Bill Jason Priest, Community College Pioneer

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Bill Priest stood chuckling as the more than seven hundred people who had gathered to honor him laughed and applauded. The occasion was his retirement from the Dallas County Community College District (DCCCD) after fifteen years as chancellor. A group of college administrators and faculty gathered around him on stage bedecked in t-shirts ablaze with red letters declaring: “Priest, a legend in his own time.” They ceremoniously presented him with a t-shirt imprinted, “A Legend in his own Mind.” Everyone, including Bill Priest, enjoyed the humor of the pun, but everyone, with the exception of Priest, knew he was a legend in the world of community colleges. He was a leader among leaders in two-year higher education and had founded a college district in one of the largest cities in Texas, a district he developed into a national model for other community colleges. This was the surprising career legacy of a young lad from a small rural town in California, whose lineage consisted of farmers, religious leaders, and sportsmen.

In 1917, Woodrow Wilson was president and the United States had just entered World War I by declaring war on Germany. The
Chicago White Sox won the World Series by beating the New York Yankees four out of six games. The population of the United States was just over one-hundred-million with fifty percent settled in rural homesteads. William D. Stephens was in his first year as governor of California and the state legislature passed a law providing funding for public junior colleges. On September 23, 1917, in rural French Camp, California, Bill Jason was born to Jesse and Clarice Priest. To describe 1917 French Camp as rural is an embellishment. The tiny town had been founded in the pre-gold rush days of 1828 as a beaver trapping post and it had not developed much beyond that. The Priests already had one child, a three-and-a-half year old daughter, Maradah. The family lived in a poorly constructed shack and Jesse tried to farm the unfertile land around it. Jesse and Clarice had each been eighteen years old when they married in 1912. Neither had graduated from high school.

Jesse was the adopted son of Will and Mary Priest. Fortunately, most of the Priest family had escaped the country’s flu epidemic of 1918, but in 1919, Jesse’s mother died from cancer. Medical treatment in the early 1900s was not easily accessible to Mary Priest, nor was it of much value when dealing with catastrophic illnesses. After his mother’s death, Jesse moved his wife and two children from their less than adequate dwelling to live with his father in an eighteen-room house on a four-hundred acre ranch just outside Stockton, California. That move brought together opportunities and conflicts which greatly influenced the young Bill Priest through his formative years.

Jesse Priest’s father was an elder in the First Christian Church and had aspirations for his son to become a preacher. Jesse not only rejected the notion of making his living preaching, but also took issue with all formalized religion. Bill Priest grew up attending the First Christian Church with his paternal grandfather part of the time and attending the Unity Church with his maternal grandmother, Adah Freeman Stubbs, other times. In between, he heard in-home sermons of religious refutation from his father and bellowing arguments between his father and his grandfather. He also observed his soft-hearted grandfather being taken advantage of by
glib-tongued fellows tapping him for monetary support of various religious causes. One such young man duped him twice. The first time he claimed to be an evangelist in need of land on which to erect a building for a school of theology. With all good faith, Priest’s grandfather gave him the deeds to pieces of land only to have the swindler slip into the night with cash in hand. The same man returned some time later with a new scheme, Priest’s grandfather complied with the request for money, and again, no religious good came of it. While his grandfather seemed to forgive and forget, Priest never forgot and developed a wary view of formalized religion. Priest did not throw out the grain with the organized religious chaff and gleaned from its moral teachings a philosophy of forthrightness that would serve him well throughout his life. He also developed a conservative concept of all issues being either black or white with no shades of gray, which would put him at odds with others, and occasionally, even himself.

One of the eighteen rooms of his boyhood home housed the library of James Budd, who had been the governor of California from 1895 to 1899. Governor Budd had bequeathed the library to Priest’s great aunt, Dr. Clara Freeman. Dr. Freeman was a medical doctor, an unusual profession for a woman in the early 1900s. Priest’s mother, being the favorite niece, had inherited the library from her aunt. In 1897, Governor Budd signed legislation authorizing the establishment of San Diego Normal School to produce teachers for the city’s growing population. Like foreshadowing in a Charles Dickens’ novel, Priest’s young mind was fed from the library of a political advocate for education.

A prolific reader from a very early age, Priest developed a love of history and by the age of seven, had a clear focus on what he wanted to be when he grew up—a history teacher. Unlike most seven-year-old children who dream of being cowboys and firemen, Priest’s eye was on teaching. His other talents, and intervening events, would however, not allow his career path to be direct to this clearly defined goal.

He glided unchallenged through the first four grades, and was double promoted to the sixth grade, skipping the fifth. Even with
that advancement, his teacher had to create a special reading class just for him. He was given books on an advanced level and left to read on his own.

