

This monthly article highlights one of our branch members. We hope that you enjoy knowing a little more about your fellow members and the interesting life they have had. If you have someone you would like to nominate or if you would like to help author an article, please email the editor, Ron Nakamoto, at [ron.nakamoto\(at\)yahoo.com](mailto:ron.nakamoto(at)yahoo.com).

## PETER THURSTON



After a challenging and financially rewarding forty-four-year IBM career, I survived a threatening health event which caused me to re-focus my activities. I became a volunteer environmental education teacher taking first- through fourth grade students on field trips to help them “fall in love with nature.” While it was a dramatic transition, it has opened up a world of wonder and fun that has greatly enriched my life.

I was born in Cincinnati, Ohio. Five years later, my family moved to Pittsburgh, PA. Houses were scarce after the war, so our family rented a small house out in the country surrounded by farms, forests, and running creeks. We had well water, septic tank and a coal burning furnace. My older sister, twin brother and I would spend hours exploring the oak forests, fishing in the creeks and finding places to hide. This experience made me feel connected to nature and enhanced my love of adventure and exploration. For the next eight years, my school experience consisted of large rural school classes with coal miners’, steel mill workers’ and farmers’ kids. For many of my friends, getting a football scholarship was the best hope of getting to college.

My father was a distributor for A. B. Dick mimeograph machines. I remember visiting my father’s office in downtown Pittsburgh at mid-day. The coal smoke was so thick, I could not see across the street. We were motivated to make good grades in order to get accepted into college, rather than to follow our classmates into manual labor jobs after we finished secondary school. I was always the tallest kid in my class, but my parents did not approve of me playing football, so I played the clarinet in the band.

When I entered high school, we moved to an upscale township which was more academically oriented. I was mentored by Mr. Matthews, an outstanding Chemistry and Physics teacher, whose goal was to get one of his students accepted at MIT each year. All I knew about MIT was that it was back East somewhere and that it was the best engineering school in the world. I worked hard, focused my studies, and I was accepted at MIT based upon my Chemistry SAT score and MIT was looking for students from

Appalachia. I did not realize until years later that I was a beneficiary of an early Affirmative Action Program.

When I got to MIT, I discovered that every freshman had graduated first in his class, was the best at math and science in their school, and that I was at least one year behind my classmates who had attended private schools. I knew that if I was not the smartest or most well-prepared kid that I had to work harder and work smarter in order to make it in this challenging environment. Rush Week happened before school began. I was fortunate to be accepted into Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity. I immediately moved into the house which became “my home away from home.” Fortunately, I landed in an academically oriented fraternity with lots of jocks and a great social life with all of the colleges near Boston.

I discovered in my freshman year that I was not passionate about becoming either an engineer or a scientist so I moved to the business school where I felt more at home. I graduated from MIT with a B.S. and M.S. in Industrial Management. I was able to work my way through graduate school as a teaching assistant. Since I had more free time in graduate school, I was able to play on the MIT Rugby Club in the front row of the scrum as prop and after I graduated, I played with the Boston Rugby Club.

I joined IBM in Cambridge, MA as a Sales Trainee. In those days, punch card tabulating equipment was the cash cow for IBM, so I learned how to wire boards which controlled the machines. After seven months, I took a two-year leave to serve my ROTC commission in the Corps of Engineers. As I drove to Ft. Belvoir, VA for Engineer Officer training, the Bay of Tonkin incident occurred. It was not a good time to be going onto active duty. *(Editor's note: On Aug. 2, 1964 the destroyer USS Maddox, on patrol in the gulf of Tonkin, was attacked by three North Vietnamese Navy torpedo boats. Provoked by this aggression, the US Congress, passed the “Gulf of Tonkin Resolution” which granted President Lyndon Johnson authority to assist any Southeast Asian country jeopardized by communist aggression. The resolution served as legal justification for open warfare against North Vietnam.)* After completion of training, I took a side trip to Jump School at Ft. Benning, GA. After two weeks training and five jumps, I was Airborne qualified.

