Captain Noah & "Flame", the Tiger, circa 1975

A small, clear image of the past...

Captain Noah Fishing, circa 1930

GRANDPA'S
REMEMBERENCES & RUMINATIONS
ABOUT GROWING UP IN A SMALL TOWN
IN PENNSYLVANIA, U.S.A.
Many, many years ago...

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The Great Depression

I have here gathered together for my daughter Pam and my twin Granddaughters Abi and Ashley, some of the remembrances of my boyhood spent growing up in a suburb of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, adding here and there a few ruminations about changing times - that the lessons of things past will not be totally forgotten.

It was a small town that was deeply affected by the Great Depression, 1929-1939, a market collapse on a grand scale, during which many families, including our own, lost their homes when the local banks and private lenders foreclosed on their mortgages. My father lost his management job with Triple A, and became a door-to-door salesman, a printer's agent, a Santa Clause, and a TV actor and pitchman. He made a living, supported his family and put cardboard in once expensive shoes with holes now worn into the soles. I remember going to a cotillion dance class on the second floor of the Fire House, wearing his golf shoes with the cleats removed.

Some folks had a worse time of it. Jean Preston and her brothers had to squeeze onto the family's cabin-boat, when their mortgage was called in. As Jean recalls stoically of those days, "We had no water. So my brothers and I, hauled buckets of water on our play-wagon from a nearby boat club. Meanwhile, Daddy, cut down the gunwales and converted our "home" into a make-shift tug-boat". Anything to make a living - there were no such things as unemployment compensation or "entitlements".

It was a time in which a white-haired former slave freed by the Civil War in 1865, would stop and talk to us kids playing mumblety-peg under the shade trees on our front lawn. I think he was a waiter at the old Chester Club.

"Have you boys figured out my riddle yet – that I've got my tongue in my shoe and I can't get it out?" He had a deep, Paul Robeson chuckle. There are many questions now, that I wish I had asked him then;

The terrible Second World War, which followed on the heels of the Great Depression, would change forever our attitudes, our lifestyles and our sense of values. This is not to suggest that your memories and experiences will be in any measure less than mine. Each generation has the opportunity to make of their growing-up-years, what they will.

W. Carter Merbreier | May 2003
"Grandpa Noah"

Our Disappearing Town

In the folklore of Germany's Black Forest, there is the legend of a mysterious village Germelhausen, that appears for a single day once every hundred years. Poeple passing through that part of the forest on that particular day and coming upon that quaint village, unaware of this mystic peculiarity and becoming caught up in its life, often became tragically entwined in love affairs, friendships, business deals and promises that could never be fulfilled. This legend became a Lerner and Lower Broadway musical entitled "Brigadoon", with a Scottish storyline and cast, rather than a German one. Evidently, the show's producers felt that audiences would prefer kilts, highland flings and bagpipes rather than leather pants, Bavarian shoe-slappers and glockenshiels.

My hometown of Prospect Park, in a most peculiar way, was also a mysterious village, that disappeared and reappeared not just once a year, but several times a day. This strange phenomenon occurred on the Philadelphia-to-Wilmington railroad line.

Between the Norwood and Ridley Partk train stations on that line, there was a stop for Prospect Park. However, the name in gold letters on the red signboard hanging above the boarding platform declared it to be, not Prospect Park, but Moore! Aboard the train approaching the station, the Conductor, pacing the swaying aisles of the braking passenger cars like a sailor bracing against a roiling sea, announced in his authoriative voce that the station coming up was as the sign indicated "Moore", and not "Prospect Park".

Incredibly, it would seem that the town of Prospect Park, with its sixty five hundred souls, four churches and one "tap-room", the Lephart Bakery, Louie's barber shop, the firehouse with two pool tables, the Manor movie theatre, and the signer of the Declaration of Independence, John Morton's log cabin, disappeared and reappeared eight times each day by virtue of the arrivals and departures of the Pennsylvania Railroad train schedule.

It was rumored that the source of all these shenanigans was a land acquistion deal that the Pennsylvania Railroad made with the Moore family, whose descendants lived in the big white house with the enclosed porch, across from the park that they donated to the town, and right beside the lot they sold to Mr. Freeman, our math teacher, when he married Miss Dalton, the girl's hockey coach.

It would seem that before thre was even a town incorporated as Prospect Park, the Moore family owned quite a chunk of land that the railroad coveted for their right-of-way, and it was agreed for one reason or another that the railroad station would be forever identified as "Moore".

Hopefully, since the mystery is much more fascinating that whatever the forgotten facts, we will probably never really know the answer to this mischief concerning our evaporating town and the spurious railroad station. I never had nerve enough as a little kid, to ask our Methodist Sunday School Superintendent, Mr. Moore, the tall, lean scion of the Moore family: "Why can't our train station be properly called Prospeck Park, instead of Moore, Mr. Moore?'

The Moore family had one son, a bachelor, who is long gone, and who might have shed a little light on the conundrum of the disappearing town of Prospect Park, with its fragile resemblance to the more poetic Brigadoon. Like Germelhausen, Prospect Park is not a very lyrical name and will never be made into a musical, but it was a great place in which to grow up and this sentitment is a shared one:

"Brigadoon, Brigadoon, blooming under sable skies,
Brigadoon, Brigadoon, there my heart forever lies."
~ Alan Jay Lerner

W. Carter Merbreier | October 2007

That Wonderful Old Alley O' Mine

I feel sorry for kids who didn't grow up along an alley. Oh, not one of those concrete alleyways, barely wide enough for a boy and a girl to walk side-by-side holding hands. Nor one of those walkways so narrow you scrape your knuckles on the building walls carrying the trash out to the curb.

No, a real neighborhood way-of-life alley. One wide enough for cars, the few there were during those Depression years, and for kids to play hide-and-seek, and cowboys-and-Indians, and toss a baseball. That kind of all-purpose, welcoming piece of well worn community real-estate no longer built into the design of cul-de-sacs and manicured "open spaces".

That wonderful old alley along which I was privileged to grow up, was not all sugar-and-spice, mind you. It did have its problems. Not from pedophiles who hadn't even been invented yet, nor muggers, nor rapists, nor drug pushers, nor warring gangs of territorial teens. No, the danger was in the cinders. They were the charred debris of the coal ashes from all of the furnaces of all of the houses along the alley spread to form a primitive roadbed. If you tripped running and went down on those coarse clinkers, bare knees, elbows and hands were painfully damaged. There was always somebody with scabs or bandages or a limp as witness to alley wounds...

There were also irresistible evil temptations along the alley. For instance, a sickle pear tree lured us kids each year with its luscious crisp fruit. We stuffed those pears down our knickers, which by the nature of their bag-like configuration cinched just below the knees, were perfect for harvesting and hauling. Then, too, there was Mr. Biggers' grape arbor. The rumor was that Mr. Biggers made his own wine in the basement and understandably took a dim view of children pilfering his exotic crop. We were a little afraid of Mr. Biggers, so we didn't eat many grapes.

Alleys in the city were, and are still, paved with concrete and led to garages built into the rear of the basements of row houses, right under the kitchen. Not so in Prospect Park, where I grew up, nor in the villages and towns that made up the suburbs along the Philadelphia- to-Wilmington Railroad Line.

Anyway, unlike our city cousins and today's attached garages, our garages were detached. Two of them, as I recall, had been barns for horses and carriages. and had second floor lofts for hay. One still had harnesses on the wall. Archie Oplinger's garage had purportedly been used by racketeers during Prohibition to store booze under the floor. Understandably, we liked to hang out in Archie's garage, what with its aura of crime and derring-do. Then too, it had a pot-belly stove, which was great when fired-up in winter. Except for that time that I left my Limburger Cheese sandwich on the lid.

The Bronson's (not their real name) garage probably held the most fascination for us. George Bronson's father had been found dead in the family sedan. Seems that he had backed into a snow drift and gotten stuck and the snow had blocked the exhaust pipe. The carbon monoxide backed up into the car and asphyxiated him - and dramatically a lady companion not his wife. The car was stored up on blocks in their garage and we would stand at the window and stare transfixed at the car inside. I remember it was a two-tone brown touring model.

