: the day I got into my one and only fist fight. I have know idea who started it or who won. I know the teachers pulled us apart, and I was in tears with anger.

Such as: several of us boys taking turns running up to the cutest girl in our grade, touch her, then run away.

Such as: the safety posters saying stuff like “Wear White After Dark” and “Don’t Walk Between Parked Cars”.

Such as: the smell of mimeograph ink on slick paper, banging blackboard erasers together and creating clouds of chalk dust.

Such as: Savings bonds and pennies put into our very own savings accounts.

Such as: the Stations of the Cross Tim and I would visit during Lent at the nearby Catholic church. At lunch period, we would set off, independently, from different points of the school. It was a walking race, to see who could get there first. We would walk quickly but casually, each keeping an eye on the other. Both of us would run when out of sight, then pretend to be walking when we could be seen. I found a shortcut through a fence behind the priest's house, and could enter from the door near the sacristy. That worked for a couple of times, until Tim caught on. Whoever got to the church first would pretend to be piously meditating in front of one of the stations, as if he had been there for a long time, but smirking inwardly.



Such as: Stuart Gronigon, my favorite classmate. Stuart had a wonderful drawing talent. At recess, we would walk around the playground, arms atop each other's shoulders, fused at the hip.

Such as: the time I ignored another friend, Bruce Chaney, then had to apologize and kowtow to him when he pulled the same stunt on me for several days.

Such as: listening to Mrs. Pruitt, our fifth grade teacher, read a chapter from a book about Davy Crockett every day during reading period. We would put our heads on the desktops and listen to her story.

And that's about it.

Religion

As previously chronicled, religion was very important our parents, and by reference, to us kids. Even when we went to the drive-in movies in Salinas, we didn't get a pass on the rosary. Either we said it before we left or we said it in the car. Maybe Moner's passing ended the tradition, because I don't remember it when we moved to the "New Prison".

While we didn't have a Catholic school, we definitely had a Catechism class. I recall:

"Who made you?" "God made me."

"Who is God?" "God is a Supreme Being Who created all things."

Etc.

I learned when I contracted venial sins, my soul filled up with little spots; when I caught a mortal one, the whole thing turned black. And confession was like the washing machine in the Quonset, without the spin cycle. In retrospect, I guess it did have a spin cycle.

Donny Scanlon and I were in the same Catechism class. One afternoon, we got to go inside the confessional, which was the kind that just had a velvet curtain for privacy. Donny was ushered into one booth and I was told to kneel in the other. I stage-whispered, “Hey, Donny!” But he was busy whispering to Fr. McGoldrick. I didn’t know the space between the booths was occupied. The next thing I know, a little door slid open and Father was talking to me! I had nothing memorable to say.



At least he wasn’t as bad as Father O’Meara at St. Raphael’s, who was old, retired, deaf and crotchety, and who would yell “WHAT DID YOU SAY? YOU DID WHAT??” as you mumbled your most embarrassing transgressions. No one with any smarts stood in line for Father O’Meara’s confessional. Unless it was Easter and the other lines were a mile long.

But that’s another story.

Where was I? Lessee. The next day I was dressed in a white suit, complete with white shoes, for my First Communion.

I looked like a mini version of Colonel Saunders, sans the white hair and beard, with Donny Scanlon next to me looking much more casual. I was moving right up the sacraments.



Next thing I know, Tim and I have been volunteered to be altar boys. We’re sitting in the priest’s house and Fr. McGoldrick is filling our little minds with latin:

Confiteor Deo omnipotenti, beatae Mariae semper Virgini, beato Michaeli Archangelo, beato Joanni Baptistae, sanctis Apostolis Petro et Paulo, omnibus Sanctis, et vobis fratres, quia peccavi nimis cogitatione verbo, et opere: mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa. Ideo precor beatam Mariam semper Virginem, beatum Michaellem Archangelum, beatum Joannem Baptistam, sanctos Apostolos Petrum et Paulum, omnes Sanctos, et vos fratres, orare pro me ad Dominum Deum nostrum.

Or, my personal favorite, the Suscipiat:

Suscipiat Dominus sacrificium de manibus tuis ad laudem et gloriam nominis sui, ad utilitatem quoque nostram, totiusque Ecclesiae suae sanctae.

