

By Dan Friesen

In my previous post, I left the story of my dad at the point where he had moved the family to Oregon to start a career as a high school German language teacher, and that this is where the seeds of WAI were born. But before shifting into that chapter of my father's life, a couple of dad's more dominant attributes need to be shared.

Physically, dad was a mountain of a man. He measured a hair under 6 foot 5 inches tall, and from my earliest childhood memories, carried well over 300 pounds on that frame. Everything about dad was BIG, including his personality.



Dad was also gifted with a lovely singing voice, which became attached to his lifelong persona. My last surviving uncle, dad's little brother, Benno (a remarkable man in his own right) recently told me that, at 16 years old, dad became the first person ever, in their ultra-conservative church, to be invited to sing a solo. Apparently, solos were considered a temptation to pride.

With dad's size came a natural tsunami of volume. With dad's oversized personality came a flair for showmanship. I remember once as we were leading a walking tour in a small, mountain village in northern Italy as we participated in a club walk. A huge circus tent had been erected for the social aspects of the event, which drew several thousand walkers from Italy, Austria, and Germany. An American group in a rural town was a bit of a novelty and we were often honored as the group having come the farthest. As dad accepted the award, he took the mic and started to work the crowd...in German (the part of northern Italy that belonged to Austria before WW1 still speaks German).

Dad did not need a mic, but he took the mic and, before I knew it, had the crowd singing an old German folk song that was apparently common knowledge for much of that language group. It was classic “dad” and one of my fondest memories of leading walking tours together!



One of Dad’s many moonlighting jobs – our own personal Santa. He was perfect for the part in every way but our mom didn’t tell us it was him, leaving us to figure it out. As I recall, his hands, and wedding ring, were the give-away for me. Note little brother Tim Friesen’s fascination with the big man!

Another thing about dad was his restless inventive spirit. We were a family of six and after leaving mission work, he started his teaching career late and behind. Finances often seemed to be upside down. So dad was always working extra jobs and scheming about creations and inventions, something he could sell, some process of everyday life that could be automated (Among the door-to-door products he sold were Cutco knives – still in the family – and Compton’s encyclopedias).

I recall a couple of unique inventions stemming from the time I was 5 or 6 years old. He was involved as a pastor in a nearby church and came up with a novel idea for a youth activity. Army surplus stores were still common in the 60s and one day he came home with a

parachute. His enterprising idea was to cut slits in the chute to reduce lift, then hook the harness to a long nylon rope attached to a car.

This was the era before America was liability-conscious. And dad's style was generally more inclined to ask forgiveness than permission. In those days, you could drive on most Oregon beaches, and before you could say "Geronimo", we found ourselves at the Oregon coast with a pile of teenagers and dad's parachute contraption.



After harnessing the flyer, a couple of us would hold up the side of the chute to catch the wind, then dad would slowly accelerate while the flyer and the chute holders jogged a few steps before liftoff. It was a truly exhilarating experience, in spite of the times the chute came down a bit hard or drifted into the surf for a salty baptism. Dad was a land-based parasailer before parasailing was a thing!

During that same period, in 1962, the world's fair (Century 21 Exposition) was held in Seattle. The central icon of the event, of course, was the still-standing Space Needle. Dad's brainstorm was to create a spinning top toy mirroring the revolving multi-level top of the Space Needle, along with a metal stand to represent the superstructure on which the Needle sat. He had it designed and manufactured and his kids became his assembly crew and actors for his ad campaign.





The prototype of Dad's Space Needle top, recently given to me by the previous custodian, my brother Dave. Thanks Dave! This is a family treasure!

It was a truly brilliant idea, and I have no idea why he didn't sell millions, but I suspect ineffective marketing was the culprit. In any event, we assembled hundreds, dressed up in our Sunday finest to film demo commercials, but ultimately stored boxes of unassembled tops in our basement for the rest of my childhood.

Later, dad saw opportunity during the 1973 oil crisis. He installed a self-designed system of copper tubing in our family car to harness heat from the engine to convert water to steam, supplementing the internal combustion power from gasoline with steam power. I can't remember (or probably never understood) the full workings of the mechanism but though the car continued to operate just fine, I don't think dad saved much at the gas pump.

Dad's brain was always looking for solutions! Space does not permit me to share his other novel ideas, some of which involved gold mines and oil wells. His favorite projects and solutions, however, usually involved large obstinate objects that were in the way and needed persuasion to be forcibly moved.

On my next post, I'll be sharing the genesis of dad's world travel and Walking Adventures International. But for now, perhaps, you'll better understand the force of character and size that drove this 30-year project.