

A Tribute to the Life of 'My Big Brother' Val J. Foubert



**Val Foubert (left) with his brother Jon Polless.
Val was 13 when 'Jonny' was born in 1937.**

My big brother Val had just turned 13 when I was born in June of 1937. My mother always told me that he was impressed, to say the least, when I arrived home from the Hospital. He used to rock me to sleep in my crib; and then he used to tell me later on that just when he thought I was asleep ... **Bing!** My eyes would open up and he would have to start all over again.

I remember him holding me and I always felt comfortable in his arms. In fact, later on, I would run to him instead of my mother when I was in trouble.

My early childhood years, it seems, were spent a good part of the time waiting for my big brother to come home from his school events as he almost always used to bring 'Tootsie-Rolls' for me. He always claimed it was just the Tootsie-Rolls that I was waiting for.

When I was four or five years old, his job was to take care of me while my mother was working swing-shift at the Boeing plant in Renton. Sometimes he would take me to the movie in Issaquah on Friday night. He would stash me with some of the other little monsters down front, and go sit with his friends in a different area. I always knew he was there, and I would enjoy myself. That was one of the things about my Big Brother: I always knew that when he was around I felt secure.

When Val came home from Issaquah High School in the evenings, he would sometimes relate to me his adventures hitch-hiking home. His job when he arrived home was to chop kindling for the cook stove. I must have been a pain following him around all the time but he never seemed to complain. Although, one time he told my mother that he was going to give me away to the garbage man and I went into hysterics.

I was so used to him being at home that I was completely devastated when, in June of 1942, my mother told me that he was moving to Seattle. He had graduated from high-school and like all young people, wanted to try it on his own. He was soon to leave for the Army.

I was not to see my big brother for many years. My mother told me that he was in far-off places with the Army. I could sense that my mother was very worried about him, but other than that, I just accepted the fact that someday he would be home from the Army.

Our small family moved many times while he was away, as the mill in Monohon had burned in 1944, and my Dad had to find other work.

We had settled in Shalishan, a model housing project designed for defense workers during the war located in Tacoma. It was April, 1945, and I can remember the solemn music being played on the radio. FDR had died; it seemed that he had been loved by everyone.

Then it was May, 1945, and my Dad told me that it was 'V-E Day.' We had won the war with Germany and now my big brother Val would be coming home.

Of course, not knowing exactly where Germany was located, I didn't know just when he would be coming. My mother told me that he would probably come home on the bus, so from that time on for several months, I would keep my eye peeled down at the bus stop for him. This went on for quite a while until one day my mother told me that he was on the way and that I had better go to the bus stop and wait. He didn't come that day, but the next day when I went, there, lo and behold, he had just gotten off of the bus and was walking up the block. He was dressed in his Army uniform and was carrying what I later learned was a duffel bag. He was just as I remembered him, only bigger and at that moment, he was my hero.

Val didn't stay with us very long, and I had to get used to the fact that he wouldn't be living with us anymore. He had his own life to lead, I would be able to see him from time to time, and that's the way life is.

My mother and father were both alcoholics; this played a big part in my mother leaving my dad in 1946. My mother and I went to Seattle, where big brother was now

working at the Port of Seattle. He helped us get and share an apartment with a girlfriend he knew. While there, I discovered that he was planning to get married to a girl by the name of Wilma, whom he had met in Wyoming during the war.

Val was off to get married in August of 1946. Shortly afterwards, my mother decided to rejoin my Dad in Tacoma. This second try at being together was not any better than the first, and Mother left my dad for good in November, 1947.

We arrived again in Seattle, only this time penniless with really nowhere to go. I can imagine that my big brother was just thrilled to see us. He had been married for just over a year and had a brand new baby by the name of Philip. Val and Wilma were living in a small studio apartment on Boren Ave. and he had just started at Seattle College on the G.I. Bill (the school became Seattle University during the time he was there).

Somehow, he squeezed out enough to put up my mother and myself in a small hotel next door, by the name of Prince Rupert. It was \$10 a week for a room w/o bath and we were grateful for it.

Giving us the money for the hotel was just one of the many times that he stepped in and helped during my life. I might add that he did so knowing that he was slighting his own family.

My mother eventually found work, and we were able to get our own place. This worked well until my mother met a man that she married in 1949. This man did not want me around so I was boarded out with various families for the next six years of my life.

During this time my big brother checked on my welfare, and on occasion even brought me to live with his family from time to time. I spent most holidays with his family so I didn't feel completely abandoned.

Most of the time I lived in the same area as Val, and we were able to get together and do things together. He took me to my very first baseball game in 1947. It was the Seattle Rainiers and Oakland Acorns. He introduced me to basketball by taking me to the Seattle College games. We went fishing together out to the Issaquah Creek, Lake Sammamish, and a whole lot of small lakes where we mostly didn't catch many fish. But, it was the outings that I remember, and I now know that I probably wouldn't have been able to do any of these things without his being there.

