

From **Fargo** to the World of Brands

*My
Story
So
Far*

David
Aaker

A portrait of David Aaker, an older man with grey hair, wearing a grey button-down shirt and a red patterned tie. He is smiling slightly and holding a pair of glasses in his right hand. The background is a plain, light color.

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From Fargo to the
World of Brands

My Story So Far

David Aaker

From Fargo to the World of Brands: My Story So Far

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Preface

I wrote this book for two reasons. First, the exercise was a good chance to relive some good times and some difficult times, an excuse to talk to people that have been important to me at one time or another, and a reason to review the many picture albums and files that have been gathering dust. The journey has been awesome. I recommend it to anyone.

Second, I wanted my children and their children and perhaps others that have crossed my path from Fargo to the “World of Brands” to have a record of what happened to me and why. What was it like to develop a career, to experience events, to see a family grow, and to enjoy friendships in the times and places in which I lived? What people crossed my path? I know that I would have appreciated such documentation from those that came before me. It is a bit sad to think that all those events, emotions, opinions, and relationships will so soon be lost to posterity.

I have four concerns. One is that others will feel that I am presumptuous to think that my life story is of interest and worth writing, and that reflecting on the good things that have come my way will appear as bragging rather than telling a balanced story. A second relates to the discomfort in sharing my life in such detail, sanitized though the story may be. A third is that there are a host of people important in my life whose photos and even names do not appear because I forgot some details or was missing some information or a photo. I’m afraid they will make the wrong attribution to this omission. A final concern is that that no one will read the book because they do not know it exists or, worse, they

have no interest. At the end of the day, the book went forward despite these concerns.

The book covers everything. It is not limited to a period or a particular part of my life such as my professional background or my family life. It addresses questions like:

- What was it like growing up in the Midwest in the 40s and 50s?
- Who were the Aakers going back two generations? What did they do and value? How did they influence me?
- How did a Fargo boy in over his head survive at MIT and Stanford?
- How did three highly qualified entrepreneurs fail? Why was failure a good thing?
- What is an academic life like? What processes and people populate it?
- How did my academic research stream evolve toward the study of brands? Why did portions of my research lack impact?
- What were the drivers that led to new research directions or to impactful work?
- Who were the five key Aaker coauthors and what were their roles?
- Why is academic research interesting, even fascinating?
- What is life as a public speaker and author like? What are my eight speaker rules?
- What is it like to have a second professional home in Japan?
- What is Prophet, and what role do I play in growing this small consulting company?
- How did the Aaker family with three daughters evolve over forty years?
- What were the activities, the lifestyles, and the relationships that represented those forty years?
- What makes a good friend, and what are the characteristics of a successful marriage partner (according to Dave Aaker)?

I have tried wherever possible to provide not only detailed descriptions of activities, events, and people with anecdotes to illustrate and inform, but also the associated feelings. I wanted, where possible, to get beneath description and offer insight into who I am, why I did what I did, the passions that motivated me, and the nature of the relationships that I developed.

The book is structured in topic sections so that it would be easy for the reader to skip or skim parts that are less relevant to them, although many of the insights into my personality are sprinkled here and there. Many of the sections will span wide time periods because spreading them out over multiple chapters would make the narrative more difficult to read.

I have had books that have sold in the tens—even hundreds—of thousands. I am not sure if this book will have an audience beyond my friends, relatives, and family. The sales may be measured in the dozens. In the unlikely event that there are any net royalties, they will be donated to charity.

My thanks to the pros at Icen Books. Nathaniel Birdsall, a fellow Fargoan, did a nice job copyediting. Atilla Vekony helped me understand photo scanning and encouraged me through the final stages of writing. Finally, Susan Wenger, a patient, friendly, and talented production editor, made the book become a reality.

My thanks to all those who have helped me grow, live, and achieve. There are a host of people to acknowledge, starting with my parents, my wife Kay, my three kids, our friends (especially the DeJonghe family), and my professional colleagues that have been especially meaningful and supportive. Thanks to those that helped me with the creation of the book. My daughter Jennifer, in particular, read the manuscript in detail and pushed me to improve it. However, despite that help, the book is what it is.

Credits

The cover picture was taken by Mr. Takayuki Watanabe, Manager, Creative Management Division, Dentsu Inc.

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1 Growing Up in Fargo

My adventure in Fargo, North Dakota, started February 11, 1938. In 1938, the nation, under the leadership of Franklin D. Roosevelt, was still trying to find an exit to a depression nearly a decade old. North Dakota, a farm state that had suffered through the mid-1930s from droughts and dust storms (black blizzards), was no exception. North Dakotans were frugal by necessity and inclination. Many were Scandinavian immigrants or their descendants who had left tough economic times in their homeland. Stable jobs, such as being a postal worker, were prized. Yet people in Fargo, at least in my parent's circle of friends, seemed to be active, happy, and good at enjoying simple pleasures.

Fargo

Fargo, with some 38,000 people, was on the eastern edge of North Dakota, separated from the Minnesota town of Moorhead, with its 10,000 or so people, by the Red River of the North (which actually flows north). It was the largest city in North Dakota and the largest city between Montana and Minneapolis. Its regional prominence was reflected by the presence of two major railroads, the Northern Pacific and the Great Northern. The primary industry was farming, with the rich Red River Valley generating grains such as wheat, oats, and barley (with global warming the crops have lately shifted to corn, sugar beets, and soybeans). The terrain was flat, and there was no semblance of a hill for miles—the only trees to be seen were by a river or those planted by the government during the Depression to provide windbreaks. The whole state was like a tabletop. The Red

River was a quiet, dirty stream that erupted into a serious flood every four years or so.

Fargo was the regional metropolis but was still modest in terms of what shopping and activities were available. The downtown was about ten blocks long and ended at a large park inexplicably called Island Park despite the fact that there was no island. It featured two department stores, Herbst (where my brother Paul once got lost at age two and was found at the police department) and DeLendrecies, six menswear stores (including The Fargo Toggery, Straus Clothing, and Seigel's Menswear), and eleven women's clothing stores (The Store Without a Name being one). There were three colleges, North Dakota Ag College (now renamed North Dakota State University), Concordia (supported by a branch of the Lutheran Church and founded in 1890), and the Moorhead State Teacher's College (now Moorhead State).

For adult activities there were six or seven movie theaters, an outdoor drive-in theater (where a speaker was attached to your car), a few bowling alleys, the library, the Elks club, assorted churches, two golf courses, and a fairgrounds that held a county fair each year that had animal awards, rodeos, and rides. The municipal golf course, Edgewood, was on the north side of town, while a country club was on the other side. Our family was an Edgewood, northside-type for sure. The Aakers knew their place economically and socially; it was not at the country club.

The top cuisine was found in a few hotel restaurants: the Powers, the Graver, the Gardner, the F-M Hotel, and a few steakhouses in Moorhead. The F-M had a "view" restaurant on the top floor of what I believe was an eight-floor building. Moorhead had a big edge over Fargo because in North Dakota you could not serve drinks in restaurants (except at private clubs like the Elks). The Moorhead steakhouses thus enjoyed a price premium, although the décor was more plastic than upscale. Fargo did have some ethnic fare. Maybe six times a year, we patronized a Chinese restaurant, ironically called the "Fargo Café," that specialized in chicken chow mein. A Norwegian smorgasbord offered Norwegian dishes such as meatballs, herring, and cheese. Remarkably, given today's scene, there was not one pizza restaurant. This was definitely not an Italian area, and the pizza chains

had not gotten traction. Round Table and Pizza Hut were not even around in the forties and fifties. The absence of more good restaurants did not bother my parents because they did not eat out often.