It kind of rolled off the tongue. There we were: up there with the main man, and we had our own soliloquies! And that's not all. As we knelt up on the altar, we had functions to play: the boy on "The Book" (left) side climbed the steps, took the missal and its stand, bowed, descended the steps to the center, genuflected, re-climbed the steps and placed it on the right side of the altar. Not exactly efficient or necessary, but it kept us occupied. Meanwhile, Mom was in the congregation, praying I wouldn't trip on my cassock or drop the missal (which looked massive in my eight-year old hands). The Book server also got to present cruets of wine and water, with accompanying towel, to the priest as he washed his fingers.

But the "Bell" side was the cool one. At Our Lady of Solitude, the bells were actually electric chimes, activated by three keys embedded in the altar steps. At the appropriate times, the boy on this side got to play the chimes. He also got to accompany Father McGoldrick to the altar rail, positioning the paten under each communicant's chin. We used to fight over who got the Bell side.

Being an altar boy was neat, except for the "getting up for the 7:00 Mass" part. When you stood up, the whole congregation followed you. It was like being in charge. And Father McGoldrick (who later became bishop, despite his experience with "the boys from the prison") was really a great guy.

There was a time when we were in the sacristy, putting on our cassocks and surplices and being a bit noisy when Father was donning his vestments. When everything was ready, we trooped out onto the altar. In midstride, he stopped, did an about face and herded us back into the inner sanctum. There, he changed his chasuble and stole and we returned to celebrate Mass. Before he started his sermon, he explained that "the boys from the prison" had got him so distracted, he had put on the wrong vestments.

Once, he took us all to the Clyde Beatty Circus in Salinas. I marveled at Clyde, dressed in his Great White Hunter outfit snapping his whip and ordering lions around in the cage. I came home with a toy whip and a chameleon (and no, I didn't try to order the lizard around with the whip). At Christmas one year, Father gave each of us a crucifix covered with Mother of Pearl that I thought was magnificent. It still hangs in our house today.

Not quite as magnificent, though.

Later, when we moved to San Rafael, I was again recruited to the altar boy pool. The age requirement at St. Raphael's was 11, and I had already been serving (including weddings and funerals, Stations of the Cross, Benediction and Veneration of the Blessed Sacrament) for three years. Father Knapp marveled at my proficiency.

The "New Prison"

In 1951, the first real prison opened. The "old" prison, which I mentioned previously, was really a camp center administered by San Quentin, was now titled the South Facility, and the new one was officially known as the Central Facility. Later, in 1958 (after we moved on), the North Facility was added. But to us kids, there was the New Prison and the Old Prison.



From a family perspective, the New Prison was a big step up in living standards, as it offered permanent housing for key staff members. We moved into a brand new, 3-bedroom house with a two-car detached garage and hardwood floors. We had a big backyard that bordered on a field cultivated by the prison. There was a big area for playing and plenty of room to romp and roam and get into mischief. I'll get into the mischief, but first let me introduce our neighbors:

Dr. & Mrs. Reinartz – He was a retired Brigadier General as well as an MD before coming to Soledad as a resident physician. A very dignified gentleman with a waxed Kaiser moustache, he received recognition as a Pioneer In Space Medicine for his research into the effects of weightlessness on the human body. This was at least a decade before the first man in space.

The Schneckloth's – The two boys were Bill (my age) and Rick (Tim's age). That made for some interesting rivalries. Father Merle was also Associate Warden, and Dad's colleague.

The Scanlon's – My friend, Donny, was another "boy from the Prison" who served Mass. He was also the one who lost the finger in the washing machine. He'd wiggle the stump, which was creepy.

The Snodgrass's – Jimmy was a year or two older than me. I didn't have much to do with him, but do remember having a bath with him at his house (which his mother sanctioned). I thought it weird then, and still do. Which may be a reason why I kept my distance...

It didn't take long for the mischief to start. One night, Dad and Mom went somewhere leaving Suzi in charge. Tim started chasing me around a circuit that consisted of the kitchen, through a hallway, through the living room and back to the kitchen. I reached a stretch of hardwood flooring in the living room, and, as I turned the corner toward the kitchen, my stocking feet went out from under me. I landed with a thud, but felt OK until Tim yelled and pointed at my thumb ... which was tilted at an odd angle. I screamed. Tim flew over the as-yet unsodded lawn to Dr. Reinartz's house, next door. The good doctor pulled my dislocated thumb back into position and splinted it.

I think that episode may have been why – the next time Dad and Mom went out – they hired a babysitter: a boy only a year or two older than Suzi on whom she had a crush. She was mortified. That was probably in 1953, because the song "Tell Me A Story, Then I'll Go To Bed" became popular. Whenever it came to the chorus "Tell me about the birds and bees, how to make a chicken sneeze", Suzi would giggle knowingly. I would query her on the reasons for her mirth and she would refer me to Mom. Who demurred.