I arrived in Huntsville, AL and was assigned to the Saturn V moon rocket program. This assignment was too good to last. I received orders to serve in Vietnam. I spent most of my tour as Officer-in-Charge of an air-conditioned IBM punch card installation in Qui Nhon Depot, along the sea coast about half way between Cam Rahn Bay and Da Nang, managing spare parts inventory for the mechanized Army divisions in central Vietnam. I was discharged in Ft. Lewis, WA in 1967 and decided to rejoin IBM in San Jose.

I lived with my sister in Menlo Park. She attended a Stanford Alumni Valentine Day's party. While she was disappointed with the selection of single guys, she did meet a remarkable, single gal, whom she introduced me to. It was love at first sight, and as they say, “the rest is history.” Carol had recently returned to San Francisco after taking a year off from middle school teaching in Menlo Park. She lived and studied in Paris where she fell in love with French cooking. She had an apartment in San Francisco

where she invited me for a blind date dinner. The food was amazing. Afterwards we went to The Buena Vista Café for Irish coffee which was very romantic. *(Editor's note: The café is credited with introducing Irish coffee to the United States in 1952. It originally opened in 1916 when the first floor of a boardinghouse was converted into a saloon.)* Everything was magical. After six months I proposed and almost fell out of my chair when she accepted. Carol and I married the next year.

After living in Palo Alto for a year, we had the good fortune to purchase a small house in Los Altos Hills from a friend who was leaving Stanford to start up a Cybernetic department at U Mass. It was a great place to raise our three children. We have been blessed with five grandchildren who occasionally stay with us. We have lots of space for the grandkids to run wild the same way that we used to play as kids growing up north of Pittsburgh.

After ten years working with IBM customers in the Bay Area, I transferred to San Jose Storage Products. After seven years working in product marketing and product management, IBM offered me promotional opportunities in New York, Arizona and Japan. I accepted the move to Tokyo and our family of five embarked on another life adventure for the next four years. I worked at IBM Asia Pacific Headquarters and we lived in Hiroo Towers with a view of Mt. Fuji. I had the good fortune to visit most of the Asia Pacific area. A special treat each summer was our family trip home. IBM's travel policy included annual business class travel for the entire family. In those days we could exchange the business class tickets for around-the-world coach tickets which we did and visited many exciting places such as Europe, a safari in Africa, and the Great Wall of China. I retired in 2008 after surviving endless "resource actions" as IBM was getting out of the storage hardware business.

During my final year working for IBM, I was diagnosed with prostate cancer. This wakeup call gave me a chance to reconsider how I should spend my retirement time. I



HV Guide rediscovers fountain of youth, LATC\_4-Dec-2013

I decided to pursue my love of nature at Hidden Villa, which is in our neighborhood. I volunteered as a Farm and Wilderness Guide in the Environmental Education Program. I was invited to join the Hidden Villa Board and I served for seven years. When I am asked about how I liked being a Trustee and being Guide, I reply that being a Trustee is a great honor, but being a Guide is always a lot of fun. I also became a Nature Docent at Environmental Volunteers in Palo Alto and at Filoli in Woodside. As I hoped, working with young students has helped me become a better Grandpa. I am happy knowing that I am helping the next generation of students to fall in love with nature and to develop a commitment to protect our natural world.

Three years ago, I was invited to join SIR Branch 35. I joined the Branch Executive Committee as Publicity Chairman. As a former technology manager, I had little time to develop a network of professional men outside of work. I hoped that SIR would help me fill this void. Branch 35 has many activities that have enabled me to make many new friends. Branch 35 has filled this void better than I ever imaged it would. I have enjoyed having fun with a large number of professional men with similar interests by serving on the Board and by joining the Bocce Ball, Hiking and Wine Groups. Our branch has an amazing history, stable membership and active members. I am looking forward to the honor and challenge of being Branch 35 Big Sir 2019.

I believe a healthy society needs to let the cream rise to the top. In other words, I believe in a meritocracy. The steady movement in our country to a place where most of the income and wealth is concentrated into the hands of a small group of people is not a sustainable path for American leadership in the twenty-first century.