Fargo is very different today. It is over three times as large, with some 175,000 people in the area. There is a million-square-foot mall, indoor tennis, an indoor driving range, a dome that houses events of all sorts, and a host of museums. The revived downtown includes renovated hotels, boutique hotels, and a variety of trendy restaurants. The nicest theater of my day, the Fargo Theater, has become a historic art deco theater with a live organ and classic movies.

Fargo has always made the lists of the best cities to live or do business in, mainly because of its people, the safe neighborhoods, the Midwestern values, the cost of living, and the work ethic. Fargoans are proud of where they live, even if they do occasionally complain about the weather. The area was especially inhospitable in the winter for adults in my era who, unlike their kids, did not tend to play in the snow and go skating. The winters were long—very long—and punctuated with storms that brought heavy snow, high winds, and bitter cold. Shoveling the walks and driveways was a challenge. Actually shoveling snow was not only difficult but dangerous. Our class golfer, Norm Vennerstrom, was one of many who had a heart attack while shoveling snow. People stranded on highways by a storm could and did freeze to death. A family friend recalls the deadly storm of March 14, 1941, with its dirt, winds, extreme cold, and several deaths that hit while my parents were at her house playing bridge. I (then three years old) was home with a baby-sitter. Despite advice to the contrary, my father covered his face and walked five blocks to relieve my baby-sitter, a risky undertaking.

The summers with welcome warm weather were wonderful except for the humidity, the mosquitoes, and the thunderstorms. Late in the day, the mosquitoes would “eat you alive” unless there was a rare breeze to keep them down or you escaped into a screened porch. Thus, it was usually hard to enjoy the warm evenings. There were frequent, sometimes unpredictable, thunderstorms that could affect picnic plans. And there was the rare tornado. In 1957, one hit Fargo and tore the roof off the Andrist

house (Mabel Andrist was a golfing friend of my mother, and her daughter Kay would become my wife—more on that later). We survived, and we found a phonograph record in our tree the next day. Summers were also a time when there was ongoing concern whether the farmers had too much or not enough rain.

Fall and spring would come in fits and starts. April, May, October, and November could see wide day-to-day variations in weather. The weather report was always news in Fargo, unlike San Francisco, where the weather forecast is nearly always the same.

The Early Days

In 1942, my parents bought their first house, 1045 Second Street North, a corner house fifteen blocks from “downtown.” It was my home during my Fargo days. The house always seemed secure and comfortable. The entryway faced a staircase that led to two bedrooms of modest size (but which seemed roomy to me at the time) separated by a bath. A cozy den off the living room held a piano and desk. A dining room looked out onto Horace Mann, the school I attended from the first through the seventh grade, and the school where (future wife) Kay Andrist’s father taught. The roomy basement contained a ping-pong table, a pinball machine, and, later, a knotty pine bedroom. The single-stall garage was separated from the house, and the walk from one to the other in the winter could be uncomfortable. I can’t imagine carrying groceries on a windy day with below zero temperature. A corner house meant that the sidewalk involved three times as much snow shoveling in the winter. My bedroom window was only a few feet from a bedroom of the house next door. When I was about seven or so I had some romantic conversations with Jo Lobb, a girl one or two years my senior, protected by the space between us.

When I was in college, at my mother’s insistence, we moved about two blocks into a more “modern” house on 1213 First Street. A single-story, rambling home in a newer (but not new) neighborhood, it was a step up for sure. The most notable amenities were a fireplace in the living room, a connected dining/living room, a third bedroom, a “modern” kitchen, and an attached garage. I felt a bit disappointed by the move, even though it meant that I finally had a real bedroom. It was as if part of my childhood with



1045 Second St. North

its memories, experiences, and heritage had been taken away. And I was in no way consulted about the decision. In retrospect, I should have been happy for my mother, but I was not blessed as a young man with such sensitivities (which, of course, I now have in excess).

The first record of my impact on the community was on May 5, 1942, when a picture of the Aaker family examining the first sugar ration books issued in Fargo during World War II appeared on the first page of the *Fargo Forum*. The start of rationing was big news, but not the only news that day. Japan attacked Chungking using the Burma Road; fighting was fierce in Corregidor and Madagascar; the Nazi forces executed 127 people in France and Holland; and some 400 products were deprived of iron and steel needed by the war effort. Closer to home, a prize was available for the jitterbug contest at Eddie's Nightclub, dresses were being sold for under two dollars at Penny's, and a two-quart container of milk sold for nineteen cents at Vic's Supermarket.

There were plenty of neighborhood children to play with. I did well with women early on. The picture of myself in a parade



The first sugar ration book in Fargo—1941

at age four playing a drum between two cute girls shows I was no male chauvinist. Another picture taken a year later shows me at a party, the only boy with five girls, wearing a rather debonair sweater and jacket. Another of my outfits that same year, 1943, was a military uniform complete with hat. I may have sensed that women of the day were attracted to uniforms.

There was a limit to my patience as a boy. My mother always liked to go out after Sunday church at First Lutheran for a Sunday dinner (as opposed to the light evening supper). One of her favorite places for this outing was the Powers Hotel. Although their free “popovers” were delicious, I always lobbied hard against this monumental waste of time. I much preferred to get home and into some comfortable clothes and start some serious playing.

My mother tells a story about an incident when I was six or seven. We were waiting for the bus to take us home from church. Gasoline was rationed during the war, so the bus was a very reasonable alternative for the fifteen-block ride. But I did not like to wait very long, and one day—and in the midst of a large group of

At age 3—
not a
chauvinist



Age 4—ready
for World War II

churchgoers—I bolted out to the street, peered down the block, and asked angrily, “Where is that damned bus?” My mother has no idea where I could have learned such a word. Another story of the same vintage had me observing during a dinner at our neighbors’, “I don’t eat this kind of soup at home.”

I had my first girlfriend in the second grade, but she moved away and our love did not survive. My romantic interests then receded until the fifth grade, when my friends and I again discovered girls. We then had wheels—bicycles—that allowed us to escort the girls home. One time after school we were a bit too forward—I guess we buzzed them on our bikes—and we were called before the principal. It was an uncomfortable time. In the sixth grade we wrote lists of the girls that we liked. These lists were entrusted to unreliable people, so leaks were inevitable. It was most embarrassing when these very private lists became public information, and very sad when one of the less popular people would have an unattainable list exposed, thereby becoming a subject of derision.

My folks did not travel much, undoubtedly the preference of my father. But on one occasion they did try a major trip without me. They went to California, where the highlights were a stay on the Queen Mary, berthed near San Diego, and a trip to Coronado Island. I stayed with an older couple that had a musty house and a tightly organized schedule that included listening each night to H. V. Kaltenborn, the evening anchorman of the day, pontificate on political issues with a very distinctive speaking style.

Paul, my cute redheaded brother, born in 1946, was eight years my junior. Where the red hair came from was a mystery until my father grew a red beard during the Fargo centennial when most Fargo men grew beards in order to relate to the early pioneers. Paul shared my room until high school, when our dad built a room for me in the basement. I don’t recall any major sharing problems—that was simply the way it was. We had a small



Brother Paul

library in the room and both liked to read. However, I do recall being glad to get my own room in the basement somewhere in my teens, even if it was a bit dank.

