

To seek my fortune

An autobiographical overview by Robert L. Baber



Introduction: When I was a child my mother occasionally told me that someday I would strike out and seek my fortune. But I always wondered what that meant: Leave the security and comforts of home and go far away, into an unknown world? Dig in the ground with a shovel looking for buried treasure? Look for a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow? ...?

Like many children, an early goal of mine was to become a fireman. Later, in primary school, I planned to become a rich bachelor. In high school, my thoughts became more serious and real: to work on the forefront of knowledge and perhaps even contribute to advancing it.

When I first travelled to MIT I realized that it would be an important step in seeking my fortune, although it was not at all clear to me at the time where the path I was starting would lead. Most directly, MIT gave me the knowledge that provided the foundation for assuming professional responsibility in my subsequent career. Less directly but just as important, the social experiences gained during my student days were the first steps in seeking my life's companion – the most important factor determining my happiness in life.

Hobbies: When I was in primary school, a friend and I started collecting stamps, which led to my curiosity about countries all over the world. While I was in the 7th grade, a community cultural organization needed children for a performance of the opera Carmen, so our choral singing teacher supplied most of our class to sing together with some soloists from the Metropolitan Opera. That led to my strong, life long interest in opera. One summer while I was in high school, a local swimming pool offered a short, free introduction to scuba diving, which I later took up as an active hobby. My freshman year at MIT introduced me to sailing, which I also pursued actively later in life. Our young son's interest in theater led us to join an amateur theater club, in which I worked backstage, acted in several minor roles on stage, and was treasurer for several years. Shortly before retirement, I decided that I should seek a less strenuous but challenging substitute for diving and sailing. I was living in Ireland at that time, so the omnipresent Celtic harp (the national symbol, printed on all official forms, and the well known logo for Guinness) was an obvious choice. Had I known 50+ years earlier that the boy to girl ratio among teen age harp players was roughly 1 to 10, I might have taken up the harp much earlier.

Languages: I was very impressed in the 4th grade by a Mexican classmate who was completely fluent in both English (his second language) and Spanish. I thought he must be a genius. My later attempt to learn Spanish in high school tended to confirm my suspicion, but later I concluded that we didn't become fluent in Spanish for a quite different reason: In the course, we were expected to learn about Spanish, but not necessarily to learn Spanish. So we didn't. My singing in the opera Carmen (see above) provided my first contact with the French language. Later, while at MIT, the first Swedish movie I saw impressed me by the aural beauty of the spoken Swedish and by the emotional beauty of the story and its presentation. A summer trip to Europe increased my interest in Sweden and Swedish, so I took an evening course in it while a graduate student at MIT. My first job after completing my military service took me to Germany, where I learned German. Later, I became interested in Esperanto. In retirement, I took courses in French, Akkadian and cuneiform writing.

My life's companion: The long search for my life's companion began early in my freshman year at MIT with my first kiss with a girl – a student nurse – next to the door to the morgue in a dingy, dimly lit basement corridor at MGH (Massachusetts General Hospital). The location was not romantic, but the kiss, like all first kisses, was. By getting to know several girl friends in the course of my years at MIT I formed my criteria for what I wanted and what I did not want in a life's companion. An early girl friend fulfilled my criteria very well but I apparently did not fulfill hers, leading to one of life's disappointing, but also important, experiences. Having known her was important, for it convinced me that nearly ideal girls did exist. Finally, a year after finishing graduate school, I did find that most valuable part of the fortune I was seeking, my life's companion. Our meeting illustrates how great a role pure chance plays in important events in life. A German girl (in the U.S. seeking her fortune) went with her Dutch girl friend to a rodeo. They missed the last bus back to town, so asked a couple

with young children for a ride home. That couple was a fraternity brother and his wife, who very quickly brought me into the picture. A little over a year later the German girl and I were married.

Studies at MIT: In my sophomore year I took a computer course as an elective. That was my introduction to a major part of my life's professional work. Afterward I joined the cooperative course in electrical engineering (VI-A), during which I spent the industrial semesters at IBM, designing a circuit for their first fully transistorized calculator, writing programs for checking the design of circuits for the STRETCH computer, etc. After electrical engineering I studied industrial management.

Career path: After finishing graduate school in early 1962, the army called. I served two years in a computer center in an atomic bomb proof installation in the middle of a rock mountain near Washington, D.C. The main lesson I learned during this time was that in a nuclear war, both sides would be pretty much wiped out. My next employer, Control Data (a computer manufacturer) sent me to Germany, where my wife and I were married. Later, I worked for the German subsidiaries of Diebold (a computer consultancy) and Harbridge House (a management consultancy). Then I worked as an independent management and computing consultant. In 1994 I earned my doctorate degree at the Technische Hochschule Darmstadt in Germany. In 1996, my wife and I moved from Bad Homburg, Germany, where we had been living for 32 years, to Johannesburg, South Africa, where I was a visiting professor in the Computer Science Department of the University of the Witwatersrand. In 2000, we moved to Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, where I was a professor in the Department of Computing and Software at McMaster University. After retiring from that position in 2003, we moved to Ireland, where I worked in a software research laboratory until 2005, when I decided to retire properly and finally. We then moved back to Bad Homburg, Germany, where we still live.

Books: I have written several books on an engineering approach to designing computer software. The basic idea behind them all derives from what I learned in my early MIT days. Others came up with a mathematical foundation for software corresponding to $F=ma$ in the traditional engineering fields and Maxwell's equations in electrical engineering. My books dealt with applying that mathematical foundation for software in practical, day to day software design work.

Observations: Over the years I have observed that people are happy only when they have unfulfilled but achievable goals. So my goals for the future are (1) write a book on the language of mathematics, (2) learn to play the Celtic harp better, (3) learn more about the history of technology, science and mathematics in the ancient world, and (4) generally enjoy life and the world, especially the people in it.

"Nature abhors sharp corners" a professor of atomic physics at MIT often said. I abhorred the sharp corners that seemed to be expected of me: learn only for many years, then, all of a sudden, switch to working only for many years, then, again suddenly, switch to doing nothing only. I tried to make the transitions gradual and smooth and even for a while in mid-career working and learning about half time each. In addition, I consciously added some play to all phases. In retirement, I am trying to continue learning, some working and playing, thus eliminating the "doing nothing only" phase of life.

In Europe, many different kinds of reflections on WWII were triggered by the 60th anniversary of its end. These reflections, together with my own contemplations on human history, up to and including current times, lead me to the conclusion that the common people on both sides of a war are always the losers. Only the leaders of one side *might* be winners. Aging has led me to become more pacifistic.

The most important lessons to be learned from life seem to me to be: (1) Set your initial goals carefully – you might just end up achieving them, and quite possibly not much more. Include the really important aspects in your goals and exclude aspects not really important, otherwise you will waste much time and effort in achieving things you later do not really want. (2) Irrelevant random events strongly affect your path through life. (3) Professional aspects are important in getting you through life, but ultimately, other aspects – people, emotions and close personal relationships – are much more important for happiness.

My fortune sought and found: Now I think that I finally know what seeking one's fortune means: living life – nothing more, nothing less.

2008 June