The grammar school was located in French Camp, California, whose student population was fifty percent Japanese. This first-hand cultural experience was quite unusual for Anglo children in the 1920s, and was in this case due in part to Priest’s family. His grandfather had sold ten acres of his ranch to Japanese immigrants. The parcel of land was fertile loam and from this successful farmland grew a Japanese settlement. This experience enriched Priest’s education and broadened his cultural awareness. Eighth grade graduation completed grammar school.

In high school he noticed a beautiful girl, one he had also seen horseback riding past his home. She was two grades ahead of him, and that seemed like a chasm. He did not approach her.

Priest’s high school days were not the same educational experience for him as had been grammar school. There were no real problems in the ninth grade, but by the tenth he was hit by a series of events that drained the motivation from him and left him wondering about what was really important in life.

Priest’s father was given to drink and like most alcoholics, inebriation brought out his worst characteristics. As a boy, Priest relied more on his mother for parenting and was exceptionally close to his grandmother. That school year, his mother became critically ill and was hospitalized. One day, someone came to get him because his mother was near death. When Priest arrived at the hospital, his father was there, but was drunk. Priest seethed with anger, feeling his mother was being betrayed in her final hours. She recovered, but as a boy of fourteen, Priest had no forgiveness for his father’s self-indulgence at the time of his mother’s need.

Following this incident, Priest lost his sanctuary. His maternal grandmother, Adah Freeman Stubbs, died. He had been very close to her and deeply admired her intelligence and resilience. A child of the mountains, she migrated with her family to California in an ox cart in 1858. She grew up, by virtue of necessity, as a naturalist, and developed remarkable skills of survival. She read the signs of
nature to forecast the weather and could make meals from the vegetation around her cabin. She could make new tools from what was left of something broken or worn out. She lived by the principle that if you want it done, you do it yourself. But she was not her own focus; she always thought of others first. Priest was fascinated by her abilities and independent spirit. He spent many days with her while he was growing up and he was her favorite grandchild.

Her death was not kind or swift. A strep infection caused her to slowly deteriorate and then lie in a coma for ten days before succumbing to the illness. Watching the strong woman he admired growing weaker and withering before dying was more than Priest could emotionally process. To him, the loss of such a remarkable and special person made all else seem meaningless.

Another comfort to Priest was the close relationship he had with his sister, but that same year she married and moved away. This was joy mixed with sorrow for the young Priest. He was happy for his sister, but again for him it was a loss of personal support, an important and reachable relationship. In his sophomore year, the star of French Camp Grammar School made two C’s and two D’s at Stockton High School.

But the pendulum of life swings wide in opposite directions. That same year, one of the most positive events of his life also occurred. Harold Vogelsang, the Chief of Police, filled many roles in Stockton. One was coach of Stockton’s Karl Ross American Legion Junior Baseball team. The rules of the league included an age limit of seventeen, and Vogelsang’s team lost eleven players that year due to the rule. In seeking new talent, he encouraged Priest to try out. Priest had not played baseball in school because the Stockton high school did not have a baseball team, but he had the skills of a seasoned player. His father had played pro ball as a catcher in the Three I league, and young Priest had learned to pitch under his tutelage. Priest was quite adept at throwing a curve ball, a distinct advantage in the junior world of baseball. In 1932, at the age of fourteen, Priest became the first string pitcher for Stockton’s American Legion team.
The team did very well. In 1933, winning state and regional championships took them to Topeka, Kansas for the sectional title series. They were eliminated by the Chicago American Legion team in the national semi-finals. It was a disappointing loss, but the team from the little town of Stockton, California had attained significant success at the national level and had much of which to be proud.

As a reward for the team, and a great educational opportunity, Coach Vogelsang took them to Chicago to attend the World’s Fair, Century of Progress. The boys were amazed by the impressive cornucopia of exhibits, but nothing was as exciting to the ball club as going to a Chicago White Sox game. Being a spectator at a professional major league baseball game was a first for Priest. The White Sox beat the Philadelphia Athletics eleven to five with cheers and applause from the Stockton American Legion team members, not so much for one side or the other, but from sheer joy.

Before the game, Priest met and shook the hand of Kenesaw Mountain Landis, the first commissioner of baseball. Also an American jurist, Judge Landis served as commissioner from 1921 to 1944. He helped to restore the American public’s faith in baseball after the “Black Sox” scandal of 1919. For Priest, meeting baseball’s top person was “like going to baseball heaven.” In truth, the meeting in Chicago was little more than a junior baseball player from a small town having a special opportunity to tour the big city and mingle with the professionals in the sport of his passion. It would, however, prove to be more significant in just a few years as Priest’s career would take him to one of the teams under the watchful eye of Judge Landis.

