

The Making of a Supreme Curmudgeon by Lee Fowler

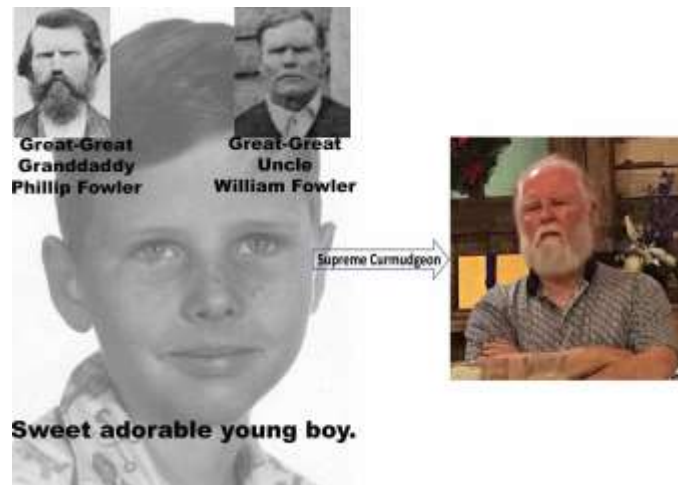
People sometimes say, “You seem to be a likeable enough fellow, so how did you come to be known as the ‘Supreme Curmudgeon?’” OK, the question didn’t go exactly like that. It’s more like “How come sometimes you’re a grouch but other times you seem to be kind of friendly?” It’s likely that people got a smidgen of a glance at my “Mr. Wonderful” persona. It doesn’t surface very often, thank goodness! The “Curmudgeon” in me is the dominant trait. How that came about is a mystery. Is it hereditary or did it develop from environmental influences? I’ve always been told that we’re a product of our environment. The genes from one or both sides of the family are highly suspect. After all, my half-great uncle lived most of his life in the insane asylum in Milledgeville, GA. He died there the year I met Suzanne, but I didn’t tell her about him. When I announced to some family members that I was writing this story and that I was up to four pages, my oldest son, Scott, said, “How could you get all that in just four pages?”

When in the second grade at Arlington grammar school in Mobile, Alabama, there was some sort of pageant at school and they had girls and boys paired off. We had to walk around this large circle holding hands. I kinda “disappeared” when it started ‘cause I didn’t want to hold hands with a girl. Later I felt really bad about that. I had made that girl miss participating in the pageant. This may have been the “fork in the road” for me. Go right and be a nice guy or left and be a curmudgeon. I seem to have veered left.

It could be that it all started when the family moved from Mobile to Alexandria, Virginia, in 1949 and I wasn’t allowed to take any of my toys, which were very few. Not even my favorite marbles. Two adults, three kids, and a dog in a 1939 Pontiac didn’t leave much room for toys. But my marbles? And no, I didn’t “lose my marbles!” In thinking about it, the Curmudgeon trait could have started earlier when I got stabbed in the back in New York City in 1942. I’m not kidding. It really did happen. New York is a dangerous city to live in. But that’s another story.

Those were environmental influences, but it could be very well be in my DNA. When we were very young, my older sister was annoying me, so I hit her in the head with a brick. Heck, I warned her I was going to do it if she didn’t stop pestering me. She didn’t and I did. My two sisters turned out ok, I guess. So, I

need to figure out which side of the family could have contributed to possible Curmudgeon DNA, the Fowler side or my mother's Downing side.



Nature or Nurture?

On my birthday in 1950, my mother made we wear a pair of Knickerbockers to school and I got laughed at by my classmates. That could very well have been the genesis of a curmudgeonly attitude. Then this city boy got moved again in 1951 to rural north Georgia, where the school had just installed indoor plumbing and the classrooms still had coal-fired heaters. I had to give away my bicycle 'cause there wasn't enough room in or on the Pontiac. But my older sister's bike was loaded on top. Once we got to Georgia, she never rode it again. And I never got another bicycle. Should have hit her in the head again. Having acquired a Virginia accent, those country boys thought I was a "Yankee." More fuel to kindle a curmudgeon spirit. A city boy with nothing but rocky, dirt roads to walk on? That could definitely contribute to a mental adjustment in a negative direction. The environmental impacts keep piling on.

There were positive influences that should have buried the curmudgeon, but it just didn't happen. Even though we were dirt poor, I had an aunt who married a well-to-do Italian. They lived in Chicago and drove Porsches. Yep! Porsches...plural. Every year they went on a Treffen to Germany and bought a new Porsche. This was in the middle 1950's and Aunt Lucille wrote trip reports for Panorama. They drove down to Georgia in the summer to visit relatives, which gave me the opportunity to ride in one of those funny little automobiles while I was in grade school.

On one of those visits, Uncle Don said that he would like to buy some fresh peanuts. I said that there was a feed store in town, and we could probably get some there. We pulled into a parking space and I asked him what the car was in front of us. He said that it was a Volkswagen. I asked him what they cost, and he told me. Then I asked him how much his Porsche cost and he told me. Then I told him, "I'm going to have one of those first, then I'm going to buy one of these."

