

Chapter 20

HOW DO YOU SPELL *EMERITUS* ?

Don't let it be too late!
(Billy Bob Thornton)

It was 1984 and I had been calling for more than thirty-five years. Square dancing had been good to me, but it had also taken over my life. I had created a lifestyle that effectively excluded anything not connected with square dancing and, what's more, I had done it deliberately. For many years, the life I lived was exactly the life I wanted. But now I found myself wishing I had time to do other things. I still enjoyed calling but it was harder to generate enthusiasm for my weekly club dates and, after fifteen years of uninterrupted publishing, I had come to dread the unforgiving monthly deadlines of Choreo Breakdown. I was definitely ready for a change and I wondered whether the time had come to think about retirement. I would turn sixty-two the following year and be eligible for Social Security. Would the extra income make a comfortable retirement possible? And what would that retirement be like?

I tried to imagine the kind of retirement I'd choose if I had enough money to do anything I wanted. I had always yearned to live in the mountains and Betty and I both enjoyed our frequent visits to Lake Tahoe. Could we move there? I wasn't sure I'd enjoy Tahoe's snowy winters, however, so why not become a snowbird? We could live at the Lake for most of the year, and spend the winter months some place warm and sunny - - like Maui. It was an ambitious plan and we probably couldn't afford it, but I decided to check it out anyway.

I was astonished to find that while a Tahoe/Maui scenario would be expensive, it was definitely feasible. I checked and rechecked the numbers and there was no mistake. With the retirement income I expected to have when we added my Social Security checks to the pot, it was a decidedly possible. At least financially. I hadn't been this excited since I discovered square dancing!

I discussed my scheme with Betty and although she had some reservations about whether we could afford the annual trips to Maui, she agreed that it was worth a try. We spent the next year working out the details. We couldn't quite swing three months a year on Maui, so we settled for two. We chose January and February because we guessed those months probably produced the most snow each winter. December and March were also snow-prone, but we figured we had reduced the risks substantially and that if a problem did occur, it would be both minimal and manageable. If it snowed in December, Maui was only weeks away; if it snowed in March, Springtime was just around the corner. We could cope!

We still lived in the Amondo Drive house and thought we'd have to sell it. When we told our daughter Linda and her former husband about our plans, they asked if they could rent it from us instead. It would be one less detail for us to worry about, so we agreed. She and Joe moved in when Betty and I moved out. They were married in that house in 1986.

Next, I had to dispose of Choreo Breakdown. After some lengthy discussions, I sold the entire enterprise to Don Beck, a New England caller and a good friend. We agreed upon a price and

a monthly payment plan and we closed the deal. My Farewell Issue of Choreo Breakdown was dated December 1984 and Don took over in 1985. It turned out that Don handled deadlines badly and after his first year, he often published late or missed an issue completely. He never missed a payment to me, however, and we settled our contract on time. He continued to publish Choreo Breakdown but slowly lost subscribers and, after a few years, ceased publishing altogether.

I was calling and teaching classes for three weekly clubs at that time: The Square Hoppers (26 years), the Whirlaways (17 years), and the San Mateo B&Bs (11 years). I told them of our intention to move to Lake Tahoe and gave them each three-months or more to find a replacement caller. Before we left, each club threw a big farewell party for Betty and me and while they didn't want us to leave and the goodbyes were tearful and charged with emotion, everyone wished us well. We had all had some good times together and the three clubs are still actively dancing today.

I wasn't giving up calling completely so I didn't cancel any of my weekend engagements. My plan was to continue to work on Saturday nights until those bookings no longer came in, but that changed after our first winter when, before escaping to Maui, we had to drive down the hill through a treacherous snowstorm to make a Saturday night commitment in Santa Rosa. After the dance, we stayed with friends and, the next day, headed back to Lake Tahoe only to be stopped at Placerville because the snow had continued all night and they had closed the roads. We took a motel and weren't allowed to return home until the following morning. Shortly thereafter, I examined my calendar and canceled every date that involved driving off the mountain during the months when snow was likely to mess up the roads.

Rather than buy a house at Lake Tahoe, we decided to rent one until we were sure we were going to like living at the Lake. I had been checking the Tahoe real estate ads and had a pretty good idea of what was available and what the rents were. Early in 1985, we drove to the Lake on a weekend house-hunting excursion and rented the first house we looked at.