When the landscaping was complete, it included colorful flower beds and a lot of lawn. Two low-lying hothouses were in the back and the whole property was bounded by a hedge of mallow bushes. The bushes had a soft, broad leaf with a stem that could be plucked and chewed on. They were wide enough to create shade you could lie under. And attracted bees you could zap with a rubber band.

One day, my friend Bill and I decided to play space man in the backyard. Our helmets were plastic bags. In fairly short order, the bags would steam up and we used the colorful flowers to guide our way on the planet. And, yes, the breathing became a bit difficult, too. Somehow, we survived.

Each residence had a permanent clothesline with 5-6 cotton rope strands about 7-8 feet long. One time, we decided to lay a sleeping bag on the lines, and then climb on it like a nest. Unfortunately, the cotton rope stretched, and it wasn't long before the "nest" was only inches from the ground. Bad idea.

A popular game was "Bang, Bang Shoot 'Em Up", a cross between "Hide And Seek" and "Cops And Robbers". It was played after dusk, and our yard and the Schnecko's next door offered many hiding places in the dark. This was one time when kids from various age groups played together, and 5-6 of us would look for the opportunity to sneak "home" before being shot.

Dad ordered a swing to be erected in our yard, the frame comprised of steel piping about 10 feet high. It became a trapeze for circuses or, after shimmying up the pipe, a perch to view the surroundings and from which to play Taps on the trumpet. In addition to amazing trapeze and clown acts, circuses included Patrick the Wonder Dog, a strong man with a wax mustache bending an old piece of hose and a fearless tightrope walker (a caterpillar nudged along with a Popsicle stick).



At the back of the backyard was a wooden structure about 4 feet by 4 feet by 4 feet. It was open on one side and had a roof, like a box turned on its side. I don't know who built it or why, but it became our playhouse. Sometimes, it was a fort; sometimes it was a rocket ship. Sometimes, it was a place to puff on a cigarette swiped from Dad's pack.

On the other side of the dirt road behind our residence was a large field providing more opportunities for fun and games. One year, it was planted with barley. When the stalks were about 2 feet high, we would enter the field, leaving the edges untouched. Then we would get on all fours, using our forearms to crush the growth as we moved into the field. The results were mazes worthy of England's crop circles. When we'd lie down we couldn't be seen from the street. The barley stalks would separate from their sheaths, revealing sweet shoots that also made good chewing. I'm sure the officials weren't pleased with the damaged crops, but we never had any repercussions. Maybe the field was rented out to a farmer.

Since I'm on the subject of farming, I should mention a couple of common sights in the Salinas Valley (aka America's Salad Bowl). The first were the crop dusters, old biplanes that would dive down to maybe 20 feet above a field, dump its pesticides along the rows of crops in a cloud of poison, then quickly climb for another pass. Windbreaks and telephone wires that bordered many of the fields made this business hazardous. My first flight was in one of these. There was a place in Salinas that rented rides, and Mom bought each of us a 10-minute flight.

The second common sight was edible roadside litter. Back in those days, Highway 101 was a 2-lane road, not the Interstate it is today. During harvest season, large trucks loaded with lettuce heads would rumble from field to market. As they bounced along, an occasional head would be flung from the open truck bed, landing on the road's shoulder. Mom (and many others) would stop the car, jump out and grab the lettuce for tonight's salad! Could you imagine trying that stunt, today?

And since I'm on the subject of highway sights, here's a nod to an advertising scheme that defines a generation: the Burma Shave signs. Burma Shave was a popular brushless shaving cream in the middle of the twentieth century. Here's a description of their roadside advertising campaign from Wikipedia.

Typically, six consecutive small signs would be posted along the edge of highways, spaced for sequential reading by passing motorists. The last sign was almost always the name of the product.

Each sign included part of an interesting couplet, such as:

The wolf / Is shaved / So neat and trim / Red Riding Hood / Is chasing him / Burma-Shave

The big blue tube's / Just like Louise / You get / A thrill / From every squeeze / Burma-Shave

Proper / Distance / To him was bunk / They pulled him out / Of some guy's trunk / Burma-Shave

Slow down, Pa / Sakes alive / Ma missed signs / Four/ And five / Burma Shave

The campaign started in 1925 and ended in 1963, a victim of the newly constructed higher-speed Interstate System. Anyone born later than, say, 1970 probably has never heard of the Burma Shave signs.

But I digress.

