

Thursday, December 20, 2007

[The Holiday Display](#)

The coming Christmas celebration gives me a moment to [weigh](#) in on one of the vexing issues of our day. The holiday display. We had one in Wenonah, in the park, on E. Mantua Ave, across from Margies. The Lion's Club erected it shortly after Thanksgiving and the display consisted of a creche (life size figures of Mary, Joseph, the Wisemen, and baby Jesus all 2 dimensional cutouts), several pine trees decorated with lights and carols piped through a sound system. There may have been Santa and some reindeer but I can't remember. I do remember baby Jesus.

It was cheesy and nice. It mostly had a place in our collective little hearts but as a sincere demonstration of the miracle of Christ's birth it might have been lacking. Not that I don't think piped in carols would have made the manger in that long ago Bethlehem a better place but really I would have preferred just reindeers and Santa and we could leave Jesus in church where he seemed to look a lot better.

Last year I visited Suzy Parker's folks in Townsend's Inlet after the 4th of July. Dewey, Suzy's dad, told us about one year, maybe three or four before my 5th grade celebration, when he was in charge of the music for the Lion's Club. He allowed a young woman whom he and his friends found attractive to pick the music for the display. She picked "Rockin Around the Christmas Tree".

Needless to say this did not go over well in little Wenonah. But listening to Dewey tell the story reminded me of how cool it used to be that just a dumb old rock and roll tune could set everybody into high dudgeon. We were blessed with our small town nincompoopery and it's crazy little battles.

I don't know that it matters whether Jesus is in the park on Christmas eve if he's made of colored pressboard. I do think it matters that he's in the hearts of people that profess to believe that's important. I believe that Christmas is a joyous holiday. The Druids, the Christians, the Jews, all of us knuckleheads shaking in the dark, lighting candles and singing songs. God Bless Us Everyone!

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [8:07 PM](#) [2 comments](#) 

Sunday, December 16, 2007

[Margie's Luncheonette](#)

Downtown Wenonah didn't have much in the way of shopping. There was a BP gas station on the corner of West & Mantua. Across the street was Bowker's grocery store and in the rear of Bowker's was Tony Sacca's meat market. Next to Bowker's was G. Wayne Post and a woman's hair salon. There was a bank further up North West Ave., the Farmer's and Mechanic's National Bank and next to the bank was a building that was first a police station and then a small store run by Mrs. Fleming and Alice Brangan, the


Village Shoppe. Across the street on E. Mantua Ave. was another building that housed various businesses and a second where Margie's Luncheonette was located. Margie's was the center of Wenonah. It was directly across from the park and almost dead center in town. It had a lunch counter, a magazine rack, several booths, school supplies, and a candy counter. It could be said to be almost heaven. In 5th Grade I was finally allowed to eat lunch at Margie's on rare occasions rather than returning home. This meant a grilled cheese or hamburger and a chocolate shake. It was also mega intimidating since all the "cool" kids ate and hung at Margie's. The counter was generally filled with local businessmen and the booths in the back with teenagers and 6th, 7th, & 8th graders. Most of my time in Margie's was spent not in the booths but at the candy counter or magazine rack. Comics and candy. A dual addiction. There was also a cooler filled with sodas on ice. Cokes and vanilla soda and grape and pineapple. You'd stick your hand deep into the cold water and pull out what you wanted. All for a dime.

Candy was still penny candy, which was good if your allowance was .25 cents. My particular favorites were jawbreakers and a sour English candy whose name escapes me. While staring at the counter and making your selection you would steal glances at the kids in the booths. Girls in cashmere sweaters and guys with leather jackets and pompadours. Cool kids cracking wise and all no doubt laughing at me in my cowlicked glory. The Gernaga brothers, the older DeHarts, the Brangans, Bobby McQuaide, and a dozen other kids all too cool for school were back in the booths blowing straws at each other and sucking down fountain drinks. Hanging out.