Our particular alley ran for two blocks: from Lafayette to Prospect to Madison Avenue. I can best remember the folks who lived in our neighborhood from the viewpoint of the alley. Friendships, dreams, and imaginations were kindled along that alley. Games were played there by children who would march off to wars, go to college, become doctors, clergy, ballet dancers and generals. Kids who once drew hopscotch patterns in the cinders and twirled sparklers in the darkness on the Fourth of July, now appear less frequently in news stories and reunions, and more frequently in obituaries.

I can remember the trash man regularly coming up that alley in his horse-drawn rickety wagon, chanting out on a clear summer's day, "Any rags, any bones, any bottles today? It's the same old story in the same old way!". He bought our balls of used string, and rubber bands, and peeled cigarette-pack tin-foil for a nickel a pound.

His poor old horse collapsed one hot day down behind the Methodist preacher's house and I never heard his song again. Except in my head, where all the sounds of us kids laughing, crying hurt, teasing girls, and pretending at imaginary battles with rubber band guns along that wonderful old alley, remain clear and hauntingly contemporary to me.

None of us, really, ever did say, "Goodbye".

W. Carter Merbreier October - November | 2002
("Captain Noah")

Orange Crates, Tin Cans, & Roller Skates

We walked a lot. We walked twice a day to the old Lincoln Avenue Elementary School and home again. That's because there was no such thing as a cafeteria and you had to go home for lunch and come back again. When you got older you walked to the Washington Avenue School, which for me was even farther. Though it had no food cafeteria, you could at least carry your lunch, get a cartoon of milk, ordered and paid for a week in advance, and have a place to sit down.

We walked to the ball-fields, one at the end of Tenth Avenue, the other over in the hollow between the Lake and the Boy Scout Cabin. They were about a mile apart if you sneaked across the railroad tracks at the Madison Avenue hedge break and close to three miles if you went the long way 'round. In choosing-up-sides, every team wanted Jack Daniels, yes that really was his name, who went on from our dusty fields to play for the old Boston Braves and five All-Star teams. He married the beautiful preacher's kid, Eleanor.

We walked to the trolley stop on Chester Pike. We walked back and forth along Lincoln Avenue, we walked to the grocery store, the barber shop, the drug stores, the post office, and the Fire House, with the one-armed janitor, who had unfortunately gotten his arm caught in a press at the local paper mill.. We walked to church and Scout meetings. Car pools and kids-being-driven from place to place were unheard of, because most families didn't have cars. So, we had to walk.

As I recall, there weren't many fat kids in our town!

Most of us had bicycles, though. Howard Bacon and Art Kettel, were older and set a new standard of daring-do, when they took the handle-bars off of their bikes and steered just by leaning from side to side. Of course we younger kids followed their example, which led to a considerable number of scrapes and bruises and parental nay-saying, and the shocked looks of people seeing kids with no apparent way to steer.

We also had roller skates, which winched tightly onto the soles of your shoes with a huge key and cinched with a strap at the ankles. The shoe soles were forever disfigured into roughly the curved shape of a shovel at the pressure points of the clamps. The sound of the metal wheels of a half-dozen kids on a summer day when all the windows were open, drove old man Jeffrey crazy. Now, years later, I can sympathize with poor guy.

Some genius among us, discovered that by pounding your foot across an empty soup-can made it curl up and clamp to your shoe. Wow, talk about noise! A newly shod team of Clydesdales couldn't match the likes of us in full gallop wearing tin can hooves.

The luxury conveyance for children in those days was a push-mobile: the forerunner of soap-box down-hill derby cars. Basically, some father would take the wheels from a beat-up child's wagon, and attach them to a plank. The front wagon wheels swiveled and a clothes-line was tied to the axel to steer. On the front end of the plank an orange-crate was attached like the hood of a car, with tin cans nailed on each side to simulate headlights. Everybody took turns pushing and driving, pushing and driving. It was pretty heady stuff being at the wheel, or more properly the rope. There weren't many push-mobiles, because everybody wanted to drive and nobody wanted to push.

But, the epitome of transport was the skate-board scooter! What a magnificent contraption that was. You simply removed a rubber plug from the front set of wheels on an old roller skate, so that those wheels would turn. Then separating the front and back sections of the skate, by unscrewing the length-adjusting bolt,, each section was attached to the ends of a length of 2" X 4" lumber. An upright orange-crate was attached to what would become the front end with the "turning" wheels, on the top of which was nailed a stick or a piece of broom handle to serve as a handle-bar. Tin cans were added to the sides of the crate with candles inside as head-lights. It was a vehicle of raw power! A half dozen of which, with candles aglow in the tin-cans and the kids making loud guttural engine sounds, matched the thrill of a motorcycle club roaring down a modern expressway.

So we innocently traveled the streets, alleyways and avenues of Prospect Park, riding our marvelous hand-crafted contrivances of orange-crates, tin cans and skates, unaware of the radically changing world ahead of us, with its creation of the atomic bomb, the affordable automobile, jet air travel, and all those plastic ready-made toys for children.

W. Carter Merbreier | April 2003

My Most Unforgettable Character

Earl " Morton Park Pool" Smith

There were no backyard pools in our town – or for that matter in any nearby towns. About the only ones were a 4' x 5' pool that was built for gold-fish in old man Jeffrey's garden across from the village park, and the fenced-in crocodile pool next to Helen Rathmell's house on Ninth Avenue.

On hot summer days, there was a natural pool along Ridley Creek, just before it went under the railroad bridge below the Prospect Lake. That is until some mean tempered beavers scared the bejabbers out of us kids.

There were, however, two local public/entrance-fee pools in the nearby small towns of Springfield and Morton. The Springfield Pool, at the intersection of Baltimore Pike and Kedron Avenue, was the fancier of the two, with a separate pool for splashing around, and another for proper swimming and diving, plus a sandy sort of beach. The Morton Park Pool, about a mile down the road in Morton, was more park-like with trees and picnic-tables and waterfalls splashing down to a blue lake tinted by large doses of chlorine crystals and soda ash – which were necessary given the number of people who seemingly never left the pool to use the bathrooms.

It was at that Morton Pool, quite by accident, that I began my short lived aquatic career - and worked for an incredible small town character, the pool's owner: Earl "Morton Park Pool" Smith.

My poor old rickety, worn-down bike tires finally gave out on the way to the Springfield pool at, of all places, the gravel road off Kedron Avenue that lead back to the Morton Park Pool and Earl Smith.

The only phone that I could find there to call home for help was a pay-phone on the porch of an old house across from the pool area that served as the office, command post and home for Mr. Smith. I was to find out later that Earl Smith used that pay-phone even for business

"I need a locker-room boy", I heard him shouting. He was small, but he was loud.

I poked my head around the corner, smiled and said, "I'll take the job. I'm your boy". I was fourteen years old and big for my age.

Mr. Smith was seated at a large oil-cloth covered table – stacked with piles of rumpled one dollar bills, neatly columned quarters, dimes and nickels – even pennies – a couple of tough looking side-kicks sat nearby – and a pair of holstered pearl-handled pistols were on the table at the ready.

"Okay, kid" nodded Earl Smith and the job at 25 cents an hour was mine. Henceforth I was in charge of the single locker key and its command of 500 lockers. I was also responsible for the men's room urinal and toilet stalls, as well as the First Aid Station, in that order, until I graduated to Life Guard. I quit my job of hanging onto the back of a milk-truck early every morning for 10 cents an hour, but kept my Bulletin newspaper delivery route making one cent per paper delivery. It was a wonderful world! I signed up for Social Security, some fifty years early. I could hardly wait to be a Senior Citizen.

Sundays were the big days at Morton Park Pool. Picnickers and swimmers crowded in from the city in droves. The hot-dog stand operated at full-tilt, adding to the load of "change" neatly piled on the linoleum topped table. All of us were paid in cash. Life Guards got ten dollars for any life-saving rescue that could be legitimately proven. It wasn't easy, I was to discover, to get a crying, heaving, nearly drowned-victim over to Earl's "office" to testify about their terrible experience.

