

THE HISTORY OF VAN IRVIN



BY HIS SON
NATHANIEL IRVIN

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This biography was compiled from multiple sources. The main source was Van himself - his letters, the recollections he shared with me, and several recordings of his family history that we did together. I also gathered a lot of information from the people in Van's life - his wife, his brother, and my siblings. Other information was gleaned from public records, such as archival documents I was able to retrieve from Boulder County, Colorado. Private records also played a part - I am indebted to a record Van's father made of the dates and places they lived over the years. Without it I would have only a vague idea of where Van lived and when.

I have tried to write this without assuming the reader is already familiar with Van, his family, or the organizations and institutions he was associated with. Hopefully that will make everything clear to all readers in all periods of time.

I have done my best to ensure that all the information in this biography is correct. There were times when various sources - particularly people's memories - conflicted. I have tried to either make a note of that or leave the description open to both interpretations. I have also tried to ensure that I tell the story as it pertains to Van, rather than to me or any of his other family. I'm sure that despite these efforts I have made some errors and that there are places where my voice is too strong. All errors and perspectives in this record are ultimately my own and no one else's.

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In southeast Colorado, about an hour's drive from Pueblo, lies the sleepy town of Rocky Ford. It is a modest place, but not a backwater: it has theaters, local schools, and the railroad runs through the downtown. Around it are farms and mills, and some of the owner's families have been in the area for generations.

In August 1954, Pioneer Memorial Hospital¹ opened its doors in Rocky Ford, and on September 8, 1954, Howard Van Irvin was born there to Larry Van Irvin and his wife Norma Jean (née Jackson). Howard - or "Van" as he was always called - was their first child and eldest son. He was also one of the first children born at Pioneer Hospital and received a special baby blanket for it.

Van was born into a family that had pioneer roots and ancestry in the area. Larry's father was Van M. Irvin, who had been a prominent citizen of the county during the 1930s. Some of his personal belongings later ended up in Rocky Ford's town museum. Van M.'s wife Viola Lorene (née Cordes; she went by Lorene) had settled in the area after coming across the plains in a covered wagon at the turn of the 20th century. Sadly, H. Van Irvin never met his grandfather Van M. Irvin - the elder Van had died of a heart attack in 1943, when Larry Van was only fifteen years old. H. Van would grow up knowing his grandmother Lorene and his father's other relatives, but not his paternal grandfather.

Larry was understandably very impacted by his father's death, especially since Van M. had only been forty-three years old. Larry would come to feel that his father had put off too much in his life, not enjoying it because he expected to be able to do that after retiring. Larry decided he was not going to make the same mistake. He resolved to live life fully and retire early.

Larry graduated from Rocky Ford High School in 1946 (it was and is a very small school; only a few dozen other students matriculated with him). He was interested in chemistry and began to learn about the science and cultivation of sugar beets from a chemist in the nearby sugar beet factory after work hours. His plans for his future were interrupted however by the Korean War. He was drafted into the Army and sent into combat in that conflict. While he returned with only a few physical scars, the emotional impact was much more profound. Larry rarely discussed the war or his experiences in it with anyone. One time, when pressed, he stated he had killed enemy soldiers, but said little else. He claimed to have been awarded a Purple Heart, but to have lost it when he shipped his belongings home after the war. His family believed him, but the story could not be verified with Army records. When he returned from the war, he decided to enroll in the University of Colorado at Boulder (CU Boulder) to further study chemistry.

In the early 1950s, a young woman named Norma Jean Jackson moved to Rocky Ford. Some years back, her family had taken a vacation 'out west' from Indiana and Norma Jean had fallen in love with the area. She dreamed of marrying a cowboy. So after graduating from Ball State Teachers College in Muncie, Indiana, she moved out to Colorado. By 1953, she was working as a schoolteacher, and one of her co-workers was Lorene Irvin. Lorene invited her over for dinner one night, which was where she met Larry.² They began dating, and married later that year. Marrying an aspiring sugar beet chemist was a far cry from marrying a cowboy! But the two were happy and committed, and would remain together the rest

¹ The hospital was converted into a nursing home (called Pioneer Health Care Center) sometime before 2005 (and may have served as a library in-between). It is located at 900 S 12th St, Rocky Ford, Colorado. (References: [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Pioneers_Memorial_Hospital_\(Rocky_Ford,_Colorado,_USA\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Pioneers_Memorial_Hospital_(Rocky_Ford,_Colorado,_USA)), <https://seconews.org/article/158>)

² Larry once recorded that he lived in Manzanola, Colorado, a town 10 miles away, from 1932 to 1948, and then an address in Rocky Ford from 1948 to 1954. Whether he was still living with his mother and siblings at the second address or had moved out is unclear.

of their lives. Norma Jean's parents ended up moving out to Boulder, Colorado not long after this themselves.

In September 1954, Larry and Norma Jean arrived back in Rocky Ford after living in Boulder for school for several months. Norma Jean was nine months pregnant at the time, and Van was born only a few days later.

The Irvin family did not live in Rocky Ford long. Larry wanted to continue his education and so he, Norma Jean, and Van returned to Boulder in February 1955. So while Van was born in Rocky Ford and visited his relatives in and around Rocky Ford many times in later years, it was not where he grew up.

The family stayed in Boulder for the next three and a half years, till August of 1958. Larry was using the GI Bill to go to school, and as a veteran he qualified for housing in CU Boulder's "Vetsville", a collection of trailers and Quonset huts near the campus built for veteran students. So for most of the family's (second) time in Boulder, they lived in Vetsville in one of these Quonset huts, a place Van vaguely recalled in later life.

During this time, Larry and Norma Jean welcomed their next child, a girl named Lori Jeanne. Sadly, she was not long for this world. The Quonset hut did little to keep out the cold, and the Colorado winters were not mild. Lori Jeanne caught pneumonia and died when she was only a year or so old.³ In the years to come, Van could barely remember his sister personally. The family spoke of her from time to time, and her brief time in their lives was not a secret. But Van's knowledge of Lori Jeanne was mostly from stories, not from memories.

A month or so before Lori Jeanne's death, the family's third child was born, Van's only brother Jim. Van had not had much time to make a connection with Lori Jeanne, so Jim was in many ways his first sibling. The two would go through many of the ups and downs of brotherhood over the years, but ultimately formed a bond that would remain strong for decades to come. The next year, another sister joined the family, Teena.

Van once later told his son that one of his earliest memories was playing near a creek when he was a few years old. There is a good chance that he was remembering a time at his grandparents' house. Howard and Lois Jackson, Norma Jean's parents, by 1958 lived along Boulder Creek, up Boulder Canyon.

Larry eventually dropped out of the university program and took a job with the US Army Corp of Engineers as a construction inspector for Atlas ICBM missile silos. In August of 1958, this took the family to Cheyenne, Wyoming, where they settled at 1400 Leisher Road. Larry's new job would take the family to a few different places over the next decade or so. During the family's time in Wyoming, another sister was born, named Melissa. Van began attending school here at Roosevelt Elementary School, starting with kindergarten. The family had a labrador retriever named Pepper that chased cars with a vengeance!

The Irvin family lived in Cheyenne for only a year and half: by May of 1961 they had moved to Wellington, Kansas. It was a surprisingly humid area, with a much nicer house than their residence in Cheyenne. While there, in third grade, Van started wearing glasses, and he would use glasses & contacts for the rest of his life. One benefit of this was that he was finally able to learn how to ride a bike! Van was nearsighted, so reading and other pursuits had been relatively unencumbered but bike riding had proved a

³ Her brother, Jim Irvin, later said it may have actually been S.I.D.S. (sudden infant death syndrome).

real challenge before vision correction. Riding bikes wasn't always roses though - one time a collision between Van and Jim ended up with one of Van's teeth being chipped!

The first James Bond movie, *Dr No*, came out while they lived in Wellington (in 1962) and Larry took Van and Jim to go see it. This would start a tradition of the three of them catching the newest Bond movie, and it would last for years. Van loved these films and would continue following the series into adulthood. He eventually saw them all and owned most of the installments.

Van's youngest sister Lois was born in Wellington. Their family was Methodist (though Norma Jean had attended a Quaker church for a while as a younger woman). Van was taught to believe in God and his parents instilled strong moral values in him. The family was not overly devout - not every Sunday saw them at church, and they did not read from the Bible with any regularity. But every Christmas Eve the family would read the Nativity story in Luke chapter 2. It was one of the family's few Christmas traditions (the other was clam chowder on Christmas Eve).

Larry taught Van integrity & respect by example. He taught him to respect their political leaders even though they didn't like JFK. He taught him not to give family special treatment during Van's baseball games where Larry was an umpire, and by making amends with Norma Jean after arguments. He and Norma Jean encouraged their family to be patriotic.

The family had a dog here, too: a toy terrier named Patty.

Van had a good childhood, but he had his share of struggles. Addition did not come easily to him in elementary school, and Larry spent lots of time helping him with his homework. Norma Jean cared for Van and his siblings when they came down with the typical childhood illnesses. Van was picked on occasionally for being a small kid, but he took comfort in the Bible story of Zacheus who was short and climbed a tree so he could catch a glimpse of Jesus, and then Jesus came to visit his home.

In late 1962, Larry's job moved again, and the family relocated to Sidney, Nebraska. One of Van's memories of this new town was that one summer, a local theater had a deal where they could see a movie every week. The family frequented musical films, Disney and otherwise, and Norma Jean would sometimes take them to see musical theater productions as well.

