"Unionville Neighborhood"

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August 11, 2014

"Go outside to play but stay in the neighborhood."

When I was young, that meant our yard, or Sellers yard on one side of us or Uncle John's on the other. If we heard the steam engine whistle, we could run down three houses past my Uncle's and wave to the engineer from Gaeth's yard,—and then the caboose man—before scampering back closer to home. It seemed like a big wide world with lots of choices.

Every year, Daddy sent Brunel Kramer, one of his egg route drivers, north of Caseville to shovel the truck full of sand from the beach along Lake Huron. He brought it back to our house and dumped it just the other side of the two box elders in the back yard that were spaced perfectly to make a swing set. A heavy wooden pole was extended from the crotch of one, to the crotch of the other. Two thick ropes were hoisted over it and a truck tire was tied at the end of each rope. That made swings that could go straight, back and forth, or crooked so we crashed into each other. When the tire was twisted around and around, it made the person sitting in it crazy dizzy after a speedy untwist.

At the beginning of the summer, we had a sand mountain to climb where the sand was dumped and, as it spread out, we made tracks in it for a fox and geese circle….just like the ones we made in snow during the winter. We'd rake the sand back in so it wasn't scattered, then run the hose from the side of the house to water it down for good packing. When we filled tin cans and pails with the wet sand, packed it down hard, tipped them over, then lifted off the cans and pails, we had delicate sand bricks to build castles. As big as the sand pile was, there were still lots of fights over sand. "No fair! You got more sand than I got!"

When it rained, the side of Seller's yard flooded over the road between our two houses and made a huge lake. If there wasn't any thunder or lightening, we got to put on our bathing suits, run through the rain, and wade in the water that went almost up to out knees. Soon after it stopped raining the lake disappeared, but before that happened, kids from all over town came to splash in the water with us.

As I got older, the neighborhood got bigger. Having roller skates meant being able to skate to the end of the sidewalk, and by that time, you were already down town. You had to be brave enough to skate past the cedar hedge between Burgess's and McCoy's where everyone knew German or Jap soldiers might come out and ambush you. Thanks goodness we got past that spot safely every single time. Achenbach's boarding house, where some teacher's stayed, was next to Hannah's beauty parlor where one time I was

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http://berrypatch.info/rita/010.html
Last updated on 11 August 2014
Photo Caption: The neighborhood began around the family home located at 3289 Bay Street in Unionville, Michigan. This photograph was taken in 1945.

hooked up to a permanent machine that had sizzling hot curlers and I ended up with some burns on my neck and frizzy hair.

In the next block was a row of chestnut trees in front of Russell's where we filled our wagons full of horse chestnuts to haul home and throw in the fire to hear them explode when fall leaves were burned .You would pass Otto Gaeth's gas station where he'd sell you a piece of bubble gum for a penny, which was a rare treat during the war and for a long time after it was over. Somehow he kept track of which kid in town already bought a piece and there was no way to trick him out of a second one, so you just kept dipping it in sugar to keep it sweet, and stuck it on the headboard when you went to sleep at night so you wouldn't ruin it by getting it stuck in your hair if it fell out of your mouth while you were sleeping.

In the next block you passed Armbruster's Chrysler dealership, a bar, Lothian's drugstore, the post office, bank, my Dad's egg grading station and Eisengruber's bar and restaurant where I went in one day, climbed up on a stool and ordered a T-Bone steak. They laughed at me and told my Daddy about it. I didn't go back inside there ever again.

Across the street was the bakery, Kramer's grocery store and Kemp's department /grocery store, where my mother bought our groceries. Eleanor, who worked there, let kids sit on the floor of her department and read the new comic books as soon as the order came in if we promised not to bend the pages.

When you skated around the corner there was the Star Bar, a Chevy dealer where Daddy bought our first new car a few years after the war, and the Unionville Crescent newspaper office. Bruce Sweeny, the editor, bought my brother a $50 war savings bond right after he was born because he thought my parents named our new baby, Bruce, after him. I didn't know what it meant, but heard Mother telling Fay from next door about Bruce's bond and remember hear her say, "Not in a million years!"

Across the street from those places was the blacksmith shop where you could peek inside and see sparks fly when a horse was being shoed. Beside that was an empty lot that used to be a theater but it burned down, and Daddy bought it. The wood that was still good was used to build Uncle John's house when he came home from the Army. Next came Prime's grocery store where Aunt Mary bought all her groceries. It was right next door t next door to Achenbach's furniture store and funeral home.

