

Remember When

Jane Richardson

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Remember When

by Jane Richardson

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Preface

SOME TIME AGO I started to ramble on about the days long gone, but in no way entirely forgotten ... the fun days when everyone had so little, yet so much.

Those papers and snapshots were given to Bob to keep on the chance that some day someone in the family, even many generations from now, may want to read, comparing their lives with the distant past.

That scrapbook has been expanded and now exists in this book.

Here's hoping it helps tie our generations together.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks go to the countless relatives, neighbors and friends interviewed, both formally and informally, for the information contained in this book. Without the help and support of these people, this document would not be possible.

Rather than attempt to list this complete group of people, and risk offending any by omission, a “group thank you” is given instead.

There are, however, two pertinent exceptions. A special thanks to Barb and Steve for the gift of my laptop computer. Steve’s patience as my teacher was noticeable and frequently required.

Editing, composing and publishing was no simple task for Bob, who stayed up to the wee hours fine-tuning. He makes my humble writing efforts more complete. Any accomplishments are due in large part to his untiring attention to details.

My Earliest Recollections

My earliest recollections are preschool years, 1920-1924, living in the very small corner “cottage” at either 6322 or 6219 Francis Avenue, Cleveland, Ohio, the northwest side of the narrow street. Compactly small, but filled with laughter. I like recalling that part, but there were also the gross aspects.

As pop walked through the steel mill where he worked, a piece of steel found its way into one of his eyes, cutting through it tragically. The eye had to be removed. In those days there was no such thing as Workman’s Compensation, leaving my parents in a financial bind and pop out of a job. He had to be fitted with a glass eye. It bothered him tremendously making it necessary to remove it frequently – and eventually, permanently.

In a rather grotesque way, it both haunted and spellbound me. When no one was looking I’d sneak into his bedroom dresser drawer and remove its little black box. Even then black became an ominous color. Gingerly opening the box, I’d hold the contents in my shaking palm. Strangely, it was a work of art with thin colored strokes throughout the iris. Who painted it, making it so real? It looked back at me, but what was it seeing? Sickening and sinister, I was left to worry about eyes the rest of my life. Any speck of dust would make me shudder. Would I, too, lose my eyes?

Directly across the street was the Bilsky saloon, happily for all of us. They sold birch beer. While I cannot recall the exact taste, I know it was different from root beer. On warm days mom would send me across the street with our glass pitcher, its gold decoration half worn away with all the washings. The proprietor was a jolly sort.

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Filling the pitcher, I'd stare at his bowl of red hard-boiled eggs soaking in beet juice. Seems the beer drinkers liked them with their brew.



Mom (Martha Patch); Bilsky's saloon across the street

Catty-corner across the street was pop's small, plain gas station he operated after losing his steel mill job. He put in long hours but I sure knew how to twist him around my tiny fingers. Feigning scratches or boo-boos, I'd stand on our street corner, calling to him, knowing he'd get me an

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ice cream cone from a store at the other end of the block. It never failed, milking it for all it was worth. He never seemed to mind me being woefully devious.

On 64th St., just beyond the saloon lived the Soeder family in an upstairs two-family house. Julia Soeder, a widow with three kids, worked at a box factory. Mary, the oldest, would prepare dinner. Inasmuch as I had a crush on Frank, I was a frequent visitor. Keep in mind I was a pre-schooler.

From their back kitchen window we'd watch for their mother crossing the narrow, swaying, pedestrian bridge, long and ominous, high above a gully. We, too, had to cross this Side-Away bridge on Sunday mornings, going to church. I had to learn not to look down.

Mary would have the dining room table set, the centerpiece always the same, a glass jar filled with teaspoons, appearing like silver flowers.

And how many other pre-schoolers had a boyfriend to take her for a bike ride on his handlebars. That was almost as good as an amusement park ride. There was no Cedar Point in the neighborhood, so this was as close as we could come to a thrilling ride. Sewers every few houses dipped at curbside. Frank would peddle his bike at breakneck speed, and from my lofty perch I'd feel a twinge of excitement. That was perhaps even more thrilling than sailing our little twig sailboats in rain-swollen stretches of curb, rushing to retrieve our precious twigs before the sewers could swallow them.

There are many fond memories of life in that cottage: the apricot colored chiffon dress mom bought for me one Easter. I thought it would be the prettiest dress I would ever possess. Perhaps that's why I wanted to wear apricot at my daughter's wedding years later. As a little girl it had seemed to transform me into a fairy princess.