The dirt road between our residence and the field ended at a windbreak of eucalyptus trees. Beyond the windbreak was an apricot orchard. Both offered still more opportunities for adventure and/or mischief. We had our barley field forts, but the windbreak allowed us to have tree forts, too.

Bill, Donny and I comprised the Fly Gang; Tim and Rick had their gang, too, which name I don't recall. Each gang had its designated tree (although we didn't mark it in the typical canine fashion ... only because we hadn't figured that out) and there was some sparring going on between the gangs ... usually consisting of apricot fights. By the way, eucalyptus trees don't make for very good tree forts, as their branches are mostly vertical rather than spread out, like an oak or elm. So cover was sparse.

The orchard provided fruit to eat, as well as ammunition. There was a processing shed that contained hooked cutting knives, but for some reason we stayed away from them as weapons. Go figure. By the way, don't eat green apricots.

One year, there was a bumper crop of onions in the Salinas Valley, and the farmers were losing their shirts in the marketplace. The prison was approached to see if they would take the excess, and The Onion Barn was born. That's what we called the shed designated to store sacks and sacks that year. They filled the barn, which was perhaps 20 feet by 30 feet and the sacks were stacked 8-10 feet high. Another adventure!

The shed was located in a storage area between the Old and New Prisons. It didn't take long for us to consider the possibilities. We restacked the sacks in ways that allowed us to create burrows and tunnels in the onion pile. Pretty cool! And we were lucky the thing didn't collapse on us.

Which was similar to another structure we created with sod. A new baseball park was being created for the residents. A lush lawn was planted and the pitcher's mound and base paths were cut out, leaving a pile of sod in the outfield.

Hmm. Seeing the potential, we restacked the sod to form walls, layered a sheet of plywood to create a second story, then more



sod walls, then another sheet of plywood, then a sod roof. That's Linda poking out the skylight. We were very proud of our workmanship. Uncle Jimmy, who was visiting at the time, surveyed the results. Dubiously. Unfortunately, the sod hut mysteriously disappeared the next day.

Between the baseball field and the guardhouses were the Bachelor Officers' Quarters (BOQ's), long one-story apartments for the single officials. Adjacent to the BOQ's was an L-shaped carport capable of accommodating 15-20 cars. The appealing thing about the carport was its long, flat roof. One day, Bill and I (Bill, actually ... seriously!) had the inspiration to ride our bikes on the roof.

We leaned one bike on the side of the carport and Bill stood on the seat to get a grip on the roof. Then I got underneath to give him a boost up. Next, I handed up the front tire of his bike, which he hauled up. I'm not sure how I was supposed to get myself up, but it didn't matter because about that time a prowler car drove up with Bill's father inside! I guess it wasn't a good idea to try that right below a guard tower...

Bill was a piece of work. Once, we took a hacksaw to Linda's tricycle, cutting it just behind the front forks. When we took off the seat, it left us with a curved hollow shaft connected to two wheels and a rear running board. We somehow connected that to the back of a bike, and we could tow a kid behind us as we rode around.

Our most notorious escapade (Bill's, actually) involved burning down the Schneckloth's garage. It was innocent enough. As I mentioned earlier, each residence had a detached 2-car garage. At the rear of each garage was a storage loft. Bill's loft included a worn-out sofa with the stuffing sticking out. We happened to be up there one day when Bill – who happened to have some matches with him – decided to demonstrate the interesting properties of the cotton-like stuffing when lit. It would glow when you blew on it, then just smoldered when you stopped. We thought that was pretty cool, stomped on the stuffing and departed.

Later that evening, there were shouts of FIRE!!!! Suzi, hearing the commotion, ran out the door with a pan of water, only to see the garage fully engulfed in flames! Bye-bye sofa. Bye-bye garage. Bye-bye car and boat and whatever else the Schneckloth's had stored there.

After the fire department had left and things cooled down, Mom and I took a look through the rubble. The framing was still in place, and I observed a broken light bulb hanging from one of the charred rafters. I suggested to Mom that maybe the broken light created a short circuit that caused the fire. She bought that until I finally “fessed up” in my thirties. She was scandalized. Some things are better left unshared, I guess, when your mother is as naïve as that.

Speaking of fire departments, I'm reminded of a time when our Cub Scout pack visited the prison firehouse. The firemen (all trustees) showed us the engine and the facilities. There was a living quarters upstairs, and they really slid down a fire pole to get to the engines. I remember Dad joining us, decked out in his trademark fedora (I think he was

the last American male to wear one). I was so proud of him that day, basking in the glow of his importance.

