

Twenty-Seven IFs in Life on My Path to Becoming a Teacher Fresno – Family Background - Two Goals and One IF

IFs

The IFs that determine the directions of all of our lives reveal their outcomes only as we look back over time. How could I know at the time that my being kneed in the ribs at a football practice in high school would be an essential first step towards my becoming a teacher? How could either Mary or I know that the fact that I played water polo would lead directly to her writing her first book? How could we know in advance the many other IFs waiting to determine the directions of our lives? This chapter and [Chapter 3 – The Four Years In-Between](#) tell the stories of the many IFs that marked my path to becoming a teacher. Later chapters recount the many IFs that determined the kind of teachers both Mary and I would become.

But First, a Little Family Background



This picture above appeared in The Fresno Bee (Fresno's local newspaper) on Mother's Day in 1944. Pictured are me, my three brothers, our mother, and our dog Hoppy. We sons are wearing shirts our mother made for us. Number-one son Paul is the one pretending to

be pouring. I am number-two son holding the empty cup. Number-three son Jack is holding the olives. Number-four son Bill is staring at the cameraman's assistant, wondering what he is doing there.

My brothers and I take pride in being the third generation of four-boy Lorton families. The fact that our generation was all born within a five-year span would play an important part in my life's choices. However, I do not count that fact as an IF in my life. Family is not an IF. Family is just the starting point for all of us.

The picture above was taken in the backyard of our family home. My parents did not build this home, but our family was its first occupants.



Our home was directly across the street from Fresno High School's athletic fields. Our elementary school was within easy walking distance, just three blocks from the other end of Fresno High. Cochran's Ice Cream Shop, our favorite shop of all the many shops nearby, was just across the street from the far end of Fresno High's athletic fields. This home of ours was a perfect place for us to be.

Before There Were IFs, There Was a Plan

Early in life, I set two goals for myself. My first goal was playing End on any football team I might be on, high school, college and, maybe even pro. Every weekend during football season, starting as soon as my youngest brother could catch a ball and run, my father, my brothers and I would cross the street and play football on the school's football field.

Our football games were two against two, with my father serving as quarterback for each side in turn. The games were simple. Two brothers running out for a pass with the other two defending. Four downs to score or not score before the ball changed hands and the defenders became the receivers. We played basketball and baseball during their

seasons, but neither sport interested me. Football was all I wanted to play, and End was my position.

Second Goal

I set my second goal when I was nine years old. The date I set that goal was Saturday, November 20, 1948. Thanksgiving that year was on Thursday, November 25th. My family and my mother's sister's family had traveled to Burlingame to spend Thanksgiving week with the sisters' parents, who were, of course, my grandparents.

At that time, the traditional Stanford-California Big Game was played the Saturday before Thanksgiving. Both my father and my aunt's husband Jim had attended Stanford. My father and Uncle Jim were taking my brother Paul and me to our very first Big Game, which was being held in Berkeley that year. Berkeley is just a short drive from Burlingame.

Keeping us company on our ride to Berkeley was Carroll Schmitz, the son of my Grandparents' next-door neighbor. Carroll was currently attending Cal. Paul and I knew Carroll and his family quite well. Mrs. Schmitz (aka Carroll's mother), Paul, and I often worked on putting together jigsaw puzzles. She had also taught both Paul and me to play Whist, the card game from which Bridge evolved.

On the ride from Burlingame to Berkeley, Carroll encouraged Paul and me to root for Cal, while Uncle Jim and my father pushed for us to root for Stanford. At the entrance to the stadium there was a souvenir stand. At that stand, my father bought me a plastic red and white ribbon with a tiny football and helmet hanging from it and pinned it on my shirt. Right then I decided to root for Stanford. And from that point forward, I also set Stanford as the college I would be attending.

Polio

Polio is a condition that can leave people with permanent physical disabilities. Polio was a dark cloud hanging over all my years in Fresno. Polio was at epidemic levels in the United States from 1942 through 1953, with a peak in the Summer of 1953, the summer my family and I left Fresno.

Swimming was a prime suspect because polio outbreaks were most common in the Summer. While research first reported in 1946 was said to eliminate swimming pools as a culprit, the research did little to alleviate people's fears of public pools. As a precaution, during my time in Fresno, every public pool in which my family and I swam was completely drained of water on a weekly basis and then refilled.

Swimming or Splashing About

My brothers and I learned to swim without receiving any formal instruction. My dog paddling eventually evolved into learning to hold my breath so I could put my head down and pull my arms out of the water between strokes like I could see other children doing.

