

Unlike much of my early adult life, I can stake this bit of history down to a solid calendar date — April 29th, 1965 — and time — 8:28AM.

A big chunk of my life from high school graduation in 1960, to my marriage in 1973, is a jumble in my memory. Chunky recollections — particular jobs, particular cars, particular apartments, particular people — float around like dumplings in a simmering broth of time and refuse to line up into a sequential narrative. Sometimes I can tie things down to a historical event; for example, I remember the apartment I was living in when RFK was assassinated, so that was June 5, 1968. When did I move in to that apartment on the slopes of Twin Peaks? Why? When did I move out and to where? No recollection. And no, I wasn't taking any drugs, then or any other time.

Another benchmark: the 1962 Seattle World's Fair. I was attending the University of Washington, living in a dormitory named Lander Hall, and from the window of my room I could see the frame of the Seattle Space Needle rising as it was built in the winter of 1961. So I was still a full-time student then, although not for long. Soon, failing grades would cost me the National Merit Scholarship that had made my attendance financially feasible for my parents.

There was a period living in San Francisco, immersed in amateur theater and the early days of the hippie movement (no; no drugs), and then another attempt at living in Seattle, working part-time while attending — and failing — classes at the UW, and being — and this I recall clearly enough — deeply unhappy and frustrated.

Somewhere along this period, my friend John Snow, who had learned radio electronics in the Naval Reserve, had convinced me that an FCC first class radiotelephone operator's license was a ticket to steady employment. The FCC "First Phone" promises that the holder is competent to operate a commercial radio transmitter — knows all about the electronics of transmitters, the proper current loads for antennas, how radio waves propagate and so on. Lots of arcane knowledge but the kind of thing I should have no trouble learning. And it could be learned at — and here again memory fails; I have no idea how I discovered this — a vocational school not too far from my parent's home, the "Ranch" whose dust I had peremptorily brushed from my feet a few years before.

So I went home, to live in the basement of my parents' house. Each day I drove 20 miles to a suburb of Tacoma to attend full-time classes in electronics, theory and labs. Evenings and weekends I worked on electronics hobby projects in the basement. By spring of 1965 (almost exactly 5 years after graduating from high school) I was ready and signed up to take the First Phone license examination, which would be held at the FCC office in Seattle.

I'm sure of the date because I vividly remember driving through the near-empty morning streets of Seattle when my car seemed to wobble strangely. I thought I might have had a tire blow out? Or some failure in the steering linkage? I pulled over and checked: no, nothing visibly wrong with the car. I continued to the FCC office, but noticed some fallen masonry on a sidewalk, and hearing sirens. When I got there I learned that there had just been an earthquake, and the office would be closed. Examinations postponed.

That was the Seattle earthquake of April 29, 1965. It's well-documented, so that unlike almost all other significant moments of my life, I can know exactly when I was driving on my way to take the FCC exam.

I took the exam a week later, and passed, and received the license. I never operated a radio transmitter, but the license helped me get a job, first at Pacific Bell, and then at IBM; so John Snow was quite right about that.