There were a couple of Olympic configured gymnastic "rings" and a leather gymnastic "horse" in the beach area. On Sundays, little side-shows by paid acrobats would take place. The grand finale was a dramatic and awe-inspiring "iron-cross", posed between the rings with much grunting by a muscled performer. Famous wrestlers of the day swaggered through the crowd. For instance: "The Greek Golden Terror", George Mikrakostas, his huge hulk coated with olive-oil glistening in the summer sun: and Milo Steinborn, "The World's Strongest Man", who never wore shoes, so he had laces tattooed on his shins. Smith announced that they were all part of his famous wrestling training camp, although there was no evidence of any such camp. However, they all appeared regularly at the wrestling ring behind the pub beside the Baldwin Locomotive works, in Eddystone. Which, was purportedly, owned and managed by Joe " I Can Get You a Bucket of Coal" Doblets, of early Delaware County political fame.

The high point of Sundays for Earl "Morton Park Pool" Smith, was the daredevil-high-diving show at the 60 foot ladder rising above one of the pool spillways. He stood precariously on the end of the nearby high-dive board, a huge bundle of keys dangling from his belt which would have pulled him to the bottom of Morton Park Pool had he fallen, inviting the Sunday crowd with his vintage megaphone (which he indicated was a gift from Nelson Eddy), to join him for "the greatest diving show ever presented in the United States".

"And now, folks – at the every top of the ladder (gestures dramatically), six stories above the blue waters - is Olympic diving medalist Paul Pomeranse (holds up a framed display of medals), – now dangerously diving into the shallow end of Morton Lake – watch this folks - demonstrating his championship dive at the World Olympics." He was now so excited that he actually began to stammer, "– a two and a one and a ha-ha–half gainer - plus a front fla-fla-flip (he was really getting the crowd and himself

....

worked up - and the show was just beginning)

"Hold it down please", Earl pleaded in what suddenly became almost a stage whisper, "Paul has to concentrate". When everyone quieted down, Paul pushed out from the tiny platform, gyrating and spinning through the air in absolute silence, broken finally by the screams and applause of appreciation, when he surfaced undamaged halfway across the pool.

It was a good show in those days, before the war, for a small town on a hot summer Sunday. Olympic has-beens and wannabees were able to pick up a few extra bucks. But, the best show of all was Earl himself – as the show's impresario and ringmaster: Earl "Morton Park Pool" Smith. He ended the day in a cowboy outfit riding his trick horse, Silver King, which he claimed had belonged to the movie star Buck Jones, into the pool's picnic area. At his command, the horse pawed the ground ten times with its front left hoof, All of the kids joined in the count.

It was hard to pin Earl Smith down on any real facts. Every logical follow-up question seemed to hit a sharp bend in the road that went in an entirely new direction. What was the truth? Who was he – really? He seemed to ooze CARNIVAL – of pitch men, ballyhoo, side shows, and neat piles of small change.

The only thing western about him, when I worked for him, was an old well-worn western bib-shirt with a great deal of piping design. Somewhere along the line he moved from Morton to the town of Perryville, Maryland. According to an article by Robin Brown in the Wilmington News Journal, Earl now evoked a total western aura as Earl "Rodeo" Smith: which by Earl's accounting was as a former Hollywood western-movie stuntman, rodeo star, and close friend of western luminaries like Buck Jones and showman Wild Bill Cody. He had a momentary brush with the law and fame of sorts in 1961, in the town of nearby Middletown, when he climbed up onto a wagon in their centennial parade, drew those two pearl-handled six-shooters purportedly belonging to his grandfather, purportedly a Civil War hero, from their holsters, and shot out a power-line and put a bullett into the rump of the lead mule. The judge fined him $35.

About ten years later, Earl "Morton Park Pool (now "Rodeo")" Smith, showed up at my office. He looked like somebody you might find "squatting" under the Wildwood, New Jersey, Boardwalk – long beard, uncut hair, and disheveled western getup. "There's a down-and-outer – some character in the waiting room", announced the usually unflappable secretary, Helene Bubikat, " who claims he knows you from years ago and wants to see you. He says his name is Earl "Morton Park Pool" Smith."

Helene was uncharacteristically wide-eyed as she ushered in what looked like, what one would imagine General Custer might have looked like years after the Battle of Little Big Horn, if the "Injuns" had not got him.

"Hi, Merf ", it was my old high school nickname in that rapid carnie voice so familiar to the gang at Morton Park Pool.

....

I immediately called my wife, Pat. I had talked so much about this incredible character over the years, that she had come to believe he was a fiction. Now, here he was in my office, in the flesh – raggedy and worn - but, the living proof of that someone of my yesterdays. She came, she saw, she believed and met – what was to me – the incredible Earl "Morton Park Pool" Smith.

The other day we took a ride down Amosland Road, parallel to Kedron Avenue, the main-drag in Morton, and the pool and picnic area are still there. It is still a swim club. But everything looked smaller.

The cement block locker-room that I hosted must be at least eighty years old and it looks the same. If the old urinal is still there, it should be an antique of sorts. The old house and the barn filled with all kinds of Earl's collectables and treasures are gone. It was to that barn that Earl gathered eight of us to move a telephone pole lying on the floor about four inches over. We all straddled the pole, all in a line awaiting the command from Earl squatting at the end of the pole to "lift and shift". We all looked towards him. He bent down facing me, looked me straight in the eye and gave me the only advice he ever ventured: "Merf, never face the rear end of any man bent over to lift a heavy load". He smiled (a rarity) and commanded "Lift!".

He died at his Silver King Ranch 'bout ten years later. I'll bet the Silver King Ranch, was little more than an old house or trailer on a parcel of land. But, I would love to hear Earl "Rodeo" Smith describe it, on a sunny Sunday after-noon, balanced on the end of the Morton Park Pool high-diving board, in front of his blue hued chlorine lake, with his golden skinned wrestlers looking up at him. And maybe - somewhere - he is!

W. Carter Merbreier | January 2010

(The year 1935 or thereabouts)

The Fourth of July

The catalogue for ordering fireworks for the Fourth of July, always arrived at the beginning of April. There would never be a book, magazine, travel folder, newspaper, pamphlet or any other catalogue that would fill my life with more pure excitement than that inventory of noisy Independence Day razzle-dazzle. It was read and reread until the black-and-white descriptive pictures and copy became almost indecipherable. If I had paid half as much attention, a tenth as much for that matter, to my school books or the Holy Bible. as to that portfolio of sparklers and rockets, I might very well have become a better man, or at least a more literate one.

Tempting images of pyrotechnics filled the pages of that Fireworks emporium, promising to make the celebration of The Fourth, at least on one block of Prospect Avenue, an exciting display of soaring rockets, and multi-colored pinwheels, and tin cans flying high into the air propelled by loud cherry bombs.

For those who have never known, and will probably never experience the sheer joy of "setting off" their own fireworks, my pre-packaged $5.95 whiz-bang Fourth assortment, included a half dozen Roman Candles, each of which could shoot ten colored fireballs up into the night sky, and a like number of Pin-Wheels that were nailed to a telephone pole or a tree and ignited to spin out a shower of colored sparks. There were also cardboard cones papered to look like a mountain with a wick on the top, which when lighted sprayed sparks like a volcano and was appropriately called The Vesuvius. There were gray pellets that smoldered into Snake shapes and left stain marks on the pavement that lasted all summer. Well worth an additional kit cost were the dramatic red-white-and-blue rockets, to be launched from milk bottle gantries for fiery soaring flights into the night, not to land on the moon as rockets would someday do, but to thump down on a garage roof or scare a neighbor's dog.