Speaking of trustees, it's probably worth noting that many inmates were on minimum security status, mostly living at the Old Prison. They were allowed to sign out to work in the fields or to do gardening in the residential and public areas beyond the prison yards. We had a trustee assigned to our house named Romero. He was nice to the kids and made a rubber band gun for us. This consisted of a piece of wood cut in an "L" shape with a notch at the front of the "barrel" and a clothespin taped to the handle. A rubber band was looped into the notch and stretched to the clothespin where it was secured. Then it was just point the gun and squeeze the clothes pin handle to make the rubber band shoot.

Maybe not the best thing for a con to instill in young minds, but it was fun.

Discipline

Despite the fun we had, we were also subject to rules. The first I remember involved The Calendar. Dad believed in Kitchen Police (KP), and each kid was assigned a rotating job after dinner. One would wash the dishes; another would dry; a third put them away. Maybe this was before Linda was old enough to participate or maybe I don't have all my facts straight. It also could be that on the fourth day, a kid rested.

Each of our initials would be written on each day of The Calendar, designating which function was assigned to whom. The jobs rotated each day.

Despite the rowdiness heretofore described, we were basically good kids. Probably because of all those rosaries and Masses and stations of the cross. We didn't want our souls to fill up with black stuff.

But not always. There were two levels of punishment for transgressions. If it were a venial offense, we were put "In Boundaries". This was today's equivalent of a Time Out, but we were restricted to the limits of our yard. And no fraternizing over the mallow bushes with Bill next door.

Mortal offenses involved corporal punishment, i.e. spankings. Dad would designate a time the infliction would take place, in order to let us sweat out the interim period. I think he got that idea from guys on Death Row in San Quentin. But there was no Governor for us. The best we could do would be to hide comic books in our pants to mitigate the blow. For there only needed to be one.

The worst injustice was when Dad would intone "This hurts me more than it hurts you." Where did he get that stuff?

Early Vacations

It hadn't dawned on me, but I guess prison employees weren't highly paid. We lived well and wanted for nothing, but there were no trips to Hawaii or even Disneyland. Well, Disneyland hadn't been built yet, anyway.

Most of our vacations involved camping. The first one I remember was at Shaver Lake, which was pretty primitive. It was adjacent to one of the State Forestry Camps where volunteer trustees served as fire fighters. I recall we borrowed a kayak from one of Dad's colleagues, which we tried to paddle around the stumps sticking out of the water. The lake was pretty new and hadn't reached its planned depth.



Then there was Hume Lake, also in the Sierras. This was also artificial and the site of a Christian Camp. The area included developed campsites, so this was civilized compared to Shaver. The first time we went to Hume, we arrived just as a downpour was starting. Dad was trying to erect an old army tent, which involved connecting tent beams comprised of heavy steel pipes, putting a large canvas tent over the frame and stretching and pegging a dozen adjustable ropes to pull it tight. Of course, the ground wasn't level, and it was raining, so water would run right under the sides of the tent.

Fortunately for us, a Presbyterian minister, Dr. Stein, and his family had the adjacent campsite. He came over to help Dad put up the tent and dig ditches around it to divert the water. The Stein's had two boys, Larry and Carl, and our families became good friends. They taught us some neat campfire songs, such as:

Once there was a Dutchman
His name was Johnny Verbeck
He made the finest sausages and sauerkraut and speck.
He made the finest sausages that'll evermore be seen,
Till one day he invented a sausage makin' machine.

Chorus:

Oh, Mr. Johnny Verbeck how could you be so mean,
I told you, you'd be sorry for inventin' that machine
now all the neighbors cats and dogs will nevermore be seen
For they'll be ground to sausages in Johnny Verbeck's machine.

One day a boy came walkin' a walkin' thru the door.
He bought a pound of sausages and laid them on the floor.
The boy began to whistle, He whistled a merry tune.
And all the little sausages went dancin' round the room.

Chorus:

One day the machine got busted the darn thing wouldn't go,
So Johnny Verbeck he climbed inside to see what made it so.
His wife she had a nightmare, went walkin' in her sleep
She gave it a yank a heck of crank and Johnny Verbeck was meat!

The rides to these places were interminable. We'd take the old Packard because it had a big back seat and jump seats folded out from the backs of the front seat to create two more seats. We had to cross the San Joaquin Valley to get to the Sierras.

The Valley was very hot in the summer and we had no air conditioning in the car. So we kept a lookout for the foot-long hot dog stands located along the roads. They were easy to see: bright orange and shaped like an orange. Besides hot dogs, they served fresh squeezed, ice cold orange juice! Mmmm. Perfect for an overheated traveler.