When I got old enough to baby-sit, I became the first option. One Christmas my folks had a social event every night for two weeks, and on each of those nights I was called on to watch Paul. I didn't mind baby-sitting or the low pay, but I did mind being tied down every night. I had a social life as well. I got frustrated, and one night when Paul was asleep I snuck out to play hockey. As luck would have it, that was the night I was tripped and cut my chin. I went to our neighbor, Don Warren, to see if I should go to the doctor. He advised against it. Big mistake—I still have the scar. When my folks returned, I emphasized my injury to divert attention from shirking my duty. My folks were perturbed that I'd left Paul, but they also felt guilty for imposing on me, and they did not have, as usual, the disposition to engage in any meaningful discipline.

In the summer most people had a garden in which they raised fresh vegetables, always including iceberg lettuce (which was served in wedges with thick French dressing over it) and tomatoes that were incredibly flavorful. I recall the victory gardens of World War II that appeared when I was six or seven. They were more significant undertakings on a major plot of land several blocks from my house. The idea was to raise food so that more resources could be diverted to the war effort. My father tried his hand but lacked a green thumb. A "friend" put up crosses to commemorate Dad's dead tomato plants. I once tried tomatoes with the same result—green thumbs are apparently genetic.

A staple of every backyard was rhubarb. It was a fast-growing reddish stalk with a wide leaf. The taste of the stalk when eaten raw was sharp and sour, but flavorful. However, it was usually served as a dessert, either in rhubarb sauce or rhubarb pie. In either case the product was heavily laced with sugar. There was a time when rhubarb was my favorite pie, although it later lost out to banana cream (with piles of real meringue—no cream tops for me).

Meals at my house tended to feature hearty meat and potatoes. Meatloaf and pot roast were frequent main courses. I suspect I was served potatoes nearly every day in Fargo. Liver and

onions with bacon made its appearance about once a week because of its health value. Steak was regarded as something of a luxury. When steak was served, my mother bought cheap cuts and made sure it was well done. As a result, it was neither tender nor tasty. To this day I have never liked steak, so it has not been a hardship to avoid red meat. When freezers were introduced, deciding whether to buy one was a huge topic of conversation. The killer app (application) of the day was to buy a side of beef—either a quarter, half, or whole steer. The freezer and meat purchase represented a big investment, but the payoff seemed worth it. My folks finally bought a freezer and settled for a quarter side of beef. The quality of the meat probably improved, but, unfortunately, the preparation did not.

Horace Mann School

Kids and parents were serious about school in our part of town. Although kids will be kids, most teachers had a relatively easy time with discipline. The parents were under control as well (unlike some Orinda parents)—there was not a lot of pressure for first-graders to start establishing a record that would lead to



Dave at Horace
Mann ...

It got cold in Fargo!

Stanford. The school simply reflected the Midwestern school work ethic.

Music at Horace Mann was not one of my things. The music teacher, Miss Ellifson, had a system. She put the best singers in the rear, the second best in the second to the rear, and so on. The logic made sense. People would have an incentive to achieve the recognition of moving toward the rear. Further, the poorer singers could be “helped” by listening to those behind them. However, being branded as the worst did not make the class a barrel of laughs. Further, the music teacher made a big deal of the Christmas show. She spent months priming students for “that night.” I was one of three or so to whom she gently but directly suggested that it might be better if we moved our lips but didn’t actually sing. From the first through the third grade, I got A’s and B’s in ten subjects, but C’s and D’s in music. How harsh is that? Giving a first-grader a D in music is not a confidence builder.

We did not progress as fast at reading as students do now. I recall that in the second grade I could not read a lick. However, I once offered to pick out the next book that the teacher would read aloud to the class. I went up to the bookshelf and with great concentration pretended to mull over the selection, when, in fact, I could not read the titles. In the third grade, small circles of students would read aloud out of material that was not very demanding. I don’t believe that I could read with any real fluency until the fourth grade.

I did better in “auditorium” (a combination of literature and dramatics) under the guidance of a no-nonsense teacher, Mabel Garman. My biggest achievement was memorizing and performing “Casey at the Bat,” a very emotional story of a local baseball hero that struck out. I recall the teacher insisting that two stanzas would be enough, but I found other audiences that would listen to the whole thing. I still get called on to recite it. I found the poem in our twenty-volume *Book of Knowledge*. Every family that wanted their kids to be successful had to have an encyclopedia. I actually spent hours reading its wide selection of poetry. I especially liked poems with a beat, such as those of Robert Service.

Horace Mann was the site of marble competitions before and after school. You would put a desirable mooney (clear marble) down, and others would try to capture it by hitting it from a

distance that would be fixed depending on the desirability of the mooney (usually based on its size). You would collect the misses and could accumulate a lot of marbles that often tended to fall out of very full pockets in school. As there was no referee, arguments would ensue. In contrast, my father had a different take on marbles. His schoolboy group would put marbles in a circle. The goal would then be to knock them out of the circle by flipping a “shooter” marble with a thumb. I could never master the flip.

Living across the street from the school had several implications. I could leave for school later and thus sleep in more than others. The upshot was that I was frequently late for school. I could always go home at lunch for a hot meal. Campbell’s soup and toasted cheese sandwiches were frequently on the menu. Horace Mann was also a convenient recreation facility. I practiced basketball on the outdoor courts. My father got out on rare occasions to demonstrate the underhanded technique of the 20s, but I was usually by myself when I practiced my shots. Later, when I took up tennis, I spent hours using the side of the brick building to refine my tennis strokes. It was hard because the ball would come off at angles.

My best friend, Roy Smillie, lived a block away. When I was nine, in 1947, he and I celebrated New Year’s by playing Monopoly until midnight under my grandmother’s watchful eye—a very adult evening. For several years we would say “good luck” when parting, but, finally, that seemed too childish.

Sports

Even in elementary school, sports were an important part of my life. The major winter activities were skating and hockey. We tried skiing, but we were short on equipment and hills. When we got older we skied behind cars in the country, a dangerous activity because the sides of the road were not designed with skiers in mind—you could hit a culvert. So skating it was. I’m sure that I skated virtually every day all winter (around five months per year) from the second to the sixth grade. The rink was an easy three blocks away. I would swing my skates over my hockey stick and trudge down the streets crusted with snow. The exceptions were those days when the rink closed because it was colder than fifteen below or storming hard. I recall the exhilaration of hitting the ice

for the first time each day. There was such a feeling of speed, control, and accomplishment. And the warming hut, where snacks and hot chocolate were available, was small but warm and filled with friends.

I was good at the coordination aspects of hockey but short on aggressiveness and personal courage. Depending upon your viewpoint, I relied upon skill and finesse rather than brute force, or I was a coward fearing for physical safety. In fact, I played center and was one of the best skaters and stick handlers in my grade at our rink, where I played with Bruce Larson, Tom Wright, and others who also were into skill rather than intimidation. However, in the sixth grade we advanced to the point of playing boys from a rougher part of the northside who were aggressive and did not abide by our gentlemanly rules of no checking or lifting the puck into opponents. We were totally intimidated. A player from this group caused the scar on my chin the night I was supposed to be baby-sitting by tripping me from behind after I had embarrassed him with a particularly good play.

The prime activity in the summer was baseball. I was usually the captain because I was a great talker and organizer—not because of my ability. Although I had good footwork as a catcher or first baseman (not important skills), I could not throw, field grounders, or hit (skills that were important). Because of my weak arm, I was limited to playing first or second base. As a catcher my throws to second base involved a bounce, as an infielder I always thought that grounders would bounce up and hit me in the face, and as a batter I feared getting hit by a pitch. Despite my lack of potential, the games were important to me. I once imposed on my father to interrupt our lake vacation to drive sixty miles to one of my Little League games.