Fast-forward through grammar school, high school, a couple years at a military college, and finally Georgia State University in Atlanta. Traded in my 1960 Pontiac for a brand new 1964 Volkswagen, \$1,495 base price plus \$90 for a sunroof. \$1,585 was a lot of money for a college student working two jobs to pay for tuition and books.

Took a non-credit course in computer programming and got hired as a student assistant in the Computer Center. The director of the center brought in gifted students from a local high school to learn programming. One of them turned out to be the future Mrs. Fowler. Well, what do you expect? Geeky little high school girl and dashing, debonair college man. Now that I think about it, this could definitely be where the curmudgeon personality started.

Suzanne and I married and moved to Virginia, courtesy of the United States Navy. I had spent four years majoring in microbiology and then another year majoring in physics. Then, when I was within a couple of courses of getting a degree in mathematics, I got a letter from my local draft board. They said, "You been in school too long so now you're ours." Arrgh! I'm spinning down the Curmudgeon vortex. I decided that the Navy needed me more than the Army, so I joined up. Suzanne had to give up her quest to get a degree in mathematics to go with me to Virginia. What a trooper! We had joined Peachstate Region, so PCA transferred our membership to Potomac Region. During the Parade in 1967, we were coming back from an event and topped a hill only to see a 356 coupe from Elizabeth, New Jersey, sitting right in the road. Our front bumper met his rear bumper. Not a friendly meeting. If Suzanne had been driving our brand-new Porsche, I would have been all right. But no! It was me and the Curmudgeon was festering inside. We called our dealer in Marietta and inquired about trading in the now-blemished 912. They said that they had a new, fully equipped 1967 912 sitting on the docks in Jacksonville and we could have it. That was nice but didn't soothe the simmering resentment of having to pay to have the 356 rear bumper repaired.

Potomac Region put on an autocross school and I wanted to attend. Didn't have any idea what that was all about. Suzanne signed up also. It was a number of years later that she admitted that she really didn't want to attend that school but did it to support me. If I'd known that she would wind up with more autocross trophies than me, I never would have encouraged her to sign up for the school. Obviously, that contributed to the growth in my Curmudgeon traits.

We went through a number of Porsches during the "BK" period, "BK" meaning "Before Kids." We decided that we just had to have a 356, so we bought one from a Navy Officer friend. We decided that the 912 needed a companion, so we traveled to Kentucky to buy a 1967 912 Targa advertised in Panorama. For some unknown reason, we decided that we needed a 1967 911S Targa. Then one of our dearest friends sold us his 1957 Speedster. It had an extra set of Competition Engineering wheels, soft top, and a hard top. We later sold it for \$3,000. Definitely a contributor to a Curmudgeon attitude.

Very few of these were owned by us at the same time. When our youngest son, Brad, was in high school, we bought him a used 914. That was a nice car, but he grew to be six feet, five inches tall and couldn't fit in it.

Here is me, Phillip, and Brad. Obviously, the DNA continues, but Brad is a throwback. He's actually a very nice guy.



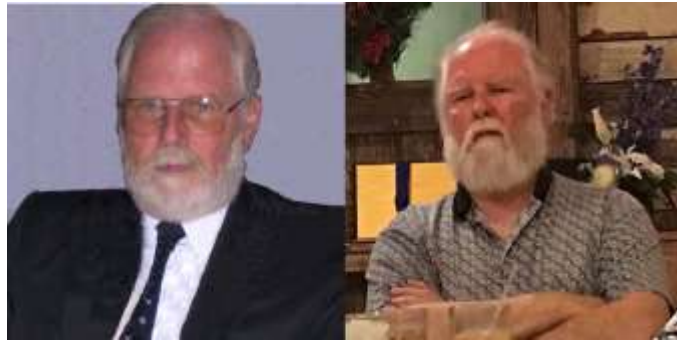
Through all the Porsches we've owned, the 1967 912 we bought new is still in the garage. If I'd kept all those other cars, I'd be a zillionaire by now. Who can blame me for being a poor Curmudgeon?

You would think the positive influence of all the great PCA folks that I interact with would have an effect. But no! At Spring Thing, I was regaling Steve Baum with one of my fascinating stories when Dave Schroetter interrupted. Dave said, "Lee, I have an almost photographic memory and I'm keeping count of how many times you tell the same stories." No problem! Curmudgeons have an impregnable

wall around their egos, so no amount of negative influences can get through. Instead, they strengthen the wall and increase the “Curmudgeon” attitude.

So, to answer the question at the beginning of this story. We were at the Parade in Charlotte, NC sitting at the banquet table with Paul and Donna Webb. I was having my usual suave, entertaining conversation when Donna said, “You’re a Curmudgeon!” So I says, “What’s that?” Donna then proceeded to explain the attributes of a Curmudgeon. I thanked her for the compliment. Then I told her, “Donna, if I’m a Curmudgeon, I’m certainly no ordinary Curmudgeon. I’m a Supreme Curmudgeon!

So, was it environmental influences or genetics that caused me to be a Supreme Curmudgeon? Hell, I don’t know! And that’s the end of the story!



**Mr. Wonderful or Supreme Curmudgeon?
You decide!**