I was forbidden to hang out. I'm not exactly sure why but I do know that Earl Rowland was one of the kids in the back and he was a real bad egg. Ralph Parkinson and his crew were there as well. Some girls my age were there, Dolores Lorenz, Sandy Fay, Jane Shiflet. All fast girls. Way too fast for me who know idea what any of this meant.

So I'd get my two comics and five pieces of candy and walk slowly home through the gathering dark. Inventing fantasies where the girls would dig me and I'd save them from evil. Then I'd be the cool cat. Then they'd see. They'd know who I really was inside. The fantasies of young boys are deeply disturbing and I'll leave you now to contemplate my terrible revenge. If Bobby McQuaide and Stewart DeHart could hang me in a closet by a fan belt, well, fine. But soon they'd know who they were messing with. I was smart. I was brave. I weighed 65 pounds soaking wet. My hair stuck up in the back and my shoes were scuffed and worn. My shirts screamed loser. My pants had flannel lining in the winter.

Oh they'd soon see who they were messing with, yes, indeed.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [9:20 AM](#) [5 comments](#) 

Wednesday, December 12, 2007

[Interior Decorating](#)

It's true that most houses were viewed for just a second from the porch. The exception was the houses of our friends. We spent lots of time in our friends homes and we were being taught lessons, about what rooms were for, about where we could go, and about what we could do.

My own home was decorated in a mix of hand me down furniture and store bought couches. The basic motif was "colonial". At least that's what my mom said it was. Lack

of money meant some pieces of furniture were periodically repainted to fit some new color scheme my mom came up with. Some chairs were periodically reupholstered. Once in a while a new couch or chair came to the house from Sears or the furniture store. Once in a while. Not often. It was always a sensible piece. And it was "colonial".

My friend Terry Fleming's house was the exact opposite of ours. One of the few contemporary homes in our neighborhood it boasted fireplaces and a finished basement. The look was "modern". Probably Danish modern but I'm just guessing. There was a kidney shaped table made from weird wood. There were thick odd carpets. There were glasses in the cabinets with racy sayings on them and skimpily clad girls. Downstairs in the basement there was a slot machine that worked.


A slot machine! In Wenonah! You couldn't do anything bad in Wenonah but in the Flemings you could gamble. Sadly you couldn't keep your winnings but then you didn't have to use your own money either.

The basement had wood panelling as did the kitchen and small first living room. Everyone in the Fleming house slept late. Mick and I were up at 6am and banging on Terry's door at 7:30am. Mrs. Fleming would open the screen door and stare at us as though we were martians. Terry was asleep and that's where we should be. Boom. The door would shut and we would meander out to figure out what to do till 10am when Terry woke up.

Mrs Fleming was fascinating to me. The house was filled with the smell of her Toni hair treatments. She was a tall, loud, brassy Irish woman. Big hearted and filled with noise. The exact opposite of my house. Years later I met her sister. She had sung with the Dorsey brothers in the forties and was married to a NY stockbroker. Their son was "damaged" in Nam and spent his days flying a biplane. Their daughter worked at MOMA.

The Flemings went to clubs. The Latin Quarter. Philly. They drank and laughed. They were like grown ups on TV.

Mick and I would go back to our colonial home and bumble around with our soldiers or read some comics then back to Terry's and the slots. It was like going from Christmas in Connecticut to Viva Las Vegas every day.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [6:48 AM](#) [1 comments](#) 

Friday, December 07, 2007

[5th Grade Report Card](#)

Dewey and Edna Parker's house. It was the childhood home of my friends Suzy, Danny, and Billy. Behind it Dewey ran his West Jersey Biological Supply business (the rat farm). But we could care less. For us all that mattered was the lake.

There were other lake's to skate on in Wenonah. At the end of Jefferson by the Wenonah lake was Davidson's lake, perfect size for ice hockey, and upstream from Parker's Lake was a much larger lake, Langston's. We didn't much go there till we were in our teens. Over in Sinnott Tract there was Sinnott's lake. We'd skate on any one of these lakes but during my youth everyone in town went to Parker's.