Swimming was another summer activity. But it was strictly recreational—there were no swim teams in Fargo. The main swimming outlet was a large municipal pool at Island Park, in the middle of town. I would ride my bike the two miles or so to get there. We would pay our fifteen cents and receive a metal wire container in which we would place our clothes. The number of the container would be attached to an elastic band that we placed around our ankles. It was rather like going to prison. The pool itself seemed enormous but on a hot day was completely full of



With Mike McLain,
set to battle the
elements

people—there was no way you could swim two strokes without bumping into someone. I didn't enjoy swimming that much.

At the behest of my parents, I also tried scouting. The meetings were OK because we played ping-pong. And the Boy Scout camp I attended over two summers was fun with a lot of water sports. There I learned the backstroke, breaststroke (or frog), crawl, and sidestroke. While the sidestroke never became an Olympic event, it can be very helpful when swimming a long way.

However, the merit badge route required real time and effort. It was basically a lot of crafts and camping, and I never liked either activity. So after maybe three years I was still a tenderfoot.

An important part of our house was its basement with its pinball machine and ping-pong table. I played countless games with my parents and with several friends such as Tom Wright and John Altenburg. We kept track of scores, and I did well against both Tom and John. Once, when I got some boxing gloves, the basement became the site of a boxing match with Tom. Boxing, which requires a modicum of personal courage and reckless physical abandon, was definitely not my sport—I lost quickly and retired from the sport. Our basement was also where I learned to pass a basketball behind my back with either hand by using the concrete wall as a backboard. That skill was satisfying to develop but virtually useless except in the hands of a player like Bob Cousy, Pete Maravich, or Jason Kidd.

During the winter months we found things to do inside. One of our friends, David Scott, had a large house that included a billiard table and assorted other games. We spent hours there mostly learning billiards. I felt rather worldly playing such a grown-up game.

There were no African Americans in Fargo, so my parents had no firsthand knowledge of them. I recall my father using the phrase “darkies” when, even then, that was not politically correct. My mother once suggested that I not play so much with Bruce Larson because he had kinky black hair and might therefore be part “Negro.” I went apoplectic, making sure that my mother realized how prejudiced I thought she was, and I deliberately made my association with Bruce more frequent and visible than ever.

Entertainment and Activities

There was no television during the 40s, but there were a host of radio shows that commanded a loyal following. *The Buster Brown Show* with Buster Brown and his dog Tye was an early favorite. We then graduated to mysteries like *The Lone Ranger* (“It’s the masked man with his big horse Silver”), *Superman* (“It’s a bird, it’s a plane, no, it’s Superman!”), *The Shadow* (“The Shadow knows”), and comedy shows like *Jack Benny*, *The Great Gildersleeve*, *Fred Allen*, and *Can You Top This*, a joke show. *The Hit Parade* had a countdown for the top seven songs of the day. I remember throwing a tantrum once when I was not permitted to listen to one of my favorite shows. I think my folks learned from that incident not to fool with me—I usually got my way after that. The theme song of *The Lone Ranger*, the *William Tell Overture*, was my only exposure to classical music.

Saturday morning movies were a great attraction. We would walk, bus, or bike to a theater to see a movie for all of twelve cents; often it would be a Roy Rogers or Gene Autry western. In addition, there was an extra show, a serial that would be spread over about eight weeks. It would always stop at a crucial time with the hero in an impossible situation. You simply had to return the following week to see what happened. These serials provided the inspiration for *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and its sequels.

Our first TV set came sometime around 1950. Much of the day you just got a test panel, a geometric design that allowed you to tell if the picture was centered and clear. When there was programming, you could access three or four channels, many of which would be snowy. There was some art to adjusting the rabbit-ear antennas to improve reception. Some of the early

shows were transferred from radio. Some radio personalities like *Jack Benny* and the *Lone Ranger* made the transition to TV well, but others, like Fred Allen (who was an authentic wit and friend of the father of my son-in-law, Andy), struggled in the new medium. *The Hit Parade* worked on TV but could get repetitive when a song like “How Much Is That Doggie in the Window?” was number one for the fourteenth straight week. There were also new faces such as Lawrence Welk (who was a North Dakota boy and mother’s favorite), Milton Berle (whose slapstick comedy really worked on TV), and Ed Sullivan, a newspaper columnist who became MC of a variety show that introduced both Elvis Presley and the Beatles to American television. In 1956, Elvis sang “Hound Dog” and “Love Me Tender” on an *Ed Sullivan* show that 82.7% of the U.S. television audience watched. The cameras did not show his hip movements, as they were considered by some to be too suggestive. Times have changed.

North Dakotans appreciate summer—whatever there might be of it. It was a time for picnics in the park. And golfing. Golfing was an activity in which I was included at an early age. I would get to follow the group and hit balls. Eventually, I would play



The swing has not improved

The skis were different then



Edgewood with my folks. I enjoyed then and today the challenge of hitting that stationary ball and the feeling that comes with connecting.

Another Saturday activity was to go to the library. I always checked out the maximum: four books. I remember the smell of dusty shelves and old books—somehow it was comfortable and pleasant. I recall my joy when I learned that there were books of fiction about sports. The Clair Bee series of books featuring Chip Hilton with titles like *Touchdown Twins* and *No-Hitter* were terrific—I read some many times. *The Hardy Boys* by Franklin Dixon, a series of some eighty-five books written between 1904 and 1985 about two brothers who experienced incredible adventures, was another staple. *Nancy Drew* was also a big seller for girls, but the appeal was definitely gender specific. I would not read a Nancy Drew book.

Very few “new” kids arrived in Fargo when I was growing up. Larry Swenson was one of the few. He moved in and tried immediately to get “in” with our group, the prestige group, consisting I suppose of Tom, John Altenburg, Mike McLain, and Roy Smillie. Larry tried everything. I recall him on a black bicycle racing past the girls and us. He had the best bike and was probably the best cyclist, but we were not impressed. Over time, Larry finally was accepted, but it was a bit of a battle, perhaps partly because he was not the sort that just blended into a crowd unobtrusively, and in part because, like most schoolkids, we were not secure enough to welcome others into our midst.

During high school and college, Larry was a clothes salesman and dealt in used cars. A natural politician, he was a fixture on the student council during high school. After graduation, he worked for several years for General Motors as a district manager (the youngest appointed to that post in the history of GM) before beginning a career as a car dealer. He owned a series of automobile dealerships—Ford in Huron, South Dakota, and Willmar, Minnesota, Chevrolet in Fargo, and Cadillac/Oldsmobile also in Fargo. He and his lovely wife now live on a lake at Park Rapids, a Minnesota town not far from Fargo. He organized a golf outing there a few years ago for Tom Wright, our Ben Franklin basketball coach, Donovan Nelson (who incidentally married one of our classmates and is still remarkably fit), and myself.

Larry has always been fun to be with. He has opinions, is never boring, and is always good for an adventure. However, he often speaks with a serious, sincere voice that some (not me of course) occasionally label in a good-natured way as pompous. Larry is the very definition of a good friend. When Roy Smillie got melanoma in the mid-1980s, Larry was there for him during the last year or so getting him involved in a business venture and finally helping to care for him. Friendship does not get better than that.

Vacations

Our vacations most years were local and modest, reflecting the frugality of my parents and my father's reluctance to take long trips. We never, for example, escaped the long winter by going to Arizona or Florida. Flying would have been way too extravagant, and driving would take too long given my father's limited vacation time. So we mainly stayed around home exploiting the Minnesota lake country.