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My gorgeous apricot chiffon dress at Francis Ave. home.

One wintry day Gil, 9 yrs my senior and Gerry, 7 ½ yrs. my senior and a few of their friends built an igloo. My recollection of that structure was of a smooth, flawless mound. It must have been excellent snow for packing. I was surprised they allowed this little mutt to crawl through its tiny opening. How do Eskimos exist that way?

The inside of our little house is still very vivid in my mind. The kitchen was at the back, the wood-burning stove it's hub. At the farthest end a small door led to the

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dirt-floor circular basement. Ger would recall the home-canned jars of food mom would prepare and store there. I only recall putting the caps atop beer bottles as pop would make his own brew and allow me to help with the bottling chore.

Next to the kitchen was our dining room, which evokes much sentiment. How could any of us forget the pot-bellied stove standing in one corner, reposing blissfully on a square metal sheet? Through opaque eisenglass windows in a hot door we could watch flickering flames radiating their much-sought warmth.

Next came the very small square living room. Although I'm sure there was some degree of comfort, even for a family as poor as we, only two pieces of furniture come to mind. One was a black horsehair sofa. I could never decide whether I liked it or hated it. Something about my love of animals made me bristle. Yet, if mom loved it, how could I hate it? Was it okay to feel that way?

The other item was a black papier-mâché Japanese table, hand painted with gaudy flowers. Who would have imagined I'd one day learn to do this type of painting? Years later mom asked us kids if any of us wanted it. No one did. Now I hate myself for allowing her to throw it out. How many more stupid stunts would I pull in my lifetime?

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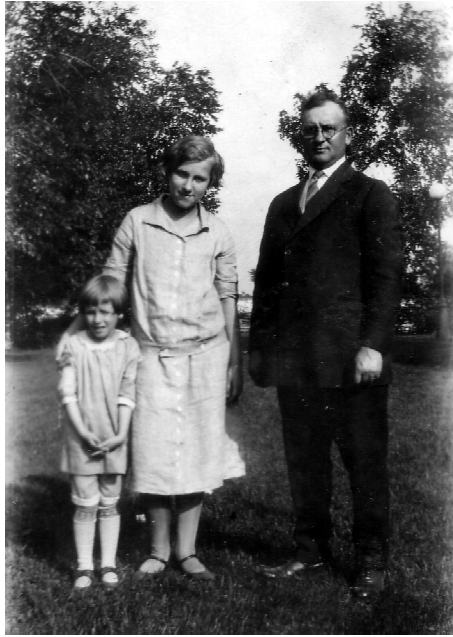


Mom, Connie Soeder, Pop

Off the living and dining rooms were two wee, small bedrooms, one for mom and pop and one for Ger and me. Gil says he slept up in the attic but can't recall how he climbed up there.

I've been told on Halloween nights we were allowed to walk only to those houses where there were children – and there weren't many of those. Afterwards we'd end up at the Bumlitz's for home baked cookies and something to drink. Ger always claimed that was one of my favorite nights because I got to stay up later than usual. What a deal!

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Jane, Gerry, pop

Looking back on those amazing days, I suppose part of my hang-up on Frank Soeder was that he had a new-fangled radio. It was called a crystal set and a cylinder had to be scratched with something or other to bring out sounds. I'd sit patiently, silently waiting as he struggled to make it work. At long last I'd hear something. Wow. It talked to us.

The owner of Meyer Dairy, pop's gas customer, had a larger and far better radio a few years later. Our family would be invited to their house to listen to the prizefights. Yuk!

Santa Finds His Way

We next moved to 2991 E. 63rd St., just around the corner, into the upstairs of a row of two-family houses. Across the street was St. Hyacinth Roman Catholic Church. The parishioners were Polish. Best of all they had special holiday parades, and we had the best seats in town, our upstairs front porch. Priests looked so elegant in spotless white garments, carrying pictures of religious significance, followed by faithful congregation. It was my introduction to parades and festivals – to be followed throughout my life in many countries.



Jane (1927)

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My baby brother Russell was born while we lived in this house, on April 2nd, 1927.



Mom and Russ

Inasmuch as I was a grownup 7 yrs old, I was given the dubious honor of nightly walking him around the block in either his buggy, or the next year in his stroller. That was okay though. It got me out of drying dishes.