Like any young boy, Van had many interests, particularly scientific ones. He enjoyed chemistry, though not in the same way his father Larry had. Larry tried to tutor him in it once or twice, but Van found sugar beet chemistry dense and confusing (even in adulthood when Van had a background in organic chemistry himself). He followed the space program with great interest, reading Larry's copies of National Geographic on the subject and putting up posters of astronauts in his bedroom. He also began to learn to play the trombone at school.

Van's interests certainly weren't all bookish. He enjoyed playing with his friends, particularly bike-riding with his buddy Lance. As many kids do he also had a frenemy, his in the form of a kid named Perry Crom. Van, Jim, Lance and Perry were also often joined by Phillip Herera and Ken. They would play down by Lodgepole Creek (or "the crick" as Norma Jean would have called it) and catch bluegill with their bare hands. Some of these bluegill made their way into a tank at the Irvin home, but that stopped after an incident where the tank was knocked over onto the carpet!

Larry recorded pieces of his family's life and vacations with home movies, captured on 8mm film. After recording, the family would help to create titles and edit the films together. They had a (temperamental) projector and screen and would frequently watch these films on the weekends. They were recorded without any sound, so narration and context often came from the memories of the people in

the room watching them. Decades later, these films would be transferred to VHS and later to digital formats so the children and their families could have copies.

The family would make trips back to Colorado from time to time to visit Lorene as well as Norma Jean's parents. Sometimes these visits were brief, sometimes they lasted for a good chunk of the summer. Lorene still lived in Rocky Ford, while Norma Jean's parents had a cabin outside Boulder (a few hours away from Rocky Ford). In these visits, Van played with his brother and sisters and the neighborhood children.

Their other major vacation activity was camping: it was Norma Jean's favorite pastime and the family went as often as she wanted, which was often! The family visited many national parks and went to Yellowstone on several occasions. Often they stayed in tents (Jim and Van shared a pup tent many times), but they also sometimes brought along a camp trailer. From this and other experiences, Van developed a love for the outdoors. Even at a young age, he decided he wanted to become a naturalist in his career; he wanted to be a ranger like those he interacted with at the parks. Van enjoyed the family togetherness of these activities as much as the nature aspect, later remembering fondly playing things like playing Yahtzee in the tents at night.

The family also enjoyed road trips that didn't necessarily involve camping. Van enjoyed stopping and reading historical markers along the way, and developed a particular interest in the history of the Native Americans of the southwest.

Larry would take the family fishing from time to time. Van didn't much enjoy the sport, but he did enjoy spending time with his dad and the time outdoors. One time while visiting his Jackson grandparents in Boulder, Colorado, he saw a truck come and add more fish stock to Boulder Creek, which ran in front of the Jackson's home at 37296 Boulder Canyon Road. Seizing the opportunity, he got his fishing pole and nabbed a fish!

Van and his siblings enjoyed many happy summers at Grandma & Grandpa Jackson's place. They would climb the mountain behind their house,⁴ and explore the mine shaft back there that they were not supposed to go near. They'd swim in the creek, creating their own little swimming hole. Howard & Lois would leave out trash and food specifically to attract raccoons so the family could watch them off the back porch in the evenings. They'd also take their grandchildren on excursions in the area, including to fancy restaurants and shops in Boulder and Denver. At times other members of the extended family would gather there as well and they'd have mini family reunions.

After two years in Nebraska, the family moved to Great Falls, Montana in late 1964. It was a significant change from living on the Great Plains. It rained a lot less than the downpours they'd get in Kansas and Nebraska. The elevation was over 3,000 feet, there was snow in July one time, and Van and Larry once watched an aurora borealis together.

Larry was now working at Malmstrom Air Force Base. One of his co-workers, John Bush, was the Scoutmaster of a local Boy Scout troop which Van later joined. Meetings were held only a few blocks from the family's home. The troop enjoyed activities like camping, snowshoeing, horseback riding, and searching for fossils. They did some winter camping, and tried their hand at ice-fishing in an old ghost town called Hughesville. The assistant Scoutmaster in this troop was a man named Ralph, and he had built his own kayak, a feat that Van greatly admired. Van also participated in Pinewood Derby (and Larry didn't build just build the car for him!).

⁴ Howard E. Jackson and M. Lois Jackson sold off some of their land in the 1960s and 1970s, so the mountainside and mine shaft may no longer belong to the same plot that the Jacksons originally owned.

One summer the troop went on a 102-mile trip down the Missouri River. On this trip Van and his fellow Scouts earned the Historic Trails award and the 50-Miler Badge. Earlier that year, to prepare for it, they did one trip where they paddled canoes out to Scout Island, bringing along some of their family. Larry accompanied Van, but as he was not much of a swimmer he did not have the greatest time! Larry had a much nicer time though when he took Van (and presumably the rest of the family) horseback riding out at Chico Hot Springs.

The neighborhood in Great Falls was cozy. Three convenience stores and Van's elementary school were only a few blocks away. After school, he and his siblings would ride their bikes in the summer and skate on a local pond when it froze over in the winter. During the winters, Jim and Van would shovel their neighbor's driveways and sidewalks, sometimes for some extra change. Larry and Norma Jean made sure they did it for free for one of the local widows from their church and made them return any tips she gave them. Van enjoyed the winter months: the snow was pretty and there were lots of great hills around for sledding! He also enjoyed spending time at the local YMCA, where he had a membership.

The family had a toy terrier in Great Falls as well, though whether this was the original Patty or another Patty is unclear.

For most of his life, Van was an early riser. Since Larry had to work Army hours, the family got up early most of the time. Larry would often rouse the kids by singing at them. Norma Jean would drive Larry to work in the mornings and drop him off at the base so she could have the family car during the day. Larry would be able to use vehicles from the base's motor pool during the day for his work, so the family was able to more or less have two cars, even though they only really had (or could afford) the one. Van's time with the Boy Scouts also involved a lot of early mornings. So Van got in the habit of getting up early, and it was a habit that would last for most of his life.

Larry & Norma Jean liked being self-reliant and working with their hands. Larry taught his sons how to fix things around the house and cars, while Norma Jean would make clothes for her kids.

Larry's influence in Van's life also extended to his sense of humor. Larry was a fan of puns and 'dad jokes,' and Van was too! Van picked up many colorful phrases from his parents that he would use all his life. He would say things like "Why I oughta pound you" in an exaggerated southern accent while mockingly shaking a fist, or "you dirty rat!" in the same manner, or "what in the wide wide world of sports is going on here?" Van also made some of his own, calling things "Van-tastic!", to which Jim would call him "Ho-weird".

During their time in Great Falls, Larry and Norma Jean decided they wanted to adopt. They approached Montana Social Services and were connected with a family from Havre, Montana which had several children that needed homes. Their mother was an alcoholic and at least some of the children suffered from Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. Two of these children were LaRae and Laura. The girls had a few "practice visits" with the Irvin family before anything became official. A third sister, Milva Lee, was being considered also, but ultimately only Laura and LaRae were adopted. (Milva Lee's foster family ended up adopting her.) These girls were Native American with Blackfoot and Assiniboiné ancestry. The split-up sisters (there were more besides Milva Lee) did maintain some contact over the years as they moved around to different states with their new families and their adult lives.

LaRae and Laura were welcomed into the new family, but the transition wasn't easy. The girls were young, only ten and eight years old (LaRae was the older of the two). Teena had to start sharing her room with LaRae (though that wasn't so unusual - Jim and Van shared a basement bedroom at the time.) Sometime after the adoption, the family took a trip to Disneyland. The road trip down and the separation

from the place where she had grown up was a difficult experience for Laura especially. (This trip involved several other stops to visit family in Boulder, Colorado Springs, and San Diego.) They visited Disneyland one other time besides this trip.

Van continued with the trombone and played in the band at East Junior High School. He also took up an interest in aviation. One of Larry's hobbies and talents was model airplanes, and Van sometimes joined him in making and flying these. Jim joined in a few times as well, and the three sometimes went to airshows (at least once camping there too). The three also enjoyed watching a new show called *Star Trek* together.

In 1967, Larry took a new job. The Atlas missile construction program was complete, and he was discharged from that responsibility. He took another construction inspection job, this time at Hamilton Air Force Base. This took the family to Novato, Marin County, California, and it would be the end of their moving for a while. Van would live in Novato until he went to university (and on and off again until just before he got married). This was a relief for him: he hadn't liked all the moving around. He felt it was hard to make friends. It did however force him to develop the ability to meet new people and make new friends. It shaped him into a gregarious person.

Van liked living in Novato, and California in general. His brother Jim got a paper route, and Van would help out occasionally. This actually had a hand in getting him a trip to Disneyland - the carriers had a contest that the folks who signed up 18 new subscribers would go for free! Van came up a little short, but a kindly supervisor named Bill Saladin let him go anyway, and Van made up the last 4 subscriptions after the trip.

Van continued to be interested in science and joined a science club at Hill Junior High School. He continued to play the trombone and went fishing a few times. Boy Scouts fell by the wayside though and he did not advance any further than 2nd class Scout. Van enjoyed biking all around Marin County: he and his siblings would sometimes bike to the Cheese Factory, enjoy some cheese and Fresca, and then bike home.