Many families had a cottage on one of the numerous lakes around fifty miles away, such as Pelican, Melissa, Cotton, or Detroit—but not the Aakers. My parents regarded a lake cottage (like the country club membership and even dining out) as an unnecessary extravagance. But even without owning a cottage, the lakes still played a role in our summer life.



Where is the game?
The Pelican cabin

Our vacation always included one or two weeks at a rental cottage on Broadwater Beach on Lake Pelican, about sixty miles east of Fargo. A two-bedroom cottage, it was primitive in the early years with an outhouse with the worst odor imaginable and an icebox. Every other day or so my father took a wheelbarrow to the local icehouse about a block away, picked up a block of ice,

and hauled it to the kitchen. However, the cottage did finally get indoor facilities, an extra bedroom, and a refrigerator—luxuries that were not taken for granted.

The prime activities were swimming, boating, fishing, and playing with neighbors. There was a floating platform about thirty yards from shore to which we often attached an inflatable boat that was tipped over. It could be used as the basis for tag and hide and seek as well as diving and sunning. My greatest thrill, however, was getting to run our boat with its 3.3 hp Evenrude outboard motor by myself. What a feeling of independence that was! It was superior to my first bike or first car. You could start and stop it at will, go anywhere, turn sharply—it was great. I would take it on long fishing trips to Fish Lake, perhaps two miles away, nestled around a point. However, the trip was more important than the fishing, which was just OK unless the sunfish (which would put up a vigorous fight) were biting. Being accepted by the neighbors was also important. It helped that I was good at the ball games that they tended to play. I remember one year that we had rain every day of our vacation. I just played outside with the neighbors, but my folks must have really suffered.

My friend Roy Smillie had a cottage across the lake and I would motor across—a forty-minute trip. What an adventure! And there were no life vests in those days. When I got to the other side, the first task was to travel along the shore looking for his cottage. I could never hit shore very close to it. At the Smillie cottage, we would play badminton, ski, or surf behind his big ten-horse, and be spoiled by his mother. Now, of course, kids use nothing smaller than seventy-five hp outboard engines. On one occasion, an electrical storm came up as I was returning. The waves and whitecaps were a worry, but the possibility of being hit by lightning, a very real likelihood in an aluminum boat, was really frightening. I made it, but the last twenty minutes were among the longest in my life. My mother was very glad to see me.

There were other vacations oriented around the Minnesota lakes. Each summer we also had a gathering of the Aaker family at Lake Bertha, a subject for the next chapter. In 1952, we had a vacation from hell when, with three other families, we took over a house on an island on Lake Lizzie, accessed by a rickety barge. First, the power went out, so we had no lights, refrigerator, or

water pressure. Then there was an explosion in the gas stove just before the gas ran out. We stored the food in the well until we realized rats were eating it. A storm prevented us from leaving. However, it was hard to complain about the nightmare experience because the owner of the island, a local church, had offered it to us “free.” “Free” was a big upside for my family and friends.

With two exceptions, our travels never extended beyond the Black Hills in South Dakota or Duluth, Minnesota. The first exception was a trip to the West Coast to visit my mother’s cousin, Gaylan Larson (who was then studying to be an optometrist), in Eugene, Oregon, and her aunt (Ann Larson) in Tacoma. I recall packing the ’38 Chevrolet for the trip. There was barely enough room on one side of the backseat for a small boy. There was no air conditioning, and the trip was hot and long. We would pass the time by attempting to spot state license plates from as many states as possible. We saw Yellowstone, Glacier National Park, and the Pacific Ocean, all breathtaking after a life on the Dakota prairie.

The other exception was in 1952 when, at age fourteen, I joined my parents on a trip to Detroit, where my father was attending a meeting connected to his work at the telephone company. One of the biggest thrills of my life was seeing my first major league baseball game. The Yankees played the Tigers, and Yogi Berra hit two home runs. It was awe-inspiring. In addition to the game, I recall my mother being nervous about driving on Detroit’s bewildering freeway system filled with huge trucks. I wrote a letter to my grandparents detailing our visit to the Ford Museum, a showplace for the heritage of the Ford Motor Company and the marvels of the production line pioneered by Henry Ford.

Junior High Years

My junior high years were good for me both athletically and socially. I spent seventh grade at Horace Mann, which was then a school that spanned first through eighth grades. The eighth and ninth grade were spent at the newly constructed Ben Franklin Junior High, about a mile from my house. The new school was spiffy and up-to-date. It felt good walking in those doors.

My big achievement in the seventh grade was making the basketball team. In fact, I was perhaps the best seventh-grader in basketball. Although I didn't realize it then, it was to be the pinnacle of my basketball career. I also made the team in the eighth and ninth grades, but the talents of my contemporaries continued to improve, whereas mine seemed to have plateaued. I was strong at the fundamentals of passing and shooting but never got comfortable with team play. Still, I was on the team and got to go to practice. By high school, I dropped basketball (or more accurately, basketball dropped me) as an active participant. But in junior high I was one of the athletes.



Eighth grade at Ben Franklin

Manager—Sam Norris

Coach—Don Nelson

Tom (32), Dave (29), Roy (28)

I also played football and ran track in junior high at the insistence of our basketball coach, who felt that the experience would

sharpen our talents. I had no talent for either sport. In football I was too nearsighted and weak-armed to play quarterback and too slow for much of anything else. So I played guard, but my small size and fear of getting hurt were handicaps. In track I developed great high jump and shot-put form but had zero talent. My performance was a joke. In my view, the reason people don't excel is often mistakenly attributed to a lack of practice or coaching when it is really a simple lack of talent. My track efforts (and piano playing for that matter) are a case in point. The basketball coach made me give up hockey as well (because we might get hurt—as if the team would notice). In retrospect, I had far more potential in hockey than basketball had I gone that route.

“Hooking” cars or buses, which consisted of hanging on to the rear bumper and sliding along the snowy street, provided both transportation and recreation. Every morning John Altenburg (who lived on First Street in the house that my folks ultimately bought) and I would attempt to hook a bus from Second Street up to Seventh Street, where Ben Franklin was located. We never considered riding the bus for such a short trip. Sometimes the drivers would smear grease inside the bumper to discourage us. Tom and I would often skip our Saturday morning confirmation class to hook cars as well. I'm sure that hooking cars is no longer an option in Fargo. In those times, the streets were continuously covered with a coat of packed snow. Now, there is much less snow, and the use of salt reduces the number of days that the roads are covered even when the snow is heavy.

I was fairly successful socially in junior high, even dating a cheerleader. A group of popular girls had arrived at Ben Franklin eager to meet the fabulous Horace Mann boys who impressed with suave personalities, cool wardrobes, and dazzling self-confidence. A lot of the social whirl revolved around the skating rink. We would ask girls to skate and would circle the rink holding the girl around the waist. It was terrific fun! A ploy that Tom Wright and I employed was to meet our dates in the balcony of the theater. That meant, of course, that we didn't have to pay for their ticket. It also meant that we could arrive whenever we felt like it. I still recall our girls sitting with Swenson and others and leaving them to come to us when we arrived. My romance did not survive high school, where she had better pickings.

In our class there was a boy named Fred that was different. We were amazed to learn that he had memorized the telephone directory, and he could demonstrate his knowledge by giving us our number knowing only our name or address. Shy with a gangly body that was not always coordinated, Fred did not fit in, and some teased him, causing him considerable discomfort. We now know that he was autistic, a person who finds social interaction confusing and scary, and who had special skills, in this case an ability to memorize numbers. Such a person, termed an autistic savant, was the subject of the movie *Rain Man* with Dustin Hoffman and Tom Cruise. I like to think that schoolchildren today would handle such a classmate in a more understanding manner than we did then.

