

The Samsonite Briefcase

Frederick DeBoom Witzel, ca. 1980 – 1985

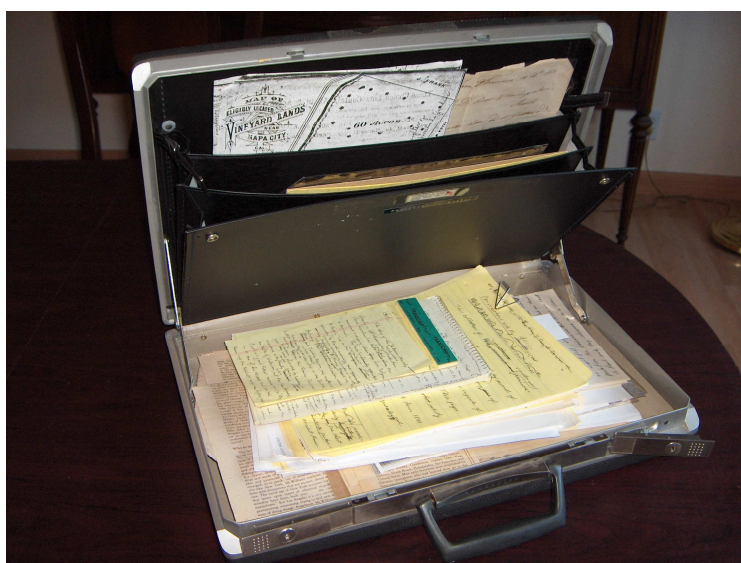
Chris Witzel, ed., July 4, 2006

When Dad died in 1988, my sister, Joanie, her husband, Bob, and I helped Mother tidy up her condo apartment. This included putting a lot of Dad's things down in the storage room (named 'la cave' by Bob because of its excellent temperature for storing wine) or stuffing them into closets. After a few years, when Mother began to suffer from Alzheimer's, none of us had any interest in sorting through old things; instead we focused on looking for Mother's glasses, earrings and lost objects that she frequently put in surprising places.

Not until Mother's apartment was sold in July 2005 did we seriously tackle looking at family memorabilia – there was so much of it. Dad had saved thousands of photos, travel brochures, souvenir postcards, and many photo albums. All of their correspondence – before they were married, while Dad was away on Navy duty, letters from China by Mother to Emma and her own mother – were sitting in boxes. Plus memorabilia Dad had inherited from his mother, Emma, less the things he had given to his brothers during his lifetime.

Finally, in 2006, I was ready to open Dad's old dark gray Samsonite briefcase which I knew contained some notes. "Some notes" turned out to be a "collection of vignettes and reminiscences ... in response to recent suggestions made by several of the younger tier in our family." The briefcase contained several stories, mostly rough drafts, and numerous lists of story ideas and cryptic phrases to remind him of key points to include. Only one handwritten document is dated – July 1980. Judging by the handwriting, most of his writing was done in the early to mid 1980's. The briefcase also included some supporting materials – photocopies of documents he had used, or intended to use, to verify historical facts.

Dad (and Mother, too) had an amazingly interesting life. Born just 3 years after the great Fire and Earthquake of San Francisco, he participated in WWII, the Chinese Civil War, the technological transformation of America, and was an early 'angel investor' in Silicon Valley. You can get a sense of his education, encyclopedic knowledge of all things related to sailing, seamanship, logistics and supply, love of travel, and sense of humor simply by reading through the variety of topics he intended to write about.



One of his topic lists is entitled "**What Was it Like in Ancient Times, Dad?**" He has crossed out the footnote which read, "When young, my children had the remarkable facility of telescoping all events from historical, Roman times to the 1930's in one short set of experiences which I was expected to have been a principal participant."¹

Here's the associated list of stories he intended to write:

- Introduction ✓
- Golden Days on Clayton Street
- Bonnemaman and Page Street
- Sand Dunes, Fog, and Street Cars
- Adventures on the Bay
- In the Footsteps of Menuhin, Ricci, and Stern
- ΑΣΦ Stealing Flowers
- S.S. San Juan – An Iron Rust Bucket
- Blind Baggage to the Azores²
- Asahi Bear, and Football in Guam
- Tragedy off Fiji
- Now Hear This: Sweepers, Man your Brooms
- A Tonkinese Girl in Bali Hai
- A Train Ride to Nanking
- Nanking Night Life

Another page has **No Title**, just the following items:

- A visit to Buckingham Palace
- Flying over the Pole Holding Time Still
- Cornelius De Boom – Forty-Niner Merchant
- Claus Wreden – The German Grocery Experience
- Road Race down the Dalmatian Coast
- Wright's Station
- Witzel & Baker (Horn & Buggy)
- Lowell High School Rowing Crew vs. U.S.S. Pennsylvania
- Fishing at Lime Rock
- Traveling to Ross

¹ As one of those children, I need to add that this is the risk a parent assumes when they have the ability to provide vivid explanations of historical events. On the other hand, as little kids we may have simply considered anyone over 21 to be ancient.