The success of the young Stockton baseball team brought a bit of notoriety to all its members and Priest became known in the community. With his competitive nature and desire not to disappoint those who placed faith in him, being in the spotlight made him want to do well in all aspects of his life. He refocused his efforts in high school, and his grades improved dramatically. He returned to the level of academic achievement in line with his abilities by earning four A’s and one B in his senior year.
Priest lists Harold Vogelsang as one of his three mentors. Vogelsang had served as an infantryman in World War I and had been active in youth work for many years. Vogelsang coached the young Priest not only on the baseball field but also in life. He encouraged him and assisted him in setting and attaining goals. Banks were not a secure place in the early thirties, so Vogelsang kept Priest’s earnings in the safe at the police station. Protecting Priest’s money from the unpredictability of the depression was just one more way Vogelsang helped Priest to secure his future. Giving Priest the opportunity to hone his pitching skills would open many doors.

After graduating from high school at age sixteen, the goal of being a history teacher still shone strong in Priest’s vision. Teaching required a college education, and the taste of success on the baseball field turned his eyes toward the University of California at Berkeley, one of the premier universities in the United States, and where one of the best college baseball coaches, Clint Eans, worked. There were no scholarships, but that was not the first hurdle. Due to Priest’s lack-luster sophomore year in high school, he was half a credit short and was not accepted at Berkeley.

It was then that Priest was introduced to the value of junior colleges. The junior college concept, uniquely American, was relatively new with the first public junior college opening in Joliet, Illinois in 1901. Twenty years later, Modesto Junior College opened in California. By 1934, it was one of thirty-eight junior colleges in California. Priest’s half a credit deficit did not hinder his enrollment in Modesto Junior College, which allowed him to make up the high school credit, and to establish himself as academically solid. That spring, he was accepted at Berkeley as a second semester freshman and played on the freshman baseball team.

Priest quickly moved to the varsity team where he distinguished himself by being voted number one all-conference pitcher two of the three years he played. Additionally, he won the Golden Bear Blanket Award for lettering in baseball three years. His peers honored him by electing him as president of California’s Big C (Letterman) Society and appointing him to the University’s Athletic Council.
This was the middle of the Great Depression which saw everyone scrapping to pay bills and keep food on the table. Since Berkeley did not offer baseball scholarships, it was necessary for Priest to work while attending college. He worked during the summers and through the winter holiday breaks. That first summer, he earned $16.80 a week for a forty-eight hour week as a day laborer in a warehouse owned by Western States Grocery. While attending classes, he cleaned pots for an agricultural researcher, a job he obtained through the National Youth Administration. The pay was thirty-five cents an hour for fifty hours of work per month. To stretch his earnings, he surreptitiously ate some of the tomatoes, which were being grown for research. In addition, the job included five cents per hour transportation compensation which he saved by walking to and from the lab.

His sophomore year, Priest became the campus representative for a jewelry company that made fraternity and sorority jewelry. At seventeen, he was selling jewelry, cleaning pots, taking seventeen credit hours in college, and playing baseball. With all of this demand on his time, he still maintained a 3.0 grade point average.

Between his sophomore and junior years, he worked for the Calaveras Cement Plant. The pay was sixty cents an hour for twelve-hour days. The upside to that job was that he also earned money playing baseball for the Mother Lode League in the Angels Camp in the “jumping frog” county.

The following summer between his junior and senior years, Priest pitched in the California State League. They played each Sunday. He was paid $15 if they lost and $20 if they won. They won ten straight games. During the week, he worked as a gas and electric meter reader for $42.50 a week, one of his most lucrative jobs. The Pacific Gas and Electric Company gave each meter reader a book of addresses and no timeline to complete reading and recording the information from the houses and buildings listed for that day. Priest began at eight in the morning and typically finished in two and a half hours. In addition to offering good pay, this job also was one of the most interesting of all his jobs. Part of his territory was the rather large red light district in Stockton. Although
he stood at the door shouting repeatedly, “meter reader,” he often was mistaken for a customer. When a young woman would offer her services, Priest would explain the reason for his being there. Sometimes it was necessary to explain to several different ladies of the evening. Frequently a conversation would ensue and the topics were varied and always engaging.

The summer after graduation from Berkeley in 1938, the college baseball team barnstormed the country with a series of games beginning with Denver and ending with Dartmouth. The most delectable wins for Priest were over Harvard and Yale, both occurring in the same week. They were truly the boys of summer.