While what my brothers and I were doing would technically be called swimming, it was more like we were just splashing about enjoying the water. Swimming was just a means of getting us safely back to the side of the pool after doing cannonballs off the diving board. For us, swimming was cannonballs, games of tag, playing Sharks and Minnows, or sliding down the water slide if the pool had one.

Our summers were spent clamoring for more and more pool time. I was aware of the existence of polio. I had seen pictures of children using iron lung devices. My parents, particularly my mother, always pointed out to us any child they saw wearing the leg braces that were associated with polio. However, none of that was of any concern to me. No one I knew personally had polio, so why should I be worried?

A Vacant Lot and a New Home

When I was in the fifth-grade, my father presented my mother with a two-acre vacant lot as a present. This lot was to be the site of our new home. When I say vacant, I mean vacant. Not a single tree. Not a single bush. For the remainder of that school year, we spent part of every weekend working on that lot to make it less vacant.

While we were planting plants, an architect drew plans for our new home and arranged for its construction. By the start of my sixth-grade year in school, our new home was ready for us.

Old Versus New

When we first moved into our house across the street from the high school, it was new and in a great location. Nearly everything was within walking distance: our school, grocery store, and other routine shopping establishments, two barber shops, play areas, and children our age living on the same block as playmates.

Our new home was not close to anything. When we first moved in, my brothers and I were allowed to finish out the school year in the schools we were then attending. Bill, Jack, and my school was three miles away. My father had to drop us off each morning on his way to work, and we had to ride a city bus home each afternoon. Our walk to the bus stop from our school for the trip home was longer than our walk from school to home had been earlier. There were also no children our age living anywhere near us.

The Main Reason

While my parents liked the idea of living in a home of their own design, the main factor for building their dream home was something we could only have in our backyard if we moved out of the city – our very own swimming pool.



Lifeguard Not Needed

The polio epidemic was the main factor in my parents wanting a pool in our backyard. Our pool meant we could swim as often as we wished without ever having to visit a public pool. However, public pools had an advantage over backyard pools like ours. Public pools had lifeguards. My brothers and I were now old enough not to need babysitters. My mother wanted to make sure we did not need a lifeguard either. She wanted to be assured that we were such good swimmers, that it would be okay for any one of us to swim in our pool even when she and my father might not be at home. My mother's response to her concern was to have her four sons take swimming lessons for the first time in our lives. We could all swim, but our version of swimming was closer to splashing than to anything prettier.

The Man with Two Pools

The swimming instructor my mother found for us was a man with two swimming pools. I don't remember his name, but I definitely remember his two pools. Not two pools next to each other. Rather, one pool on top of the other. He had one in-ground pool like we had in our backyard. He then had a second pool literally built on top of his first one. To accommodate both pools, he had a steel and cement structure built over pool number one that allowed about six feet of space between the first

pool and the bottom of pool number two. The bottom pool was completely enclosed by this steel and cement top pool structure. A single door served as the entrance to pool number one. We had our swimming lessons in pool number two.

This man with two pools was an instructor who trained competitive swimmers. We were now going to learn how to swim, not just for the sake of being very good at swimming. We were going to learn how to be very good at swimming fast. At the conclusion of our series of lessons, the instructor told my mother that, while we were all now very good swimmers, my youngest brother Bill would end up being the best of all of us. The instructor turned out to be rather prescient. My brother Bill is the only one of us to have been inducted into our high school's Hall of Fame for both swimming and water polo.

I was not at all concerned that our instructor was not as impressed with my swimming as he was with Bill's. I really enjoyed swimming, but I did not see any competitive swimming in my future. All I saw was football.

The End of Our Time in Fresno.

During my eighth-grade year, my father was transferred to his company's head office in San Francisco. He initially declined the transfer offer because his family was quite content in Fresno, and he had just built a new home there. However, the offer to triple his salary if he made the move was an effective persuader.

My father's parents lived in San Mateo, and my mother's parents lived in the neighboring city of Burlingame. Both cities were a short commute from the City. My father opted to live with my mother's parents that year because their house was better suited for a year-long house guest.

While my brothers and I finished our school year in Fresno, my father spent his weekends with us and his weekdays commuting between Burlingame and San Francisco. In the Summer of 1953, our time in Fresno came to an end.

One IF

As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the "IFs" that influence the direction of our lives only reveal their outcomes when we look back over time. The key "IF" in this chapter is the construction of that backyard pool. If that pool hadn't been added to our lives, the paths of not just me, but all my brothers, would have turned out quite differently, as you will discover in the chapters on the many "Ifs" in life that follow.