But, the day belonged to the fire crackers! They served no purpose whatsoever except to make a lot of loud noise. The Cherry Bombs, so called because of their red cherry sized shape with a purposely colored green fuse "stem", still called by that name even today, were serious explosives and really did scare the bejabbers out of most of us. The brave, or the foolish, used them mainly to send tin-cans sky high. You set the Cherry Bomb in the middle of the street, lit the fuse, placed a #10 soup can over it, ran like hell for the curb, and "bang" the can would fly as high as a house. Nowadays, with all fire-crackers outlawed for use on the Fourth , kids can't watch a spinning can arch up over a telephone wire in Olympic grace. So they buy cherry bombs illegally and get their kicks by putting them into somebody's mailbox and blowing it all out of shape. That's progress!

Then there were the Chinese Firecrackers! So named, because the Chinese invented firecrackers centuries before. Chinese Firecrackers came in strips, some containing as many as 100 individual crackers with each of their fuses intertwined with a long single fuse, the lighting of which sequentially set off all the crackers in the line. Each cracker was wrapped in an oriental colored paper and the packages of varying lengths were covered with exotic Chinese scribbling. This, of course, made them look authentic even if they were manufactured down south in Georgia.

We didn't use matches for each separate firecracker. We had punk sticks, about twelve inches long, covered with a dried, dyed fungus compound, that smoldered after lighting if you kept blowing on it. The "punk" was carried around and used to ignite a "cracker" fuse, the same way as a Civil War artilleryman used a glowing taper to touch off a canon.

Evan Johnson, who lived across the street from the Owens on the 10th Street corner, came home one Fourth on leave from his Army post. He stood on the corner resplendent in his full Cavalry uniform with Sam-Brown belt, jodhpurs, shinny boots and polished spurs. I vaguely remember that perhaps he even had a riding-crop tucked under his arm. Some kid thought we ought to ask him, being military and all that, to light some crackers. But he looked so grand and imperious that we didn't have the nerve to approach him. I wonder if he wondered why we didn't ask or even say "Hi".

He was still on the corner when the summer remnants of our Prospect Park School Band, which wasn't very grand by today's huge, gloriously costumed school band standards, crossed Lincoln Avenue on their way up 10th Avenue towards the Park. Lt. Johnson gave the Color Guard, carrying white painted wooden rifles, a snappy, proper military salute the likes of which we had never seen before.

I don't remember much else about those parades, except for a disorganized bunch of kids following the band on bikes with colored crepe paper intertwined in the wheel spokes and flags on sticks tied with string to the handle-bars. Blessedly they hadn't thought, or maybe the City Fathers were too cost conscious for such a taxpayer expense, to include fire engines in the parade. Which was pretty smart I think, because I have always been annoyed with fire engines blasting their sirens so loudly that no one can hear the bands playing. All in all, it wasn't the kind of parade we have come to expect on the Fourth of July. But rather a musical announcement, an attention getter, a colorful preamble to the afternoon of competitive games that were about to begin in the park.

Games, mind you, where medals were not simply handed out to every participant so that no one's feelings would be hurt by losing, but where the winners and the winners only actually got prizes for their speed or strength or endurance. Boy, were we behind the sociological correctness curve.

After an afternoon of running around that little park in sweaty relays, in egg and potato races, sack races, and broad jumps, they awarded prizes for the best bike decorations and patriotic get-ups. There were no prizes for those who just ran around acting goofy, which was a name then for being silly, and not yet the name of a Disney character. Following the competitions and award's ceremony we got a free small tub of vanilla ice-cream and a tiny wooden spoon.

Towards dusk a mini-orchestra set up on the band-stand, which is still there, in the middle of the Prospect Park park. Underneath there was a storage room that served once a year as a dressing space for the magician, the juggler and a couple of singers that were "packaged" in with a comic MC from a Philadelphia talent agency. It was for us all very Big City stuff. There was only a small bathroom down there, so I have always wondered how all those band and the cast people went to the toilet. At least the good citizens and their kids could dash home. Which they did, back and forth, back and forth, all day and evening long, like worker ants in constant motion on the outer periphery of a colony.

After the "acts", the band played a few closing Sousa marches, until it was dark enough to start the movie. Preferably, one that had not played up at the Manor Theatre on Chester Pike. By now the mosquitoes had had time enough to come up from the Darby Creek marshes down towards Essington, and were poised for their annual Fourth of July picnic featuring all us little kids in shorts and sun-dresses. Of little help was a smelly cloud of citronella that had been sprayed earlier as a protective shield around the cluster of human bodies sitting on the grass in front of the movie screen. So we slapped and swatted our way through the cartoons and main feature, oblivious to our discomfort and ever so happy with all the excitement and entertainment of the Fourth of July.

I remember, fondly now, that Grandmother Merbreier patiently sat there on the damp grass along with my brother Karl and me, in the flickering light of the black-and-white "feature", moths dancing in the light beam of the movie projector, enduring the mosquitoes and the heat.

Then we all went home. In the dark surround of night there were the bright glistenings of a few remaining hand held "sparklers", aptly named for their appearance of giving off electrical sparks, fanning out from the park. Wands of wire coated with a special metallic material, they glowed brightly, briefly and dramatically, and you could give them a spatial dimension in design by waving your arm in circles and squiggles.

Now, as quickly as it had come in the morning, our small town Fourth of July faded into the night. When I got home I took one last exhausted look at the worn Firework's catalogue, thinking about what to order next year. Confident that, like the Scottish "Brigadoon", where a whole village disappears only to magically reappear unchanged at some later date, the Fourth of July would come again.

W. Carter Merbreier | 2003

Hodgepodge of Holidays

For the SUMMER VACATION, the few families that could afford owning a car, loaded it up to the gunwales with family necessities, such as beach umbrellas and canvas beach chairs, jars of Noxzema to sooth sunburn, bathing suits, sheets and towels, dress up clothes for the Boardwalk, soap and toilet paper, a box camera and a roll of black and white film, and kids, their own and sometimes the neighbors, and took off for Ocean City or Wildwood or Medford Lakes, New Jersey, or for a rare few the Pocono Mountains. On the way they loaded up at the farmer's roadside stands with delicious fresh Jersey tomatoes, corn, cantaloupes, peaches and watermelons. Most families were lucky to get a week's vacation. You were packing to come home almost as soon as you arrived.

When you arrived you looked for am ice-man, to get a block of ice into the ice-box to cool the groceries and the lunchmeat, and to chill a pitcher of iced-tea.

"Hey, kid, you want some ice up there?", he yelled to me leaning on the porch railing three floors up.

"How much ?", I inquired, knowing the delivery rates were different the higher up the rental.

"15 cents ground floor ...", he estimated correctly,." ...and 25 cents to the third floor".

"We'll take the first floor rate!", I yelled and tossed down a nickel and a dime, which he expertly caught in his hat.

With equal expertise he chipped a block of ice from a larger block of ice under canvas on the back of his truck, slid it into a large canvas bag and set it on the sidewalk.

"OK, kid, here's your ice. Come and get it!", he called up.

With that my father tossed down a 40 foot length of clothes-line with a hook on the end."Hook it on, pal, and we'll haul it up."

The next day, instead of "Ice! Ice!", the ice-man shouted, "Throw down the rope!"

By the time we left Wildwood, other dangling cloths-lines had appeared for the first floor ice delivery rate.

EASTER has changed little during my lifetime. There are still the same dress-up Easter church services and seaside "boardwalk" parades, the hiding and seeking of dyed hard-boiled eggs, baskets with yellow marshmallow "cheeps" and one big floral decorated chocolate coated coconut egg with your name on it. In our house there was always my mother's large fruit and nut cream egg, with her name "Retta", hand-scrolled on the top. It was her Easter Egg! Yet, and in spite of all that we had in our basket, we coveted a piece of her egg: "Please, Mom, just a thin slice! Please!".