A big project during the summer prior to entering high school was to begin the insect collection that was to be assigned for high school biology, which would be taught by Art Dronen in the following fall. John Altenburg was determined to get an A and collected hundreds of specimens. Working with John was a mixed blessing. On one hand, I got a lot of insects just by using his duplicates. On the other, I got into the project far more than I wanted. It was this project and the subsequent course that convinced me that I was not destined for medicine. The grade was based upon the number of insects collected. Ladybugs were the best. They came with different numbers of spots on them, and I figured that the number of spots was the way that one species was distinguished from another. It turned out that the teacher disagreed.

John followed his science interest by becoming an ophthalmologist after marrying an attractive Fargo girl. He retired after practicing in the Army, and he and his wife Sue moved to Florida, where he developed a successful private practice doing operations on eyes. We see them periodically and hear about their travels. He and his wife take off three or four times a year, going to exotic places to view and take pictures of animals. Africa and Asia are common destinations, but one trip took them to Antarctica.

I was not that well informed about current events as a junior high student. Harry Truman sacked General Douglas MacArthur in June of 1951 for speaking in public about using nationalist Chinese troops in Korea. I recall being puzzled at the time and uncertain who was the hero of that decision. I was not alone, of

course, as MacArthur got a ticker-tape parade in New York. When Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin claimed in 1950 to have a list of 205 communist spies in the State Department, I wondered, like many others, why the government allowed spies to hold jobs in the government. Of course, thanks to television, McCarthy's excesses finally become public in 1954, and he was brought down. However, for a time, few stood up to him. I was nervous about the nuclear threat and recall wondering, like many of those in Fargo, whether a bomb shelter would be worthwhile. Given that Fargo would never be a target and that any shelter would be next to useless, there was not much logic in those thoughts. But, as a young boy with superficial knowledge at best, the fear was real.

Confirmation class, a two-year Saturday morning commitment preparing young people for full church membership, was something most Lutheran children went through. My class was under the supervision of Reverend Berge, a stern Lutheran minister that set the standard for boring. He did not have a knack for making the scriptures and Lutheran dogma interesting and persuasive. The goal of the two-year course was to memorize large chunks of material, much of which was passed off as "truth" by Reverend Berge. The climax was a test in which the students would stand up in the aisle of the sanctuary in front of an audience of apprehensive parents. The minister asked questions to the "candidates," and a memorized response was expected. I had bluffed my way to the point that he thought I actually knew the stuff. So I got the hard questions, and my memory was not up to the task. It was a disaster. The whole experience, I suspect, was intended to make us better and more committed Lutherans. It did the reverse. Memorizing answers to questions that seem irrelevant just created doubts and skepticism.

Since that time my religious feelings have evolved. I consider myself a believer in God and a Christian. I find a relationship with a higher being comforting, uplifting, and helpful in creating life priorities. Further, parts of the Bible—such as the twenty-third psalm—can be a friend in difficult times. Christianity, to me, means that a concern for others in thought and deed—whether it be family, friends, or disadvantaged people at home or abroad—is an obligation, an opportunity to enrich lives, and a source of

rewards and warm feelings. It provides an inspiration to do the right thing when others are involved. Easter and Christmas, whether based on reality or myth, help put life's daily happenings into perspective. I have been a fairly regular churchgoer for much of my life and usually find the sermons to be stimulating and the music inspiring. Christianity is like a kind, empathetic, principled friend, and role model.

Having said all that, I do have reservations about the dogma and intolerance sometimes associated with organized religion. Reverend Berge insisted that any who were not Christian would not get to heaven, and he implied you had a much better chance if you were a Lutheran or at least a Protestant. That made no sense to me then or now. I have no issue with those Christians (or Muslims or those of the Jewish faith) that have beliefs that differ from mine on interpretations of the Bible, on social issues, or on how people should behave or dress. However, I get annoyed when they signal that their way is the only right way and attempt to impose it on others. Of course Christians, at least in this country, no longer have the Inquisition, the Salem witch trials, or similar mechanisms to enforce adherence to the dogma of the day and place, but I too often observe an intolerance about the beliefs and actions of others that makes me uncomfortable.

High School Years

In retrospect, my high school experience was a good one. There were no protests or drugs in the 50s, so the school and associated activities were relatively placid and goal directed. Although, like many, I struggled socially on occasion, there were plenty of fun times. It was also productive with solid academics, opportunities with class politics, and the debate team experience.

My high school was the venerable Fargo Central, an older school that housed some 950 students in a solid, imposing structure, with three large staircases in front, about three miles from my home. Our nickname, the Midgets, was coined in 1911 when the championship football team averaged 138 pounds. During my sophomore year, I mostly walked the three miles home—even in blizzards—although there was a bus option. As a junior and senior, however, I drove my car. Fargo Central burned down in



Howard Erickson



Larry Swenson



Jack Bergene



John Altenburg



Dave Aaker



Tom Wright



Larry Dodge



Lyle Baker



Roy Smillie

1966 (ten years after I graduated) and was replaced by two modern schools, one on each side of town.

I was on the debate team all three high school years and have long felt that this activity provided the single most important learning experience of my life. Each year there would be a new topic, and we would research one side with great diligence. In my senior year the topic was federal aid to education. Except for the first speaker, every participant had to be able to adapt remarks or rebuttals to what the opponent had said. Thus, there was a great premium on organizing thoughts under pressure, as well as on exposition.

In my junior year I had Howard Erickson as a partner. The team, which included David Papermaster and Lois Ivers (both of whom went to Harvard), did exceptionally well that year. For example, we got second in a regional tournament with some forty-five teams held at Concordia College. And we won the prestigious state tournament. In my senior year great things were expected from Lyle Baker, my new partner, and myself. To the great delight of my “friends,” we barely won at all—in fact we accumulated an amazing string of losses culminating with a solid 0-5 record in the state meet. Sandra Daley, a witty, bright junior on the team, made the losing trips more bearable.

A highlight of high school was my first and last foray into the theater. I played Laurie in *Little Women*. I recall my entrance line: “What ho! Within there, what ho!” I really got into it. During the big scene I cried actual tears on cue. In contrast, the girl playing Amy opposite me, Faith Smith, a veteran of many plays, would always break up and laugh. Musicals were a big deal at Fargo High but were, of course, out of my competence arena. The school put on *Desert Song* and *Naughty Marietta* during my last two years with casts that included Roy and Larry, but not me.

I enjoyed academics and usually got the three A’s needed to be on the second rung of the honor roll. My high-water mark was in the spring of my junior year, when I finally got up the courage to take a fifth solid and got all A’s. My best subjects were probably math and history, and my worst were the sciences. I remember a very colorful French teacher, Theodore Vavrina, who had a strong French accent. I did learn to read and write French but was hopeless at speaking or understanding other speakers.

In high school I discovered minor sports, namely golf and tennis, that seemed to place a premium on raw coordination, did not require speed or physical strength, and involved little competition. It was clear that the sports were not only labeled as minor, but were second-class on all dimensions. The letters awarded were half the size of those of the “major” sports, and letter winners were not eligible to join the National Athletic Scholarship Society unless you won multiple letters.

