

Growing Up in Wilkes-Barre, PA

Adventures with the Pool Gang

This is continuation of my article about growing up in Wilkes-Barre. The first article is titled "Memories of the 1960's". It sets the stage for this article so you may want to take a look at it.

Living in Wilkes-Barre

Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania was a great place to grow up in the 1950's and 1960's' especially for kids in low income areas. Kids were free in Wilkes-Barre. We could roam all over the city without fear of being attacked; no adult would dare harm a child. By the age of nine my friends and I would wander miles away from home. We would go anywhere from downtown to up into the mountains.

Conversely, only the wisest of the wise guys would disrespect an adult to their face. To insult an adult was considered a major offense. All teachers had a paddle in their room. I received my share of swats and it did me no harm what so ever. If a kid ran home and cried to their father that they were paddled by a teacher, their father would likely swat them again for embarrassing him. This balance of discipline and respect made that time in Wilkes-Barre great for kids.

The Top Dogs

All neighborhoods have their top dogs among the kids hanging out. Ours were Mike and Matt; no one messed with these two guys. Matt seemed to be born a boxer. He was tall and slim with lightning fast hands and incredible agility. There was a boxing event that was held every year. Matt had a good friend named Joe. Joe would go to camp for two weeks in the summer. Each time he would go he would learn some new boxing tips. When he returned he would challenge Matt and they would duke it out. There was no malice in the battle. It was just a challenge of skill but they didn't pull their punches. Matt's natural skill always won the day and Matt's younger bother finally told me his secret last Saturday, but I won't share that here.

Mike was a big guy. By the age of sixteen he was about six foot three. He was also quite strong and an all together imposing figure. I only saw Mike get mad once. Some guy started knocking around Mike's younger bother in the movie theater. Mike grabbed that guy that threw him into the theater's side exit doors. The guy hit the doors so hard that they popped open and he went flying into the street.

These two guys could easily rule the pool but that wasn't their style. They never picked on or pushed around the other kids. They were two of the nicest guys you would ever want to meet. Mike took a lot of ribbing from guys a half a foot shorter than him. He could have easily pounded them into the ground but the thought never occurred to him. When it came to street corner civility these guys were my role models.

Sneaking in the Movies

When you don't have a lot of money you have to be creative. The Hart Movie Theater was one of the last neighborhood movie theaters left in the city. It was just a few blocks from our hangout at the Parrish Pool. It also served as winter quarters for the Pool Gang. If there was a movie we wanted to see, we would wander down to the theater.

Sometimes one guy would actually buy a ticket, but other times he would wait until the ticket taker was distracted and slip in. Once inside our point man would slide over to the side exit door and push it open. Sometimes as many as five or six of us would sneak in and disperse into the theater. I saw several good movies that way. There was another way in around the back but I never really saw that used. Yeah technically it was the same as stealing the movie tickets but it really didn't hurt anyone. The theater was never more than half full so we weren't stealing seats from paying customers.

Quotes

Some things stick in your mind, even after forty plus years. There are some things that were said that I will never forget. The first one was from my young teenage days. A group of us came out of a pizza parlor on Hazel Street. We made the turn on Blackman Street to head back toward the pool when I car with a few older guys pulled up. They started jerking us around but my buddy Lefty would have none of it. He got right back in the older guys faces until one of the guys told him that he would fight him with one hand tied behind his back. Lefty told him, "I'll take the other hand and stick up your ass." That line broke us all up including the older guys. They drove away laughing and we went on to the pool.

There are times when a few of us would strike out looking for lovely ladies in other parts of town. One time my good friend Bill and I went down to the public square in the center of the city to see if we you make the acquaintance of some downtown girls. Well on that night we had no luck at all. This was a Saturday night and it was the thing in those days for adults to get all dressed up and go to the Paramount Theater on Public Square. The movie "Barefoot in the Park" had just completed and the well dressed people were leaving the theater. My buddy Bill seats himself on the fire hydrant in front of the theater and yells at the top of his lungs, "I PROTEST COLD FIRE HYDRANTS; THEY GIVE YOU PILES." I almost dropped to the sidewalk I was laughing so hard and to my surprise the well dress people were laughing just as hard.

This one could be listed under pranks but the line was delivered so well that it became a memorable quote. Later I'll mention more about phone pranks but this one was classic. One of the boys, who I will not name to protect the guilty, was great at impressions and he did a great Bobby Kennedy. He'd call up a house and get a lady on the line and in a perfect Bobby Kennedy voice he would say, "This is Bobby Kennedy. Did you know that the angle of the dangle is equal to the mass of the ass?" Of course there would be nothing but a gasp on the line and we would just be rolling with laughter.

Pranks

As I just mentioned we did our share of phone pranks. We didn't order stuff and have it sent to a house. I'm not sure if it was our scruples or just that there wasn't any pizza delivery at that time. We would call up and deliver the classic lines:

1. "Is your refrigerator running? Well you better go catch it."
2. "Do you have Prince Albert in a can? Well let him out." I guess you have to be at least my age to know about Prince Albert canned tobacco for rolling your own cigarettes.
3. My favorite, other than our talented fellow above, was calling up and asking the person if they had a well in their backyard. I like this one because very few people saw it coming. When they answered no and group of us would gather around the phone and sing the chorus to the Christmas carol "The First Noel."

