

Chapter 2

Swaddled

beginning on December 24, 1949
and continuing for 4 years, 2 months, and 7 days

*“And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped
in swaddling clothes (Luke 2:12)”.*

Bellaire, Ohio

I entered the flux of humanity at 5:05 p.m. on December 24, 1949, the fifth child born to John and Jenny Foreman. My birth certificate notes my weight at nine pounds and one ounce. After spending one night at Bellaire Hospital, my mother was anxious to return home for the holidays. On Christmas morning, she wrapped me in swaddling clothes and placed me under the living room tree. Deceptive angels and stars danced above my head. Mom explained to four children that Chris was a special Christmas gift to the family. My sister Eileen is purported to have remarked, “What? Another brother? I already have one of those. I wanted a dog”.

My parents considered a few names for their second son, but my Christmas Eve advent cinched the deal in favor of “Chris”. My father deliberately chose not to name me “Christopher” after the tainted Catholic saint. One of his buddies joked, “since everyone else is calling the baby ‘Chris’, I’ll even things out and call him “Topher””. This moniker persisted for a while especially spoken by Jack and Eileen. Of course, any knowledge of my earliest days comes second hand to me.

I was alive for eight days during the decade of the forties. I have always looked upon myself as somewhat older and wiser than contemporaries who were born in the 1950s. That odd notion persists until this day. I tell youngsters I was born in the first half of the last century in the previous millennium.

In 1949, the conflagration of World War Two continued to spark global hot spots. A scan of contemporary events sets my historical context. During my birth year the Berlin blockade brought the USA and the USSR to the brink of war; Mao Tsi-tung proclaimed the People’s Republic of China; and India gained independence. Then, six months after my birth, an uneasy truce on the Korean peninsula exploded into war. The entire world was undergoing seismic change.

America had emerged from war as an economic powerhouse. Millions of men had returned home after demobilization and optimistic couples were migrating from city and farm into suburbia. It was a time to make babies. American children born in this era (1946 to 1964) were termed the “baby boom generation”.

I boomed in Bellaire for only thirteen months. During this time, my parents faithfully brought me to church. I have a certificate of nursery enrollment from the Christian Church in Bellaire, Ohio, dated January 6, 1950. My mother also cut and saved the accompanying notice from the church program announcing my arrival. Faith was a notable part of my life even at fifteen days old.

About that same time coal mines were shutting down across eastern Ohio. Employment prospects looked bleak for my father. Word came that his company was about to shutter and dad began looking for a job outside the mining industry. This is his severance letter dated May 10, 1950.

To whom it may concern: John F. Foreman has been employed by the Lorain Coal and Dock Company for a period of six years. Six months as a laborer and timberman, two and a half years as a Unit Foreman, and three years as a Shift Foreman. All this work in a mechanical mine. He has proved himself to be dependable, ambitious, honest, and a good workman and supervisor. His job has been discontinued through no fault of his own. I do not hesitate to recommend him.

His situation wasn't as bleak as it might seem. In 1946 my mother's parents had moved to Whiting, Indiana, to work at the bustling Standard Oil refinery. Grandma Dydek encouraged my father to seek out a job in the oil industry.

My folks made a few long drives to investigate the job market and dad was promised a millwright position at Standard Oil. It still took six months to relocate.

The move away from Bellaire was difficult. Our roots were deep. Both parents had family in the Ohio hills and friends going back to childhood. Charlotte was ensconced in school and involved with classmates. Jeanne especially was upset about moving away from Bellaire. With tears she pleaded with dad to stay through her High School years. She explained she was trying out for the junior cheer team and it would just "kill her" if she made the team and then had to move away.

Jeanne tells me she was amazed at dad's response. He said, "Jeannie, if you do make the cheer squad, we won't move to Indiana. I can get a job anywhere". Jeanne didn't become a cheer leader at Bellaire High School which caused sadness, but she did learn how much her father valued her.

My mother held a different view about relocating. Yes, it would be difficult to leave the only town she ever knew, but she would be moving close to her mother. That would provide a fountain of joy. As for Jack and Eileen, they were young and were up for any adventure.

During the summer of 1950, Jeanne, Charlotte, and Eileen, spent a few months with grandma anticipating their migration. Then, after one more semester in Bellaire, all seven of us packed up a trailer and pointed the 1946 Hudson westward, driving four-hundred seventy miles to our new hometown in Indiana.

