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Chapter 41

GROWING UP IN A SMALL FACTORY TOWN DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION

If you don't know where you come from, you don't know where you are going. Jonathan Erlen

In the 1920s and 1930s, extended families normally spent their entire lives living within a short distance of each other. My paternal grandparents lived 1½ blocks from my family's home in Conshohocken, PA, and my maternal grandparents lived in Philadelphia – a short train ride away. The Browns, my father's cousins, lived in a house less than 1 mile away. A few relatives lived a bit farther away, but still less than an hour by automobile. Most of my relatives lived near public transportation, but some on farms did not.

Since few homes had telephones in those days, relatives usually did not know when visitors might come; however, they were always warmly welcomed, although farm work was never interrupted. My Aunt Reba Fischer, my mother's sister, lived with her husband Uncle Bill in a row house in Philadelphia, less than an hour's drive. However, going there by public transportation involved a mile walk to the train station, then a trolley car ride to an area near their house, and then another walk of half-mile or so. A wait for the trolley or train usually added another 10-20 minutes to the trip. Use of public transportation may seem archaic to some younger readers, but increased use of public transportation may be the future norm in the United States. Anyone who has used public transportation in most of Europe or Japan will not dread this change.

Howard Kent was my only cousin on my father's side of the family. He was a physician and was killed in a head-on collision when two younger people reportedly were driving on the wrong side of the road. I still keep in touch with his wife Peggy, who survived the crash. Howard had a successful practice in Hammonton, NJ, and even ran a 300-bed hospital there. He later joined the faculty at Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia, PA. By then, I was working at Virginia Tech, so we rarely saw each other – a vastly different situation from my childhood. The many cousins on my mother's side of the family were always easily accessible, so I know something about them even though I can no longer travel. In the "old days," we would have been in close touch.

When I was growing up, most people in Conshohocken walked to work. When my father went to work at the office of the New Jersey Central Railroad in Philadelphia, PA, he walked about a mile to the train station to travel to work. Most days, he drove his car around eastern Pennsylvania to solicit freight shipments for the railroad to various parts of the United States. He worked for the railroad his entire life and retired with an adequate pension, which is far from common in the 21st century. My Uncle Bill Fischer worked his entire life on the huge Sears and Roebuck annual catalog (which was the foundation of many outhouse jokes). He and Aunt Reba moved to Palo Alto, CA, when he retired. They had no children, but, even so, retiring so far from family and friends was unusual in those days. I was able to phone them many years later while giving a seminar at University of California, Berkeley, but I never saw them after they left Philadelphia.

I don't recall going to a clothing or shoe store during my childhood. Everything came from the huge Sears and Roebuck catalog – orders were placed by mail and accompanied by a check or money order. Credit cards didn't exist in our town back then. The parents of my good friend Arnie Perloff owned a store that sold clothes and shoes to factory workers – strong, sturdy material that could stand many hours of hard work. Few people had many clothes during the Great Depression, and the closets in our small home were tiny by today's standards. Monday was clothes washing day, and homemakers engaged in a good natured race to see which one had the clothes hung on clothesline in the backyard first. No one had electric clothes dryers. Maytag washing machines had attached motor driven wringers to remove excess water – no spinning dry. At Penn State University, we all had laundry boxes. Richard Rusk, who lives in the room next to mine at the retirement center, remembers an address holder that held a card with the destination (usually one's mother) on one side and the return address on the other. No laundromats existed in those days.

I know of no parents who both had earned income, although, even in a small town, a few probably did. My mother worked hard – no labor-saving devices or shopping for a whole week of meals at a huge supermarket. Shopping daily or every other day was the norm. The tiny grocery store at the other end of our

block had very limited supplies of everything, and the range of choices was also very limited. Every home had an icebox with ice delivered daily – at least in summer. Naturally, food did not keep as well as it does in modern temperature-controlled refrigerators. Conshohocken had no school cafeterias, and all students walked home for lunch on a 1-hour lunch break. My walk was about 20 minutes round trip, so I had about 40 minutes available for lunch.

I never realized how lonely my mother must have been. Anyone coming to a small town undergoes trying to join a close knit tribe. The Conshohocken women were not hostile – my mother just wasn't one of them. I am confident that my realization is close to the truth because my mother did not have a single close, or even somewhat close, woman friend during my entire childhood.

Grandfather Fesmire left our house in Conshohocken to become a resident in the Hayes Mechanics Retirement Home. The man assigned to care for him was very fond of male canaries and their beautiful songs. In those days, many homes had a male canary. Grandmother Cairns raised canaries in a huge room on the third floor of her house. The canaries had been in captivity in Germany for many years and easily raised a brood indoors. Usually young, male canaries were taught to sing by putting them in a room with a "master singer," male canary. From that group, the best of the young, male canaries was selected for important gifts. My mother gave such a gift to the man responsible for Grandfather Fesmire at the Hayes Mechanics Home who had expressed a deep interest in singing, male canaries. This gift was typical for that era – the giver had invested a substantial amount of time in producing the gift.