At Christmas a fragrant pine tree would stand in the living room corner. There was a swinging door between the kitchen and dining room. Peeking through, we'd have a good view of the spectacle. The door was always kept closed on Christmas Eve and somehow I was always whisked away that evening by Gil, to pop's gas station. By this time it had been rebuilt at the corner of E. 65th, backing up to Meyer Dairy, pop's chief customer. Pop not only

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filled their gas tanks, but repaired the tires, changed their oil from down in his pit and greased the trucks

Meanwhile I'd twiddle my thumbs, waiting for pop and Gil to lock up for the night. Meanwhile mom must have been clairvoyant. She always knew when Santa Claus was due. At long last pop would turn out the lights, lock the door and we'd get into our car, driving down the half block to 2991.

The house had only one set of steps to the upstairs, at the back. In the hall at our top landing stood the icebox in its recessed niche. My job had always been to check and make sure the pan underneath the wooden icebox was not running over with melted water. That would have caused a very frustrated mom. It never seemed to melt as fast in the winter.

Inside the kitchen mom would line the glass door cupboards with lace doilies. Fresh ones every spring and fall housecleaning time. At the kitchen window was our table, and across from it the long legged stove rising majestically from the linoleum floor. On top the burners were warm with pop's dinner in an edible state of grace. The rest of our family had much earlier finished our meal.

Patience at this point had a short fuse. The wait was already far too long and I'd beg pop to hurry through his meal after losing himself in the bathroom, changing oily, smelly clothes. Yet somehow I think he was as anxious as we. Had Santa silently come and left? No one was allowed to swing open that dining room door except mom.

Stealthily she'd tackle the chore, peeking into the living room. She'd finally let us in. Our gifts would be opened on this magical night for there was no way we would miss church on Christmas morning.

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We were far too poor to receive much, but always shared the joy of each other's gifts. I do remember the last doll, giving it to my daughter Barbara many years later. I do hope it'll remain in the family as a keepsake. Another special gift was made by Mrs. Soeder who still worked at the box factory She put together for me a little chest with drawers for my shoes and some for sox. Best of all it was mine, all mine. It had been covered in a pretty blue flowered print paper. Eventually mom was hired by Mrs. Soeder to work in her department, covering specialized hatboxes for those who could afford such luxuries.

The other special gift was a hand-knit cap, scarf and mitten set, mailed to me by my godmother, Mrs. Schreckengost. They had moved out of town and the thrill of receiving something in the mail was as exciting as the contents. I deduced that receiving something in the mail must have meant I was a very special person.

Somewhere along those years some of the nasty kids in school started putting doubts in my mind about whether there really was a Santa. When one Christmas Eve had come, and we had acquired a car, Gil had whisked me out to it and suddenly remembered something, running back into the house. But he admonished me to sit still in the car and wait.

Can you imagine my undiminished glee when I heard a noise. From the small back window I spotted none other than the gent himself, getting out of another car parked behind us, grabbing a bag full of goodies. Whistling and singing, he bounded up the front steps of the house next to ours, looked into their front window, opened their door and entered. "For gosh sakes, Gil," I remember worrying, "get yourself out here and lets get away." I was sure Santa wouldn't leave our gifts if he found us at home. Whew. We got away just in time, I think. And now I knew

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for sure: of course there's a Santa Claus. Those dumb kids were just making up stories.

One other year I saw Santa with my own eyes. I'd been standing in our front window, indolently daydreaming when something flashed across the sky. It had to be Santa in his sleigh. Boy, he sure was in a big hurry, but then of course there were a lot of houses for him to cover.

Still another year we had a disaster. Pop had been very ill. He had gotten out of bed, walked into the living room and fell into the Christmas tree, toppling it and breaking many of the delicate ornaments. Good thing the candles weren't burning on the tree.



Russ and Jane

Gerry and I shared a bedroom that overlooked the next-door neighbor's first floor kitchen. I loved being a voyeur and spying, especially at mealtime. I thought it strange that their mother would take the pots and frying pans from her stove and place them on the middle of their

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table. Everyone would rush to help themselves. I thought this gross.

We at least had better manners and a bit of culture. We eventually were able to afford a Victorola. To keep it from running down and screeching like a banshee, the machine had to be wound with the crank on the side. This was a periodic procedure, but best of all the records this machine played were my introduction to Claire de Lune and other popular classics. We also had another of my favorites: Parade of the Wooden Soldiers.

Ger tried to learn to play the violin, and Gil now tells me it was really his instrument. I don't ever recall his practice but I sure hated that squeaky sound she managed to frequently come up with. I never did learn to enjoy that instrument, except for the rare privileges of hearing something glorious by professionals, such as Hora Staccato, Barcarole, and Lieberstrom.