To keep us occupied, Mom would buy at least one copy of each of our favorite comic books, as well as lots of the Classic Comics, too. They were fine until we started up the curvy mountain roads, which after a while created queasy tummies.

Other diversions were the radio shows: Hopalong Cassidy, The Lone Ranger, Sky King, etc. We'd get deeply involved in the stories, only to drive out of signal range. As the station became more and more staticky, we knew we wouldn't hear the ending.

Another favorite camping area was Big Sur. Not only did it offer camping amid redwoods, but it was only an hour away from home. Big Sur was also used by the scouts, so we also visited for camporees there, too. And since Dad was active in the Monterey Boy Scout Council, that was a natural place for us to go.

Camping those days evolved into a major production. The army tent stayed, as it allowed army cots to be assembled for Mom and Dad. It's good to be King. And Queen. And there were air mattresses, which we blew by mouth. When we were lucky, we got the one that didn't sag in the middle of the night.

An umbrella tent was also erected for Suzi and Linda. And one or two pup tents sprouted for Tim and me. So we had a little tent city at our campsite. We'd acquired a parachute, strung above us among the redwoods for shade ... as if that were necessary among the tall trees. And we acquired several heavy tarps that smelled like creosote that were hung around the perimeter to protect us from prying eyes. And there was a hammock strung between two trees. It was a swing for us and a place Dad liked to doze. As I said, I come from a long line of nappers.

Mom, on the other hand, was a Type A+ personality with energy to burn. So she would bring along her ancient Royal typewriter to compose publicity stories for her myriad clubs and committees or to write letters. And the peace and quiet of the woods was punctuated by the rat-a-tat-tat of her typewriter.

Even when camping, the kids had chores. One would wash dishes. One would dry. Another would fill up the canvas water bags from the faucet down the road. And another would sweep out the tents.

Those were fun times. Tim would go fishing and sometimes catch something! None of us were crazy about cleaning them, though (especially the catfish that never seemed to die until you nailed the head to a plank. Not a pleasant sight. I do remember pan fried trout fried in bread crumbs over a campfire. I have epicurean tastes.

I would explore. Usually, that would result in poison oak doses that would swell my eyes shut, invade my nose, cover my arms and hands and puff up my dinky. Usually, that seemed to happen on the last day, because I don't remember it stopping us. Or maybe I just shortened our vacation.

Arroyo Seco

During the summer, when nights were warm and days were long, we'd often drive up to Arroyo Seco, nestled in the foothills of the Las Padres National Forest, at the south end of the Carmel Valley. It was about a half hour away from Soledad, so it allowed for some impromptu picnics at the campground, located along the river. There were raised tent bases around the area, although I never saw any tents on them. They were concrete and about 4 feet off the ground. Maybe the river running through the Arroyo Seco (which means "Dry Gulch" in Spanish) got a lot higher during rainy seasons.

When we were there, the river was pretty shallow and placid. One part had a swimming hole with a rope attached to a tree, allowing you to swing out and plunge into the water. But even the swimming hole wasn't more than 6 feet deep at its deepest. One year, the river/creek was quarantined due to a polio epidemic (a frightful disease that once put kids in iron lungs or crippled them, but now is almost completely eliminated due to the miraculous Salk vaccine).



While the kids would run around, the adults would enjoy themselves at a campsite, setting up a fire in a fire pit, laying out picnic provisions, enjoying a late afternoon cocktail and doing the stuff adults do. Frequent guests included Dr. and Mrs. Reinartz.

Mom would set out appetizers, and I remember that was the first time I ever tried black olives, which I decided I loved. Also on one of those outings, I had another life-changing epiphany. Whenever we had chicken, it was portioned out in a standard issue: Suzi got a breast; Tim got a thigh (I think ... or maybe he got the other breast), I got a wing or two; and Linda got a drumstick. At one picnic, I accidentally bit into a breast and yelled “Hey! These are GOOD!” and the delicate balance of chicken apportionment was forever changed.

After dinner, more wood was put on the campfire and we’d roast marshmallows. Each kid would stick one on each of the metal 2-pronged forks used for such purposes. It was an art to get the marshmallow golden brown and sufficiently gooey to make a good S’More (a sandwich consisting of Graham Crackers, Hershey’s chocolate and a hot marshmallow that was supposed to melt the chocolate but never did). Or, a well-toasted marshmallow could be popped directly into one’s mouth to let the sugary goo permeate one’s tastebuds.