The family's interest in camping did not wane. In fact, on the weekend of July 20, 1969, the weekend of the moon landing, the Irvins went camping in the Redwoods! Van made sure to listen to the actual landing on the car radio that day/evening, but did not get to see it on television. In later years he would wonder why his mother insisted on camping that weekend, but never really got an answer.

The family visited dozens of national parks, state parks, and other attractions: Huckleberry Hot Springs, Lolo Hot Springs, String Lake, Leigh Lake, Jenny Lake, Glacier National Park, Logging Creek in the Little Belt Mountains, Crystal Lake, Seeley Lake, Flathead Lake, Grizzly Creek Redwoods Park, Gros Ventre, Hebgen Lake, and more! They visited Yellowstone on multiple occasions, including a few times in the winter. The family also enjoyed hiking, and took on peaks as high as Mount Whitney. Van was proud he made it to the top faster than Jim!

As the oldest of their family, Van was often a typical older brother to his siblings, teasing them and bossing them around. While the children had the occasional conflict with each other, in later life both Jim and the sisters regarded Van as a good older brother.

His first week at Hill Junior High, Van met Antero "Terry" Ravisplata in a math class. They became friends and would remain close the rest of their lives. Terry's brother Chuck was also a part of their friend group, and he and Van became friends as well. Another Chuck Van met around this time was Chuck Manuelle, who would have an outsized influence on Van's life a few years later.

For Van's 13th birthday, Larry took him into "the city", San Francisco. They had shrimp cocktails on the Wharf, then rode a cable car to Chinatown to have Chinese food for dinner. Another time, Larry & Norma Jean took the whole family into the city to eat at the Benihana, which was a new kind of restaurant at the time. Van later described both times as very memorable moments spent with his family. He also fondly remembered playing catch with his dad.

Growing up in the Bay Area of California during the late 1960s and early 1970s, Van was definitely influenced by the culture of the area and the time. The Vietnam War didn't affect him as profoundly as some other people of his generation, but it was on his mind. He himself supported the war, though he worried about being drafted after graduation. Protests at UC Berkeley across the bay alarmed him due to their violence - he could sometimes see smoke rising from clashes on campus.

He enjoyed the music scene of the area. From the Novato home he could often hear the Grateful Dead practicing and performing. Van's sister Lois even met one of the members of the band at a riding academy when she was having trouble with a horse and he helped her out. Van sometimes saw the famous guitarist Buddy Miles riding around on a big 3-wheel motorcycle, and once met songwriter Bobby Pickett while helping Jim out with the paper route.

The Irvin family was not overly active in the civil rights movement of the time, but they supported it. Larry and Norma Jean went out of their way to be welcoming to and make friends with black families in their neighborhood, and encouraged their children to do the same. Ironically, one of the phrases Van picked up from his parents was "hold your cotton-pickin' horses!" The potentially racist nature of this phrase probably never occurred to any of them.

Another aspect of the Bay Area culture that affected Van was the environmental movement. Van became active in these causes as a freshman in high school, and eventually came to believe in the theory of Zero Population Growth. During his sophomore year, he voiced some of these thoughts to his friend Chuck Manuelle. Chuck was a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, and the Church believed instead in the growth of families and that there was plenty of room on Earth. Chuck shared these thoughts with Van, and the two began to discuss religion. Chuck eventually invited Van to learn from the Church's missionaries, and Van began attending lessons (the missionary discussions, as they were then called) at the Manuelle home. He was very moved by the Church's doctrines, and could not wait to get to the house for the next discussion each week!

Larry and Norma Jean however were not as enthusiastic. They were not comfortable with the idea of Van joining the Church, and eventually told him that they would not agree to him being baptized until he was an adult. This put a damper on Van's progress, and after a while the discussions and his investigation of the Church halted. Melissa had shown some interest as well, and her parents strongly dissuaded her too.

Van was still interested in aviation, to the point that he was beginning to consider that as a career over something in naturalism. For a while he aspired to go to the Air Force Academy. To this end he joined the Civil Air Patrol. He went through their survival training and was able to do some practice flights, including flying in a Cessna 172 and doing a barrel roll in a T-33 jet trainer! In his view though that service was rather disorganized during the Vietnam War, and the requirements he needed to advance through the ranks were not adequately addressed. He was disappointed with the experience and did not make any further progress towards becoming a pilot. (Ironically, the thought that he might have to go into combat if he joined the Air Force did not really sink in for him at the time.)

Van got his driver's license when he was old enough, and was a typical teenager when it came to cars, which is to say he got in the occasional fender bender. He was always grateful that Larry & Norma Jean were patient with his failures!

Van adopted the '70s fashion of bushy hair and wore it that way through a lot of high school. It was easy for him to grow it out, so he would also cut it short when needed. Occasionally this hairstyle would cause friction, though not from his family.⁵ One time he was riding his bike and a man threw a beer can at him from a truck, shouting at him to 'get a job, hippie!' An ironic moment, since Van's pursuits in high school were hardly counter-culture: he played in the band and was on the swim team, the water polo team, and the cross-country team. Norma Jean came to support her son at nearly all of these events, though she often couldn't see Van very well at the cross-country meets. Van also took two years of German, continued from his time in junior high.

Van graduated high school in 1972, a few months shy of his eighteenth birthday. As a graduation present, his parents gave him the gift of rock climbing lessons at a school near the Grand Teton, which culminated in his climbing the peak that summer. This touched off a pursuit of rock climbing that lasted for a few years (he'd been interested in it for some time, but Grand Teton was his first climb). His friend Terry and several of their other friends enjoyed climbing together (including an old friend from Great Falls). Van considered himself more adept than most of them, but not Terry - Terry was a mountain goat and could outclimb them all! Van also did a little with a local Boy Scout troop, led by a Mr. Eckhoff.

Larry's job at Hamilton eventually ended when the base was decommissioned. He was able to find another job nearby at a radar station on Mount Tam. A few times, Van and Jim rock climbed up from Mountain Home, a chalet at the bottom of the mountain, up Throckmorton Ridge to have lunch with Larry. Van and Jim did a fair amount of hiking and backpacking in the Sierra Nevadas around this time, and Larry and Norma Jean would often provide vehicle support.

When the next school year arrived, Van began attending a junior college called the College of Marin.⁶ He continued living at home and rode to school with Terry Rivilplata most of the time, but sometimes took the bus. That first summer he was a counselor at the Kingsley Meadows Mountain camps for boys and girls and led several hikes.

Around this time, Van had a dream, and sometime after that he was inspired to pick up and start reading *The Book of Mormon* again. The eighth chapter of the book contains an account of a dream that a man named Lehi had. When Van read it, he was thunderstruck - while some of the details were different, it was the same dream he had had! This reignited the flame of interest he had had a few years before, and he began to investigate the Church again. He began attending the Novato Ward,⁷ and was deeply touched by the sense of home and community that he found there. In 1973, he was baptized a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.

Joining the Church meant that Van's lifestyle changed. Members of the Church are teetotalers and never drink alcohol. Larry and Norma Jean by contrast had become something of wine aficionados in California. Van now attended Church every Sunday and read the scriptures regularly, things his family rarely did. Most of Van's parents' objections to the Church were theological rather than behavioral. Still, it was occasionally awkward having joined a church his parents disapproved of and living a lifestyle that differed from theirs.

⁵ Jim recalled that Larry gave crew cuts, but didn't necessarily insist on them.

⁶ This institution had been named Marin Junior College in the 1930s and 1940s, and Van occasionally referred to it that way.

⁷ In the Church, local congregations are called wards.

In 1974, Van transferred from College of Marin to the University of California at Davis (UC Davis). While attending there he rented a mobile home just off the freeway with Terry Rivasplata (that Terry's parents had bought). The two had developed quite a rapport after years of friendship: when Norma Jean visited overnight once, she could hear the two talking to each (unintelligibly) in their sleep! Their mobile home was close enough to campus that they typically walked to class.

Van pursued a degree in Wildlife and Fisheries Biology at UC Davis and graduated in the spring of 1976. His senior capstone project involved a nearly month-long stay in a cabin in the mountains above Sacramento observing wildlife. America's Bicentennial was that summer, and in Van that stirred an interest in learning more about the Constitution.

In the Church at the time, it was expected that most young men would serve as a full-time missionary for two years between the age of 19 and 21. Missions might take these young men to far away countries where they would have to learn to proselyte in new languages, or they might serve in domestic, English-speaking missions. Van was already nineteen when he joined the Church, and was not in a financial or spiritual position to do a mission at that time. As his graduation from UC Davis drew closer though, he began to seriously consider going on a mission. After graduating, he worked odd jobs in the area, saving up and preparing himself to go. In the later part of the year, he submitted his name to be a missionary, and received an assignment to serve in the Busan, South Korea mission!

Van's family was not supportive of him serving a mission, and tried to change his mind. He was not living with them at the time, or Terry, but at another place in the Novato area while he prepared to go. In February 1977 he left California to start his missionary service. He first spent eight weeks undergoing missionary training in Provo, Utah⁸ where he was taught proselytizing techniques, but spent most of his time learning the Korean language. After the training course he flew to South Korea and began his time there. South Korea in the late 1970s was a military dictatorship. It was a more open society than the North, and was allied with the United States, but it was still unsafe and underdeveloped in many ways. Van taught the gospel in large, modern cities but also in small villages where there was no electricity or indoor plumbing. (South Korea's military junta was overthrown in 1980 and a democratic government installed, which began the country's rapid modernization into the society we know today.) He served in five or six different areas and had at least one stint as a zone leader. He fell in love with the people and their food - even many years later he would sometimes make a batch of kimchi.

