

# Jo Anne & Bill



Love, Faith, Baseball  
**A Memoir**

Bill Ralston





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## Chapter 2

# Family

### Parents and Siblings

**FAMILY BACKGROUND WAS** formative to the people JoAnne and I became. Not only are our personalities influenced by our parents but also by our siblings and, to a lesser degree, by more extended family such as aunts, uncles and cousins. So, I would like to give a brief capsule description of our parents and siblings.

### Ernie and Noreen (JoAnne's Parents)

JoAnne's parents, Ernie and Noreen Guggisberg, raised both JoAnne and Margie (sister) in Pico Rivera, CA, a town adjacent to Whittier, CA. Since their home was right on the city boundary I often say JoAnne was from Whittier. Guggisberg is a Swiss-German name which Ernie's grandparents carried with them when they immigrated to the U.S.

Ernie was a commercial insulator by trade who worked on commercial buildings, hospitals and power plants. He was renowned for being a tough and blustery foreman. All his helpers initially were scared of him until they got to know him and this understanding turned into a loving respect. Ernie was somewhat of a legend in his profession. The last project he worked on before retirement was at



## JOANNE & BILL LOVE, FAITH, BASEBALL A MEMOIR

the Diablo nuclear power plant in Pismo Beach, CA. He and Noreen lived in Pismo the last 20 years of their lives. This beach town was the perfect spot for Ernie to enjoy snorkeling to collect abalone, mussels, scallops, and to dig in the sand to find the famous Pismo clams.

Ernie was a veteran of WWII who served in South East Asia. He didn't like talking about it much I'm sure because of the atrocities of the war. At the end of the war he came back to California via a troop ship. The trip took several weeks because of horrendous Pacific Ocean storms.

Ernie grew up in Cottage Grove, OR where he was a star in all his high school sports. He attended Oregon State University where he held the OSU mile record for several decades. He became a champion intermural wrestler after a career ending football injury. After college he ran distance events for the San Francisco Track Club. He

ran the mile with times under 4:30. Very excellent times for the 1930's!

Having grown up in Oregon, Ernie was a seasoned hunter and outdoorsman. A story I was told was that Ernie abruptly pulled his car off the highway while he and Noreen were on their honeymoon. He jumped out of the car and started running through the trees, while Noreen sat in the car wondering what kind of mad man she had married. In a few minutes he came walking back to the car and said he was just chasing a deer.

JoAnne told me a story that one night she and Margie came







home late from dates (before I knew her), and Ernie got up early to go on a fishing trip to Baja, Mexico. He said to Jo and Margie, “What time does a guy need to get up around here to find the bathroom open?” He knew that raising two girls in a one bathroom house posed some real challenges.

Fishing was his real passion. He was one of those guys who could catch fish when nobody else even had a bite. One time I was trout fishing with him on the mountainous section of the San Gabriel River. Fishermen were lining the river banks with no one catching a thing except Ernie. I believe he caught three trout that morning. He taught our boys a love for fishing once they were elementary school age.

Noreen was raised in East Los Angeles for most of her years by a single mother right in the middle of the depression and this circumstance necessitated Noreen going to work when she was 13 years old. During part of WWII she worked in an L.A. factory making equipment to support the war effort. Ernie and Noreen met in an L.A. area nursery where he was working when he first moved to southern California. Margie told me that her mom loved to dance, so during the early years of their marriage she convinced Ernie to drop her off at the Big Dance Hall during some evenings. This was when big bands were popular. You can probably guess that Ernie wasn’t much for dancing.

Margie was born (1943) right before Ernie shipped out to Asia. JoAnne was born (1946) the year after he returned. The first year of the “baby boomers” generation.

Noreen was a stay-at-home mom up until Jo was in high school (1960-1964). Noreen only learned to drive so she could take her girls to their activities. The driving examiner told her, “I’ll pass you, but don’t go too far.” I suppose she had room for improvement! Shortly after Jo graduated, Noreen went to work in the office of a Buick dealer located in El Monte, CA. Noreen loved her girls and taught them to be independent minded, knowing right from wrong, and to be of strong moral character. Even though she did not have









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## Chapter 3

### *College Years*

#### CERRITOS JUNIOR COLLEGE

Wally Kincaid, head baseball coach of Cerritos Jr College, was in the bleachers of my Pioneer High School game on a sunny California day in May, 1963. This was the third game I had noticed coach Kincaid attending. I was thinking he was at these games to watch me play but I wasn't sure since he had not taken time to talk to me after the two earlier games. However, at the end of this game Coach Kincaid came up to me to talk. He introduced himself, then said, "Bill, I would like to invite you to play 3<sup>rd</sup> base for me at Cerritos. Would you be interested? You need to know that baseball will require a big commitment of time, plus I expect you to keep up your grades." Coach Kincaid was the only coach to recruit me and I had heard enough about the success of the program that I felt it would be the right decision to commit.