The house was located on a large corner lot in Skyland, an upscale, well maintained residential community in Zephyr Cove on the Nevada side of the Lake. It was a large 3-bedroom house with a spacious 3-level floor plan not counting a large room over the garage that could be used as a den or playroom. It was probably more house than we needed, but it came furnished and the rent fit our budget. We signed a lease and moved in on May 3rd, 1985. In less than three months time, we had completely changed our lifestyle. My retirement was turning into everything I had hoped for and more!

One of the first things I did was to take two courses at South Lake Tahoe Junior College. One was Water Color Painting and the other was Wine Appreciation. I enjoyed both classes. I got a B+ in Water Color and an A in Wine Appreciation.

Wil and Lori Bernard, an East Bay square dance couple with whom we had become friendly, afforded me the opportunity to buy premium French wines at the bargain basement price of a buck or two a bottle. Wil worked for a spirits distributor in Oakland and he was able to acquire supposedly damaged merchandise at ridiculously low prices. The distributor sold mostly to fine restaurants who required that each bottle they bought be in absolutely mint condition. It often happened that, en route from France, a cork might chip, a label might tear or become stained and, while this in no way affected or disturbed the wine, such bottles were regarded as damaged merchandise. They couldn't be sold and had to be returned to the seller. It was cost-prohibitive to ship them back across the Atlantic so the seller gave instructions for the bottles to be destroyed. But that seemed wasteful, even sacrilegious, so rather than destroy them, the distributor sold the

damaged bottles to his employees for a token fee. Wil bought all he could get and asked me if I would be interested in buying some bottles too. I told him that, at those prices, I would buy all the French and German wines he cared to sell me.

Wil and Lori visited us at the Lake every Labor day weekend and they'd bring up about twenty cases of French wine every time they came. When they arrived, we'd unload their car and I would go through the cases of wine like a kid opening presents on Christmas morning. The wines were mostly upper medium-grade Rhones, Bordeaux and Burgundies, but I'd occasionally find some top-rated treasures too. I converted the room over the garage into a wine cellar and at one point, it contained more than 800 bottles of premium French vintages.

I knew my good fortune couldn't last. One day, the distributor caught some of his workers selling the bottles at a flea market and that was the end of that: they stopped selling the wines to their employees. Wil's source had dried up. For me, it had been an unexpected stroke of good luck and I am grateful to Wil and Lori for allowing me to indulge my taste for fine wines. I have long since polished off almost all the wines they brought me. About a dozen bottles of the really good wines remain and I hoard them jealously. Wil and Lori now live in Reno and our friendship continues. We exchange e-mails regularly and we drop in to see them whenever we are on the Mainland.

Anyone who enjoys the mountains would agree that we had made the perfect move and that our new home was ideally located. From our front door, I could walk one block to the Lake's eastern shore and, in the opposite direction, walk another block to a place where I could enter a part of the Lake Tahoe National Forest that hardly anyone ever visited. We lived at the Lake for nearly fifteen years and, for most of that time, I regarded this small tract of the Sierra wilderness as my own private hiking preserve. I called it *The Mountain*. The Park Service maintains no hiking trails here, but numerous old logging roads and game trails still criss-cross the area and I came to know them all. I also did a lot of off-trail hiking.

During the time we lived at the Lake, I hiked in some part of the Forest nearly every day. I hiked solo, which could have been a real problem if something happened to me while I was alone on The Mountain, but I felt it was a risk worth taking. I was fairly woods-wise and I usually took the precaution of telling Betty where I planned to hike on any given day. My hikes would usually last one, two or three hours and Betty always made me tell her how long I planned to be gone so that she would know when it was time to begin worrying.

Fortunately, I experienced no problems and I have many beautiful memories of my daily walks. While there were no peaks to ascend, there were many high ridges with excellent views of Lake Tahoe. I hiked them all. A broad assortment of wildlife lived on The Mountain and, in addition to the ever-present chipmunks and mountain squirrels, I frequently crossed paths with deer, raccoons, weasels, foxes and, one time, I even happened upon a mother bear and two cubs.

I was coming down The Mountain and was heading home when I saw the bear just off the trail. I was about twenty feet away and the moment I saw her, I froze. I was simultaneously frightened and fascinated. The big brown mother bear was busily scratching for grubs in an old fallen log and she completely ignored me. The cubs, on the other hand, watched me intently. I didn't know what to do, so I did nothing. Not wanting to disturb a mother bear with cubs, I remained stock still. I wondered why she wasn't aware of my presence, but she kept on pawing at the log and seemed oblivious to anything else. Finally, unable to stand it any longer, I took a very slow and tentative step forward. She kept scratching. I took another. She still ignored me. Then

another and another and another - - the two cubs watching my every move - - until I was well past them and out of sight. I quickly walked the rest of the way home. I still couldn't believe that the bear hadn't seen me and when I told my neighbor about the encounter the next day, he suggested a possible explanation. He reasoned that, without my ever seeing her, the bear had often seen me on The Mountain. She must have long ago decided I posed no threat and allowed me to share her habitat unchallenged. Could be! I never saw the bear or her cubs again.