Van's two years ended in February 1979 and he returned to the United States. He now realized he was going to have to change his plans for the future. He wanted a large family, and to do that he needed more stable work than what would be available to someone with his degree. Wildlife and Fisheries Biology trains one to become a forest ranger, a lower-paying and more time-consuming position than schoolteacher, without the summers off. Unsure of what he wanted to do, he applied to Brigham Young University. In the meantime he lived and worked in Novato. After getting accepted to BYU, he moved (back) to Provo, Utah in 1980 (moved into an apartment at 1980 North Canyon Road, near the stadium). Somewhere along the way he took a career assessment and was told he would be well-suited to the profession of speech therapist. So he began graduate school to get a masters in Speech Language Pathology.

The typical life path for a returned missionary in the Church is to get married not long after returning, and it was an endeavor that Van threw himself into whole-heartedly. He made sure to date

⁸ At the time, the organization and facility were both called the Language Training Mission (LTM). The LTM organization had existed since 1961, but the campus in Provo was only a few years old. The campus and the organization were renamed to the Missionary Training Center in 1978.

frequently and with a variety of women. In the fall of 1981, he met Laureen Terry, a fellow graduate student (of Child Psychology), in a class in the McKay building at BYU. The two became fast friends. Laureen was also from the Bay Area of California - she had grown up in El Cerrito, California, next to Berkeley and Oakland. Unlike Van, her family had been in the Church for generations, and their roots were more in northern Utah rather than California.

In January of 1982, Van started dating Laureen seriously. After only three weeks, he popped the question while they sat in her living room of the basement apartment she was renting. Laureen had not been expecting this, but she had been hopeful for it, and knew that she would say yes if he asked. So she accepted his proposal, to which he told her to wait just a second while he ran out to his car for the ring! Van later confessed he got cold feet the day after proposing, but by the day after that he was sure he had made the right choice. Laureen, her mother Patricia, and Larry & Norma Jean put a wedding together in record time, and the two were married in the Oakland Temple on April 9, 1982!

Their marriage was destined to be a happy one, but their wedding was marred by some difficulties. The day before their wedding was the first time Van met Laureen's parents and the first time she met his parents. As Van's parents were not members of the Church, they were not permitted to attend the actual wedding ceremony (called a sealing) inside the temple. They were understandably a bit hurt by this. A secondary ring exchange had been planned for after the sealing. The individual invited to speak at this ceremony, who was to explain the reasons for the temple wedding, did not show up (a mix up in scheduling) so another person was asked to speak at the last minute. Not knowing all the family history, he made some comments that Norma Jean took exception to, further alienating Van's parents. The two were still not happy that Van had joined the Church in the first place (though Norma Jean had made some efforts to understand her son's faith after he returned from his mission). Sadly, the wedding would further drive a wedge between Van and his parents that would last for many years to come.

For their honeymoon, Van and Laureen decided to go camping at the Grand Canyon. Laureen's family had not been as avid campers as the Irvin family, but she loved the outdoors and they both thought it would be a good adventure. They had underestimated the difficulty of the hike in and out of the Canyon though, and didn't have the best experience.

Van graduated from BYU with his Master's degree only a few weeks after the wedding. He'd learned of a job in Amarillo, Texas, at High Plains Baptist Hospital. A new speech therapy program there was looking to bring in fresh perspectives, and its director courted Van to be one of those. Van took a bus trip down to Amarillo so he could interview, and he was excited about the job opportunity so they decided it would be a good move. They were also looking at the Alaska Public Schools, and liked the thought of spending some time there, but ultimately decided on Texas. They lived in Orem, near Center Street and State Street, for a few months before moving.

Amarillo is in the panhandle of Texas, on a flat, dusty plain bisected by Interstate 40. Van & Laureen anticipated living there for a few years and then returning to California. For the first year, they lived in an apartment, but in early 1983 they bought a house and moved in there. On their first anniversary, Laureen was due to give birth to their first child in just a few days! The child took his sweet time getting there though, and was born nearly two weeks late. Nathaniel Van was born at his father's place of employment, High Plains Baptist Hospital, on April 29, 1983! Van later said that he thought he knew what love was before that, but that he didn't really know what love was until he became a father.

Van enjoyed living in Amarillo - in fact Laureen later joked that he enjoyed it too much. He embraced the local lifestyle and affected a southern cowboy persona at times. Laureen left her job when

Nathaniel - or Nathan as they then called him - was born, and threw herself into motherhood. The young family formed a social circle at church and in the neighborhood. They also enjoyed taking trips, including one down to Houston when Nathan was about six months old. There were a few trips back out to California and Utah as well - some just by Van or Laureen alone, but others with all three.

At High Plains, Van worked alongside a physical therapist named Sally Katz. Sally and her husband Elliot invited Van & Laureen to join a square-dancing class, which they did and found they really enjoyed! Van & Laureen went on to become good friends with Sally & Elliot. While the interest in square dancing didn't last much past Nathan's birth, the friendship between the Katz and Irvin families would last for decades to come.

Distance did not lessen Van's friendship with Terry Ravisplata. For Christmas 1983, Van, Laureen, and Nathan went to California, planning to stay with Larry & Norma Jean. They however were not at home⁹, and so the little family went to visit Terry's folks instead. Van had spent a lot of time over at their house as a young man, and they welcomed him and his again. They spent the night there and then went to visit Laureen's folks in El Cerrito the next day.

In his life, many people would express a certain amazement that Van had chosen speech therapy as a career, given how hard it could be to understand him sometimes! Van talked quickly and sometimes didn't enunciate very well, so he often had to be asked to repeat himself, which no one loves to do. Plus he had a habit of starting a topic, veering off into another tangent, then a second, then coming back to the first topic and overexplaining it before finally getting to the point! Van was interested and informed about many things, and his eagerness to share often caused it to all spill out at once. So despite being good at his job, Van was often quite the rollercoaster to actually talk to!

On November 5, 1984, Van & Laureen's family grew with the addition of their second child, a girl named Andrea Michelle (born at the same hospital as Nathan). Before that, money had been getting tight, and so Van had started moonlighting as an insurance agent while still working at the hospital. He was good at it: even won an award for being the best salesman. It was an okay job; he liked his boss but wasn't crazy about the company and never thought seriously about switching careers.

Though he had chosen a different career path, Van was still interested in aviation. He briefly pursued getting a civilian pilot's license: he had made friends with a man who flew small planes for a living, and this man offered to train him. Unfortunately, timing prevented him from taking advantage of this opportunity. The job at High Plains had soured, and the family was looking to relocate. Van heard of a job in Greenville, North Carolina, and eventually decided to take it.

The move in February 1985 became the source of many family anecdotes that got repeated over the years. They'd ordered a reasonably-sized moving truck, but due to inventory shortages, they were given the largest truck the U-Haul place had. Their modest belongings fit into the truck with so much room to spare they could have put Van's brown compact Dodge into the truck itself instead of towing it behind! When the trip began, not-yet-two-year-old Nathan was very fussy. But then one of his parents hit on the idea of turning the car seat around so he could see the road, which made him (and the trip!) much happier. The little family arrived in Greenville on Valentine's Day, and made their tired way to a motel. Miraculously, in two days they found a house to rent and got moved in.

Their new home was in a neighborhood called Hardy Acres. Van was working at nursing homes in Greenville, Washington (30 miles east), and Williamston (30 miles north) with a company called

⁹ Laureen's memory is that Larry & Norma Jean still lived in an apartment in Novato at that time, but Van & Larry's memories are that Larry & Norma Jean had already begun their nomadic life.

National Speech and Hearing. The family was now part of the Greenville Ward of the Kinston Stake¹⁰ of the Church. The Greenville Ward was small, but growing: a new expanded chapel had been completed only weeks before the Irvins moved in.

Van & Laureen's initial plan for North Carolina was the same as their one for Texas: stay there for five years, then move back to California. However, as time went on, that became a less attractive option. Moving to and living in California would be very expensive, and Laureen disliked the state's politics. Eventually, they decided to put down roots in eastern NC. It was more humid and gave Van colds a little more often than he liked, but he enjoyed the outdoor opportunities it had available. The mosquitoes were not pleasant, but Van considered them a small matter compared to the ones in the Sierras!

Van & Laureen liked Hardy Acres well enough, but wanted to grow their family, and the little house they were in didn't give them the room to do that. So they began looking for another place to live. Laureen took on most of this responsibility, and eventually found a place in a small village about twenty miles east called Fountain. After picking it out, she had Van come take a tour to see if they both liked it. It needed work, but Van was impressed, and they decided to go for it. And so in July 1986, Van, Laureen, Nathan, and Andrea moved to the "blue and yellow house" or the "blue and white house" across from the Baptist church in Fountain, North Carolina.

It would be Van's home for the rest of his life.

After working for National Speech and Hearing for several months, Van struck out on his own, doing contract work with several agencies in and around Wilson County, about twenty miles east of Fountain. Eventually he landed a contract with Wilson County Home Health: it gave him more opportunity and flexibility in his billing hours, and the chance to do more house calls, which appealed to him. He would stay in this mode of work for the rest of the 1980s and 1990s. Speech therapy, like all other medical work, requires a ton of paperwork, and it filled Van's days and nights for the rest of his working life. But it was never enough to put him off the profession - he enjoyed helping people too much.