² He was working on the title, trying out "Blind Baggage," "Summer Bumming Trip," "Bumming A Way to the Azores and Back," and "Summer to the Azores and Return."

Another page is titled "**Places**" and includes:

- 560 Funston
- 1777 Page – description & Dudley Stone – description – Miss Caven, Park entrance, car barn
- Clayton St
- Shady Lane, Ross Valley
- Tom Sinclair
- 576 17th Ave. – De Conick – Sutro School
- Market St. Railways
- Masonic St....Mission
- West Portal Park
- Cornelius De Boom. Almost always spoke French; Eng. accent. Favorite Dickens – paid by word. Tip afternoon visit.
- Bonne Maman. No pack on their back. Sans coulottes. Wore matelons. Enormous prejudices. Baronne du Barle. Save the girls. Hated gardens. Arracher.

Yet another page is called "**Titles of Articles.**"

Here he has listed:

1. Living in Haight Asbury – Page Street.
2. Santa Cruz Mountains – Wrights Station
3. Experiences in China 1946-1948
4. Experiences in England 1952 -4
5. Havannah Harbor – Frenchman's Cove
6. Sea Stories
 - S.S. San Juan
 - S.S. Missourian
 - U.S.S. Henderson – Guam, Shai – Tiensin, Ching Wang Poo
 - U.S.S. Utah
 - U.S.S. Broom / handler – storm
 - U.S.S. Colorado – Air Collision
 - S.S. Liberty ship – Man Overboard
 - U.S.S. Gen'l Butler

Sea Scouts contains a few cryptic notes on a small SRI notepad:

Richardson Bay	Painters:
Sailing ships	Jack Cosgrove
Makaweli	Art Hyman
Barkentine Echo	Neil Winship
Union Fish Co.	
Belvedere Island	

But an **Untitled** full-size page follows up with some details:

WORKAWAY – M.S. Missourian

Essay on Makaweli – Barkentine. Echo – Bark. Impounded. German Alien Prop Crt. Hinds-Rolph – Capra

Richardson Bay in 1920s: graveyard, hulks, romantic. disappeared one by one in 1920's. Sans.³ & Belvedere – W. side rugged, unsuitable for habitation like Lands End.

 Union fish Co. – 3-masted schooner moored to Pier. Salmon

Painters in 1924 Easter Vacation: John O'Hara Cosgrove II, Arthur Hyman, Neil Winship, F.W.

Cosgrove & Hyman owned a rehabilitated 24' Navy sailing & rowing Whale Boat (acquired at an auction at Mare Island) painted green. Sliding Gunter?⁴ rig – could be rowed in very light winds or very fast on quarter. Could not point high. Cosgrove & Hyman visiting some of the hulks – became friends with shipkeeper Capt. Fred Wann. Masters ticket. Sail vessel any tonnage. 1.2 pay, Makaweli – named after town & bay in Kawai. Sunny days roaming the vessel. quite modern-sized turnbuckles & stays. Steam boiler for handling sails & raising anchor.

Echo – John Quivera⁵ acquired after WWII. Remittance man. Wann. Antique furniture. WJ Sloan Interior Decorator. Nurse. Captain's quarters fitted out. Gig – Rope rudder. Quinn in stern. Tossed Oars. Breakfast, lunch, & dinner. Sausalito Rest. Bills – limit – 60 cents dinner. Painting – stages. Lived Foc'sle Makaweli – Wann Contractor.

³ Illegible

⁴ Illegible

⁵ Spelling is unclear.

Notes for War Experiences is quite detailed. Besides a reminder to look at his SOPAC (South Pacific) file, he has outlined the following:

1. Departure from Washington D.C.⁶
 - a. Joanna chicken pox,
 - b. Packing HHE (brief),
 - c. Jan 1943
2. Drive Across Country
 - a. Layover Mineral Wells⁷ (brief)
3. Waiting in Menlo Park – Boarding Liberty Ship
 - a. Loaded Gas in Drums, Torpedoes, Bombs – for Solomons
4. Thirty Days to Fiji – Sura, Nandi Levu
 - a. Loss of seamen over the side
 - b. American crew performance
 - c. Passing ? Island – Mutiny of Bounty
 - d. Line Crossing Celebration
 - e. Arrival in Fiji – Pacific Club – Cricket
5. Transfer to U.S.S. ?
 - a. Local runs to New Hebrides
6. Report to U.S.S. Colorado
 - a. General Quarters station
 - b. Sorties to the Slot
 - c. Landings at Rendora (Ed)
 - d. Coast Watchers
 - e. Havana Harbor – Officer’s Club
 - f. Frenchman’s plantation
 - g. New Hebrides – Fighter-Torpedo Plane collision
7. Return to Pearl – Cinc Pac
 - a. Work – 60 hours/week
 - b. Planning Tasks
 - c. Outrigger Canoe Club – Anna & Sergeant
 - d. Hodges. Al Watkins & Lucille
8. Transfer to Guam
 - a. Cinc Pac Hill
 - b. B29’s
 - c. Swimming
9. Transfer to Uncle Sugar(?)