On one of my hikes, I discovered a tall dead fir tree on a high ridge with a large osprey nest at the very top. Ospreys are large, migrating sea eagles who mate for life. Their nests are disc-shaped and are approximately three feet in diameter. The same pair of osprey returned to this particular nest every spring. I took a bird-watching friend to see them and he mentioned them to a Park Ranger he knew. This particular ranger was responsible for counting Lake Tahoe's wildlife. She telephoned and asked if I would take her to see *my* osprey and we arranged a time. When we had seen the birds and were hiking back to her vehicle, she told me that my birds were the ninth pair of nesting osprey she had thus far recorded around the entire perimeter of the Lake and that their nest was the furthest inland.

On another occasion, I crested a ridge and, on the other side and about thirty feet from where I stood, I saw a group of eight grazing deer. As soon as I appeared on the ridge, we all froze and stared at each other. We stood there, *en tableaux*, for about a minute or two, when the largest deer - - the only one with antlers, - - slowly turned and calmly trotted off down the hillside. The others wheeled in behind him and, in single file, they followed him down the trail. I suppose that, like the bear, I didn't threaten them either.

From the early spring, when the snow plants poke their bright red tops through the crusted snow, to the late fall when a profusion of white mountain asters cover the sides of every stream, The Mountain is awash with wild flowers. Although I didn't always know their names, I recognized most of them by sight and I always enjoyed their ever-changing kaleidoscope of rampant color. One day I decided to see how many Sierra wild flowers I could identify and capture on film. I bought some guidebooks, loaded my camera and carried it with me on every hike. In only two seasons, I identified and photographed more than a hundred different species.

It had become our custom to have dinner every Sunday evening at the Lakeside Casino, a small and friendly establishment whose motto was *Lakeside Loves Locals*. We became regulars and the casino personnel - - from pit bosses and money changers to dealers and slot mechanics - - knew our names. We were often *comped* to dinner and were always invited to the special Christmas party they hosted each year for their special patrons. Toni was our favorite waitress at the restaurant. She knew exactly how we liked our martinis and we could trust her to tell us when to select - - or avoid - - this or that item on the menu.

After dinner we'd gamble. Betty would hit the slot machines and I would try my luck at a blackjack table. When we first moved to the Lake, I was a bit apprehensive about what affect the nearby casinos might have on our retirement budget. Betty and I both enjoy gambling and while I had included gambling as a fixed-figure expense in our monthly Tahoe budget, I wasn't certain that we'd have the discipline to stick to it. I needn't have worried. The entire time we lived at the Lake, I kept careful records of our combined wins and losses and found that at year's end, we were never more than one or two hundred dollars on either side of the break-even line. We soon learned to take separate cars to the casino on Sundays. Betty spent a lot more time at the machines than I did at the tables and it was therefore important for each of us to have our own transportation.

I had promised myself that if the time ever came when I had some adrenalin to spare for things other than square dancing, I would explore the possibility of working with a community theater group. For forty years my job as a caller had gratified my need to perform on stage. It wasn't acting, however, and I had never lost my keen desire to perform as a thespian. At Lake Tahoe, the opportunity presented itself sooner than I expected.

I was seated at a blackjack table one Sunday evening, playing with one of my favorite dealers, a charming and vivacious young lady named Liz Niven. During our usual mid-game banter, she mentioned that she had performed professionally in musical theater and I immediately sensed a kindred spirit. I told her of my short-lived flirtation with the Broadway stage. She countered by telling me that she was attending an audition for a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that the Drama Department of the Junior College would soon be putting on and suggested that I try out too. That off-hand conversation ignited a spark that would once again make acting an important part of my life.

I went to the audition and found that it was much more casual than the ones I remembered from my younger days on Broadway. Tryouts were still competitive, but they were nowhere near as stressful as the ones I had previously experienced. On that night, the actors I competed with were either young students or hobby actors like myself and the uneasy aura of quiet desperation and cut-throat determination that characterized my earlier auditions, was completely absent. I read for several roles and, to my delight, was cast as Aegeus. It was a small part, but I had no complaints. I was back on the boards, and in Shakespeare, no less! I was in seventh heaven.