One fateful night, I told Dr. Reinartz that I was toasting a marshmallow especially for him. In my exuberance, I positioned my fork too close to the fire and the mallow burst into flame! I blew on the blazing torch and the fire went out. But there, on the end of my fork ... my pronounced gift to the good doctor/general/pioneer of space medicine ... was a charred blob starting to ooze off the fork.

In a gracious gesture, Dr. Reinartz pulled the mess off the fork and stated “This is just how I like my marshmallows.” My pride was saved! He liked my gift! And my life became much easier. Because whenever I toasted a marshmallow for him thereafter, all I had to do was plunge it into the fire until it burst into flame. I’d let it burn awhile, then I’d blow it out and present it to Dr. Reinartz.

Christmas Pictures

Thanksgiving was a time of anticipation and dread. On the plus side was a delicious turkey dinner with all the fixin’s. When I was old enough, I was given the chore of grinding oranges, cranberries and sugar in a meat grinder to make the cranberry relish (which Suzi still serves at Thanksgiving and is still my favorite).

OK, now the dread part. We couldn’t partake of that delicious dinner until we had posed for Christmas pictures to be included in the Christmas letter, which I will describe a bit later. First, there had to be a theme. One year, we were dragging the tree into the house. Of course, it was supposed to be cold, so we were dressed in sweaters despite the balmy weather. On another, we were posed around the Christmas tree with fake presents.

Now these were the days before digital, self-focusing, self-adjusting, self-timing, point-and-shoot cameras. First, Dad had to wave his light meter over each of us like a Geiger counter. Then he’d measure the distance between the tips of our noses to the lens of the camera. Then he’d make adjustments on his Leica, mounted on a tripod. If this was a kids-only shot, he’d try to make sure we were all smiling and snap the shot. Then, he’d do it again. And again. And again. It was now or never. And “never” was not a part of Mom’s vocabulary.

If we were all in the picture, he'd try to use the unreliable manual timer dangling by a cable from the camera. Sometimes it would trip the shutter; sometimes it wouldn't. We'd wait, frozen in time for a snap; then, when Dad figured it was useless, he'd go back to check and, of course, that was when the flash would go off. Many years later, this became a favorite gag of Tim's when he inherited the responsibility for Christmas pictures for a much larger extended family with a better – but not perfect – camera.

For a kid drooling for dinner, this was agony. I was not a good model, and pictures of me smiling were rare. Which just delayed dinner.

There is much more to the Christmas pictures story, but I will postpone that until the San Rafael episode.

Activities

You need to know a few child-rearing principles that guided my mother throughout our formative years. First, and foremost, we were all going to college. That was understood, and it was a conscious decision on her part for us to take it for granted too. So it was never “If you go to college”, it was always “When you go to college”. It worked. Second, she would enroll us in every achievement-oriented activity she could get us to into. Third, obedience and decorum were important. She would tell me an A in Citizenship was just as important as an academic grade. Maybe more so. Maybe not, but very important.

In addition to providing us with educational “toys” such as a kid's chemistry lab and an optical lab where we could perform harmless but interesting experiments, we had many other enrichment experiences:

Scouting – Suzi was a Girl Scout; Tim and I were Cubs, Boy Scouts and Explorers, from Webelos through Eagle. Tim and I also received the Ad Altare Dei awards (a Catholic scouting award, latin for “To The Altar of God”) and were inducted into the Order Of The Arrow. More about that later. Linda was a Blue Bird and Campfire Girl.

4H – This was a big deal in the agricultural Salinas Valley. Tim and Suzi were active leaders. Suzi was renowned for her canned fruits and jams as well as her yummy pies. She won many, many blue ribbons in local fairs. Just recently, I learned one of her pies got spilled in the car going to the fair. She won first place, anyway. She also sewed dresses from patterns. Tim made killer displays for the fairs, taking advantage of his artistic skills.

Mom tried hard to get me interested, but I was having too much fun with all those adventures. She tried to make me a beekeeper. The prison provided hives, tended by the trustees. She bought me beekeeping stuff (a smoker used to get the bees out of the hives, a special beekeeper mask, long gloves).

She even bought a used honey extractor, a 50-gallon drum with a centrifuge. You'd insert honey combs vertically into the fin-like centrifuge after scraping off the crusty

outer layer of the comb. When you turned the crank, the centrifuge would spin and the honey would fly out into the drum. The combs wouldn't be destroyed and the bees could start all over again without expending the energy to make new combs. That was interesting, but the inmates maintained the hives, Suzi canned the honey and I played. And chewed on honeycombs. Sorry, Mom.