Whiting, Indiana

My parents moved in with my mom's parents for a season. From February first until the end of June, seven people co-occupied space with Grandpa and Grandma Dydek. I am told it was crowded, joyful, and miserable all at the same time.

Four of the children enrolled at George Rogers Clark School at the midterm—Jeanne in tenth grade, Charlotte in eighth, Jack in second, and Eileen in kindergarten. Jeanne reports feeling out of place in her new school. Her classes were easier than in Bellaire but some of the kids made fun of her “hillbilly” accent. Eventually she made friends, and on October 9, 1951, she made a lifelong special friend by the name of Donald John Zeleznik.

Within the broadcast beam of Chicago-land, television became our great distractor. Bellaire had been too remote for decent reception, but with four channels of daylong broadcasting, my cramped family became mesmerized by the flickering tube. The 1950s would become the golden age of TV. With such tremendous cultural and informational influence emanating from Chicago, we felt more like citizens of Illinois than of Indiana. Mayor Daley became my personal mayor.

My folks began looking for real estate the moment we arrived in Whiting. The tight quarters made this an imperative for dad. He ran into problems getting a bank loan and had to borrow outside money to close the deal. Jeanne wrote a diary for the year and located the day we entered our new premises. It was June 30, 1951. On that same day, she records, mom announced to the family she was expecting a baby. Jeanne's response was, “What? I'm sixteen years old! How can mom be having a baby?”

My parents were thrilled with their new property. 1750 Lake Avenue included a two-bedroom brick home with a basement, attic, front and back porch. The corner lot encompassed a detached rental unit and sat at an intersection of maple-lined streets. Clark School was just one block away. I think the sale price was about \$9,000 with the rental unit covering most of the monthly mortgage. My dad was earning about thirteen dollars a day at the time.

Our mailing address was Whiting, Indiana, but our actual location was the Robertsdale neighborhood of Hammond. As a cultural extension of Whiting, we resided in the extreme northwest corner of the state, about one mile east of the Illinois border and one mile south of the Lake Michigan shore. Our cross-road to Lake Avenue was 118th Street, meaning we lived one-hundred eighteen blocks south of downtown Chicago.

Hoosiers in other parts of Indiana referred to this northwest corner of the state as “da region” because of its proximity to mobster-famed Chicago. In fact, our clocks were set to the central time zone of Illinois and not the eastern time zone of remnant Indiana.

Whiting was hemmed in by heavy industry—oil refineries, steel mills, and processing plants. Not without reason was it referred to as the “armpit of the state”. The saying went that a north wind brought a stench of alewife from Lake Michigan, a west wind the musky odor of corn product, and a southeast wind stinky sulfur from Standard Oil. My dad would sniff the air, “So what?”

That's the smell of money." Distant flares of escaping gas shone through the night and shrill whistles marked factory change in shift. Once a visitor arrived at our house in late winter. She asked my mom why piles of coal were lining the streets. Mom sheepishly responded that sometimes the snow turns black.

Most of Robertsdale consisted of reclaimed marshland, surrounded by shallow lakes. One section of housing, near Wolf Lake, was called the *Water Gardens*. Every few years, the area would flood and our family would drive down to see residents paddle to their front doors in canoes. In the fields surrounding our house, children would dig holes in the sandy soil. Inevitably they would strike water at three feet and the hole would collapse. Until my adult years, I figured that if a person really wanted water, all he would have to do is dig a few feet into the ground.

Our region was also noted for train traffic. All the rail lines from the east coast to Chicago—going and coming—passed by our southern tip of Lake Michigan. Mill trains pulled coal and iron while the refineries shipped petroleum product. The rails rumbled day and night without pause. It was not uncommon for an automobile to wait thirty minutes while an engine towing a hundred boxcars pulled forward and then backed up. Sometimes we counted each car to counter frustration.

In the fifties, Whiting was a white ethnic enclave. Some people were long standing residents, but most industrial workers were of first- or second-generation Slavic ancestry—mostly Poles and Slovaks. Six Catholic churches flourished in this compact area of fifteen-thousand souls. Growing up, I never met a person with black or brown skin. Whiting was a sundown town, meaning no negroes were permitted within city limits after dark. I remember the remark "the first word in Whiting is white."

