

Journeying By Journaling

By PJ Jancewicz, 2013

Through Journal writing we may find our journeys in life to be more than mere nostalgia. In these writings we may rediscover the better memories for ourselves and our world and come to recognize how and why we traveled in one direction or the other.

An example of a family memory:

MY LITTLE CORNER OF THE WORLD – *Sheets to the Wind - Costumes, Hats and Play Acting*

It was the age of the neighborhood corner pub and we lived across from a barroom where many WWII vets went to chum around and to partake of liquid refreshment. If some folks didn't go in as Disabled American Veterans, many of them sure did come out that way. Yet, I have some fine memories of some great people who frequented that bar. And there were occasional problems with that situation. My mom was ever fighting the endless battle of loud jukebox music. My bedroom was closest to the barroom and I can still recall every word of Kenny Rogers' ballad "Lucille" which some poor sad souls spent a wealth of quarters to play over and over again. Then there was the occasional domestic dispute or brawl and staggering people at night peeing on our tree or tearing a picket off our fence. But, for the most part, my five siblings and I met a varied group of folks who were far too humble to ever think they'd be termed a "greatest" generation.

Across from this D.A.V. Post pub sat our small yard and in that yard there stood a large, firm triangular platform with a tall, thick clothesline post at its point. The post, which to me came to resemble a ship's mast (the platform was my ship), was topped by four crossed lengths of wood. From this post my mom would hang vast amounts of clothing and sheets from the ropes that were tightly threaded across the top. Thus my ship had sails and I imagined many a long voyage upon my clothesline ship which I christened "Wanderer." (Hanging in my bedroom was an unidentified ship picture that I similarly named.) For me, my siblings and the neighborhood kids this clothesline platform was a fantastic stage upon which we could play act. Bed sheets made excellent stage curtains, especially since the crossed wooden arms rotated atop the clothesline post. There upon that sturdy wooden "stage" we kids played all kinds of games and practiced and performed numerous skits.

My father worked as a forklift driver in a paper mill and one of his great joys was to bring home brown paper bags filled with discarded items from large bails of "junk" that were bound to be chopped into paper fiber. We were not allowed to peek into the bag as he liked to keep us in suspense and to distribute the items himself. Sometimes there were partially torn dresses for my sisters or even games, toys and many other strange objects of interest. Mom would sew the dresses and dad would fix the broken toys. On some occasions the bag contained books about all kinds of things like the Civil War that fueled my imagination. Thus, our family toy closet, book closet and game shelf were filled to the max.

Dad, during his dismal, humdrum shifts at the mill, found all kinds of bizarre things to bring home. He had a great sense of humor and now and then he would shove a fake hand or a plastic plant in his garden to trick mom. I also recall that our father had acquired a first edition "Playboy" magazine that eventually (likely with my mother's help) found its way into our large coal furnace.

Our active family kitchen was situated near the clothesline and across from the barroom. With six kids of varying ages, that kitchen was sometimes busier than the bar across the street with vast amounts of food and drink and conversation and activity. In that kitchen there was music and dance, arm wrestling and birthday parties and ever the smell of food. There Dad would sit and take his usual chair, one arm propped up on the washing machine, the other on the kitchen table, partaking of his Raleigh cigarettes and Pabst Blue Ribbon. He'd carefully open the brown bag and we'd wait to see what cool things he'd brought home for us from the factory.

Sometimes the clothing that my father brought home was odd or unfashionable and so it was sent to the toy closet for costume wear. Very often dad brought home hats. There were all kinds of hats - sailor hats, baseball hats, fishing caps, even tiaras, wigs and a chauffeur hat. We all had such fun with these things and eventually those mysterious wrinkly bags provided us a huge stockpile of hats and costumes. Therefore, all of the pieces were set in place: we had costumes, a stage with curtains and just across the street we had a ready audience, potentially prepared to pay us for a show. I don't know who first concocted the idea of doing this, but I'm pretty sure it was not me. I was the youngest and likely not yet creative enough to think of such an entrepreneurial venture.

My siblings, cousins and other neighborhood kids would proudly put on our strange wigs, hats and costumes and practice our skits. Then, some of the usual D.A.V. crew (typically men) would come outside where they'd find a number of children across the street all dressed up in unusual garb and ready to perform some silly skit that was usually poorly produced, but enthusiastically staged. Back then it was just good fun and we were generally well-received and even earned a few coins now and again.

Now, more than forty years later, I can still recall the great times we had aboard my ship the "Wanderer," upon that stage that was a clothesline. What I could never realize back then, but understand now is that many of the vets who visited the barroom across the street had invisible injuries, disabilities derived from the struggles of life and the horrors of combat. We kids with our silly little improvisational productions probably provided a little comic relief, a bit of normalcy and hope for people who had seen far too much of depression and war. Both pub and platform are long gone and I'm the aging veteran. The stage curtains are no longer bed sheets hanging on a clothesline; they are the veil of time behind which so many of the players and audience members have taken their leave. But the show, the voyage goes on and I still love to don weird hats on my mostly bald head.