Liz, I discovered, is a very talented performer. She is a fine actress and sings like a nightingale - - from Ethel Merman to Julie Andrews and all points in between. In this show she was cast as Puck and she was perfect in the part. It marked the first time we appeared in a show together and, over the next few years, we appeared in several others. We still keep in touch via e-mail.

A Midsummer Night's Dream was my introduction to community theater in South Lake Tahoe and Carson City where three major show producers are active: the South Lake Tahoe Community College, the Community College of Northern Nevada, and the Brewery Arts Theater of Carson City. They select shows from a broad spectrum of classic theater, straight plays and musicals. I was involved in this theatrical *milieu* for about eight years and played everything from leads and important featured roles, to small character parts and walk-on bits. I played in Shakespeare and Sophocles, Thornton Wilder and Agatha Christie - - and that's not counting the musicals. Because I always claimed to be an actor who sang rather than a singer who acted, I usually landed parts requiring little or no singing. I appeared in *Kiss Me Kate* (Baptista), *My Fair Lady* (Col. Pickering), *Carousel* (Starkeeper), *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (Erroneous), *How To Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* (Mr. Womper), and *Man of La Mancha* (the Governor). To stretch myself, I accepted a role in the chorus of *Jesus Christ, Superstar*. It was a rock musical and I absolutely hated it!

After *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, my next role was in Thornton Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth*, a quirky play that demands an audience with an unconventional imagination. The director could never figure out if it was a comedy or a tragedy so we played it campy. I enjoyed it because I played the lead (Mr. Antrobus).

I played in only one comedy, the whimsical play about a six-foot rabbit called *Harvey*. I played Dr. Chumley, the psychiatrist. It was a great role that provided a welcome opportunity to work on my comic timing skills. I found comedy far more difficult to perform than tragedy. The

audience dynamics are different. On one night, a certain line may produce uproarious laughter and , on another, be greeted with barely audible snickers. A line may sometimes generate nervous titters and other times, even though it is delivered in the exact same way, it produces a frightening silence. I observed this phenomenon for the first time when I played in Harvey. No one can explain it. It is scary.

One of my most unsettling on-stage experiences occurred during a performance of Measure For Measure. I played Duke Vincentio and Liz played my daughter and we were doing the show arena style - - the stage in the center pit and the audience seated around us on all four sides. For the audience, there was only one exit to the lobby. There is a scene in the play where only Liz and I are on-stage. We are engaged in an ardent exchange of difficult Shakespearean dialogue. One night, during this scene, a lady in the audience got up from her seat and, in the middle of my most impassioned speech, marched across the stage and , moving directly between us, continued out the exit door. It was unnerving to say the least and for the only time in my acting career, I went up in my lines. I was so shocked, I forgot where we were or what we were doing. Luckily, Liz stayed in character. In perfect iambic pentameter, she was able to improvise dialogue that steered me back to one of my key lines and we were able to complete the scene. The lady who interrupted us never did understand what all the fuss was about.. She desperately needed to use the rest room and the only way she could get to it was to walk across the stage. When she was ready to return to her seat, they had to physically restrain her from going back the same way she had come.

I played Tiresius in Oedipus Rex .which was also staged arena-style but with an interesting difference: Instead of the actors constantly turning to give all sides of the house an equal view of the action, the director mounted the stage on a large motorized turntable that slowly rotated throughout the entire play. Most of us were skeptical, but it worked.

My favorite musical was My Fair Lady with Liz as Eliza Doolittle. I played Col. Pickering. It is an actor-proof show and we did it especially well. I also remember Gypsy in which I played a dual role. In the early scenes, I played Rose's father but later I became Mr. Goldstone. To underscore that this was a different character, I wore a false mustache as Mr. Goldstone and, during one particularly hectic performance, the action became so abandoned that one of the enthusiastic young dancers inadvertently brushed the mustache right off my upper lip. I hurriedly clapped my hand over my mouth and finished the scene as though I had a toothache.

