

Grandpa's Stogie

Seventy-five years ago my mother, father, brother and I, were living on Riverside Drive with my paternal grandparents in Sioux City Iowa. The year I would guess was 1932 and the Depression was in full onslaught, devastating everything in its path, leaving most American families, businesses, and farms in a state of poverty ruin and despair.

Our immediate family had moved in with Grandma and Grandpa James in their apartment on the second story of a ramshackle green shingled house where the combined income helped us stay financially afloat, barely.

Our three generation living arrangement was typical of family structure after the shock of the stock market collapse of October 1929. The booming economy of the late twenties had sunk precipitously with each succeeding year more perilous than the one before.

My father for all intents and purposes was unemployed having lost his successful plastering business and a home he and Grandpa were building in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, for spec. Our family home on Kenilworth Ave in Glen Ellyn was on the fringe of foreclosure. So Dad was desperately scouring the Midwest for some type of employment, hopefully in construction, but with a family of four to feed and shelter, he had given up on finding anything in his field.

Just like millions of other American breadwinners at this time, he was frenetically looking for any kind of a job that would keep us going during those dark days.

I was attending school in Sioux City in the first grade, trying to adjust to a nomadic schedule that would take our family from Glen Ellyn to Hornick, Iowa, to Sioux City, Elmhurst, Illinois and finally back to Glen Ellyn and Kenilworth Ave.

All this movement during my first grade of school.

Of course I have no memory of the fact that the fall of '32 was the year the country booted Herbert Hoover out of the White House and elected Franklin Delano Roosevelt to begin a presidency that would last until I was serving with the US Navy in World War II.

Please remember there were virtually no safety nets to provide this vast army of the impoverished any type of financial help from the government.

There was no Social Security, no unemployment funds, and no medical or emergency hospital service unless you walked in the door with cash dollars. And of course this was a time light years ahead of credit cards, and creative credit practices of pulling equity dollars out of home ownership.

With housing prices in the pits, equity loans if available then would have no dollar value. One could pick up a beautiful two-story three-bedroom house for ten thousand dollars. But those fortunate to buy or keep such a house were those who had successfully weathered the crash or those in essential security, fire and police, lawyers, doctors, and those serving in city county state and federal government services.

Now that you have a finite picture of living conditions during those years, perhaps an incident that occurred on Riverside Drive might give you an amusing antidote of how the little things were truly a reflection of the times.

My grandfather loved his cigars. Yes they were a luxury, and a source of no small dissension between him and my anal retentive grandmother who prided herself with an always immaculate home. Further she hated those smelly cigars. But she loved her Tom and agreed that one cigar a week was an acceptable compromise.

Family finances and a hospital clean house were not seriously compromised. Grandpa, now seventy, had worked too hard all his life to be denied this indulgence.

But Grandma did fuss about the smell, afterall her largess could go just so far.

Listening to this dialogue and loving both grandparents but more empathetic to grandma, I acted boldly when I found an offending smoldering stogie in an ashtray.

I threw it out the second story window onto the porch roof directly below.

Grandpa's reaction?

To add indelible emphasis to his annoyance with me, he had me hold on to his feet while he stretched his lean frame across the windowsill to grab his precious offending stogie.

It was a lesson in discipline, respect and yes very graphic portrait of how we all scraped together to maintain order and survive.

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