During my years boarding out, he always checked on my welfare. I remember him arranging for me to see doctors when I was sick, and sending me to the dentist when I had a toothache.

I remember one kind thing in particular that he did. We had been downtown trying to dig his car out of a snow bank and were riding home on the bus. I was a newspaper carrier and had to get up early in the morning and deliver papers in the snow. He had to get off of the bus first and I got off a few blocks later on. But before he got off of the bus, he asked me if I had any gloves. I replied no. He then took off his own army gloves and gave them to me.

The years went by, and in 1956 I was graduating from high school. I don't think I would have if it had not been for him giving me a push now and then. I was not the student that he was, and at that time didn't have a clue as to what to do with my life. I became interested in the Naval Reserve, and he encouraged me to join. I did, and discovered a new place where I learned self-confidence and improved my self-esteem. I stayed for 34 years.

In my adult years, Val and I had our disagreements. Somehow we always managed to patch things up. Usually I was the one who did the apologizing, as it usually was me who was wrong. I found out that it's pretty hard to stay mad at a person who was once your hero.

A tribute would not be complete unless I was to relate some of the silly and sometimes just crazy things that we did together:

On one fishing trip, we were crossing a field filled with cows. All of a sudden he realized that the cows were bulls. We both ran like crazy leaving some of our fishing equipment behind in the field and just barely escaped with our rear ends intact.

One night in downtown Seattle just after the Monorail was built, we decided to drive through and wind our way through all of the supports from Downtown Seattle, out to Denny Way. We felt good that night -- and were lucky that the police were not around!

In the middle 1950s, Val came up from California looking for a new teaching job. While he was here, he borrowed an old Plymouth, I think it was, to go on some interviews.

He showed up where my mother and I were living at that time, and told me there was something wrong with the gas pedal. I checked it out and discovered that the 'return spring' for the gas pedal had popped off and was gone. There was no way to control the gas with your foot. This was late on a Sunday night and in those days there were very few if any garages open. I remembered that the Chief Seattle Garage was open all night. With Val steering and me lying on the floorboard and controlling the gas with my hand, we slowly made our way down to the garage and a new return spring.

And, it seemed, there were never-ending adventures up on top of his roof, trying to attach a TV antenna that never seemed to be in just the right position.

So, the 1950s passed, into the sixties. Val acquired more children -- a total of five -- and I acquired a new wife. We did not see each other as much. I liked to drink a lot and soon was diagnosed as an alcoholic. The sixties came and went, I lost my first wife because of the drinking and also some pretty good jobs along the way. During those years I felt ashamed, and really didn't want to see Val very often.

In 1976 I entered the VA hospital and went through their recovery program. The only one from my family who came to see me was my brother Val. He came to see me many times and was very helpful in my return to a useful life. I don't think that he really understood my battle with alcohol, but he was there for me and that's what counted. He even invited me back into his home when I knew that his present wife didn't really want me around.

I have lived a mostly sober life since then, with a couple of relapses along the way. I met a good woman, married her, and she has given me support throughout the years.

Val grew very close to her as he didn't have any sisters and he liked to talk up a storm with her.

Of course during these later years Val continued to call me and wanted to know how I was doing. I guess he felt that he should always oversee me.

Val was in his sixties when he met Agnes Thompson. He called her 'the love of his life.' I believe she was. They were to travel to most of the places that they wanted to see, and really enjoy life together. It was unfortunate that she developed Alzheimer's in the early 1990s. He cared for her all through the illness. In fact, I would say that he sacrificed himself in many ways just to know that she was being cared for with dignity. When she died in 1998, it was a terrible blow to him. He was a very lonely man.

It was at this point that I think that I became very important to him. He needed a close relationship with other people and I think that my wife, Laretta, and I filled the bill. He started coming to my house every Saturday and Sunday and having dinner and visiting. I am grateful to have been retired by that time so I could spend more time with him.

My brother Val did not grow old very well. The physical ailments were mounting, and he was very frustrated that he could not go on teaching part-time, and he wanted to do more traveling. He always complained to me 'what a bitch it was' to grow old. He was right of course, and I always agreed.

Many times over the years, we would return to the old mill site on Lake Sammamish to reminisce about living in the mill house and growing up on the lake. On our last trip there in 2005, I asked him if he felt that he had accomplished everything in life that he wanted.

His reply was Yes, he had wanted to be a drummer in a big band, and he had done that. He had wanted to marry and have a family, had wanted to be a high school teacher, and had certainly done these things.

The only thing he had not counted on was being a soldier. But he had done that, and was satisfied that he had done a good job.

(Val's World War II record will soon be documented in another part of this commemorative website).

I know that without him my life would have been quite different. Good big brothers are hard to come by. He was a good soldier, a fine musician, a great teacher and excellent father.

He was also my big brother, I loved him, and I shall never forget him.

Jon A. Polless

Soap Lake, Washington

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Jon Polless and wife Laurretta are retired in Soap Lake, Washington.



Jon and Val with their mother, born Nellie Myers in 1905.