It's gone now. A hurricane in the 80's wiped out the dam and NJ DEP restrictions made it too costly to rebuild the dam so no more lake, no more skating.

In any case that cold January day my Aunt Gert dragged me and Mick and our brandy new skates down to the lake. This is probably going to come as a shock but I sucked at ice skating. Over the years I've attained a measure of competency so I don't look like a complete klutz but that afternoon was disaster piled upon disaster. Most of which were caused by the fact that no one with me, including Gert, knew how to skate on hockey skates. Everyone had figure skates. All over the ice people were executing twirls and figure eights, and tearing up clouds of ice with their toes. But hockey skates have no teeth on the tips of the skates. You stop on hockey skates like you do on ski's. Sideways. With edges. But no one knew that, least of all me.

So once again I was hurtling around on a new Christmas gift with no way of stopping. Except to fall face forward. I grew colder and colder. Mick got better and better. The day dragged forever. The young girls in my class skated around me like I was a lump of coal skittering across the ice.

I'd like to give you some epiphany here. Say that I at last mastered skating that day and executed a gorgeous turn and stop. But I didn't. I hurtled into the dock, banged my knees, cursed what little curses I knew and tore the skates from my feet. I'd be back the next day, and the next, and I sucked just as much.

There were some benefits to this little bit of torture but they bore no fruit till I was in my late teens. In the meantime I looked like the rough tough cream puff at a time when I wanted to glide like a god.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [7:35 PM](#) [3 comments](#) 

Sunday, December 02, 2007

[The Sears Catalog](#)

It being the holiday season it seems pertinent to mention the Sears and Roebuck catalog. The catalog came to us on a quarterly basis and in many ways was our primary shopping vehicle. School clothes, spring wardrobes, bathing suits. All from Mr. Sears and Mr. Roebuck. This is from a time when there were no shopping malls. When people had to go to Philadelphia to Wanamaker's to shop. There was an actual Sears and Roebuck store in beautiful downtown Camden but we rarely went there even though it was 20 minutes away.

But the catalog that mattered most was the Christmas catalog. It came out, as I recall, sometime in mid November and we eagerly grabbed it and began our gift choosing. Army men, Easy Bake Ovens, Chemistry Sets, dolls, football helmets, bikes, everything,

everything was in the Sears catalog.

But they weren't just in the catalog. No, things were laid out so you could see just how great they were and how you could use them. These layouts were spectacular. The army men were storming the beaches, the tubes and vials of the chemistry set were bubbling with sinister potions, men and boys were playing energetic games of touch football in authentic NFL jerseys wearing authentic NFL helmets. The bikes had gear aplenty, rear view mirrors, dangly shit that hung off the hand grips, lights and mileage devices. It was mesmerizing. It also was perfect for pointing out exactly what you wanted to your clueless parents. Left to their own devices god knows what they might pick but with the Sears catalog you could clearly circle your first, second, and third choices.

The bulk of the catalog was in black and white but the cover was in glorious Christmas colors. It, more than any religious event, marked the beginning of the holiday season. Fuck Thanksgiving, fuck Advent, this was the real deal. And by arriving well before Thanksgiving it stretched out the gap between whatever day it was and Christmas to near unendurable lengths. Ninety years till Christmas, only sixteen thousand shopping days till Christmas. The gap between getting the catalog and the lighting of the tree on Christmas morning was the size of the Snake River canyon. Unfathomable.

So we'd soldier on, day after day after day, the only thing keeping our hopes alive the catalog. In the last weeks before Christmas we'd begin the hunt for hidden toys. This was hard on everyone. Usually the gifts arrived at the Post Office in town while we were in school so Mom had time to squirrel them away before we got home. Over the years their hiding places became more and more obvious. The problem was that if you found them you didn't really know whose gift anything was. It was as if God had created some cruel laboratory experiment in envy. Part of you would be pleased you found a gift, part would think it was for your brother and your parents hated you, then another part would hate yourself because you begrudged your brother a gift. Cruel cruel fate.