For the part of General MacKenzie in Agatha Christie's classic murder mystery, Ten Little Indians, I wanted a stiff, bristly, white military mustache so I decided, for the first and only time in my life, to grow a real one. It came in fine but it was mousey greyish-blond in color and I had to sprinkle it with talcum powder to get the look I wanted. Sometimes, when I made my entrance and spoke my first lines, I shook some of the powder loose and the audience must have wondered why a thin cloud of white dust had suddenly appeared around my head. Halfway through the second act, the plot required me to die on stage and, in full view of the audience, lie quiet for the rest of the act. Lying dead on stage is one of the easiest things an actor has to do - - unless, like me, you have Parkinson's Disease and must control your tremor. I managed, but barely.

Harrah's Casino is the biggest casino at Lake Tahoe and, as a public relations gesture, they allow Brian Farnon, their former musical director, now retired, to stage a musical production of Dickens' classic Christmas Carol using only local actors. It is called Ebenezer Scroge and, among the locals residents, the show has become an eagerly anticipated annual tradition. The show is staged in Harrah's main showroom and it sells out every year. Brian wrote the show , which is

quite good and he shamelessly mugs his way through the lead part of Scrooge. I was asked to join the cast in 1992 and appeared as the Merchant and the Monsignor every year until we left the Lake.

My theatrical endeavors at Lake Tahoe are among the most enjoyable experiences I have ever had. The only downside was that they required me to leave Betty alone for many evenings while I was off rehearsing and performing in a show. For me, however, they were an unparalleled delight. I miss them.

While we lived at Lake Tahoe, I did a little bit of calling in Carson City and Reno, especially during the first few years. I ran an Advanced Level Workshop in Carson City and taught several Advanced classes. On other occasions, I conducted a Plus Level Workshop at Harold's Club in Reno (1992), and I was hired as club caller for the Reno B&Bs (1993). I also taught their beginners' class. I had grown unaccustomed to the drudgery of a weekly commitment, however, and I felt tied down and constricted. I left them both after a year or two.

For a number of years, I also called some one-night stands at the Lake. I became associated with a musical booking agent who specialized in providing live music for the many conventions that were held at Lake Tahoe. Whenever he had a request for a country-western band, he'd suggest that for a just a little bit extra, they could add an excellent square dance caller to the program and, for several years, he booked a dance or two for me each year. I liked them because they were easy gigs and they usually paid well.

Shortly after retiring to the Lake, CALLERLAB granted me status as a Caller Coach Emeritus, a new category created especially for retired master coaches who might still be available for an occasional seminar or clinic. It is a very select club; only about a half dozen or so coaches have thus far received this designation.

We moved to Lake Tahoe in the spring of 1985 and we began our annual snowbird trips to Hawaii the next winter. We rented a one bedroom oceanside condo at Lokelane on Maui's Kaanapali Beach. We spent our time acquiring a tan and exploring the island. We also got to know the dancers in the Maui square dance community. I experimented with water color painting and tried to teach Betty how to swim. I did fairly well with my water colors, but failed dismally to show Betty how to stay on top of the water. Betty shopped and enjoyed the sun.

After the second year we realized that, other than the usual tourist activities -- most of which we had experienced several times -- there wasn't much to do on Maui. We decided to divide our Hawaii stay the next year by spending half our time on Oahu, where we hoped to find a bit more action. That seemed to work. There was lots more to do on Oahu and the square dance program was much larger. We followed this Maui/Oahu pattern for two or three more years, until one year, it rained in Hawaii for almost the entire two months we were there. We were also aware that ever since we had been coming to Hawaii on an annual basis, the winters at the Lake had been fairly mild; that while they had had some snow, it wasn't very serious and it created few problems. We decided to skip Hawaii the following year and see if we could tough out the entire winter at Tahoe.

About this time we found ourselves in the middle of a major legal problem between our Tahoe landlord and his lender. During this dispute, there was a question about who should receive our monthly rent, with both sides insisting it should go to them. We had been called to court several times by the lender and each time the judge told us that since the landlord had filed for bankruptcy, he had no jurisdiction in the matter and that we should keep on doing what we were doing -- which we did.

In March 1989, we came back from our Hawaii trip to find that the locks had been changed and a SOLD sign was standing in our front yard. Our furniture and other possessions had been moved out and placed in storage in Reno. The details are still too painful to describe, except to say that the lender had gone out of his way to make things as difficult for us as possible and had deliberately orchestrated the proceedings so that they occurred while we were on our annual two-month sojourn in Hawaii. It was all perfectly legal and there wasn't a thing we could do about it.

The one bright side to the whole sorry affair was that we were able to find another comfortable house to rent in Skyland which we liked better than the first one. It cost us roughly \$11,000 to bail out our furniture and have it delivered to our new address. We lived in the new house until the end of 1998.



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