

FROM A DISTANCE



On Saturday, September 22nd, 2012 the *Merced High* Class of '62 held its 50th reunion in the Italo-American Hall, downtown *Merced California* (The same hall where Laveta and I held our wedding reception back in 1964). Of course the four of us journeyed back to Merced together. Carol & I graduated in '62, Jim in '61 and Laveta in '63.

We began our day with a group tour of the historic *Merced Theater*, a place where each of us had gone on dates. It was beautifully restored.

The theater, the town, the people, the smell of irrigation water on dry ground, the fragrance of Oleander and Eucalyptus, all evoked memories of times long past. And while some memories remained bright and fresh, others lay deeply buried and nearly forgotten. It was all very strange. At times I felt like an Archeologist digging up and examining the ancient artifacts of a previous life... my own.

Merced, you see, is the town where the four of us grew up and were married, the place where my soul was assembled; *the place where I became Me.*

The four of us are 70'ish now with most of our years behind us, but when we lived in Merced there was hardly any past- only tomorrow, or perhaps the day after that.

Returning to that smell of eucalyptus leaves- back then it was mixed with the smell of books, motor oil, suntan lotion... and the lightest whiff of perfume. Jim and I had arrived here independently from Kansas in 1956, Laveta, from Oklahoma in 1955. Carol was here already but none of us was then aware of the others. Little did we know!

I went from building model airplanes to my first motorcycle in '59, a 125cc *two-stroke*. Within a year I graduated to *the* bike of my youth, a 250cc *Zundapp*, black with silver trim and a seat with a red *Naugahide* top. It could scoot down the highway and stay with traffic. Most importantly- it attracted girls. Jim got one too and together we rode all over California, most memorably to Yosemite and over Tioga Pass to Reno. Two wheels, no responsibilities. Freedom! There's no drug like it!

By '62, I was on my third motorcycle, a 650cc Triumph. It had a tiny 1.5 gallon tank and the front seat was bolted low, directly to the frame with only a small pad on the rear fender for a passenger. The frame was painted gold and the rear fender and tank midnight blue. Gaud, it was awesome!

Crowded days breezed past in a blur. I looked very different then, 5' 9" a lean and wiry 135 pounds, with a full head of brown hair so thick it was hard to comb. I was all too ready to leap into my future, a blind leap really since so much leverage is built into beginnings- doubly so as I was truly ill prepared.

The genes and hormones powering my biological engine assured that my actions were driven as much by desire and chance as by prudence or necessity.

Summer days in California's great central valley were dry and hot, but oh, the nights! Evenings were exquisitely comfortable- an environmental caress. Cruising the drag, or riding country roads on the outskirts of town cloaked in the rumble of my exhaust I could outrun both anxiety and frustration. Motorcycles weren't common then and those who rode them exuded an outlaw aura (a kind of pheromone). When riding, I wasn't hidden behind a car's sheet metal- I was noticed. On a bike I felt strong, though of course motorcycles can fool you- making you feel stronger than you really are.

Leather and lace, suntan lotion, motor oil, rock 'n' roll- a lifetime stretching to the horizon, and then...

I'm suddenly back in Merced nearing my 70th birthday, drinking a bottle of Corona in a hall filled with old people laughing and reminiscing. Of course, it's the past that's drew us here and the Merced of our past *was* a wonderful place to grow up. Anyone who has seen the movie *American Graffiti* will understand, because *that's the way it really was*.

Year by year that enchanted land of youth recedes ever further into that distant mist that surrounds each of us. Yet tonight, looking into the faces around me, the mist recedes a little. Yah- we're back in the '60s tonight.

My high school brain didn't appreciate how the consequences of my actions would propagate down the years like compound interest. Nor did I realize then, the power of contingency in our lives and how dependent our future is... on

luck. How different would my life have been had my parents had stayed in Wichita? What if I had dated different girls? What if I my motorcycle had struck that bridge abutment (instead of missing it by inches)? What if I'd not been drafted into the Army? What if Laveta and I hadn't moved to New Orleans and later to Tacoma?

Untold numbers of decisions and (seemingly) small chance events were later revealed to be tipping points that changed my life in ways that could never be undone. What if... What If...

A thousand years ago the Persian poet and philosopher *Omar Khayyám* understood:

*"The moving finger writes; and, having writ,
Moves on: not all your piety nor wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a line,
Nor all your tears wash out a word of it."*

Of course the intervening years elicited but few tears; there was mostly love, family, friendship, success, adventure, laughter... and peace.

It was getting late. Slowly at first, people began saying goodbye. And then it was over and as we left the hall I felt both happy and sad at the same time.

Two days later we pointed our motorhome north, stopping in Redding for a couple of days to see the town and its beautiful *Sundial bridge*- then a night in Seven Feathers RV park (Canyonville Oregon) and then home. We were only gone about two weeks... or was it a lifetime? Either way- it was a great trip.

clw: University Place WA.

10/10/2012