Frank

The first piece of new furniture for the new house was a Philco 16-inch round television. During the long summer of her pregnancy, mom relieved stress by watching Jack Brickhouse announce Cubs baseball on WGN-TV. The season ended about the same time as mom's pregnancy. The Cubs fell to last place, while the Yankees once again won the World Series.

Frank James Foreman was born on September 13, 1951, at Saint Margaret's Hospital in Hammond, Indiana. He was named after my dad's older brother who lived in Chicago and was childless. We spoke of Frank as being the one Hoosier in the midst of five Buckeyes. At twenty-one months my junior, he became my playmate and best friend. We employed the buddy system throughout life, looking after each other. Frank and I always got along, playing together quietly.

Frank rounded out this family of six children. I wrote about us in a poem called *I Wonder*:

I wonder at the wonder of two parents with six kids all jammed into one 1946 Hudson.
How did we all fit?

I wonder at the wonder of two parents with six kids managing one meager bathroom.
How did we all keep clean?

I wonder at the wonder of six kids all going to school, from first grade to twelfth.
How were we all clothed?

I wonder at the wonder of two parents with six kids eating together every dinner meal.
How was everyone fed?

I wonder at the wonder of two parents with six kids filling one full row at Sunday church.
How did we all arrive on time?

I wonder at the wonder of two parents ...

First Impressions

Memories of my first four years are imprecise and uncertain. Do I remember the true event, a re-telling of the event, or just an antique photo? It's challenging to distinguish substance from shadow.

I remember sleeping in a large bed with mom, dad, and baby Frank. My little brother would sometimes sleep in the bottom, floor-level dresser drawer. With sleeping space at a premium, I think I shared a room with my parents until my fourth birthday.

I remember sitting in a booster chair around our dinner table when plaster and dusty cotton began falling from above. Jeanne yelped as her leg poked through a gash in the ceiling. I was transfixed. My dad rushed upstairs to pull my sister from her predicament. Our unfinished attic would undergo periodic upgrades over the next ten years, until it finally became a semi-habitable living space.

In the summer of 1953, The Dydeks were expanding their across-town home. I remember piles of sand and waving to Don Zelen working on the roof. Jeanne expounded on my snippet of memory. She tells me that Grampa Dydek refused to pay Don for the work he did. He claimed that back in 1940, when dad's Bellaire house was under construction, he had worked for free. Don needed the cash, because he was enrolling at Western Michigan University for the Fall semester. Grandma Dydek got so angry at grandpa that she moved out of the house and worked for a time as a hotel maid. She cleaned rooms until she could pay back the full amount of her stingy husband's debt.

I remember a few moments of Halloween, 1953. Mom took Frank and me to knock on grandma's door. We were both dressed as cowboys. Grandma gushed over Frankie's cuteness, but ignored me. When she noticed my rejection, she walked out the door and bent over to give me a hug. I

can't remember much about my grandmother, her face, her voice, or her home. I could never forget her love.

I see photos of Christmas, 1953, and remember playing with those exact toys. I pedaled that army jeep and I cranked that string to lift the elevator shaft. I retain the muscle memory. Holidays were always special in our house. New Year's Day was banging pots; Easter was dress up for church; July fourth was parades and fireworks, Halloween was costumes, Thanksgiving was food, and Christmas was gift-giving.

I can remember popular songs of the era. *St. George and the Dragonet* by Stan Freberg was unleashed on the public in September of 1953. We must have played that disk dozens of times because sixty years later, upon first re-hearing, I was able to recite every punch line. My family loved parody. The low-brow humor of Homer and Jethro reverberated through my life: "It bruised her somewhat and hurt her otherwise, but I'm glad it did not bruise her elsewhere."

I remember bouncing off walls and hopping on beds to 78-rpm records like *Der Fuehrer's Face* by Spike Jones and *Too Fat Polka* by Arthur Godfrey. This endless treasure of wacky recordings was a legacy of my brother Jack. Communal laughter filled our lives.

I remember the night-time sounds of my neighborhood as I drifted into sleep. Years later I wrote about these "Distant trains whistling through the dark".

Lonely sounds, dimly piercing the night's summer air
—only through stillness at all are they there.
Before childhood dreams, the distant trains sang far away songs.

Far away songs through the quiet of night
Comfort the darkness of childhood's fright,
Lullabied to sleep by distant songs of far-away trains
whistling through the dark.