But, what I remember most hauntingly about Easter were the canaries. In the early "thirties", canaries seemed to be the pet of choice for many stay-at-home mothers and wives, their singing apparently providing a companionship during the day in an otherwise empty house. In the summer, with the screened-in open windows and porches, you could hear those tiny melodious yellow birds throughout the neighborhood. So Reverend Richardson, the diminutive pastor of the Presbyterian Church, on the corner of Tenth and Washington Avenues, cattycorner from the high school, came up with the brilliant idea of inviting his congregants to bring in their caged canaries to hang on hooks on sanctuary beam ends for Easter Sunday. In my mind's ear, I can still hear their beautiful singing throughout the Easter morning service undaunted by organ swells, kids crying, hymn singing and preaching. I wonder if any present attendee looks up to wonder about those hooks, from which 70 years ago some member's caged canary dangled to proclaim in song a Risen Lord?

Unlike the Roman Catholic kids who went strictly to their church on Amosland Road in Norwood, we Protestant kids were more ecumenical and non-conformist in our church attendance and I, for one, attended from time to time the Presbyterian, the Lutheran, and the Methodist church, whose present day parking lot is where our Lincoln elementary school once stood. My association with the Baptist church, except for a tour where I was dumbstruck by what appeared to be a small swimming pool by their altar, was our town's annual MEMORIAL DAY Ceremonies. That's because the Baptist church, located at the top of the hill where Lincoln Avenue goes down to Chester Pike and on across the swamps towards Essington, had a cemetery. Apparently, there were some veterans of World War I buried there and maybe even from the Civil War. Whatever, it was the place to hold a Memorial Day program. So, the Prospect Park High School Band marched and played down from the High School to the Baptist cemetery. A remarkable occasion to me one year, because I was asked to recite Lincoln's Gettysburg Address at the ceremonies there among the moss covered and tilting tombstones. A presentation, which as I humbly recall, I did flawlessly.

THANKSGIVING, at the end of November, marked by leaf-bare trees and chilling winds of approaching winter, was at its outset a day set aside 300 years ago by The Pilgrims to thank God for the harvest that would carry them through the harsh winter of New England. It was and continues to be a national day of thanksgiving to God, unique to the United States of America. Even as I write this, I suspect that there are civil libertarians hunkered down with their attorneys trying to figure out how they can get any reference to "God", particularly a Christian God, removed from Thanksgiving Day.

There was no thought of that when I was a kid. The Thanksgiving prayer by the head of the family at the Thanksgiving Day dinner was a very serious matter, and much was made of it leading up to the day in elementary school lessons about the Pilgrims. Besides the" thanks be to God" implications of the day, there was the excitement of the traditional high school football game between rival schools, followed by the gluttony of the equally traditional Thanksgiving dinner. Even during the worst days of the Depression, we had a table laden with turkey, bowls of hearty gravy, bread-filling, sweet and white mashed potatoes, pearl onions in cream sauce, Brussels sprouts, two kinds of cranberry sauce, and thick slices of home- made pumpkin pie.

Mince meat pie was strictly for CHRISTMAS. Mince pie and fruit cake. Fruit cake was one of the seasonal items on the bread-man's wagon that was featured after Thanksgiving. As a marketing ploy, the bread-man had a "punch board" with a small key that would punch out a tiny cylinder of rolled-up paper with a number on it. For 10 cents the lady of the household could punch out a number, which was then written down on the back of the punch board and if, when all the numbers had been taken, hers was the winning number, she would win a free fruitcake. I guess the psychology of it being that it got everyone to thinking about how delicious a fruitcake would taste.

The deal was that when I sold a complete board, I would get a free fruit cake. I sold out three boards the first year and got three free fruitcakes. It was fruitcake overload! I got better every year, people began pulling down their shades when they saw me coming with my fruitcake punch boards, so I began selling off the extra fruitcakes in competition with my patron. I think the arrangement lasted about three years, before Mr. Harrison decided I had gotten out of control.

Christmas dinner itself was pretty much the same as Thanksgiving except for the pie, which as I mentioned was mince instead of pumpkin. Mince meat pie with, at the insistence of my German father, a wedge of sharp cheese to heighten the flavor.

Then there were Christmas cookies! Mother baked batch after batch of cookies, tins full of them, with sprinkles, nuts, and sugared fruit chips

on the tops of the cookies shaped like stars, half moons, evergreen trees, stockings, and figures of little boys and girls and Santa Clause. The tantalizing smell of all those ingredients baking on sheets in the oven filled the house with a distinctive only-at-Christmas aroma for days.. Every once in a while, thank God for small favors, a batch got over done and browned around the edges and was put in a tin that was for eating now, before Christmas.

I can remember Dad (I called him Pop, but whenever I mention that term today people think I'm talking about soda) making a wonderful train platform with paper-mache houses pressed and painted to resembled a snow scene. A Lionel train circled the display with an engine that whistled and a headlight that looked particularly impressive at night. I kept the trains and the tracks in peach baskets in the attic and years later, when I was serving as the Pastor of a church in the Philadelphia ghetto, I gave it to a poor family with five children at Christmas time.

Shortly after the New Year, a few of us would begin to gather all the discarded Christmas trees for a big bonfire to be lit at the tip of Tenth Avenue, just past Madison Avenue, where it turned into a mud road going through the fields to Ridley Park. The trees were dried out and brown and left a trail of broken branches, pine needles and tinsel from where we had dragged them. Worried that they might get wet from rain or snow and not be combustible, I thoughtfully volunteered the use of our garage for storage. In one day of diligently harvesting dead trees from neighborhood lawns, we had packed it to the rafters. When my father came home from work and I proudly showed him our enterprise, visions of all those trees igniting in his garage caused a burst of unloading activity the likes of which I had never before seen in my life.

The night of the Christmas tree bonfire the Fire Department brought their shiny pumper truck around It was a glorious blaze to behold, especially for us kids who had hauled all the trees up there. The next morning all that was left was a pathetic pile of forlorn tree trunks piled "Pick-up-sticks" fashion on the blackened cement apron. Somewhere among them were the remains of our tree, sadly indistinguishable from any of the others now. But, for awhile at least it had been bathed in colored lights, festooned with tinsel and Christmas balls that would eventually be passed on to the next generation. As it was for me and my brother Karl, so it would be for my daughter Pam and thankfully one day for my granddaughters Abi and Ashley, and great-grandchildren Oliver, Emily, Imogen and Thomas.. On Christmas Eve, Pam's tree, as mine had, stood unfrocked in the middle of our living room, if indeed it had been brought in at all, until Pam was tucked into bed. Then on Christmas morning, much to her wonder and surprise, the tree was magically cloaked with a mantel of lights, glass icicles, tinsel,

glass balls from Germany and candy canes. And at the very top the very expensive winged angel.

Whether or not a plastic Holiday tree with lights and silver-bow ribbons permanently attached, stored until the following year in a plastic bag will engender the same emotions and spirit of Christmas that I once knew, I doubt. I can only hope for the best. My obligation was to pass on our family traditions. So, if you're ever lucky enough to see the magnificent, glowing, gloriously decorated Christmas tree in the old manor house of Pam and her husband Ian, which greeted their children, our granddaughters Abi and Ashley, early on Christmas mornings in the tiny village of Albury, in Surrey, England, which exceeds in every way anything we ever did, then we as parents, Pat and me, succeeded. The real test will be the Christmas trees of our Granddaughters ...and I have no doubts about those two.

W. Carter Merbreier | August 7, 2003

Here Comes The Band!

"He's the music man and he sells clarinets to the kids in town, with the big trombone and the ratatat drums and the big brass bass". (The Music Man)

When Harold Hill came to the town of River City, Iowa , in Meredith Wilson's 1957 musical "The Music Man", he captured a time in America, when uniformed marching and concert bands were the rage. Every town worth its salt had a band-stand for summer concets, and a town like Pottstown even had its own lavishly costumed semi-pro town band, which gave sold out concerts at Sunnybrook. Amusement parks such as Willow Grove and Parkside, drew crowds of as many as 50,000 enthusiastic fans to concerts by John Philip Sousa and Victor Herbert, arriving by trolley and train.