⁶ Joanie remembers her illness delayed the family’s trip to California and Dad’s subsequent departure for CINCPAC/Honolulu for service in WWII. “HHE” is the Naval abbreviation for “household effects.”

⁷ Joanie adds that Mineral Wells was a Texas health spa where our mother Virgilia got a bad case of food poisoning.

"—Notes—" begins with a sentence to be inserted in some story.

(BBB) For city dwellers the ever present problem of horse & buggy pollution – the kind you step in – made every trip downtown a slightly unsanitary adventure.

Wreden:

- Write to W. Wreden Books
- Cover German origin – Essen / Darmstadt
- Trip to Calif – How – via Panama, Cross Country, Cent. Amer.
- SchentzenVerein⁸
- Grocery Store
- Brewery
 - Crystal Palace Swim
 - Fire
 - Acme – amalgamation of Six Bauers, Scheveitzers, Weilands,
 - distantly related to house⁹
- Trips to Europe in 80's & 90's¹⁰
- Brother William Wreden
- Corinthian Yacht Club

Unitarian Sunday School –

Stoddard? good speaker. Believe in Unity (not Trinity of God). More or less mathematically inclined. Perhaps sociologists. Boston Transcendentalists. Bright Lights. Channing, Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne. Starr King – Sunday School – Arthur & Ed – Grant Taylor – Grunsky – Chief Clk – Calif. Super Court & state judicial system. Dutton – sparse attendance, Choir, Channing Society of Christian Work

Essay on the Unitarians – 1915 – 1930 has its own page of thoughts:

Old Church – Thomas Starr King – Grandson in Navy. Beacon St. Emerson Channing – Old North Church Boston. Henry Ward Beecher. 3 levels of parishioners...no fraternization. 1) Caleb SS Dutton. Pacific Heights group – lived E of Presidio & N. of California Street, Sea cliff. Old S.F. money. Kirkland, Sesters, Alaska Packers. Hallidie Funds. Grunsky. SF xx¹¹ 2) Rest of World – converted Jews, occasional drifters, pure white middle class – comfortable means 3) New Hippies, WWII, blacks & non-caucasians. Conflict – Golf, Sailing vs. Sunday a.m. ritual. Anti-Draft, Anti-Nuclear, Politics – Left Wing Liberal Causes

⁸ Handwriting is unclear.

⁹ Handwriting is unclear.

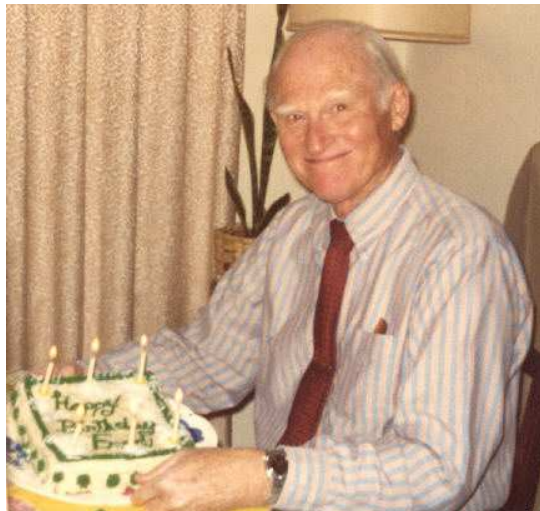
¹⁰ 1880's & 1890's

¹¹ Illegible word

Editor's Postscript

Dad joined SRI¹² as a management consultant after retiring from the US Navy in 1959. He loved the project work which used his expertise in management presentations, supply chain logistics and enthusiasm for solving business problems. I worked as a 'temp' at SRI during the summer of 1976, shortly after he had been forced to retire because of age. As he drove me to work one day, I remarked how I wished I could go to the beach instead of working; he replied how much he enjoyed working and wished he still were. Actually, Dad approached all aspects of his life (excepting doctor's visits and family arguments) with great enthusiasm.

One of his colleagues, Tony D'Esopo, recently wrote me that "One of my fondest memories of working all those years at SRI would be Fred's response to my 'How are you?' It was 'Splendid!' said with a magnificent smile. He'd turned a more or less obligatory and perfunctory exchange of greetings into a magic moment, where we both were aware of how lovely life is and how fortunate we were to be working together."



Frederick DeBoom Witzel
March 31, 1983
around the time he wrote these notes and stories.

¹² Stanford Research Institute, Menlo Park, California