

In 1949 my parents bought a lot in Downey, California, right in the middle of an orange grove on the north side of Florence Avenue. Our street was named Wiley-Burke Avenue. At that time Wiley-Burke was still unpaved and just one block long, ending at the edge of another orange grove to our north.

My parents designed our house and we took many trips back and forth from Los Angeles to watch the progress as it was built. We had a big front yard and wide areas on each side of the house. My father planted the lawn in a low ground cover called dichondra, which was very fashionable in the 1950s. It made a beautiful lawn but it required a lot of attention.

The living room was at the back of the house, with large windows looking out to the covered patio and backyard. We had to remove a large number of orange trees on the lot to make room for the house but we still had eight trees left. The smell of the orange blossoms was wonderful. We moved into our new house the day after Christmas 1950.

The families on our block were mostly upper middle class. Most of the fathers had management positions in large corporations or owned their own small businesses. Most of the mothers were stay-at-home moms, involved in church and civic organizations.

I was in the middle of the fifth grade when we moved. The closest elementary school was Gallatin School, a little over a mile from our new home. It seemed quite a long distance because the walk to my school in Los Angeles had been only two short blocks. At the end of my first day at Gallatin I got on the wrong school bus to come home. I had never taken a school bus before and realized something wasn't right when I was the last one left on the bus. The driver asked where I lived and brought me to my stop. Most of the time I walked to school. I would walk east on unpaved Lubec Street, or through the orange grove to Paramount Boulevard. Then I'd work my way north to Gallatin Road and east to the school. On the way home I'd sometimes go south from the school to Florence Avenue, then west on Florence to Wiley-Burke.

The school was built in a modified California Mission style. It was U-shaped, with a red tile roof, and all the rooms opened onto a covered portico. It was rather small, with five or six classrooms. Downey was growing rapidly in the early 1950s, and shortly after I arrived at Gallatin School they started building additional classrooms. These were in the more conventional California school bungalow design. I spent my sixth grade year in one of these new schoolrooms. As I look back, I think the sixth grade was the first year I could truthfully say I enjoyed school. I had many happy times at my Los Angeles school, and was a pretty good student, but there were times when I felt intimidated by the teachers.

My sixth grade teacher was Mrs. Truxaw. I think all of the students liked her. Her husband worked for a newspaper and she taught us the importance of writing clearly and to the point. She told the class that when we read anything we should consider who wrote it, who the intended reader was, and what point the author was trying to make. She wanted us to read with a critical eye. She also encouraged us in science and art. I feel fortunate that my early education took place in this atmosphere. At my Los Angeles school we had regular weekly visits by a music education teacher.



*1951 - Richard helping his father with the landscaping at 9814 Wiley-Burke.*

At Gallatin we had exposure to art and the sciences. I also had the opportunity to take several interesting school-sponsored field trips.

It's funny what you can remember from your childhood. I can remember sitting in my 6<sup>th</sup> grade classroom. It was a warm day and the windows facing north were all open. As we students were trying to concentrate on what Mrs. Truxaw was saying, a custodian walked by outside the open windows. Very spontaneously he began singing, "Ay, ay, ay, ay, canta y no llores ..." We students began to laugh, and even Mrs. Truxaw joined our laughter.

The sixth grade graduation ritual at Gallatin included an opportunity for each student to ring the mammoth school bell. This large bell was originally on the roof of the building, but because of seismic concerns it had been relocated to a cement pad on the ground in front of the school. The graduating students lined up and came forward to ring the bell as our names were called.

I started junior high in September, 1952. There was no junior high school in the north part of Downey so I attended Downey High School for one semester. North Junior High (now called Griffiths Middle School) was completed the following January, almost literally in our backyard. This was fortunate because I had started playing the saxophone the previous year and I needed to carry it back and forth to school.

I had taken piano lessons when I was eight years old but I guess I was too young to appreciate them. And, I had trouble making my hands work independently. I could play a melody with my right hand or chords with my left. I just had trouble doing them both at the same time. I think I was an exasperation to my teacher, Mrs. Blythe. If I made a mistake I'd go back to the beginning. She'd tell me, "Just go on. You don't have to start the whole thing over again."

The saxophone was different. I really enjoyed it. The first two pieces I learned were the "Washington Post March" and "Abide With Me." I wasn't a virtuoso but I was good enough to play in the school band.



Mr. Stillman, the Downey High School band director, was my first saxophone teacher. During the summer months my mother would drop me off at Downey High for my lessons and give me money for bus fare to get home. The two mile walk home would have been easy without

carrying my saxophone, but at eleven years old it was a task carrying it that far. Even so, I sometimes pocketed the bus fare and walked. When North Junior High opened I took private lessons from Mr. Norvell, the band director there. He was a nice man, but he had a habit of borrowing my saxophone to demonstrate some technique he wanted me to try. When he gave the saxophone back his saliva was still hanging from the reed. Yuch!