I registered in September for fall classes with an academic goal of eventually attending dental school. This goal would require me to spend 3-4 years taking requisite science courses plus the standard education classes. At the start I did not know the difficult challenge I was facing with class work and spending five to six hours a day with baseball including Saturdays and Sundays.

Add to this a growing relationship with JoAnne who was a senior in high school. For two young people in love it was a tough situation but fortunately she was understanding of my

schedule. Her solidifying moment of realization of what was required of me to play college baseball came during spring break in '64. She and some friends were going to spend the week at Huntington Beach, CA. She invited me to come along. I had to tell her that we had games all through spring break so it would not work.

JoAnne said in her naïve way, "You should just tell the coach you want a few days off."

I said to her, "it doesn't work that way. When a player commits to a college team he goes where and when the coach wants".

She learned a lesson that day that she never forgot-a college sport is a huge commitment.

## FALL PRACTICE '63

When fall practice started I had no clue of the strategy and finer points of baseball. "Hit-n-run" what was that, or even a "run-n-hit?" I knew a squeeze bunt, but a safety squeeze or a push bunt showed my ignorance. Heck, I had been playing since I was a little kid and my mentality was to "see the ball hit the ball," and to field a ground ball and throw the runner out. Coach Kincaid taught me (and the team) how the game was played. Base running skills like stepping on the inside corner of a bag with your left foot, stealing bases with proper leads or how to delay-steal second base. As an infielder (3<sup>rd</sup> baseman) he taught lateral movement with a cross-over step, how to bare hand a bunt or soft grounder and how to crow-hop when making a throw to first base.

Coach Kincaid taught us proper positioning for infielders for relays and cutoffs from the outfield and how to catch a relay on your glove side for quick release. He instructed us on defensive and offensive strategies. In fact, he gave us all a playbook of strategies which we learned and practiced every day.





**Bill, Peter, Margie 2021**



**Ron, Janis, Bill 2021**



**Dad, Mom, Bill Lake Arrowhead '68**

We practiced taking infield/outfield so much that it was rare to make a throwing or fielding error in pregame. Pregame infield/outfield in our white “Yankee pinstripe” uniforms was purposefully designed to intimidate the opposition. It worked most of the time. Our record proved that. Another intimidation thing we did maybe twice a season was take a phantom pregame infield. In this case we made all the fielding and throwing plays without a ball. The coach would hit a phantom ball and we made the play and throw. We could get away with it because we won most our games, and yes, it was a little cocky! A friend of mine pointed out to me that the Negro League teams in the 1920’s and ‘30’s were the first to entertain crowds by taking a phantom infield.

Coach Kincaid was a master teacher of the game. Many years later I came to realize that he was considered one of the top all-time college coaches. He deserved the honor. However, in my two years with coach Kincaid I struggled with his style of dealing with his players. He used fear and intimidation to drive us to be the best we could be. I wanted to please him and not make mistakes, so I allowed the pressure to get the best of me at times. The result of this pressure and stress led to poor performances in many of my games. I remember one day the coach called me into his office and asked what was going on with me. I was so fearful of him I could hardly talk.

You would think that being a follower of Christ I would draw upon the Lord to give me peace, calmness and wisdom during this stress. For the Bible says, “Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” Also, it says, “...by prayer present your requests to God, and the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your heart and mind in Christ Jesus.” My lack of spiritual maturity and fear of mistakes and authority made for some failures. However, God allowed me to be around some Godly people and circumstances over the next two years so I could move past this







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## PRO BASEBALL- EARLY YEARS

### The Signing '66

Tom Lasorda sat at the kitchen table in our 1000 sq. ft. family home in Whittier, CA on a June day. Tom was a southern California Dodgers scout at the time. He had watched me perform against Pac 10 schools, USC and UCLA, and several state universities, and felt I could play in the organization. I believe he saw value in signing me because I was able to play several infield positions, I was a hustler (physically during the game), could hit (including curve balls), and had a desire to play. Also, I believe coach John Scolinos provided a positive recommendation.