With autumn came a need to return to academics. After completing his bachelor’s degree with his long-desired major in history and a minor in Spanish, Priest still needed graduate work to gain teaching credentials. But while working toward that end, his baseball talent loomed in the path of his original career goal.

Priest had an impressive combined record from the baseball team at the University of California, Berkeley, and the summer teams. He had pitched his college team to an intercollegiate championship with ten wins and two losses. He had a dramatic strikeout record of as many as sixteen in one game, and averaging twelve to fourteen in games where he started. He also had frequently saved the game as the relief pitcher. His pitching record was notable, and drew the attention of the scouts for the Boston Red Sox, the Chicago White Sox, and the Philadelphia Athletics. Priest chose to sign with the Philadelphia A’s of the American League, the very team he had watched play just six years before. That, however, was not the deciding factor. Influencing his decision was an outfielder for the A’s, Sam Chapman, who had been a teammate at Berkeley. Under the headline, “Bill Priest Knows What He’s Doing,” Lester Grant, a columnist for the Stockton Record newspaper, wrote on June 17, 1938, “Bill is a smart guy—he doesn’t want to pitch against Chapman.” In the few weeks Chapman had been with Philadelphia, he had hit nine homeruns. Grant added, “Priest probably will be a happy addition to the Philadelphia pitching fraternity, which is undoubtedly one of the weakest chucking corps in the major leagues.”

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Philadelphia signed him for $450 a month, a salary above some with better records and with more experience. As today, the acquisition of a new player was done in hopes of improving the team’s performance. The signing of Bill Priest to the Philadelphia team made the national papers and large headlines in Priest’s hometowns of French Camp and Stockton. In an article from the Associated Press that ran in the *San Francisco Examiner*, Connie Mack was quoted as saying Priest was a good prospect and that he had not lost any games the last season in college ball. The editor added a note, “Oh, yes, Connie, Priest has been beaten, but we’ll put in with you. He is good.”

Both of Priest’s parents expressed faith in their son’s abilities but neither gushed with excitement over his becoming a professional athlete. His mother praised his character and seemed to defend his choice from possible criticism of seeking stardom. Clarice Priest was quoted, “He is a fine boy, without a single bad habit and I just know he will make good. This is something his father and I are proud of. Bill has always been a home boy, and this will not change him at all. He is very serious and takes baseball very serious and has taken baseball as his life’s work, so why shouldn’t he be just as ambitious to become a great pitcher as others are to become great lawyers and writers?”

Indeed, Priest was not of the nature to become enamored with his own accomplishments as would be reflected throughout the many successes of his life. He also proved to be a “home boy.” Shortly after taking up residence with his new team, he wrote his parents that he was “wishful for home.”

A reporter for the *Stockton Record* caught Priest’s father working on the ranch in French Camp, seven miles south of Stockton. Resting on his hoe, he gave an interview and seemed to play down the accomplishment of his son, which was his way, by responding, “The kid’s all right. He takes right after his daddy, except that I was a catcher. He’ll go right along.”

Twenty-four years earlier, when Jesse Priest played professional baseball in the Three-I league, he had been rated as one of the best semi-pro receivers in northern California. The interview noted
that Jesse had been an enthusiastic supporter at most of his son’s American Legion and college games.

Several of the local papers credited Harold Vogelsang, coach of the American Legion team, with grooming Priest for the majors. A quote from Vogelsang noted Priest was a natural, “He took to it like a duck to water. He learned fast. Besides, he could hit.”

For all the press, all the expectations, and all the praise of those who knew him, the glory days of junior league and college baseball were not duplicated on the professional fields of America’s game. The following year, Priest was moved to the minor leagues. He describes his baseball career as “starting at the top and working my way down.” Neither did his performance in the Pacific Coast League equal his college success. Priest, who is never hesitant to site his weaknesses, tells it through the words of a Philadelphia fan, “I always laugh with a sting in it; a guy told me one time, ‘Bill, you were a great college pitcher, but you forgot to bring your college hitters to hit against you.”

Although his professional baseball career was short-lived and according to Priest, the one thing at which he “was so immensely unsuccessful,” it gave him leverage and brought him recognition throughout his career in higher education. People are always fascinated by anyone’s brush with fame.

With professional baseball now just a line on Priest’s resume, his career moved from one American invention to another, the junior college. In 1940, Priest accepted a position of coach and physical education teacher at Modesto Junior College where he had begun his own pursuit of a college degree seven years before. Only three additional junior colleges had opened in California since he first enrolled at Modesto. That was reflective of the junior college movement in the United States, steady but very slow. Even then, Priest had a sense that the junior college was the wave of the future.