In the Church, the various roles and tasks are filled by invitation/assignment. One position that Van was called to on several separate occasions was Cubmaster and Scoutmaster. He enjoyed doing the Space Derby with the Cub Scouts and once taught the Boy Scouts some of his old rock climbing skills. The Kinston stake also held a regular father-son campout each spring (around April or May) that took place at a campground called Eagle's Nest¹¹ outside Dudley (about an hour south of Fountain). Van started taking Nathan at a pretty young age, four or five years old, and the tradition lasted for many years.

This tradition soon expanded to include other sons. On December 24, 1986, Van and Laureen's third child and second son, Phillip Aaron, was born at Pitt Community Memorial Hospital in Greenville. (Christmas was held a few days late that year, but Nathan and Andrea were too young to know the difference!) Two years later, on August 25, 1988, a third son was born (at the same hospital), Russell Elliot. Van & Laureen specifically tried to choose names for their kids that wouldn't collide with any living relatives or ancestors, and for the most part succeeded, though they did find a Russell in their family tree later on.

¹⁰ In the Church, a group of wards is called a stake. A ward usually has a few hundred members, and a stake usually has 6 - 12 wards.

¹¹ The campground belonged to Mount Olive College for many years, and the Church would rent it out for campouts from time to time. When the Church's use of the camp became more frequent, and Mount Olive College began to struggle with the maintenance costs, the Church bought it from the College sometime in the 1990s.

The Katz family that Van & Laureen had befriended in Texas was now living in western North Carolina, near Asheville. The Irvin family spent a few Thanksgivings at their home (Asheville is a four or five hour drive from Fountain so they weren't able to see each other much more frequently than that). Their daughter Rachel and Nathan were the same age, and their younger daughters Sarah and Leah were around Andrea and Phillip's ages. These visits were brief, but memorable.

Van's relationship with his parents was still strained, and had become more distant since he and Laureen had moved to the east coast. For Christmas 1988, Van & Laureen and the four kids took a trip to California - the kids' first plane ride! While they stayed with Laureen's folks in El Cerrito, they were also able to visit Van's side of the family as well. By this point, Larry had retired and he & Norma Jean had taken to traveling full time. They had bought a pickup truck and a camper and traveled from RV park to RV park, staying places for weeks at a time and then moving on. It was an adventurous life that they had planned for themselves for years, but it did make it hard for their children to get in touch with them. They maintained a PO Box in Fernley, Nevada, but months could go by before they checked it, so letters to and from the couple were slow to come. In December 1988 though they were visiting Lois in California, so Van, Laureen, and the kids were able to come spend some time with them as well.

Like his mother before him, Van loved to take the family on camping trips. In the summer of 1989, one particularly memorable trip saw them travel up to the D.C. area to visit the National Zoo, then camp at a few different places in Virginia the next few nights. One of these nights was spent in the most primitive of accommodations: a tarp on the ground. In a state park, Van & Laureen found an open, level spot, put down a tarp on the ground and strung a rope between two trees to hang another tarp over it. This was the tent for the night for the two of them, six-year-old Nathan, four-year-old Andrea, two-year-old Phillip, and nine-month-old Russell! In the middle of the night a herd of deer came through, apparently puzzled by the family's intrusion.

Van was still interested in aviation. As a gift around 1990, Laureen bought him a ride in a glider. For it, the family went out to a small airport where Van was towed up into the air and then glided down.

On July 24th, 1990, the family's fifth child and second girl was born: Muriel Nicole.

In the Church, children are baptized at the age of eight. For Nathan, this came in May 1991. A few weeks before this, Larry & Norma Jean came out to NC and stayed in an RV park near Wilson. Nathan stayed overnight with them once and they spent some time at the house with the family. The nearby town of Farmville has a town festival each April called the Dogwood Festival, and Larry & Norma Jean went to it with Van's family this year. Ultimately though they were put off again, either because of a schedule misunderstanding or another religious disagreement. They left before the baptism and without saying goodbye. It would be the last time Van, Laureen, or his kids would see Larry & Norma Jean for at least another ten years.

In the early 1990s, Van was aware he would be turning forty soon. While he didn't go through any kind of stereotypical midlife crisis, he did talk a lot about the upcoming milestone. With his typical humor he bemoaned how old he was getting and joked about things like needing a new sports car.

One genuine change he did make was to take up running. He wanted to improve his health and to find new ways to challenge himself. At first he set the more ambitious goal to complete a triathlon. To this end, he did some swim training in the Wilson city public pool, which he could use for free - even in the winter months, because it was covered - before or after work. When it came to running, he would get up very early in the mornings - 5 am, even 4 am at times! - and run several miles before breakfast. The

triathlon goal eventually transformed into a goal to run marathons. He subscribed to running magazines and threw himself into this endeavor wholeheartedly.

Van tried to keep up with his Korean in these early family years. One way he did this was to keep his personal calendar (back when that meant a little booklet that you kept in your pocket) in hangul. But then he lost the booklet and realized that the chances of anyone in Eastern North Carolina knowing how to read it and get it back to its owner were basically zero. Plus as time went on Van worried that he himself would not be able to read things he'd written in the past if he kept going with this approach, so he reverted to writing everything in English.

While Van kept his trombone for the rest of his life, he rarely played it after becoming a father. He did however continue his own father's tradition of waking the children up in the morning with a rousing song! On Sundays recordings of the hymns were used, and the trombone was employed a time or two.

At church, the ward would have a talent show once a year, but in later years no one could remember if Van had played the trombone for any of these. Van did like to perform at these talent shows though, once recycling an old George Carlin bit, once doing a monologue from the play *Cyrano de Bergerac*, complete with the prop rubber nose.

Van encouraged his children to learn in many ways. The family bought a set of encyclopedias, as well as the Childcraft series (a set of 'mini-textbooks' on various topics, written at an elementary-school level). He would challenge the family to memorize things like the Gettysburg Address and the Preamble to the Constitution, to sharpen their language skills and to familiarize them with America's founding. They would also occasionally visit local historical sites in North Carolina.

Van instituted the Christmas traditions of his childhood with his own children. They read Luke chapter 2 and *The Night Before Christmas* on Christmas Eve. The traditional clam chowder dinner was done for a while, but was eventually discontinued so Phillip would be able to choose his own birthday dinner.

On Saturday mornings, Van would sometimes take Nathan, Andrea, and Phillip on bike rides. They would ride out of town, past the quarry, and down Bartlet Street to a three-way intersection and back, a distance of a mile or two. Van biked regardless of the weather, but his children were not always as enthusiastic! In later years he would sometimes take Andrea & Phillip a different direction out of town to visit - and sometimes climb! - a fire tower just across the county line.

Like Larry had with him, Van helped Nathan build his Pinewood Derby car when his son was in Cub Scouts, but did not build it for him! Van attempted to pass along woodworking and other such skills to his sons, which they picked up some of.

During this time, the family did not own a VCR, and did not watch a lot of TV in general. There was a small family run video rental store on one of the routes Van would take home from work. This little store - run out of someone's home - would rent out VCRs along with tapes. Sometimes Van would stop there and pick up a movie and a player on his way home from work on Fridays and the family would have a movie night! Eventually the family bought their own VCR, though Van would still pick up tapes from there from time to time after that (and the occasional video game as the kids got older).

Van & Laureen tried to divide up the work equally in their marriage. Van cooked breakfasts and was responsible for all meals on the weekends, while Laureen cooked the weekday dinners and provided the weekday lunches. Van would often prepare a crockpot meal on Sundays - Church was from 9 AM to noon and a thirty-minute drive away, so by doing a crockpot meal the family could eat right when they got home around 1 PM. This equality of responsibility extended to the kids - from a young age they were expected to pitch in with the weekly chores on Saturdays.

In The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, regular Sunday worship is held at a meetinghouse, or chapel. Sometimes on other days though members will attend one of the Church's temples, where they participate in other religious activities. Most of these forms of worship are only available to adults, and none are available to children under the age of twelve. In North Carolina in the 1980s and 1990s, the closest temple of the Church was in Washington, D.C., a five-hour drive from Fountain.

The way Van & Laureen dealt with this logistical challenge was to plan extended weekends where they would go to the temple and would arrange for the children to go to various babysitters. Four or five young children was a lot to ask any one person or family to watch for a few days, so often the children would not all be at the same babysitter. (There were a few times though that they did all stay together.) Van & Laureen would get a hotel in the D.C. area and attend several temple sessions over the weekend, as well as often taking some time to do tourist things and spend time together.

A few times, Van went by himself or Laureen by herself while the other spouse stayed home with the kids. In the spring of 1992, Van was at the temple while Laureen was in North Carolina with their five children, ages nine to two. While in D.C. Van received word that his sister LaRae had died. LaRae had left the Irvin family home in Novato not long after turning eighteen, and had had a son named Glen around the same time. A few years prior to her death, she had a daughter named Monique. Like her biological mother before her, LaRae had become an alcoholic: Monique also suffered from fetal alcohol syndrome, and Glen may have as well. LaRae's drinking had now killed her in her mid-thirties, leaving Glen and Monique orphans. LaRae never disclosed who her children's fathers were, and certainly never lived with them. While LaRae's boyfriend at her death, Toby, was caring and attentive towards her children, he was not in a position to take legal custody.