In my sophomore year I played on the golf team with about a fourteen handicap. There were two or three golfers who had real talent, but then it dropped off fast. My parents taught me golf when I was around seven. Their advice was to keep the left arm straight, right elbow in the side, and swing slow. That was it. No lessons from pros. With that as background, I learned by reading books and playing. I enjoyed golfing with my folks because it seemed to be the only adult activity besides card games in which I was included. It was also a good outlet when I got stale playing tennis, always my priority sport. I recall once playing in a local golf tournament at the Fargo Country Club where I was paired with Bill Weaver, the local TV sports announcer for WDAY, who always signed off by winking and saying, “Win or lose, be a good sport.” I got my first taste of hypocrisy in the media when I saw him curse, be rude, and even throw clubs. Welcome to the real world.

In my junior year I was on the tennis team; in fact, Tom Wright and I won the state doubles title. I suspect anyone on the current Miramonte girls junior varsity would have beat us. A picture of us in the *Fargo Forum* showed us topless—we were not into style. In our senior year we interrupted our graduation weekend to drive to Jamestown to lose our title (despite the fact that we represented ourselves as serious players by carrying two rackets onto the courts), again to the delight of our “friends.” Larry Dodge, who beat me in the finals of the intramural tourney in both my junior and senior year held the singles spot. Through high school and college summers I must have lost thousands of sets to Larry without winning any. More on this remarkable streak in chapter three.

Tennis in Fargo was a three-month activity at Island Park’s five-court complex. The hard-core players and others would hang

around all summer. The social center was a shack manned by a court coordinator who sold soda. The courts were concrete and featured gaps that followed the lines. As a result, there would be frequent weird bounces, especially on the serves. There were also unforgiving metal nets, which did serve the function of surviving the severe spring weather.

I started to play tennis regularly when I was a sophomore in high school. I still recall the thrill when I realized I could rally with one of the better players. We were all self-taught; there were no pros or lessons. An active summer tennis league had four-person teams populated mostly by a cadre of older gentlemen. One, Warner McNair, who owned an ice cream store, had a big spin serve. The challenge was to pass this group and become number two or number one on the team so you could play better players. There were three big tourneys each summer: the all-city, the state championship, and the Red River, which would attract players from South Dakota and Minneapolis. It was not until after high school, when I got some coaching in college, that I became competitive in these settings.

In my junior year, I ran for class president and lost to my friend John Altenburg, but I was elected vice-president as a consolation prize. We were both considered noncontroversial choices. All the boys voted for John and all the girls for me—there were more boys voting. I remember John was concerned that the remaining officers, Jan Burdick (the granddaughter of our U.S. senator) and Sharon Williams, might have felt funny because they voted for me instead of him—I never did understand that. Being an officer was really a boost to my ego. The job entailed a lot of activity, much of it associated with raising money for the prom that was the responsibility of the junior class. The mainstay was frequent dances. The surefire formula was a school auditorium and a cheap band. The big winners were dances around basketball tournaments. For one tournament we sold some 900 tickets for our program of dances. I really enjoyed playing the role of politician, executive, and organizer. Associating with two of the school beauties, even if they were beyond my reach, was a pleasant extra benefit.

I was very involved in creating skits for the rallies held before big football or basketball games. We would always push the

boundaries of good taste if there was a good chance for a laugh. Making fun of a campus personality usually worked well. Larry Swenson, the football team's punt returner, once let the football go between his legs and roll far down the field. A skit was devoted to remembering the incident. A laugh was a laugh. Of course, I would have loved to have had the talent to be on the football team like Larry.

In June of 1955, after my junior year, I attended North Dakota Boy's State with some 525 other high school students, and I was an active politician. When it appeared that I could not get my party's nomination for governor, I started to create deals. I got my friends in our party to agree to support a rival for governor in exchange for controlling most of the other nominations. In the process I made sure that one statewide slot, the attorney general office, was reserved for me. Ironically, the "deal" tainted our party's gubernatorial candidate, and he lost. The taint did not extend to me, so with some active campaigning I won. This political microcosm was not unlike the real world. The democratic system may be better than alternatives (as Churchill noted), but it is not perfect. You get to vote, but only for the names that make the ballot, and often the process that generated those names can be shady and lack visibility. In this case, the details did not make the Boy's State newspaper.

As the attorney general candidate, I got to give a campaign speech and to be a pretend lawyer prosecuting a court case in which the defendant in a speeding car killed a person on a bicycle. To discredit the defendant's auto expert, I went to a gas station and asked a mechanic to give me two facts about a car that most would not know. The next day I got the defense expert to build himself up and then sprang the questions and made him look ridiculous. It was a Perry Mason moment. But it was only a partial victory because the defendant was only found guilty in the second degree. I had aspirations of being a lawyer and a politician, but this was my high point in the legal arena. My legal aspirations went downhill from there.

I ran for president of the senior class with little expectation of winning. My opponent (and good friend), Jack Bergene, was not only a star on the basketball team—he was taller, wittier, and more popular than me. To top it off, he was even brighter, with

better grades. He proposed that we limit campaigning to three signs to save effort. Since I lacked not only energy but also supporters and resources, I immediately took him up on the offer.

I did become one of the speakers at graduation. Jack was the MC, and we used that event to exchange witticisms that I'm sure others thought were inappropriate at best. In my talk, I encouraged us to dream, to set high goals, and then to achieve those goals with hard work and persistence. I quoted Henry David Thoreau, who suggested that after building castles in the air, you need to put foundations under them. It was the only speech I have ever given that was memorized. Thank goodness it was short, because it must have sounded both presumptuous and boring. It was a conventional talk for a conventional time.

Social Life

Social life revolved around dances during high school. On Friday nights, the teen canteen was the place to be. The canteen was held at the Crystal Ballroom, a large dark hall at the foot of Broadway. On special occasions, it would draw as many as 700 students from local high schools. There was often a dance on Saturday night as well, sponsored by the junior class. The dancing was mostly the fox trot until the jitterbug arrived. The twist was not far behind. There were several formals during the year, including the prom.

I was not very successful with women in high school, in part because I was on the fringe of the in-student group and was not sufficiently appealing to the most popular girls. I recall that my junior prom date needed to get in early so (I found out later) she could go on a late date with another student, Don Enabnit, who was really cool but a bit of a party animal. To impress guys he would pass gas and set it on fire. He used other techniques to keep girls entertained. He ultimately fulfilled his ambition to own a Fargo bar, where he practiced his hanging-out skills. My prom date wrote in my yearbook, "Sorry about you know what." It was definitely a low point. For the senior prom I was the odd man out and ended up going with a girl from Moorhead. She did not have a late date, so it was a big step up over the junior prom. High school can certainly be a tough time socially—and not just at prom time.

In the summer, the dances and all social life moved fifty miles east to Detroit Lakes, where there were several beer halls and a large dance pavilion. In addition, most families had a lake cottage. Jack Bergene and I were among those without a cottage, but that didn't bother us much. We would spend a good deal of time driving from friend to friend and picking up a lot of meals and places to stay. Generally, the girls—like Joyce Ivers, whose family owned a point on Pelican—were by far the most hospitable. We could always impose on people like Roy and Tom (who had a cottage on Cotton Lake), but the flak we took was sometimes intense. As we drove up we were always greeted with terms like “lunch is over” and “we are busy today.” But we were persistent. One of our best days was when we both successfully skied together behind an underpowered boat and Roy and Tom, the experienced skiers, could not.

It's really a wonder that we survived that time considering the wild driving that went on over dark and hilly roads, often in less than a perfectly sober condition. More on Jack and lake escapades in chapter three.