Music – Suzi learned the accordion and the saxophone, and played in the Gonzales High School Band. Tim became a trombone player, and I took on the trumpet. Our music teacher was Eddie Tonini. He also conducted a youth orchestra, and I remember playing in it on a radio station in Pacific Grove, I believe. Linda tried the drums, but that didn't go very far. Kinda like me with the bees.

Dance – Dance lessons were in Salinas, so that was a trek. Mom tried me out with ballet, and that lasted about one lesson. Or maybe I was tagging along at one of Suzi's lessons. And I think there may have been a tap lesson, too. But obviously, it didn't make much of an impression. Well, nice try again, Mom.

Sports – Tim and I were enrolled in Little League. Tim was pretty good, but I was a disaster. I never really got much training in how to throw a ball, which is pretty important in baseball. Despite the baseball diamond a block from our house, and frequent pick-up games with the neighboring kids, I wasn't much of a batter, either. When Tim played in a game in Soledad, I was under the stands, exploring.

At some point, the coach felt sorry for me, I guess. I was given my own uniform! Someone dropped me off after practice and I dressed myself. No one was home, so I fell asleep on the couch (did I mention I come from a long line of nappers?). When Mom and Dad arrived, they had to take a picture of me ... I was so *cute!*



While I got a football uniform for Christmas, there was no such thing as Pop Warner in our area, nor was there any interest among my friends. Besides, as this picture will show, my hands were too small to grip the ball. I look less like a quarterback and more like a waiter on the Titanic!



Swimming – There was an indoor Municipal Swimming Pool in Salinas, 30 miles north of Soledad. Mom would drive us there to take lessons provided by the Red Cross. We started with blowing bubbles under water, then the paddle boards and finally swimming. We learned the breaststroke, the Australian Crawl, the backstroke, the side stroke. Over the years, we graduated to Junior and Senior Lifesaving, which included jumping in the pool fully clothed, disrobing, then hauling a flailing person to the side of the pool. Mom didn't give up until we were Senior Lifeguards in San Rafael.

Performing – Now THAT hit my “On Button”! In addition to the circuses, I made puppets and a puppet theater and put on shows. And I fell in love with magic. It all started with a simple trick Dad brought home from a trip. He put a penny on his wrist, covered it with a matchbook and it turned into a dime!! I was hooked!!

From that point on, birthdays and Christmas included ever-more-sophisticated apparatus magic tricks. I had a special table with secret pockets; a silk scarf that changed colors when passed through the hand; The Devil’s Jug, which filled with water every time I emptied it; a wrist guillotine; the Chinese Linking Rings; a pitcher that allowed me to pour milk into a paper cone, then make it disappear; a silver sphere that I could make float above a scarf I held under it. And a lot more. Mom bought me a top hat and a red vest. Suzi made me a high-colored cape, with black linen on the outside and red satin on the inside. I was in business.

I collected a library of magic books, explaining the secrets of such master magicians as Harry Houdini, Harry Blackstone Sr., Thurston and Milbourne Christopher. Those complicated instructions were often a bit above my reading level, and stretched my ability to convert abstract instructions into physical movements. Nowadays it’s easy: the tricks are demonstrated in detail in DVD’s.

Another interest was ventriloquism. I started out with a simple Jerry Mahoney doll that had a string at the back of its neck to make the mouth move. Again, I was given books and learned the art of “throwing” my voice, which is basically speaking without moving your lips. Next, I received a real dummy, with a hollow interior and a head on a stick that I could make swivel to look at me as we conversed. Big improvement.

I took both my magic and ventriloquism acts to amateur shows in the area. Maybe Mom converted it into a 4H project. I don’t recall. I stayed with these hobbies well into high school. In fact, I still dabble in magic from time to time.

So Long, Soledad

For a kid, life was pretty good at Soledad. Not a lot of kids lived on the prison reservation, but there were enough to form strong friendships. I remember riding bikes on a particular summer evening. We decided Friday nights were “mystery nights” and we would try to discover and figure out some mystery ... like some strange sounds or lights in the sky.

And I remember stopping at one point and telling Bill “I think the perfect age is 10” (I think I said the same thing about being 9). Looking back, I didn’t realize how right I was. Being old enough to be semi-autonomous but young enough to not be burdened with puberty and/or a lot of social and philosophical questions was pretty cool.

But careers march on, and it was time to move back to San Quentin. And my life would change immeasurably.