Learning this, Van contacted Laureen from D.C. and asked if they should adopt Glen and Monique themselves. Laureen was understandably intimidated by this proposal, but she agreed. The arrangements were able to be made quickly enough and within a few weeks both Glen and Monique had come from Cleveland to live in Fountain. Glen was sixteen years old, while Monique was not yet three. The introduction of these two new and very different people into the family made significant changes to the family dynamics. Nathaniel (now going by his full name) suddenly became the second-oldest, and Muriel suddenly had a new big sister who was barely a year older than her.

Since Monique was so young, her transition into the family was relatively smooth. The effects of the fetal alcohol syndrome and the trauma of losing her mother did not begin to manifest in meaningful ways until she was a teenager. Glen however was a different story. It did not take long for Van & Laureen to realize that Glen had a drug habit, and was in fact dealing drugs. While Glen did not expose the other children to any of this, he did get in trouble with the law. (Glen had dropped out of high school in Cleveland and never attended school in North Carolina, though he did eventually get his GED.) Court appearances and stricter family rules now became part of the new normal.

One day Van had gotten fed up with Glen's behavior and decided he was not going to let the young man out of his sight so he wouldn't be able to go out and get drugs. When Glen left the house, Van followed him, walking a pace or two behind him around town. Glen came back to the house, Van still tailing him. At this point Glen lost his temper and he and Van got into a fistfight in the family's living room. It was short, and Laureen was able to get them apart and go to separate rooms. Neither were injured, but the fight happened in full view of all the other children, who of course were frightened and upset by it.

Supporting a family of nine is no easy task, especially a blended one that includes a troubled teenager. Van was the sole breadwinner, and had long commutes to and from work and to and from church on Sundays. Phillip had a few health problems during this time; thankfully they were resolved but while they were being dealt with they brought more stress. Van & Laureen had known going in that the house in Fountain was a fixer-upper.¹² But the issues had started piling up: they had no A/C in the oppressive Carolina summers, and while the winters weren't especially cold the family still needed heat, and the boiler for the baseboard heating had just gone out. The family mostly owned used cars, which came with their own maintenance headaches. Van's job paid enough, but the large family combined with the house and car issues meant money was usually tight.

In other words, the early '90s were a tough time for Van. The stress got to him at times, and there were moments when he lost his temper. Sometimes he was able to walk away, take a breather, and center himself; other times not so much. And even those breather moments could carry their own drama. One time Van got very frustrated with his rambunctious children at church and declared he was walking home. Fountain is twenty miles from Greenville, so to actually do this would have taken most of the day; Laureen and the kids ended up picking up Van along the route about two miles in.

Some relief eventually came in a rather ironic form. In 1991, while at the Dogwood Festival, Larry & Norma Jean had entered Van & Laureen in a drawing for a cruise to the Bahamas, and Van & Laureen won! So in the fall of 1992, Van & Laureen spent a week or two on a Caribbean cruise! The timing was also fortuitous as it gave them a special way to celebrate their tenth wedding anniversary. (Laureen's parents came out to watch the kids for the week.)

In January 1993, Van & Laureen welcomed their last child, the fourth girl and eighth kid overall, Cheryl Elise (also born at Pitt Memorial).

In 1994, Van turned forty. Again, there was no real mid-life crisis, but he did start talking about getting a helicopter. His family was not sure how seriously to take him - their home in Fountain was surrounded by dozens of pine trees, so landing a helicopter there would be difficult if not impossible. The family did finally get central heating and air in the house though.

Glen turned eighteen in January 1994 and not long after this moved up to Virginia Beach, a few hours away. The legal troubles he'd run into as a teenager meant he had to return to North Carolina from time to time, plus he tried to stay close to Monique. With some time and distance, his relationship with Van & Laureen improved, though interactions were still sometimes rocky.

That same year, the whole family traveled to Washington D.C. to visit the temple. This time all the children came as well! In the Church, marriage in the temple (a sealing) extends certain blessings to biological children by default. If children join the family by adoption after the marriage, they have to come to the temple to be added to those blessings. (This is the one exception to children under 12 not entering the temple.) On this trip, Monique was sealed to Van & Laureen, and all the other children (except Glen, who was not a member of the Church) got to attend the ceremony. The children were young - Nathaniel was eleven, and Cheryl was just over a year old, so it was a new experience for all of them.

Van was often busy and stressed, but he always took time to appreciate his wife and strengthen their relationship. Laureen didn't like pet names, but she was okay with him calling her "LP" (short for 'Laureen-poo'.) They would regularly do date nights, often going to their favorite restaurant, Red

¹² Property records say the home was built in 1920, but Laureen was told it was built in 1949. The home was added onto after being built, so perhaps both were correct.

Lobster. On many evenings, after the kids were in bed, they would play board and card games together. Laureen liked playing Boggle with him, since she said he was the least competitive at that!

In 1995, the family took a trip out to Utah, where Laureen's parents had moved to the year before. Van, Laureen, and the kids (except Glen) drove in the family's minivan from North Carolina to West Virginia to St. Louis to Nauvoo, Illinois, and then across Iowa and Nebraska to Cheyenne, and then to Salt Lake City. It was a six day trip where they took time to visit such sights as the Gateway Arch and Chimney Rock. After a week in Utah, Van had to fly back and return to work. Laureen and the kids stayed in Utah for another week, then drove back over another six-day journey. (Laureen's father Paul accompanied them and flew back to Utah afterwards.)

While in St. Louis, the Irvin family met up with the Katz family, who had moved there from North Carolina a few years before. The Katzes accompanied the Irvins on their visit to the St. Louis Zoo. The next summer, in June 1996, the Katzes invited the Irvin family to attend their daughter Rachel's Bat Mitzvah. Only Van & Nathaniel were able to attend - they re-traced their steps through West Virginia, Indiana, and Illinois, but at a much quicker pace this time, making the journey in less than 48 hours.

The car that took Van & Nathaniel on this 2,000 mile round trip was not long for this world. That fall, while driving home from work, Van struck a deer. Thankfully Van himself was not injured, but the car was a total loss. Van managed to get it to limp home, but it never drove again after that. Sadly, this began something of an ugly tradition: for a few years after this every fall Van would hit a deer! Some of the cars in these encounters lived to fight another day, while others had to be scrapped.

The home in Fountain had a large detached two-car garage with a workshop space in the middle. The garage contained the family's deep freezer, the now-defunct boiler, family heirlooms from Van's time in Korea and the kids' younger years, food storage, and a camper trailer that Laureen's family had used a lot when she was younger. Van had worked hard in previous summers to re-roof the garage, replace its broken windows, and the like. By the mid-90s, the larger car side held mostly storage and supplies, while the smaller side was where the family's minivan was typically parked.

On April 9, 1997, Van & Laureen's fifteenth anniversary, the garage caught fire. The fifty-year-old building had bad wiring, and an electrical fire started in the workshop section in the center. Fountain had a solid volunteer fire department, and they responded quickly. But by the time the fire was spotted and emergency services were called the fire was already going strong. The fire was put out without any damage being done to the family home, and the garage did not collapse, but was ultimately a complete loss. The far side of the garage was completely gutted, and the minivan and camp trailer were destroyed, burned down to their metal frames. The workshop and all the family heirlooms were also burnt to cinders. The side of the garage closest to the house was the least damaged by the fire, but was significantly waterlogged, so much that its contents were too water- and smoke- damaged to be salvaged. The local news caught some of the fire on camera, including the minivan's windows bursting from the heat.

The family was understandably shaken by the event, but was able to pick up and move on. The family's homeowner's insurance covered nearly everything, so Van & Laureen were able to buy a replacement vehicle, camp trailer, tools, food storage, supplies, and such. They were able to pay to have the gutted garage demolished and another building built in its place (reusing the old concrete pad). The new building was a bit smaller and sparser inside, but it was a suitable replacement. Some things of course could not be replaced, mostly notably Van's Korean memorabilia and the crib that the oldest children had slept in as babies.

Meanwhile, Glen had during his time in Virginia Beach gotten involved with a woman named Jessica. By the fall of that year, Jessica was pregnant, so Van & Laureen encouraged Glen to marry her. That September the family traveled up to Virginia Beach for the nuptials. They almost didn't happen, as Glen and Jessica had gotten into a big fight the night before. The next day Glen & Jessica did marry on the beach, and that December, their daughter LaRae was born. Van was now a grandfather at forty-three years old!

Van's life did not get less busy as time went on and he got older, but he always made sure to spend time with his kids. One thing he would do was take his daughters on father-daughter dates. Not only was this an opportunity to spend time with the girls one on one, he also used it as an example of how the girls should expect young men to treat them when they started dating.

In his home health practice, Van made many interesting associations. One person he met was a man named Charles, who suffered from ALS. Charles visited the family's home a time or two to cook for them. He also introduced Van to a moon landing hoax conspiracy theory book, which Van read. Van's close following of the space program as a young man led him to dismiss most of the arguments therein, though he did admit there were some odd aspects to the data. He played devil's advocate with the material to Nathaniel a time or two.

As Van got older and his work and church and family continued to put many demands on his time, he often did not get enough sleep. He was still an early riser, and he kept busy all day, which meant he was often ready for bed by nine o'clock at night. Laureen and the kids though were more night people, and while Van & Laureen required their young kids and encouraged their teenagers to go to bed early, there were still plenty of times when the family was up late. This meant that as the years went on, often Van would be nodding off on the couch while the family was talking or playing a game or watching TV (or in later years on video calls with the children) around him. Sometimes he would be in and out of sleep, and randomly chime into the conversation. Sometimes the family would remark that Dad was zonked out, only to have him groggily inform them that he was still present!