We also spent time ringing doorbells and running away. Sometimes we would prop tin cans up by the door so when the person opened it they would get knocked down and make noise.

The biggest prank was one we pulled on our own group. I was a victim before I was a perpetrator. Some of the guys spread a rumor that there was some kind of beast in the set of trees behind the factories. I went to investigate with some of the boys when I heard a growl and something moving toward me. I was gone like a shot. I wasn't the fastest guy in the gang but on that night it would have be hard for anyone to catch me. I might still be running if I didn't hear the guys laughing behind me. Of course that just made me ready to pull the prank on someone else. We drug a few more guys down and got more sophisticated with our methods. One of the guys cut himself running around and smeared the blood on his face and opened up his shirt. He staggered out of the woods claiming he just got away from the monster. That did it. Before we knew it we had thirty or forty kids heading for the trees. This got the neighbors at bit worried and they called the cops. When the cops showed up we scattered in all directions and the next day the Wilkes-Barre Record ran a story about the police breaking up a rumble in a field off of Blackman Street.

I was going to recount our time in Jake's Pool Hall but I guess that better wait for next time. It was a different world and kids left to their own devices can come up with some crazy things.

I could go on with memories of those times but it is getting to be time to move on. I will finish up with a little story about an old man and his little store, a rumble that almost happened, and how the music died for me. It wasn't just getting older that killed the music; it was the world and what was happening to it.

Jake's

When Hazel Street crosses Stanton Street heading toward downtown, it splits. Hazel continues on the left and Park Avenue starts on the right. Jake was an old fellow who had a small store on the right side of Hazel just past Stanton. It was just a little corner store but it had the attraction of a back room containing two pool tables. Once we found Jake's he became the beneficiary of many of the coins meant for the Sunday morning

collection plate. We used the older number two pool table most of the time. It was on that table I learned to play, Eight Ball, French, Peacock, and straight pool, for some reason we didn't play Nine Ball. Peacock was our game of choice when playing for money. The number one table was reserved for the big guys. They played straight pool and they were pretty darn good. We thought Dave was cool because he had his own two piece pool cue. His buddy Jeff drove the coolest car of our time. It was a customized 1956 Chevy known as the "Touch of Class." We spent many days, and especially Sunday mornings, shooting pool in Jake's. It was in Jake's that I heard my first Beatle's song; it was "I Want to Hold Your Hand." My time, hanging out at Jake's, painted the classic image of an American misspent youth.

Rumble

Sometimes you just have to defend the honor of your turf. There was a slight altercation between our buddy Dale and a fellow from another hang out. I don't know the details but Dale took care of business and we thought that it was over. Soon after that Dale broke both of his arms in an accident. Of course two broken arms would not stop a true Pool Gang member from hanging out so there he was at our alternative meeting place by the Hart Theater. Actually we were standing across the alley in front of the pizza parlor when a car load of guys pulled up. It turns out that they were friends of the fellow that Dale took care of and they were looking for trouble. They got out of the car being all bad but Dale and I got right back in their faces; Dale wasn't going to let two broken arms stop him. We bantered back and forth and I challenged one fellow to a one on one in the alley. It ended with a challenge, their boys against our boys at the pool a few nights later. When the night came our boys gathered. This was a matter of honor and everyone responded. We set up a little tactics. Most of the guys stayed out of sight and only five or six of us were visible on Lloyds Lane. I was the Parrish Street lookout and I stood at the end Lloyds Lane watching.

They came down Lloyds Lane in two cars. I'm sure it looked good to them at first. They had about twelve or thirteen guys stuffed in the cars. When the cars approached the pool we gave the boys the word. From behind trees, out of yards, and from around cars came the boys. We numbered well over thirty guys ready to get it done. Once our adversary saw the odds they thought better of it. They hit the gas, shot to the end of Lloyds Lane, and squealed tires around the corner never to be seen again.

I should add that the all fights, even rumbles; in our town in those days were bare knuckle affairs. There were no weapons of any kind. If it had turned into a full fledged brawl there would have been plenty of black eyes and busted noses to go around but there would have not been any serious injuries.

The Time the Music Died

The summer of 1967 was my last real good summer with the gang. From then on the world began to change. My brother joined the Marine Corp, and Matt was in the Army. Many of the other older members were beginning to drift away. I met a girl from Hanover Township and I was in love. I began spending more time there than at the old hangout.

I graduated from high school in 1968 under the specter of Vietnam. The war took its toll on the gang. We lost one in battle; Frankie stepped on a landmine. The family of one of our girls was struck when her sister's fiancé was killed. Two returned but not undamaged. One fellow was a medic and he never got the images out of his mind. He was rarely sober and he ended up driving into the side of the mountain at ninety miles an hour. Another fellow returned with the affects of Agent Orange. The government danced and avoided the issue until everyone forgot about it. Charlie died after twenty-five years of fighting the symptoms.

I was ready to take my turn in the war, but my father's chronic ailment worsened in 1968. They didn't know until it was too late that they were dealing with stomach cancer. He passed away in December and, with Tony in Vietnam, my income from the factory was the only money coming in. I was reclassified to 1S. I don't want to hear that I was lucky to get out of the war. I would have gone gladly to keep my father and make him healthy.

So the music died. I got married in 1969 and I made my final visit to the wall that summer. That was forty years ago. It was a great way to grow up. I will never forget those carefree days and all of the great guys and girls that made up the pool gang. I hope life has been good to all of you.