

23rd Storyworth: What Was The Neighborhood You Grew Up In Like?

I have no recollection of residency much before about age 9. While I was born in the Bronx, I have no memories of that at all. We briefly lived in Syracuse after we had lived in East Park, which is on the 9G side of Hyde Park, NY, of FDR's fame. We had lived in a farmhouse on the property of the Guernsey Dairy farm there, although we never had any active role in the operation of the farm. We were paying tenants, and my Dad was a Fuller Brush salesman, which meant door to door.

He must have had some success as such – he put food on our table all the time, and they chose to promote him to a district manager in a Syracuse territory, which was how I had my first experience with CNY. I don't really recall much about that except we lived on a road which was eventually shortened to enable the I-81 roadway through the city south of the Adams St bridge about which they are currently weeping and knashing because it is reaching the end of its useful life, and there is concern that the original construction seemed to not factor the devastation of the poorer sections in the city by cleaving between them with an impassable roadway.

Anyway, with my playing guitar and singing at a former Methodist church on Onondaga Hill, on the south side of Syracuse, I would recently drive past the neighborhood frequently, and could look up the streets and see how they have been shortened from that of my meager memory, but I could not identify the specific road if my life depended upon it. They were a quiet but low rent locale when we lived there, and are if anything even lower class today. But everybody needs to live SOMEWHERE ;-)

Anyway... my memory bank really filters most of that until we moved to Kirchner Ave in the actual village of Hyde Park, which was less than a block from each of Regina Coeli and the Hyde Park Elementary School. I had to walk across two neighbor's yards and the truck garage to get to the schoolyard, and the Catholic property was just beyond the Public School by that same route. My closest school friend, Bill Bolitho, lived about a mile further south in the same village, which was much like the Mayberry model with modest colonial style homes typically built in the fifties, although our home had been built pre WWII, and was just back from the corner store lot on Rt 9.

Typical middle class, the streets were tree lined so usually in shade except after losing their leaves for the winters, and with street lighting which was subdued. It was a nice place to live and to develop; it presented a good model for how a neighborhood should work with kids mowing lawns and shoveling walks, and people watching out for each other. I recall very few (but not NONE ;-)) difficulties we had with neighbors, and we eventually put up tall wooden fencing to separate us from the commerce at the corner store strip mall which ran the length of our property, which itself was about a quarter acre. I am pretty sure my parents owned the home like most Americans – ie the bank really held the title until the mortgage was paid MANY years later.

We were fortunate, I suppose from an insurance standpoint, because the place had hydrants and a volunteer fire company we could see from the front yard on Rt 9. They were always a well attended and active location, and held picnics and bake sales and participated in parades and such. As I understand it today the requirements to be a volunteer are so severe as to be making the pool of willing members a tough sell, but back then they had a waiting list. Community service was expected and appreciated.

In fact, I well recall one bitter cold winter day we had a storefront fire in the row of shops half a mile north of our home, right across from the Chrysler dealership in town, and just south of the town hall on Rt 9, which ran through the middle of town. With hoses strewn across the streets on three sides, and icicles hanging from every overhead wire, and most of the firemen's noses, we walked up to where the fire had the entire Rt 9 blocked off, and they were routing traffic over to 9G up at the corner and then back to the intersection just south Kirchner.

No fewer than twenty moms were bringing hot coffee and cocoa plus cookies and cakes onto folding tables they setup under the Chrysler Used Car Awning across from the fire to give the firemen a welcome break. At 3:30 in the morning. And they showed their appreciation when parade time came for Memorial Day, tossing what seemed like TONS of candy to the kids along the route. It was that kind of a village ;-)

I don't recall whether there were ANY non-white kids at either of my schools there, where I had as earlier indicated moved from the parochial to the public in the middle of sixth grade. And "alternative lifestyles" were as rare as chicken molars. But as a bedroom town for IBM, the work uniforms were white shirts, jackets when other than sweltering, and narrow dark ties, and the women's wear was equally conservative. This was, after all, the McCarthy era, which seems to be having reruns just now, sadly, albeit with a far more diverse population base. I see far less willingness to compromise or cooperate today than ever back then, and it saddens me. Maybe its just a symptom of the economic pressures today as well, which were far less in evidence then.

With such a neighborhood, learning to be self-sufficient and the value of a dollar was pretty easy, and well reinforced by the neighborhood. Nobody worried about the neighbor kid suing them for an injury from mowing their lawn, and everybody (almost ;-)) was sucked in by my cherubic face and sales pitch hawking candies, magazines and what-not, as well as my yard care business. As noted earlier, I started with a shovel and push mower, but eventually bought a motorized plow and then a snow blower, as well as a mower upgrade. That also tended to make me a lone wolf among my peers, as I was never a social butterfly – I was always too busy, although studying was never allowed to get in the way of daydreaming of better ways to do EVERYTHING ;-)

Like everything in life, try as we might we can never really go back, and I hardly recognize the place today, even as it is relatively little changed vs many of its surrounding communities. I think it was heavily influenced by proximity to the wealthy estates of the Vanderbilts, Roosevelts etc which lined the Hudson river, which was just down the hill from where I lived. But except for the fact my bus drove there during its route to the Jr and Sr High Schools which were both on 9G, the opposite way from the Hudson, I'd probably never even know it was there, as I had little reason otherwise to go there.

Hyde Park had a public pool which was closed for good some years before I graduated High School, which was why my brother and I sought swimming at the pond in Rhinebeck, about eight miles further north, which is where I met Lynne, my now Ex wife, during the summer between my sophomore and junior years at Clarkson, about whom I've written before. And that could not have happened without the serendipity of the guy offering my Dad the '63 Bel Air wagon the previous year, also about which you've already seen. And that all enabled the way the rest of my job and career worked out. I cannot imagine myself in today's environment, where everybody has immediate access to any information on the planet, but doesn't even speak with the person right next to them, and how that would have adversely affected what and who I became. Yeah, I came from a very lucky neighborhood, which was both welcoming and enriching, but ALSO taught me the value of giving back. I hope I never lose that sense of responsibility and wonder ;-)

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