In 1999, when Nathaniel was in 10th grade, he applied to and got accepted into the North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics in Durham, North Carolina. It is a residential school where the students live in dorms for their 11th & 12th grade years. Durham was two hours away from Fountain. Van was proud and supportive of Nathaniel, but was a little sad to have him going away from home a few years earlier than expected. Nathaniel entered the school in August of 1999, and from that point forward lived at home only sporadically.

With Glen and Nathaniel living elsewhere, Andrea was the oldest child at home. She was now in high school and (after having some rebellious years in middle school) was growing into a well-rounded young woman. She got a kitten from a family friend,¹³ and due to his oversized ears named him Yoda. Van had always liked cats, but this was the first (and only) time he had one living in his house (before he had encountered cats through relatives and neighbors). Andrea had also become good friends with a girl from an Asian Indian family that lived in Farmville. She got Andrea interested in Hindi-language Bollywood movies, and Andrea got Van interested in them as well. Father and daughter enjoyed watching these films together. Van and Andrea also enjoyed running together - Andrea ran track and cross-country in high school and frequently joined Van on his early morning runs.

The church community in Greenville had been growing steadily during the 1990s, and in 1999 the Greenville Ward was split into two. Van and his family ended up in the Greenville 2nd Ward. Van always

¹³ John Dennison

enjoyed talking to people, no matter the situation, and would often bring up the Church and try to share the gospel with them.

The ushering in of the year 2000 was an anti-climactic moment for many people in the world, and was for Van too. But with the new era, Van's life became less chaotic and dramatic. It didn't become less busy: work, church responsibilities, and the tasks of raising the six children still at home kept him very occupied. Glen's toxic marriage to Jessica occasionally spilled over into Van & Laureen's life, and after Glen & Jessica separated Glen came to live in Fountain again for a while. But in other ways things calmed down. He managed to break his deer-hitting streak. Laureen secured a government grant to have some work done on the house which especially helped improve their kitchen. They got vinyl siding, which freed them from the endless cycle of refreshing the exterior paint.

Around 2001, Van left self-employed home-health contracting and began working for local health care systems directly, mostly in nursing homes. By now Nathaniel had graduated high school and had left to go to college in Utah, at Van and Laureen's alma mater of BYU. Andrea and Phillip were in high school, and while Phillip was proving to be a rebellious teenager his behavior was not nearly as problematic or self-destructive as Glen's had been. Russell, Monique, Muriel, and Cheryl were all doing well in school and growing up well.

Van had tried during the 1990s to re-establish some contact with his parents, but had not had much luck. He was able to keep some contact and correspondence with his brother and sisters though. (Not all of them - the whole family lost track of Melissa for several years.)¹⁴ Jim came and visited a few times in North Carolina and met his nephews and nieces. For Christmas 2003, Van, Laureen, and the children (minus the two eldest boys) went out to California to spend it with his sisters.

Glen did not attend this reunion because he was in jail. A year or two before he had been involved in a hit-and-run accident and been convicted for that. The drug offenses he'd been arrested for some years prior he'd been given probation for, but this new conviction now brought on the full jail time for these crimes. Glen ultimately served four or five years in prison. Nathaniel did not attend because he was serving as a missionary for the Church, like Van had! Unlike Van, Nathaniel was serving in the Washington, D.C. area and speaking his native English. Nathaniel returned from his service in 2004, spent a few months with the family, then returned to Utah, where he would make his home from then on out.

By this point Andrea had graduated high school and was attending BYU as well. Phillip graduated from high school soon thereafter. His wild days in high school he was starting to put behind him, though he ultimately chose to disengage from the Church and live a different lifestyle. Van & Laureen were disappointed by this, but were proud of how Phillip became a hard worker, finding construction and restaurant jobs that he excelled at. Van made sure to keep a close relationship with his son despite their differences.

Things with Monique had become a bit more complicated. The teenage girl had started acting out and even running away (though it didn't seem like she was repeating Glen's mistakes of drug use). Van & Laureen got her into therapy, but it was not overly helpful and became something of a battleground as it brought up many dormant sibling conflicts. There was talk of having her go live somewhere else.

Van was still into running, but his enthusiasm was waning: it didn't seem to be helping out his overall health that much. Then in 2005 he was out for one of his usual runs, which took him down the various rural roads of Pitt and Edgecombe counties. A car pulled up to him, stopped, and two men got out.

¹⁴ Van sent a letter to the Social Security Administration asking them to forward it to Melissa. He noted in the letter that shortly after his mother's death she had sent a letter to them and Lois was able to find her this way.

They threatened him at gunpoint and tried to rob him. Since he didn't have a wallet or anything on him, these men left empty-handed and Van was not harmed. But this encounter was enough to convince him that it was time to stop these long-distance runs.

In late 2005 or early 2006, Glen was released from prison and moved into an apartment in Virginia Beach. He had been displaying encouraging signs that he was going to get on a better path while he was incarcerated, and Van & Laureen had hopes that he was going to make a new life for himself. But these hopes were dashed when Glen died of a drug overdose in March 2006. Glen Anthony Irvin was only thirty years old when he was buried in Queen Anne's Cemetery, just outside Fountain.

The rest of 2006 thankfully was a happier time. In February Andrea decided to take a break from BYU to serve a mission herself, and was called to Cleveland, Ohio. Russell graduated high school and went on to study chemical engineering at NC State University. That December, Nathaniel got married, and the family traveled to attend the wedding in Utah.

Since the visit with family in 2003, Van had been able to stay in better touch with his parents, though still in a limited fashion. Larry & Norma Jean were still nomads that popped up in Nevada only occasionally. But in 2008, that came to an abrupt halt when Norma Jean died. Van went out to attend her funeral, and ended up becoming the custodian of a portion of her ashes. (Norma Jean chose to be cremated; no headstone or marker exists for her.) After her death Larry did not continue the nomadic life: he lived with one of his children for a little while before going to live in a retirement home. Van and his father kept up their limited contact after this.

This sad event came on the heels of a happier one: in January 2008, Nathaniel's son Tobias Hinkley Van (Toby) was born. Van now had his first grandson! Nathaniel and his family were living in Arkansas at the time, and not long after the birth, Van, Laureen, Muriel, and Cheryl took a road trip to meet the new addition. They stayed with the young family for a few days and then returned home.

Around this time, Van was called to serve in the leadership of the Greenville 2nd Ward. A ward is led by a bishop, who has two lieutenants, called counselors: Van was assigned to be one of these counselors, and served in this capacity for a few years.¹⁵

Monique and Muriel had now graduated high school. Muriel was attending college at the University of North Carolina in Greensboro. Monique attended some classes at Pitt Community College in Greenville. Both girls struggled to land on a major or a plan for the future that they liked. Monique still lived at home off and on, Phillip lived and worked nearby, and Muriel and Russell were home from college during the summers. But during the school year, it was often just Van, Laureen, and Cheryl.

In 2009, Andrea got married! She and her husband Faiver (a native of Colombia) met at BYU and continued to live in Utah after their nuptials, but they came out to Washington D.C. to be married in the temple there. (The Church has hundreds of temples, and many in Utah, but Andrea felt a particular attachment to D.C.'s.) Andrea was the first of Van's children to be married in the temple, which is a big milestone in the Church, so it was a momentous occasion for Van & Laureen as much as for Andrea & Faiver.

In 2010, Monique and her boyfriend Leon had a child together, Van's second grandson Trey Anthony. In September, Laureen's mother passed away and Van and the kids all went out to Utah for the

¹⁵ For at least part of this time, the other counselor was a man named Nathan Holladay. The Holladay family had known Nathaniel's wife Kris Trevino when the Trevinos and Holladays had both lived in Florida. Nathan Holladay was in medical school in North Carolina, and after finishing set up a practice in Utah and became Kris' doctor.

funeral. That December, Phillip got married. He and his wife Heather welcomed their first child, Van's third grandson Alexander James a few months later.

Russell soon graduated from NC State, and Cheryl soon graduated from high school. Cheryl attended college in North Carolina, so she was still around, but Van & Laureen were now officially empty-nesters! That summer, Andrea & Faiver's first child and Van's second granddaughter was born, Lilia Laureen Gonzalez. (The Gonzalezes had been told they should expect a boy, so it was a bit of a surprise for everyone!)

Over the next few years, the extended family grew quickly. In 2012, both Phillip & Heather and Monique & Leon welcomed their second children: Phillip's daughter Michelle Claire and Monique's son Zach Allen. In 2013, Cheryl got married; she followed her eldest sister's lead by getting married in the D.C. temple while having a reception at the church building in Greenville. (Russell, Monique, and Muriel had, like Phillip, chosen to leave the Church after leaving home.) Andrea & Faiver welcomed their second girl, Emily Sofia, that same year. In 2014, Muriel married her college sweetheart Scott Brownlow. This last wedding managed to be a family reunion as well: Nathaniel and family had been unable to attend Cheryl's wedding, but the whole family was able to be together for Muriel's! Monique and Leon's relationship ended somewhere around this time.

Van & Laureen tossed around the idea of moving somewhere cooler now that all the kids were grown and gone, particularly during the oppressive Carolina summers. But they never really seriously looked into moving. They had roots in Fountain, in the home that they'd invested so much time and energy into, and the Church congregation they'd made so many friends and associations with. So rather than change location or circumstances, Van started to look at other ways to improve himself and enrich his life.