The 50s had distinct music that people recognize even today. Like most people who have a special attachment to the music from their high school and college years, I still love the music of the 50s. The best was Bill Haley's “Rock Around the Clock” (from the movie *Blackboard Jungle*, starring Glenn Ford and Sidney Poitier, a disturbing story about a gang disrupting a high school) that stimulated the jitterbug craze. I was into the jitterbug and have since impressed my girls by teaching it to them. We danced to that one a lot. Charlotte Tomlinson was one dance partner that made me look good. But there were other favorites such as “Memories Are Made of This” (Dean Martin), “The Wayward Wind” (Gogi Grant), “Sixteen Tons” (Ernie Ford), “Seventeen” (Fontaine Sisters), “Catch a Falling Star” (Perry Como), “Everybody Loves a Lover” (Doris Day), “Love Me Tender” (Elvis Presley), “The Rock and Roll Waltz” (Kay Star), “Chantilly Lace” (The Big Bopper), “Love and Marriage” (Dinah Shore), “The Great Pretender” (The Platters), “Day-O” (Harry Belafonte), and “Love Letters in the Sand” (Pat Boone). Other favorites were folk singers such as The Brothers Four (“Greenfields”), Glenn

Yarborough (“If I Had a Hammer”), The Kingston Trio (“Tom Dooley”), and The New Christy Minstrels (“Green, Green”).

Our graduation celebration consisted of a weekend at the lakes. Our group spent it at Roy Smillie’s cottage on Pelican. We stored the beer in the large minnow storage area at the end of the dock. I’ll never forget Jack Bergene breaking everyone up at four in the morning by barking the order, “You with the army boots, out of the pool.” The Smillie player piano played “Red Sails in the Sunset” and “Dardenella” (songs of yesteryear) again and again and again.

Winter in North Dakota depicted in the movie *Fargo* was severe, but it didn’t seem to bother us. I remember that once when school was closed because of the worst snowstorm in years, some friends and I drove out to the Kilfoyl farm to tell them that the storm was bad. We barreled through drifts in the road that must have been higher than the hood of the car. It was probably Swenson’s idea. He was crazy about cars. Yet I remember once he looked me in the eye and said with all seriousness, “You need to keep two hands on the wheel at all times.”

Tom, Dick Johnson (the star fullback on the football team), and I would go to Holloway Hill to ski. When approaching the hill, we would open the windows to get used to the cold. Go figure. On days when it was very cold, under twenty below, you could only stay out for twenty minutes or so before you had to get warm. Holloway Hill had a pathetically short run that ended at a lake. Nevertheless, we charged down the hill looking for any bump that would get us some air. The rope tow was difficult to use. I recall getting so tired at the end of the day I could no longer hold on to the rope. I would go through a pair of mittens each day I skied. After that experience I really appreciated chair lifts—which my kids of course take for granted. During one trip, Dick strained to remove the cap from a container. After Dick failed, Tom removed it effortlessly after an appropriate buildup. Dick was crushed. Tom never tired of reminding Dick about the incident. We all used long skis—the longer the ski, the better the skier. The better skis had metal edges and bottoms that did not stick, but cost more. We also used “long-thong” bindings, which was the only way to get good control with the old leather boots.

The only problem was that any fall held a great risk of an ankle injury. There were no release bindings that worked.

Among our circle of high school friends, I was probably closest to Tom Wright, although I would say that among high school boys (as opposed to girls) there is more of a hanging-out relationship than a best-friend relationship. Nevertheless, Tom and I have always enjoyed the same sense of humor and had a lot in common. He was the best man at our wedding and I am the godfather of Dianne, his second girl. We had Dianne visit us in California. She now, coincidentally, lives in Fargo, where her husband manages a major Home Depot store.

Tom married Sharon Elliott, a wonderful girl and friend. She was one of the school's elite; she was named the most representative girl (the school's highest honor), a homecoming attendant, Girl's State rep, and was just a sweetheart of a person. (I complimented Tom for marrying over his head.) After spending two years in the army (where he was basically a tennis pro based, I'm sure, on his personality rather than his tennis talent), he attended North Dakota State—quite an accomplishment, considering that he had two kids by then. He then began a very successful career at New York Life, interrupted by a tour as an executive for a St. Paul insurance company. He lived in an idyllic setting on Lake Minnewashta in Minneapolis. My kids loved to visit Tom and Sharon because it was a rare chance for them to water-ski, and



Tom, Dave, Sharon, and Kay

because they enjoyed the Wright family, especially the two boys, Tom and Jason. Remarkably, his oldest son, Tom, now lives in a house on Minnewashta next to the house in which he grew up.

Tom and Sharon retired early and spent months each year in a home they built in the middle of Baja. I once visited them there when on a Prophet company outing to the tip of Baja. It was a wonderful Spanish home designed and furnished by Sharon right on the Sea of Cortez with great diving (one of their favorite activities) out their front door. A highlight of my visit was an adventure on their four-wheeled cycles that allowed us to go to some rugged backcountry. But to get to their place you have to drive on rutted, unpaved, two-lane roads through small remote villages. They have since traded that home for one in San Diego plus a condo in Minneapolis where their kids and old friends reside. We play golf, and it is especially painful when I lose to Tom, because we both know I am the better golfer.

The Working Man

Thanks to Tom Wright's father, Clarence, who was superintendent of buildings and grounds for the school board, I was hired to wash school windows after my sophomore year. I started at seventy-five cents per hour and received a nickel an hour increase each month. It was nice to make all that money and to get to know the teachers, who were fellow workers, but it was not exactly stimulating. I got into trouble the following fall by calling my typing teacher and fellow summer worker by his first name in class. The next summer I was moved indoors to a wood shop where I sanded for three months. That was a total disaster. It was depressing to be inside, and I was never (to this day) interested in working with my hands. I was so bad that the boss, a crusty carpenter, recommended that I not be rehired the next year. I'm sure that Clarence breathed a huge sigh of relief when I told him that the next summer I would work at Culligan Soft Water—more on that experience in chapter three.

On to College

My overall impression of my first eighteen years is very positive. I had a solid Midwestern upbringing. My home was loving, stable, and secure. Links to the Aaker clan that will be

outlined in the next chapter, and to my family's friends, added warm, fun relationships. Outdoor activities for a growing boy were plentiful, and a love of books provided recreation and learning. The Fargo schools were not academically strong by some standards, but it was good enough to get me through the freshman year at MIT. The debate and public speaking activities provided me with a considerable edge. I was a very lucky guy.

About the Author

David Aaker is the vice-chairman of Prophet, professor emeritus of Marketing Strategy at the Haas School of Business, UC Berkeley, and advisor to Dentsu Inc. The winner of several career awards for contributions to the science of marketing (the Paul D. Converse award), marketing strategy (the Vijay Mahajan Award), and the theory and practice of marketing (the Buck Weaver Award), he has published over one hundred articles and twelve books, including *Strategic Market Management*, *Managing Brand Equity*, *Building Strong Brands*, *Brand Leadership* (coauthored with Erich Joachimsthaler), and *Brand Portfolio Strategy*. His books have sold over 700,000 copies in English and have been translated into sixteen languages. Cited as one of the most quoted authors in marketing, Professor Aaker has won awards for the best article in the *California Management Review* and (twice) in the *Journal of Marketing*. A recognized authority on brand equity and brand strategy, he has been an active consultant and speaker throughout the world and is on the Board of Directors of California Casualty Insurance Company. He lives with his wife Kay in Orinda, California, close to the families of his three daughters, Jennifer, Jan, and Jolyn.