I remember one of the things he would say was, "Richard, don't toot." He wanted a smoother transition between notes. He also encouraged me, saying, "Richard, I want you to make your saxophone sing. I know you sing well. I've heard you. Make your saxophone sing just like that." A friend of mine found an old wire recording labeled, "Norvell/private students." On it were several segments of different instruments playing music and scales. It including a saxophonist doing fancy scales and, as far as I know, I was his only private saxophone student, so it might have been a recording of me. I don't remember Mr. Norvell making a recording; at least he never mentioned it. If he did it was probably to review his student's progress.

I also sang in the mixed glee club. My voice hadn't changed yet so I usually sang in the alto section. I was told I had a good voice, and singing was something that really gave me pleasure. As I remember, we sang a lot of Stephen Foster songs. At several school assemblies I would switch between playing the saxophone and singing. I would begin on stage with the band and at an appropriate time I would slip out the side curtains and take my place on the risers with the other singers.



Before Wiley-Burke Avenue was extended we would play in the orange grove north of our house. We built bicycle paths between the rows of trees, and made a ramp at the end of our street out of mounded dirt. We would peddle our bicycles as fast as we could down the street and up the ramp, seeing who could jump the farthest. On one occasion the front wheel came off a friend's bicycle as he was in mid-air. When he landed the empty front fork of the bicycle dug into the soft ground and he flew over the handlebars, hitting an orange tree. He lay motionless for what seemed like ages, and we were sure he had broken his neck. Thankfully, he just had the wind knocked out of him.

Sometimes we would play "war," throwing overripe oranges as hand grenades. We often congregated in the west end of the grove, near the Rio Hondo River. The usually dry river would sometimes overflow its banks during winter rain storms and it had created a wide, flat, sandy area that was ideal for our activities. We would often see jackrabbits running between the high bushes and bamboo that edged the river so we named the area, "Rabbit town."

One or two blocks from our house, in any direction, brought me into farm life. It was just one block south, across Florence Avenue, to a huge bean field. A block west of our house was a seven-acre field where a man grew flowers for the wholesale florist industry. Two blocks west was the Rio Hondo Dairy. Less than fifty yards north of us was the orange grove.

Most of these agricultural areas were quietly disappearing, and in 1952 they took the orange grove out to build houses. We kids were sorry to see the grove gone, but we found ways to make the new construction site our own private playground.



I was never passionate about team sports. Baseball was not very interesting to me, and I never had a bat or glove of my own. There were no big league baseball teams in California in those days. I was pretty good in the few flag football and soccer games we had at school but it wasn't something I thought about often. We had a basketball hoop mounted above our garage door and even this was just a way to pass some time with friends. I did, however, enjoy track and field events. I was a very good runner, and could hurdle and long jump very well for my age. Many of the boys in my P.E. class would moan when the coach would tell us to take laps around the field. Not me. I sometimes ran facing backward as a friendly taunt to my classmates who seemed to be winded after less than half a lap. I also enjoyed badminton and croquet, and when I was twelve I built a pair of stilts that raised me about eighteen inches off the ground. I was quite good, if I do say so myself. I could even go up and down stairs.



*April 1953 - Richard throwing football in front of his house. This is the last photo of Richard before polio in July of that year.*

However, my favorite outdoor activities were roller skating, bicycling, and golf. I enjoyed hitting golf balls from our front lawn into the orange grove. I sometimes spent hours hitting balls and retrieving them. I had to make adjustments because my father's clubs were right handed and I was left handed. I would hear some of my father's friends talk about fading the ball or drawing it around some obstacle. I wasn't sure what they meant; I always hit the ball perfectly straight, right where I was aiming. I thought that was the way you were supposed to hit it. My brother Robert and I sometimes made miniature golf courses out of bricks placed in patterns across the lawn or any available bare dirt.



Saturday afternoon barbecues were a tradition at our house. My father made his own special hamburger press and weighed the meat with a postal scale so each patty was uniform. My mother bought roasts and had the butcher grind the meat. She wanted to see the meat before it was turned into hamburger. We always had an abundance of patties in the freezer because we weren't sure how many would join us. Everyone knew it was barbecue time at the Daggetts' place, and most Saturdays we had friends and relatives who, "Just stopped by to say hello." Of course, my mother always insisted they stay to eat.

During the fall and winter of 1952-53 several friends and I decided to take ballroom dancing lessons. I don't remember whose idea it was. We went to dance school in Huntington Park and learned the waltz, fox trot, "big band" dances, as well as social etiquette. I doubt that many kids would do this today but at the time it was a pleasant diversion. J.D. Williams, Bob Rechin, Karla and Jerry Watkins, and I would dress up in our best clothes and polish our manners. An added pleasure was standing very close to a girl and putting your arm around her waist. With one girl it was special. Patti Job and I tried to dance together as much as we could. It was fun, and put me more at ease the few times we had school dances, although nobody ever danced the waltz or fox trot. Downey in the 1950s was a great place to be a kid.