Little wonder that in 1939, a lot of us kids in Prospect Park wanted to play and march in the High School band. I was 13 years old and did not won a musical instrument, let alone play one. But kids being able to actually play a trombone, clarinet, tuba or drum didn't stop the fictional PRofessor Hill, some twenty years later on the Broadway stage, from recruiting wide-eyed youngsters into hi pie-in-the-sky River City band. Neither did it deter our school music teacher and band-master at the time, Mr. Burnside, from encouraging me to buy a clarinet from him and take music lessons from him as well. Violaf! Now, I was in the band.

I nver did like the clarinet, nor for that matter did it ever take a liking to me. Whenever I seemed to be getting the knack of covering the proper-holses and successfully navigating an entire passage of melody, the damn thing would let out an ungodly squeak. This led the rest of the "reed" section to look accusingly in my direction. Particulary, Jean LeBan, who took her tooting very seriously and who was after all part French.

This squeaking was quite evident during my first parade with the band. We marched, and occasionally played, all the way from Prospect Park High School, down Ninth Avenue, out Lincoln Avenue, down 13th Avenue, past the lake, all the way to the Ridley Park School field, where the traditional Thanksgiving Day football game was held. They could afford to rent a bus for the football team, but not the band. It had to be a five mile round trip for heaven's sake, during which we were expected to keep in step, play while reading music from little fluttering pages stuck on the ends of our bouncing instruments, and watch where we were going, all at the same time.

Our uniforms were white duck pants, white shirt and black tie, which we provided. The school provide a blue "overseas cap" with gold piping and a blue cape with gold lining. We looked quite smashing when we tossed the capes back over

our shoulders and the gold lining showed in a kind of diamond pattern. When it was bitter cold we were allowed to wear sweaters. Which, being an assortment of styles and patterns, hand knitted and at least two-out-of-three being hand-me-downs, radically changed the orderly affect of our blue and gold capes and caps.

It was obvious to everyone very quickly, that I was not and would never be a clarinet player. However, the rand and file design of the band had already been established for the football season and to drop me would have required a lot of reshuffling. Plus, I had learned to keep in step, turn corners in military style, obey all of the Drum Major's police-whistle signal and to execute with determined precision our only two field formations: the unwinding circle and the synchronized about-face, which was dangerous when the trombone players had their slides fully extended. I was allowed to continue as a band member, if I promised not to blow into my squeaking clarinet and make any attempt to play.

Fair enough! Since I now had no responsibility whatsoever to the music, I concentrated all my efforts on style. I no longer needed the little music cards on the end of my clarinet, giving onlookers the impression that I had memorized all of the tunes. I was free to make eye-contact, smile, strut a little bit, maybe even swagger, just so long as I kept my fingers moving in a reasonable imitation of playing notes. There was a growing impression that I was carrying the band. Which did not please some of fellow musicians, nor for that matter the Drum Major, who thought of himself as the star.

Unfortunately, the couldn't get rid of me. Like the ficitional town of River City in the "Music Man", our school had launched a money raising campaign for real, honest-to-goodness, two-toned uniforms with gold trim braiding. I don't know if the school's music teacher, like Professor Hill, was getting a cut of the action, bu I do know that my father and Renee Jaccard, father of our cute little drum majorette, Adele, and her brother "Moony", who played trumpet in the band, were in charge of raising the money. So, they transferred me to percussion, believing that I would do far less dmage there and be intimidated, which I was, by a really talented drummer Jack Greer, the son of the embalmer at the Griffith's Funeral Home.

I suppose the high point of our band came with the arrival of Bill Lamb as band director and music teacher, they being one and the same at Prospect Park High. He was the son of the owners of the Lamb Music Store and School in Pottstown, was a member of the famous Pottstown Band, drove a convertible, was a bachelor, and, to top it off, was a virtuoso of the trumpet. When he played the "Flight of the Bumblebee" at our annual uniform money raising concert, it brought the house down. We had never seen, and probably never will again, such tight lipped and red-faced tooting with agile fingers fluttering over three brass valves.

By today's consolidated district school band standards our company of musicians was rather small, and included both Junior and Senior High members. Far from Professor Hill's "seventy six trombones", we had three until Bobby Owen graduated and wasn't replaced leaving us with only two. The band sported one helicon, a sort of large tuba that Wayne Fletcher lugged around coiled over his shoulder. We played for our weekly assemblies, marched the senior class down to the train station for their traditional trip to New York or Washington. There was the annual Band Concert and the Memorial Day parade. Everybody in town knew somebody in the band or had a kid in it, so everybody smiled and applauded and cheered and shared in our joy of making music the best that we could. We competed with bands from neighboring schools like Glen-nor, Redley Park, Springfield and Darby during football game half-times. The exception being the game with the Philadelphia School for the Deaf, which didn't have a band.

There is no Prospect Park High School anymore, no teams nor pep rallies in the empty unused auditorium that upon my recent visit was very much smaller than I remembered. There's an Interborough School system now, using our old school as an administration building. There are yellow school buses lugging kids from hither to yon, large graduation classes, football teams with multi-layered substitution squads, and music departments subdivided into marching bands, dance bands,drum-and-bugle bands, jazz and rock bands adn even symphony orchestras.

You know, if I had a chance to do it all over again, I think I'd try glockenspiel.

W. Carter Merbreier | July 2003

The Shooting

With the war beginning to heat up in Europe, and the very far-fetched possibility that Prospect Park could be bombed by the Germans or the Japanese, after all we did have a wire manufacturing plant on 13th Avenue just down from Amosland Road, our school initiated air-raid drills. These consisted of the principal, Mr. Batt, ringing the classroom attention-bells and the bunch of us giggling kids ducking down under our desks. This led to the sort of confusion and accompanying mischief , on the part of boys mostly teasing girls, that the German and Japanese high-commands were probably counting on to help destroy America. Mr. Batt took it very seriously.

As did we. So much so, that we occasionally took to initiating an air-raid drill or two on our own, in order, as we later explained to Mr. Batt, to improve our reaction time. It was for us, in truth, extemporaneous theatre. Some clown would yell, " Air Raid!", and the class, all except for a few girls, would slide down under their desks.

It wasn't easy to get under a desk. That's because, there was a storage bin for school supplies taking up space under the hinged desk top. We had no such convenience as a hall-way locker. Lifting up the desk lid, you stored books, extra pencils, paper and pads, crayons, something some girl gave you, bicycle pant's clips, a straw to blow paper spit-balls, various paper-clips, cotter-pins, rubber-bands, bits of string, a pencil sharpener, large eraser, to supplement the worn down one on the end of your chewed pencil, a bottle of writing ink, a couple of metal pen nibs, an old penknife, and maybe a candy bar or an apple or, if you weren't walking home for lunch, a brown bag with a sandwich. During the course of a school day, your home-room desk would be used by other kids attending classes taught by your home-room teacher. I can't remember my desk or any one else's ever being vandalized.

Not willing to just settle for an "Air Raid" and wanting to get away from the under-the-desk squeeze, we pushed our luck and segued into something we later dubbed the "Epidemic". In which, some class character affected sickness and near collapse, followed by another and another, until the classroom aisles would fill with fake ill bodies.

At first the faculty indulgently smiled at these antics, hoping the fad would fade. Finally, they lost patience and took punitive action, which involved the malefactor's visit to Mr. Batt's office. Who, in those days, was allowed to have and to use a paddle on your backside, no matter how old or well-connected the student might be. Consequently, this

particular form of free-spirited student creativity was finally brought to a halt,

However, the possibility of such silly student shenanigans hung constantly over the heads of the faculty. It made them edgy and suspicious.

Especially Miss Lerch, a chesty dame, who taught History, and was conscientious and sensitive, and was really liked by all of us. So, she had every reason to believe that another form of "Air Raid" or "Epidemic" was taking place, when Harvey Gladhill stood up, pulled out what looked like a toy pistol and apparently shoot Bobby Reynolds.

"Harvey! You shot me!", Bobby mumbled as he stood up and clutched the side of his chest. We were ready to start laughing. I mean, we didn't think Bobby had such acting skills. Then, we saw the blood starting to ooze out from between his fingers. So did, Miss Lerch! Harvey had really shot Bobby Reynolds!

