

Chapter 38

MY BOYHOOD HOME

I was born in Conshohocken, Pennsylvania, on May 8, 1923. The small town – which probably occupied a square mile – had two or more steel mills (e.g., Alan Wood, specialty steel), Lee automobile tire factory, a textile mill right in town (next to my grandparent's house), a small chemical factory, and a paper mill in nearby Miquon. My father, mother, and I lived in a small, semi-detached house at 204 6th Avenue. On one side, our house shared a wall with another house and on the other side was a narrow, paved passage between our house and the next one. We had a tiny front yard and a long narrow backyard with a garage on the alley. Few families had cars in those days, but my father needed one for his work as a freight solicitor for the New Jersey Central Railroad. Our house had three bedrooms and a bathroom on the second floor. The first floor had an enclosed front porch, a living room, a dining room, and a kitchen. The backyard had a privy, which was never used, and I never asked why it was there. The basement had a large coal furnace for heating the house and a small "bucket a day" coal stove for heating water. The anthracite coal was delivered by a chute through a small window in the front of the house into a room that held several tons of coal. Coal was put into the furnace once or twice daily and into the stove with a shovel, which was also used to remove ashes from the stove. For air conditioning we opened a few windows. The "ice man" delivered ice from an ice house twice weekly. The ice was carried through the narrow passage way to the ice box in the kitchen. We had no telephone – most houses didn't – but the house on the other side of the passageway was owned by a member of the town police force and had a telephone that could be used in emergencies. We had a large Atwater Kent radio (my uncle worked at that factory) that stood on four sturdy legs. I listened to Jack Armstrong, the Shadow, and the Lone Ranger. All programs had offers from the program sponsor. I obtained my first crystal radio for 10 Wheaties box tops and 25 cents.

At the other end of the block was a small grocery store that was about the same size as the downstairs area of our house (the two brothers who owned it lived upstairs). Choices were limited, and what was available was in minimum quantities. However, expectations were not high since the Great Depression era was in full force and "make do" was the name of the game then. Of course, another grocery store was only a short walk away – walking to shop was the norm. On Fayette Avenue (the main street), the Nardi family had a store that was devoted entirely to fruit. I always walked home, which was never more than three or four blocks, for lunch on school days. In those days, only one working parent was the norm. Physicians also made house calls – walking was good for them, too, and it gave them an opportunity to view the patient's home environment.

I could go fishing in about 10 minutes by using my one speed, fat tire bike. The choices were Schuylkill River or Potts Quarry – or I could cross the river, take a river road to the edge of Philadelphia, and come back to Conshohocken on the other side of the river. I played a clarinet in the high school band, but there was little social life, especially for the group of eggheads I associated with. Our Saturday evening recreation was to walk to a small general store just outside town and have a soft drink and a snack (usually a doughnut or a "Tasty Cake") for a total of 15¢ – which was a sizable portion of my weekly allowance of 25¢. The other major expenditure was the 10¢ Saturday morning movie. I was lucky because many teenagers during the Great Depression did not get an allowance.

Winter recreation in Conshohocken was limited but adequate for that era. Our part of 6th Avenue was on a steep hill and cars rarely used it after a snow or an ice storm. Automobile traffic was very light at all times and essentially nonexistent after a snow storm. All the children got out their Flexible Flyer sleds and enjoyed a fast one block ride and a lower additional block for those who liked a long ride. That meant going through an intersection, but I do not remember ever encountering an automobile. Our local "lake," Potts Quarry, was available for ice skating most of the winter. Most years an adventurous person drove a Model A or T Ford onto the ice, and I was confident everyone would have known if the ice had broken and plunged the automobile to the bottom of Potts Quarry.

One of my favorite places was the town library, which was housed in an old wooden house on Fayette Avenue. The wooden floors were badly worn by years of use, but the selection of books was more than adequate for a small town during the Great Depression. My parents had also purchased a 20-volume (I think) set of *Encyclopedia Britannica* for me. Some parts were beyond my comprehension, but it gave me a superb exposure to a vast array of knowledge and reminded me how little I knew and understood. It was a decisive period of my life.

Most people lived in a very small space on Earth during the Great Depression. All but one family of my relatives, the Latshaws, lived within 20 miles of Conshohocken. At funerals, weddings, and christenings, people brought food to contribute to a meal because travel was difficult when most people did not own a car and used public transportation. Since my father worked for the New Jersey Central Railroad, we got free passes for coach seats on other railroads, but Pullman berths were extra as were meals in the dining room. However, since my father only got two weeks vacation each year, time for travel was limited.

My first date occurred during my first year at Penn State. Young people in the 21st century are incredulous at such an abnormal life, but it was the norm for the males I knew. I had turned 17 in May 1940 and entered Penn State that fall. Most of the students in the freshman class were at least a year older than I was, which was a major difference for teenagers. The college ration was about five males for every female back then – a quite different situation for US colleges and universities today where women commonly outnumber men. Despite this challenging ratio, I actually had some dates during my freshman year. It was, to say the least, quite different from Conshohocken – or perhaps it was me.

I have tried to describe life in my small town in detail because it is essential to understanding the cultural shock of going to a university at age 17. Penn State had only about 5,000 students in 1940 – small compared to many universities in 2009 – but, to a 17-year old from a small mill town, it appeared huge. When I joined the Navy in World War II, I traveled the vast Pacific Ocean with comparative strangers. After World War II, things changed dramatically. Small towns near big cities became bedroom communities, foreign travel became the norm, and family ties became difficult to maintain. As a field crew member at the Academy of Natural Sciences, I traveled to many places I had never heard of and was there for only a few weeks. In 1966, when Jeannie and I were 43, I left the Academy after 18 years to become a university faculty member. Our daughter Karen was already an undergraduate in Colorado College, but all the children were with us when the “field station era” began in 1961. We are now all in touch via the Internet. Life is a big paradigm shift with which we cope as best we can.

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