The contract he laid on the table was the standard contract for new signees. It contained the monthly salary, terms and obligations plus any additives that were negotiated. For a 24<sup>th</sup> round pick there was not much negotiating going to happen. In my case the only additive was a signing bonus with a slight bump in the amount offered. Tom offered me an additional \$500 to the original \$5000 bonus. The additional bonus money was meant to help me finish my college degree. Also, the signing bonus would give JoAnne and me the opportunity to get married. The contract stated I would be reporting to Ogden, UT in the Pioneer Rookie League and Tom Lasorda would be the club manager.

Tom was initially a southern California scout for the Dodger organization who later moved on to managing minor league clubs for

them in the later 1960's. He helped develop a number of excellent players during the 70's and 80's. He also became a very successful major league manager during this period with two World Series Championships and a handful of National League pennants. He was a big deal in baseball circles and a fine ambassador for all of Major League Baseball. He passed away at the age of 93 during the re-draft of this chapter (January 2021).

## Love for the game

To flash back briefly, I really fell in love with baseball when I was around 9 years old. My uncle, Milton, had taken me to see minor league games of the Los Angeles Angels and the Hollywood Stars during the mid-fifties. I thought the echoing sound of the bat hitting the ball during batting practice and the grandeur of the field with surrounding stadium seating was something awesome. I was intrigued by the speed and rhythm of the players taking infield.

The next summer I tried out for our local youth league but was cut. In those days there was not a team for every kid who tried out. I did not make a youth team until I was 12 years old. From that time on my skills kept improving to the point I made summer teams all the way through American Legion Baseball as well as starting at third base for my high school team.

## Ogden, UT

The flight from Los Angeles International Airport to Ogden, UT was my first airplane flight. We landed in Salt Lake City where I joined two other rookies for a cab ride to Ogden. The 35-mile trip was my first ever cab ride. Growing up in the suburbs with access to a car made cabs rarely needed.

We were dropped off at an old hotel located in the center of town. This is where all the players would live for the summer. Staying in a hotel was another first for me. My family had occasionally stayed in a motel, but never in a hotel. Seeing a spacious lobby with sitting areas, registration counter and a restaurant was a novel experience

for me as well as for the others.

The next morning we caught team buses from the hotel to the ballpark. This was the beginning of two weeks of work outs with instruction in the basics of baseball. For those of us from out of college programs the instruction was similar to our college experience; however, there were a number of high school signees who needed to learn a lot of game fundamentals.

Tom Lasorda had me playing shortstop partly because we had so many second basemen. I had never played regularly at short, so it was a learning time. We had two rookies in Ogden that went on to become long-time major league players: Charlie Hough (pitcher) and Bill Russell (shortstop). Russell was an outfielder in those days and could run like a deer and hit pretty well. Hough, a talented pitcher, was not yet throwing a knuckle ball, but he had great command of the strike zone and that pitch that would keep him in the big leagues for over 20 years.

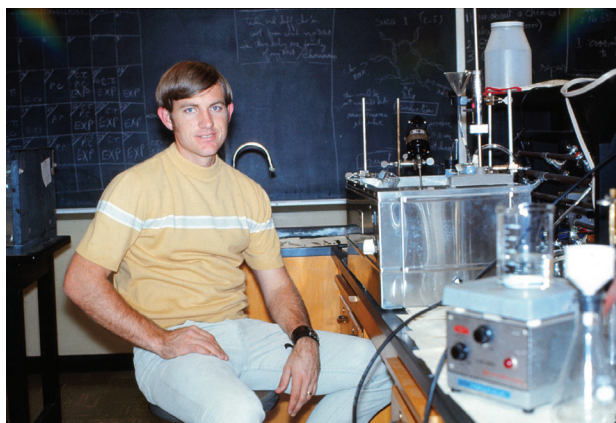
The Dodgers surprised me by moving me to their California League team after three weeks in Ogden. That was enough time in the Pioneer League to experience road trips to both Idaho Falls and Caldwell, ID. I learned really fast that bus rides, hotel living and restaurant food were part of a pro-player's life style, and that I needed to get used to it!

## **Santa Barbara '66**

JoAnne and I were excited to see each other with my return to California. It had been a month of infrequent phone calls, a few letters and no face-to-face contact. This call-up was exciting for my career as well as for our personal life. Santa Barbara is just over 100 miles from Whittier where Jo was living with her parents. A couple of times during the remaining summer she drove up to visit me. She seemed to enjoy meeting many of the wives or girlfriends and being initiated into the baseball life. That often meant late nights after ball games, waking up at mid-morning, exploring the town during the day before reporting to the ballpark for that night's game, and saying



*Bill & Jo '64*



*Bill, Cal Poly lab '72*



*Jo, Hearst Castle pool '66*