The stores stayed open on Saturday night and people who lived out on the farms came into town to shop. The street was lined with cars and trucks .Many people just stood around on the sidewalk talking. I was jealous of the kids whose parents were drinkers because their Mom or Dad would give them dime to spend any way they wanted while they waited for them to come out of one of the two bars.

If you turned the corner at the blacksmith shop and passed Duree's house, right across the street from there, was the fire station. In the winter, Daddy flooded the town skating rink that was right beside the fire hall. When there was a fire, the whistle on the station blew four times if the fire was out in the country and three times if it was in town. Local firemen volunteers rushed to the station. Hanging onto the truck with the siren wailing, they backed out of the station and headed for the fire. The "out in the country volunteer Firemen" called the telephone operator to find out the fire location so they could get there fast to meet the truck and the "in town volunteers." After enough time passed, anyone could dial the operator and she would tell you where the fire was. Lots of people would jump in their cars and go

to watch the fire but Daddy said we couldn't do that because the firemen didn't need people getting in the way.

The fire whistle told you the area where a fire was, and the church bells told you when someone died. The bell from that person's church would toll one time for every year old the dead person was. You counted the bongs and most likely knew who died because when someone was really seriously sick everyone in town knew about it. If it was an accidental death, it was a big mystery. Your only clue was the church the person went to.

The town park was next to the funeral home but not across the street from anything. It was where Bay Street ended and intersected with M-25. There was a band stand that I never heard a band play in, and a huge white sign that had the names of all the veterans in the whole town written in big black letters. My second Aunt Mary, an Army nurse, and Aunt Naoma, a WAC, had their names on it because they were my Mother's sisters, even though they didn't live in Unionville. The only time a band played in the park was on Memorial Day when everyone in town, and the people from out in the country, all showed up to watch as the parade. Veterans, dressed in their uniforms and carrying a gun over their shoulder, all the school kids, and both girl scouts and boy scouts marched in the parade and stopped at the park for a special ceremony.

Around the corner from Kemps were two more gas stations across the street from each other. The legion hall was next to one of them and if you turned left at that corner you could see the school. Elementary, Jr. High, and High School were all together. When four country schools were consolidated, the buildings were moved into town and lined up behind the big school to make room for all the students.

If roller skates expanded my neighborhood, bikes exploded it! We rode from one end of town to the other and sometimes, even out in the country.

We rode to the south end of town to the South Crick, where it was rumored the boys in town went skinny dipping, but no one was there the day Loretta and I peeked over the bridge to see if that was true. We rode across the bridge to get to the best softball field in town where there was a big open field between Wings and Rochstroh's. As we were peddling down the back street on our way there, we'd start yelling out, "IN…SCRUB…1st…2nd….3rd…." at our end of town to secure the position we wanted to play only to be disappointed that kids who lived closer already called for those positions and had them locked up before we even got there. Kids from my end usually had to start in the outfield and work our way up to pitcher (In) and batter (Scrub).

I didn't often ride to the north end of town unless I was tagging along on Alvin's paper route, but one summer Loretta, Edith, Barbie and I rode north for six miles just to be able to tell our friends we rode our bikes all the way to Sebewaing. As soon as we got a mile out of town we took back country roads, even though it was harder to pedal in the gravel, so we wouldn't be seen. I couldn't brag about it too much because I didn't ask my parents for permission to make the trip, being certain they'd tell me "NO". Every kid had to make that trip at least once, or at least tell a lie and claim they'd done it.

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At the East end, we waded in the soft sand under the bridge over the East Coggan, checking our feet legs after we got out of the water for dreaded blood suckers. This is the creek where the Veterans stopped the parade on Memorial Day to throw a wreath in the water to honor the dead sailors.

My yard, at the West end of town, had the best hiding places to play kick the tin can. No one could ever find you if you hid in the soft plants of the asparagus patch after they had gone to seed, under the porch if you were brave enough to go there, or in the thick shrubs behind the garage. If you did get caught, someone would sneak around, come running in, kick the tin can, and you'd be set free to run out and hide again.

In the Fall, we raked up the leaves from under the swing box elders, started the big pile on fire and roasted marshmallows while we tossed in the chestnuts from Russell's and heard them explode. At my house, lots of kids, making all kinds of noise, were always welcome. Mother said when kids played in our yard she never had to worry about where we were, who we were with, or what we were doing.

To get from here to there in my neighborhood, you could use sidewalks on the main street, go down the road on back street, or cut across back yards from one end of town to the other. Our neighborhood in Unionville never really ended, as long as you stayed "in town."

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