Even the houseplants were different when I was growing up. They were the kind that tolerated, even thrived, at 50° to 60°F – the ambient temperature of most houses. If the man of the house were at work, the woman of the house had to shovel more coal and remove coal ash from the bottom of the furnace. Putting on a sweater was much simpler.

Once, rarely twice, each summer, our family made root beer. Sugar, yeast, and flavoring were added to warm water and placed in a clean bottle that was capped with a special device. When I became older, capping the bottle was my job. The bottles were wiped with a clean cloth and placed on a blanket in the sun for about 1 hour. Probably about 30 bottles fit comfortably on the blanket. The bottles were then taken to the cellar. At the proper time, some of the bottles were placed in the ice box. This precious fluid was not gulped down, it required too much work! Every sip had to be savored. During World War II, I found that I could get Coca Cola from a machine for a very low price. Drinking it was a normal event, but lacked the memories of the homemade root beer.

Once each summer, my mother and Aunt Reba took a trip to Riverview Beach on an excursion boat that ran during summer. The beach was downstream of Philadelphia on the New Jersey side of the Delaware River. Swimming there is probably not encouraged now. Riverview Beach was an amusement park with all sorts of "rides." Jimmy Koch, who lived down the block, was Aunt Reba's guest. He and I were each given the same amount of money, and we scouted the rides to determine how to get the most for our money. Homemade sandwiches were for lunch, and Jimmy and I were treated to milkshakes. We rode the ferry back to Philadelphia, and my mother, Jimmy, and I rode a streetcar to the train station. Aunt Reba took a different streetcar to her home in Olny (a part of Philadelphia).

I belonged to a motley group, made up of Arnie Perloff, Bill Bates, Herb Ridly, and Bill Fozard, of male social misfits that met for about 2 hours every Saturday night. We had no leader, and our only activity was to meet Saturday evenings across the street from the high school. We walked about 1 mile to a general store just past the town boundary and had a soft drink and a Tasty Kake for 15¢. We only walked in warm weather, probably 10-15 times each year. This activity and the Saturday morning movies shot my 25¢/week allowance. None of us played football or basketball, so we were not associated with groups that did. I played in the high school marching band that performed at football games and parades, but the band had no social activities.

Except for high school football and basketball, no other organized sports were available for growing children. Organized sports for children like us came after World War II. Eight town-owned tennis courts were open to anyone with a tennis racquet and balls – I had both, but most children my age did not. However, groups formed, especially during summer, to play "kick the can," softball, etc. We made our own rules and participants came and went whenever they felt like it. The few disputes were settled by a group vote. If that failed, everyone went home. Our groups were not competitive, and I treasure those days.

During my teens, I developed a special interest in tropical fish, and my parents bought a copy of the illustrated William Innes book *Tropical Fish* for, I believe, $5. It had color pictures of both male and female fish, and the text described their origins, the habitat they favored, and their breeding requirements. (Later in my life, I would see many of these species as a member of a survey crew studying the Amazon River in Peru.) I was entranced and even managed to breed some zebra danios that laid non-adhesive eggs. The eggs fell to the bottom of an aquarium covered with marbles, so they were not eaten.

Our family physician was Dr. Perkins, whose office was on Lafayette Street (the main street), roughly in the center of town. He had a rather varied practice because Conshohocken was a factory town. He made

house calls, which provided an opportunity for him to see the home environment of his patients. Dr. Perkins actually lanced my left ear, which was prone to infection, 28 times during my childhood. I must have been a troublesome child to care for, but I rarely missed a day of school and had perfect attendance for each of my 12 years in Sunday School.

I was able to attend only one of my high school class reunions when I lived near Conshohocken. Later in my life, the warmer months of the year had me on field trips at the wrong times for reunions. Even later, I started many years of teaching and research at field stations, which also were during the times of class reunions. Jeannie missed all of her college reunions, which meant a lot to her.

The Great Depression seems to have affected people in one of two ways. Either "bad times are coming; best to be prepared for them" (Jeannie and I were both in this category, which prepared us for the expenses of years of Alzheimer's even though neither of us expected that kind of trouble) or "spend money as fast as you wish while it still has value." Given the financial, worldwide events since 2008, the second choice is suicidal. The first choice has lost some of its allure, but I could not have cared for Jeannie as well as I did from 2001-2005 had I not held to the "bad times are coming" perspective.

Growing up in a factory town during the Great Depression was a great lesson in the uncertainties in life that are always with us, but the uncertainties of life are often pushed to the back of our awareness. Living in a "blue collar" town and actually working in a "blue collar" job in a paper mill gave me an appreciation for the endurance it takes to survive in that culture. It was my personal "rite of passage."

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