

VISITING WITH GRANDMA AND GRANDPA

by

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Several years ago I was riding down Germantown Avenue in Philadelphia and suggested detouring past Grandma and Grandpa's house at 128 East Walnut Lane. That was a mistake. East Walnut Lane was no longer the quiet, rather pleasant neighborhood that I recalled from more than 35 years before. Rather, it was part of the enormous Philadelphia ghetto—windows boarded up, spray-can paint everywhere.

That scene was in stark contrast to one I recall from one of our last visits to Germantown. 128 East Walnut was the end of a row of six houses in the Philadelphia row-house style (now more elegantly called townhouses). Grandpa had acquired the strip of land behind the row and put in a rose garden that was his prize and joy. We visited the first weekend in May one year when the roses were in full color. Sunday morning we awoke to find that two inches of snow had fallen. Everyone was out in time for the lovely sight of the roses in their many colors with an icing of pure white snow glistening in the morning sun. Grandpa of course had his camera to record the scene for posterity.

A less pleasant recollection related to the apartment house next door. On one visit I was playing with a girl from the apartment house. We were running up and down the fire escape which was in a tower attached to the apartment house. We opened the door to the outside and discovered a boy about 5 years old glaring at us while holding a small rifle. We slammed the door and retreated to the top of the fire escape. When nothing happened we descended and again opened the door at the bottom. This time the boy fired the rifle, hitting my friend in the thigh. I never saw her again, but I have assumed that the wound was more scary and painful than serious.

There were two standard occasions for stopping at Walnut Lane—holidays and periodic dental check-ups. With both the Parlin and Elcome grandparents in Philadelphia, Christmas in particular

meant a feast at one house followed—sometimes the next day and sometimes the same day!—by an equally sumptuous meal at the other. One year my parents made the mistake of presenting me with a pedalled fire engine in Philadelphia. We had to tie it to the car bumper and listen to the fire bell all the way home.

Thanksgiving meant the Penn-Cornell game. Grandma served dinner early so that those going to the game would be on time. Then we had the long drive home to Glen Ridge—always, it seems now, in snow and ice. The Chevvie, which naturally would be a collector's item today, was small, at best uncomfortable, and unheated. We bundled up in blankets and slipped and slid for many hours on unplowed roads until we finally reached home. Friday and Saturday were work days then, and Pop had to get home after the game.

The star of the Cornell team in the last game or two we saw was Brud Holland, the only black on either team. He has been back in the news in recent years, being named as director of a number of large corporations.

I don't really remember Grandpa from those occasions (The dentist I remember vividly!). I can picture Grandpa presiding at the dinner table but have a clearer image of the austere assemblage of gentlemen that covered the wall over the sideboard. He did show off his roses at each opportunity and once hosted a party in the backyard that was attended by Aunt Miriam's father, among others.

Grandma spent time entertaining the grandchildren. Flinch was the big game—indeed the only game. Grandma would get out the special cards (regular playing cards were not to be found in Methodist homes of that generation) and, each time, reteach the rules. Then she would play with us at least until we had caught on. There were also books. Grandma would get me started on a civil war book with lots of pictures and a pictorial history of World War I. The latter had some gruesome shots which I still recall. Later there was a set of James Fennimore Cooper's works to keep me out of mischief.

As I said, frequently the dentist was included on the Philadelphia agenda. It wasn't Dr. Reid's fault but that was enough to make me want to stay home. It was long before the days of water-cooled, high-speed

drills used by Howie and John that have done so much to take the discomfort out of the repair of cavities. Moreover, it took a whole morning to take care of the family—no checkup and come back in two weeks, but cleaning, check-up and fillings in one sitting. The one who went first was lucky—he didn't have to sit around waiting and thinking about the pain to come.

In going between the Parlin's and the Elcome's we used to stop at Midvale Avenue to see Mom's (Dorothy's) aunts, and, in early years, her Grandmother Scott. I went by Midvale Avenue the other day and, in contrast to East Walnut Lane, the immediate neighborhood has not changed. The large lot across the street is still undeveloped and the houses look much the same. Only the trolley cars and tracks are missing, being replaced by buses and asphalt.

Several summers Grandma and Grandpa went to the Jersey shore. Two summers they rented large houses right on the beach at Bay Head (I have, over the years, gotten greetings from the real estate agent there conveyed by various friends) and the whole family gathered there. It was a matriarchy during the week with the men coming either late from New York or only on weekends.

On nice Sundays Grandma conducted Sunday School classes on the beach for all the children, with decorated shells as attendance awards. That may be a small precedent for the beautiful baptism services on the dock at Silver Bay. Grandma also organized the mock wedding with Camilla as the bride. The costumes were done by hand and all the children (at least through John) took part. (Grandma later repeated the costume production at Silver Bay with a circus motif.)

To a youngster the most exciting thing that happened at Bay Head was the burning of the Morro Castle, a large passenger ship. We could see the smoke from the front porch and saw the remains when the hull drifted ashore several miles north of Bay Head.

It was at Bay Head that I had my first swimming lessons and got my first long pants—white ducks that proved much less practical than blue jeans. When Pop was there we went crabbing and dug clams. I remember watching the kettles in which the crabs and clams were cooked but I don't recall eating any.

Also, we had a rabbit. Deweese (Irene's husband) built an enclosure out of chicken wire that seemed quite adequate. However, within a day or so the rabbit had disappeared.

The event that had the most significant effect is one that I don't remember. Mom had a thyroid problem, had an attack while swimming, and had to be rescued by the lifeguard. After an operation she was incapacitated for a long time and Eddie and I lived for the following winter with Aunt Miriam and Uncle Charles in Tenafly.

After Bay Head, the summer emphasis swung to Silver Bay. However, at least once we stayed for awhile at the Breakers in Wildwood Crest when Grandma and Grandpa were there. What brings that to mind is recollection of the lengthy discussion Grandpa had with the waitress at breakfast explaining that he wanted a cup of hot water—no, not coffee, not tea, not Sanka, not cocoa—just hot water!

In the early spring of 1938, after Grandpa retired, the two of them started on a trip around the world on a large yacht, the *Stella Polaris*. Uncle Charles decided to accompany them with Aunt Miriam and Charlie as far as Panama and invited me to keep Charlie company. The weather was bad on the way down but it finally calmed down enough so that we youngsters could use the tiny swimming pool without being sloshed out at one end or the other. The stop at Havana was uneventful—I don't believe that could have been the time Aunt Grace told about when Grandma asked for a second pina colada.

The following winter Grandma and Grandpa were in Fort Lauderdale. Grandpa had been rehired by the Curtis Publishing Co. It seems that he retired before he had the ten quarters of Social Security coverage that were necessary to entitle him to maximum Social Security benefits. While we were visiting we went to a large Miami hotel (Miami Beach was still a beach then) where Grandpa pulled out some charts and graphs and gave a lecture.

The last trip to Fort Lauderdale was notable for the traveling arrangements. Mom had gone down the week before so Eddie and I took the coach from Newark. We got off at Fort Lauderdale all right and looked for the brass band. We were the only ones on the platform. We tried the telephone to spread the good word, but there was no answer.

After what seemed like a very long time, the family finally arrived—they had been at the station for the other railroad.

Returning to Newark was also an adventure—we flew. And flew. The longest hop was about 45 minutes and the total trip was something like 9 or 11 hours. Still, although the flights were upsetting to some people, to us it was better than 25 hours on the train. Indeed, we would have done it the following year but that was not to be.