Van had always had an interest in music, and always been an enthusiastic (if not technically proficient) singer. He became interested in opera and began to attend performances, sometimes with Laureen tagging along (it wasn't her thing). They both developed an appreciation for ballet, and the late 2010s saw them holding season passes to the North Carolina Ballet. Van took some voice lessons to improve his singing, which he found enjoyable, but it was not a long-term pursuit of his. He also began to collect vinyls again, re-discovering some of the music of his youth.

Around this time Van began working for the local hospital system, Vidant Health. He worked at a few different hospitals in the eastern Carolina region, but eventually settled into the one in Ahoskie, North Carolina. It was not a short commute - one hour each way! But he enjoyed the work and his co-workers a great deal. In fact he later said he enjoyed that job more than any situation he'd been in before. By now Van was in his sixties and thinking about retirement, but he was enjoying his work so much that he thought he might even put off retiring for a few extra years!

He also decided he would emulate his old assistant scoutmaster Ralph and build his own kayak. After working on it on and off for several years, he completed it and started doing little journeys on ponds, lakes, creeks, and rivers in eastern North Carolina. Taking it on the Tar River for the first time was a kinetic experience - it went through the water much faster than he anticipated and he had trouble keeping control! But with time he figured it out and kayaking became a new pastime of his.

In 2015, Van & Laureen accompanied Andrea & Faiver on a trip to Colombia. Faiver went back to visit family from time to time and made it a point to take his children and wife as well so they would get to know his homeland and his relatives. Van fell in love with Colombia, eagerly trying new activities such as riding llamas! He spoke very little Spanish, but still wanted to talk with everyone he met, and did his best to get to know people with Faiver and others translating for him. The group visited several places,

including Bogota and Neiva. Two years later, In 2017, Andrea & Faiver welcomed their third daughter, Van's eighth grandchild, Amberly Nicole.

In 2018, Van & Laureen traveled to Lake James in northeastern Indiana, This was where Norma Jean had asked to have her ashes scattered, and now after ten years Van carried out her last wish. That same year, Larry passed away as well. Van had been doing regular calls with his dad, who lived with Teena and her husband Don for the last few years of his life.

In the Church, older retired couples often serve as missionaries together (this is called a senior mission). They rarely proselyte as the young missionaries do, and more often act as support staff or as temporary local leadership in fledgling branches of the Church. Van & Laureen had long planned on doing this after their kids were grown and Van had retired. In 2018 though a new kind of missionary service was created: the Pathway program. It was an educational program designed to help remote students get college credit (through BYU Idaho), whether they were Church members or not. Senior couples could serve as facilitators of this program without having to commit to it full-time or travel to a distant region; they could do it remotely themselves. Van & Laureen applied to serve in this new program and were accepted. They really enjoyed being Pathway missionaries and working with the young people trying to get started with their lives and careers.

Van & Laureen were serving English-speaking students in the United States, so they did not have to bring any of their old language skills to bear, or learn any new ones. But Van was interested in learning new languages anyway. He'd taken a stab at learning Hindi back when he and Andrea enjoyed Bollywood films, and now he started learning Nepali and studying Sanskrit.

On December 31, 2019, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints ended their association with the Boy Scouts of America. Van was still interested in participating in the Scouts as a leader though, and began volunteering with a troop that was chartered through a local Catholic parish.

In 2019, Cheryl & James welcomed their first child, Van's tenth grandchild, a boy named Grayson Eli! Two years later they would welcome their second son, Wesley James.

In 2020 Nathaniel and Kris separated, and divorced six months later. Van & Laureen had counseled him though the difficult last years of this marriage and were both disappointed and relieved to see it end.

In the summer of 2021, Van & Laureen decided to come out to Utah and spend a week in Moab. Andrea & Faiver had some friends who owned (or time-shared) a place there, so the Gonzalez family, Van & Laureen, and Nathaniel and Toby all gathered there to spend a few days. They enjoyed hiking in the national parks and at other attractions nearby. It was unbelievably hot: 115 degrees Fahrenheit one night! The heat didn't bother Van too much, but for the first time, he found himself unsure of his ability to complete some of the hikes.

For a few years before this, Van had been experiencing some tingling sensations in his feet. Doctors had ruled out diabetes and chalked it up to some nerve issues. It was annoying for Van, but not especially painful or restricting. This was the first time it had prevented him from doing something. Over the next few months, it got worse: not dramatically so, but enough that Laureen began urging him to go see a neurologist.

In November, Nathaniel got married again, to Amy Barlow. Van & Laureen (as well as Russell) came out to Utah for the wedding. By this time Van was feeling stiff and impaired to the point that he was having trouble walking. After the reception, he actually lost his balance trying to walk down a flight of

stairs and fell down them instead. So when they returned to North Carolina he finally went to see a neurologist.

The specialists Van saw initially were not sure what was going on: for a while it was suspected to be multiple sclerosis. Van began to have small seizures - not the full-body, grand-mal kind, but lots of little ones that would render him unresponsive for a minute or two. His energy was low and he was sometimes discouraged. Many tests were performed, some requiring overnight hospital stays. But test after test was inconclusive, so finally the doctors decided to do a brain biopsy.

While a biopsy is an exploratory procedure, it does run the risk of damaging the brain, so the family made sure to prepare for the worst. When the surgeons opened up Van's skull, they saw immediately that he had a tumor. They were able to remove a significant portion of the growth, but brain cancer is ultimately not curable. Van was told that with treatment he could expect a few more years at most, but without it he had only six months or so to live. It was a pretty dark irony - a man who'd never broken a bone, never smoked, and had run marathons to keep fit now had terminal cancer.

Van met this sharp turn in his life with good humor and patience. In fact, he had had a premonition at Thanksgiving that this illness might be his 'swan song.' After discussing the matter with doctors, his family, and Laureen, the two of them decided that he would begin the chemotherapy and radiation. If it made his life miserable, then he would stop it and let nature take its course. If he was able to weather it though he would continue it and try to enjoy a few more years with his loved ones. He finally retired from work and turned his focus to combating the cancer.

Doctors said the chemo would result in cognitive degradation and memory loss, but the first several months of treatment did not show any of that. Even before diagnosis Van had been losing the use of his legs; by January 2022 he had to be in a wheelchair almost all the time. He worked with physical therapists and was able to regain some motor function, but it never advanced more than walking a few hundred feet with a quad cane. The chemo was relatively easy on his body, stomach, and immune system though, and so for a while it looked like Van would still be around for a few years, albeit in a wheelchair. He continued studying languages, keeping in touch with his extended family, and working to keep his mind sharp. He was still a vibrant, colorful man.

But in November things took a turn. His motor skills, especially his ability to speak, went into decline. The family had planned a large vacation/reunion at a resort in Cancun, Mexico for December. Van was still able to attend, but the difference just from July was palpable. Van could barely hold his own head up. The left side of his body was paralyzed, and while he could still use his right arm there was a lot of fumbling. He could no longer use the toilet or bathe by himself.

His family, including his sons-in-law, made sure to be by his side. Russell lived and worked in Raleigh, but could work remote and so frequently came and stayed in Fountain to help out, especially overnight. Phillip & Heather lived just a few miles away in the town of Farmville, so they frequently visited too. Andrea had worked on and off since marrying Favier, but was currently a homemaker, so she came out for visits as often as she could, even spending most of the summer in North Carolina along with her daughters. Cheryl & James lived a little farther away in Winterville (twin city to Greenville), and even still attended the Greenville 2nd Ward with Van & Laureen. They were often at the home in Fountain, sometimes spending the bulk of their Sundays there. Muriel & Scott lived further away, didn't have the best immune systems, and had less flexibility with their work, so they were not as frequently available, but came when they could. Monique, now a certified surgical technician and raising her boys, also had significant demands on her time that prevented her from coming too often. Nathaniel's son Toby was reeling from the death of his mother around the same time Van was diagnosed and ultimately had to be

placed in psychiatric treatment for several months, so Nathaniel & Amy were not able to come out from Utah more than once or twice.

On January 3, 2023, Van had a follow-up with his oncologist. There he received the news that the chemotherapy was no longer working. The tumor was growing faster and the chemo was not slowing it down. It had also spread to his brain stem. The cancer was now in its final stages and Van now only had weeks left. It was time for hospice care; there was nothing left to do but make him comfortable.

At this, Nathaniel & Amy and Andrea & her kids came out from Utah again. Van was still somewhat verbal and responsive for the first two weeks of January. After that however it became so difficult for him to speak that he could barely manage more than one-word answers, and often only to 'yes-no' questions. His occasional responses showed he was still lucid and knew what was going on around him, but could not really communicate. Soon he could not swallow and his breathing became labored, and he died in his sleep in the early morning hours of Wednesday, February 8, 2023.

Van's funeral was well-attended. Many expressed how welcome and seen he had made them feel when he met them and as he associated with them over the years. He was then laid to rest in Queen Anne's Cemetery, just outside of Fountain, next to Glen.

Van Irvin loved his family, and he loved the Lord. The last thing he said to his family was "I love you." The last thing he wrote in his personal journal was memories of serving in the Church some years before. Van was committed to his faith, his friends, his wife, his children, and though he was sometimes grumpy, impatient, or overwhelmed, he was loyal to all of them until the very end.