Now, Prospect Park High School was not a very big School. Nor was it just a "high" school. The red-brick building housed, in spite of it's name, the Elementary sixth grade, plus the Junior High classes, as well as, the three high-school grades. Probably, all told, four to five hundred students. Not much went on that everybody didn't know about. The only former excitement that I can recall, was when one of the Foresman boys disappeared, and turned up two days later in Philadelphia, supposedly suffering from amnesia. Boy, did that get a lot of play in the hallway buzz. A lot more than when the Lee kid, nicknamed "Ug", popped up out of a trash container and scared the livin' bejabbers out of Mr. Noltey.

But this, this shooting, this was big time news. My Uncle Jimmy Glenny, who was editor of the Chester times, called me to get the inside story. I knew Harvey. He lived about five doors up from me. We made stilts together I think he found the silver- plated 22 caliber pistol in his father's room. We had taken it out, some time prior to the shooting, to the nursery fields behind our houses and tried to shoot it. The wobbly old firing pin never worked, even after repeated trigger pulls. The next time I saw the gun, was when he shot Bobby. He was as surprised as I was that it worked. I guess, if it had ever gotten more serious and the police had dusted the gun, my fingerprints would have been on it. My big mistake was telling Uncle Jimmy, that Harvey said he got the bullets from Maurice Edwards. That was printed in the paper and Mrs. Edwards, rightfully, took umbrage with the report and me. Her resounding castigation ended any thoughts that I might have had of a reportorial career someday.

After they carted poor Bobby off to the Taylor Hospital, they tried to regain some semblance of school order. They didn't give us the rest of the day off. They didn't bring in a team of highly-skilled counselors to meet with the excited kids who were eager to put a dramatic spin

on anything. Sadly, counselors hadn't been invented yet.

As was the practice then, our class made up a gaily decorated "get well" cardboard box, for which each of us contributed a gift to be opened one at a time on consecutive days. It was delivered to the hospital with great pomp by a class representative. We were allowed to visit Bobby, in hushed, respectful small groups in one of the "porch" rooms at Taylor. They never removed the bullet from his lung, it was safer in those days to just leave it there, and as far as I know he is walking around with it as a remembrance to this very day.

Since, Prospect Park High School was such a relatively small school, in comparison to today's large bused-in student bodies and campuses, I suppose, proportionately, our level of violence by gunfire was respectable. That is to say, "on a par with ....."

I lost track of Harvey. I feel kind of guilty about that. He had a beautiful younger sister, Eleanor, who worked as a model and dancer. I saw a picture of her forty years ago and she still looked beautiful..

W. Carter Merbreier | April 2003

Some Never Got To Graduate

There were sixty-nine of us who graduated in the Prospect Park High School class of 1944. As of this writing in the summer of 2003, forty have thus far avoided being visited by The Pale Horseman.

There were several who were at some time or other part of our class of '44, but who never made it to our High School graduation ceremony. They never got to wear the rented blue and gold cap and gown, nor to hear the applause of proud families mingled with the slow beat of "Pomp and Circumstance", played by our High School Band now minus several Seniors, never got to receive a rolled-up diploma cinched by a red ribbon.

One of whom was Kenny Bluzard. Though he didn't make it to graduation, we dedicated our yearbook to him. Kenny was a little guy with a light complexion and almost white hair. He really never drew much attention to himself until he joined the Navy in our Junior year, at the outset of World War II. He came back to visit the school while on his last shore-leave before shipping out. He was now a Gunnery Mate in his snappy navy-blues, the somebody he had never been before. Even the Principle walked down the hall beside him. Yep, we all noticed him now.

Before we even received our diplomas, Kenny was killed in action aboard the aircraft carrier Ticonderoga far out in the Pacific Ocean, when a Japanese kamikaze plane dove into his gun emplacement. He was 16 years old when he gave his life for his country, the gravity of which I did not fully appreciate at the time of our graduation, but which I think about now with gratitude. I regret that I can not tell him that to his face and shake his hand in admiration.

Bobby MacCambridge was only briefly a part of our class and I don't think he ever really graduated with any class. Bobby was retarded, at least that's what it was called in those days, and he seemed to stay in Junior High as classes came along, enveloped him and then passed along leaving him behind, like a departing wave leaves a conch-shell on a sandy beach. I suppose that today, Bobby would be classified as intellectually challenged, and entered into all kinds of special classes, and would be a medal winner at the Special Olympics Games. But, he was too early for all of that, so he just sat at one of the desks and drew snakes, nothing but snakes, pressing so hard and repeatedly with the pencil that the edges of the paper pad curled up as if to hold his hand.

Heroically, his family sent him everyday to "regular" school. They lived in a fine old house on 13th Avenue near the wire factory, with a wrap-around porch where his mother stood every day, in all kinds of weather, waiting for him to come home from school. He was always particularly neat and clean. He wore corduroy knickers, as most of us did early on, with argyle pull-up knee socks and ankle-high heavy shoes. He walked hunched forward with his head down, clutching tightly to his chest the books that he never read. Being older and wiser and more confident now, I wish I could go over to him, put my arm around his shoulder and say to him," Bobby, you're doing just fine".

Finally, there was Myrtle Cowie, who lived on the corner of 10th and Madison Avenues, directly across the street from Charlie Bainbridge, who would go on to become Secretary/Treasurer of the old PTC (Philadelphia Transportation Company). Myrtle taught me to tie my shoe laces, in what is generally regarded by all observers as the most unusual technique they have ever seen for tying shoes. She was "sickly" and I remember her as quite fragile, pale and quiet.

Why we ever hid her galoshes, I'll never know. Credit it to teenage teasing. Nonetheless, Myrtle went home from school one day without her overshoes with snow on the ground. She died in the Spring, and I was burdened for years with the thought that our having hid her galoshes on that snowy day contributed to her death. Thankfully, at least for my conscience, I was to eventually learn that she succumbed to a childhood disorder not in any way related to our silly prank.

Myrtle Cowie's father had an accent. My mother thought it was English. Some forty years later my daughter, Pam, married Ian, a fine Englishman, by the name of Cowie. I can't help but wonder if Myrtle Cowie, who taught me to tie my shoes, and thereby my tuxedo bow-tie, all those years ago, is related to my son-in-law who lives with my daughter and their family in the little village of Peaslake, south of London, in England?

But, I didn't think about Myrtle, on that hot, humid June night at the Prospect Park High School graduation ceremonies; nor Bobby nor Kenny. With all of the giddy excitement of that night, the girl's tearful goodbyes, the boy's hearty back-slappings, and the coming-of-age gift of a Yellow Bowl tobacco-pipe my parents gave me to take to college, they never even crossed my mind.

But be assured, dear friend, that they do now.

W. Carter Merbreier | July 2003

The Bucket-A-Day

Our house, had a cellar! And a cellar, located under a house, was the most unglamorous yet most functional room of a house. Here were stored row upon row, in clear glass mason jars sealed with heat, the colorful and tantalizing summer preserves of stewed tomatoes, peaches and apple butter. Sealed with wax patties were the strawberry and blackberry jams, that would be put on the breakfast table, when snow swirled across the fields towards the railroad righ-of-way. Only now, when I visit our lavishly stocked super market in mid-winter, do I appreciate what it meant for my little mother to make possible the gifts of summer harvest in the midst of winter.

Stored in the dark, under the cellar stairs, were a few precious bottles of root beer. My father carbonated the root beer with yeast and capped the bottles with a ratcheted hand lever.

Along the inside wall, my father had his work bench. There was not one piece of motorized equipment. Everything, from drilling holes, to sawing and cutting, driving screws and nails, was done by hand. He was German and precise.

The silhouettes of all the tools were painted on the panel upon which the tools were hung, each in their proper place. The same formula was followed in our bath-room cabinet for clippers, finger-nail files, tweezers or scissors. Each had its own pre-painted shadow. There was never a mistake as to where to hang things in the bathroom or in the cellar.

Against the outside wall with the high-placed window, was the laundry area. There were two wash-tubs, side by side, for soaking and rinsing, and a free-standing agitator washing machine with legs, topped by a wringer to squeeze out the soapy water. I remember that my mother used a hand crank to turn the rollers early on, before motorized ones. Every town seemed to have the tale of some poor woman getting her hair caught in the motorized wringer and getting her neck snapped.

There was no such thing as a clother-dryer. The damp laundry was carried up in a basket and hung by wooden clip-pins on ropes held up high enough by notch-ended poles so that the wash wouldn't drag on the ground. If the temperature dipped below freezing, the wet laundry quickly froze into a weird panorama of rigid socks, sheets, underwear , pajamas, napkins, hankies, bloomers and bras (discreetly hung between bed-sheets), like an undulating chorus line against a theatrical backdrop of the farmer's corn-field that was behind our house. On the best of summer days everything smelled clean and fresh, but on freezing winter days it was hung in the cellar and smelled like the cellar.

The living, breathing, pulsating heart of the cellar was the furnace and next to it to a smaller furnace just for summer. Both were fueled by coal, hand shoveled from a high wooden bin next to the furnace, with movable slats instead of a door that were removed one at a time as the level of coal dimished. The coal was funneled down into the bin on a telescoping metal chute. When the "coal-man" hand cranked up the back of his trucks and six tons of coal came down that chute, it made a unique "shushing" sound upstairs that can never be forgotten. In the middle of winter, when the coal in that bin had been reduced to a small heap in the corner, it was a very comforting sound.

You didn't need a fuel gauge or a meter in those days. You just eye-balled the coal bin for an accurate and up-to-date check on supply and usuage. How utterly simple!

In winter, you didn't have to worry about hot water. The big, old boiler furnace that heated the house also heated the bath and wshing water.

During the summer the big furnace was shut down and a smaller furnace, more properly a stove, sat beside the big furnance to provide hot water. On a smaller scale it was stoked and fueled just like the big winter furnace, but it required much less coal and hence it nickname the "bucket-a-day".

Despite its size, compard to that of the big all-purpose winter furnace standing mightily between it and the coal-bin, the bucket-a-day provided hot water for the entire house and family all summer long, which included not only the kitchen sink to wash food and dishes, the laundry tubs and the washing machine in the cellar, but also the bathtub and the sink on the upper floor for tooth-brushing, shaving, and washing-up. That was a lot of hot water for such a tiny furnace to provide with a minimum amount of coal.

The tiny bucket-a-day reminded me than and now, of the story of "The Little Engine That Could", which worked so hard to haul a disabled train-load of toys for children over a mountain. It was a daunting task that normally required a much larger and stronger steam-engine. With each turn of the wheels the little engine chugged out "I think I can, I think I can", and then, as it swept down the far side of the ridge, it proudly puffed, "I knew I could! I knew I could"!

From my beloved diminutive mother to our summer hot-water stove, I remember with admiration and gratitude the heroics and hard-work of all the little things that affected my life on this earth.

"And now the matchless deed's acheiv'd,
Determin'd, dar'd, and done."
- Christopher Smart

W. Carter Merbreier March | April 2003

In the Autumn of My Life

Vaudeville was more than just jugglers, acrobats, song-and-dance teams, comics like Cheese-and-Crackers Hagan with his floor-length neck tie and bawdy Doctor sketches. There were also serious singers and actors appearing in one-scene-acts balancing the show bill.

One of these famous skits featured an Irish cop walking his beat in Central Park. He patrols a dimly lit backdrop of apartment building silhouettes, behind a gently swaying scrim of leafless painted trees. At stage-left is a lighted gas street lamp, and stage-right a large prop-tree. The ambling cop spins his truncheon on a leather strap, as only New York Irish cops can do, as falling leaves occasionally blow across the stage.

"Hey you ", gesturing with his night-stick towards the prop-tree, the officer asks, " Just what do you think you're doin' up there in a tree at this time o' night?".

A single spot illuminates the figure of a young man, straddling a tree limb. "I'm trying to tie the falling autumn leaves back onto the trees limbs, Officer", he calls down, as he continues to attach one of a handful of dried leaves.

The Officer pulls up his coat collar and asks: "You're tying the leaves back onto the trees, even as dear mother nature is trying so hard, on this chilly night to untie them ?"

"Over there," the man in the tree gestures dramatically toward a single lighted window across the make-believe park, "my darling wife is dying of tuberculoses. The doctor told us (emotional pause) that she would live only as long as there were leaves on the trees."

(Cue pit-orchestra)

"So, Officer, I'm tying these leaves so they won't blow away - to keep (deep emotion) my sweetheart alive!".

The officer tucks his billy-club under his arm, "Get on with it then, Laddy-buck, I'll see that nobody bothers you from down here".

The man in the tree continues tying leaves on the branches as he begins singing in a clear tenor voice the 1907 hit-song, with a pit-band BG:

"I'm tying the leaves so they won't come down,
So the wind won't blow them away,
For the best girl in the whole wide world
Is lying so ill today.
Her young life must go when the leaves fall
I'm tying them tight so they stay"

(a gust of wind on a flurry of leaves removes the last leaf from the singer's grip as the light goes out in the distant window. Fade scene.)

This is how I remember my father recounting this poignant, long ago vaudeville scene to me, in which he sometimes played the Irish Cop, and which replays in my memory year after year in Autumn' when the leaves begin to fall.

Which comes to mind now, because it is Autumn in our little village of Gladwyne. There is a crisp mystic melancholy about autumn, as nature repositions itself for what is yet to be. Framed by our big bay-window, a bronzed hue has crept quite convincingly up the hillside across the Valley of the Schuylkill. It is easy to imagine the Lenape Indians, "beaching" their canoes at this place at this time of the year, heavy with venison and hides for approaching winter. Just as the Welsh weavers and mill-men along the nearby myriad of mill-creeks of what is now Lower Merion, were storing their harvests. As on that vaudeville stage almost a century ago, the leaves are beginning to fall along the river valley.

Autumn is like the evensong of a day. For me, it is a brilliant and most colorful pause before the earth's, and my own, winter sleep.

I witness in our garden Autumn's final intense display of beauty in the purple and white flowers of the Rose of Sharon, the Impatiens now in fuller flower than at any time since their summer planting, the Hibiscus and the huge baskets of mostly store-bought Chrysanthemums, the bright red berries on the Holly for wintering-over birds, and the acorns stepping-down from the old Oak beside our patio, gathered by chipmunks, squirrels and groundhogs for storage in tree hallows and tunnels.

I resemble unwillingly the falling leaves on the lawn or huddled together against the wind in the rain-gutters - my veins as theirs are drying up, I too wrinkle and crack, I am brittle in both body and mind and my original wholeness is ragged and torn. Nevertheless, at this time of my life, my Autumn, I believe myself to be more colorful, more intense, definitely more interesting and even more appreciated than ever before. The leaves are falling in the Autumn of *my* life:

"How beautifully leaves grow old,
How full of light and color are their last days".
- John Burroughs

W. Carter Merbreier Late October | 2007

In The Rear-View Mirror

In Jan Struther's book "Mrs. Miniver", there is a poignant scene where Mrs. Miniver, driving away from a buzz-bomb explosion, catches a glimpse of her burning home in her car's rear-view mirror, and "it occurs to her that you can not successfully navigate the future, unless you keep ever framed within it ***a small, clear image of the past***".

This collection of essays is meant to be my small, clear part of that image of the past!

"Carter", my mother called from the porch, nervously waving an envelope that had just arrived in the mail. "It's from the Draft Board. I think you've been drafted.

The letter congratulated me, and instructed me to report to the Chester Train Station at a specified date and time, with a toothbrush, a comb and a change of underwear. A new era was beginning for me - and for the whole world!

Captain Noah & "Flame", the Tiger, circa 1975

A small, clear image of the past...

Captain Noah Fishing, circa 1930

GRANDPA'S
REMEMBERENCES & RUMINATIONS
ABOUT GROWING UP IN A SMALL TOWN
IN PENNSYLVANIA, U.S.A.
Many, many years ago...