The only way your hopes and dreams would be revealed was on Christmas morning. Then we'd run down the stairs to see the tree ablaze with light, our parents in their robes and dozens of wrapped packages scattered about the room. At that instant you were sure you'd get everything you wanted. In that moment Christmas was glorious. It would inevitable come crashing down around you as you opened the gifts. Cold economic realities would raise their head. No radio controlled planes in the Wiler house. Yes, we'd get a set of army men but it was the second best set, yes, we'd get a chemistry set but not the complete set in the catalog. A little knowledge is a dangerous, dangerous thing. Still and all there was always next Christmas. And at least we could use the Johnny Reb cannon to blow the Christmas balls off the tree one by one. Then there'd be turkey and a week of no school. Not bad, not bad.

Wednesday, November 28, 2007

[Smells](#)

The world of childhood is very, very small. One or two blocks, a school, some friends, your parents, your grandparents, your brothers, your sisters. Nothing much else. And as it shrinks smaller things grow. Like smells, like odors, like scents. Only an idiot wouldn't be on Proust's side. Of course his Madelaine's could conjure up a world. Of course.

But what smells and where. Start in our basement at 206 W. Mantua Ave. The chlordane wafting from beneath the porch, the smells of melting plastic toys over the ping pong table, the chemistry set and it's sulphur, the oil from the oil tank, the oil for the tools, the bleaches and soaps and detergents. The smell of Lava for removing the oil from the tools and the tank. Maybe the floor had just been painted deep red so there is the smell of the new oil based paint. The mildew. The cool rush of cold from the freezer and the smell of that cold as it fills your hot face on a summer's day. The smell of your dirty shirts and socks piled by the washing machine.

Then up the stairs and into the kitchen and of course there is the smell of food. But also the ever present cigarette smoke and the wax your mother applies to the linoleum and the dish detergent. Joy. And on the kitchen window sill there is an old ceramic bowl with an old, old hard boiled egg and one day the egg breaks and there is that dense sulphur too. And garbage on a hot summer day. Bacon frying on a Saturday morning and butter browning in the iron skillet to make scrambled eggs. On the holidays a turkey in the oven and stuffing and those glorious smells and then out the back door to the garage and the smells of all the things stacked there.

Around the garage the wisteria, purple and thick with scent driving the carpenter bees insane as each of them devour the garage. The tar of the roof shingles, the oil on the floor of the garage from the cars, the three in one oil for the bike chains, the smell of chrome polish, the odor of the wax candle as you rub it on your sleds runners. The paint cans, the cobwebs and dust, the dry smell of old, old wood, dry in the South Jersey heat.

Just to the side the smells of the vegetable garden, the rotting lettuce, the tomatoes thick with smell, the sweet corn, the deep rich brown earth, nearly black and thick with the scent of decay and rebirth, behind the garden the compost and the tree and the scents of barks and old rotting leaves. The air in fall always thick with the smell of rotting leaves. When Johanna and I were in Barnsboro for Thanksgiving we sat and watched thousands of leaves swirling from the trees in the wind and she said it never smells like this in Jersey City and it never does. The smell of burning leaves mingled with the smell of the cigar from the man tending the fire in the street mixed with the scent of new macadam. Almost like licorice.

And grass and hay. New mown grass, piles of rotting grass, fresh uncut grass. Hay, and weeds, and skunk cabbage. Dead squirrels on a path. Dead mice under a log. The swamp smell of the creek and the creek mud. The smell of your wet woolen shirts and gloves. The smell of your dog or your cat just in from the rain. The smell of the air just after a thunder storm. The smell just before it snows. The smell of the chlorine pool, the cedar lake water, the smells of my grandmother's paints.

Too many to name too many to remember.

Not enough time to sit back and inhale and recollect. They come rushing in like unwanted ghosts at inopportune moments. When I was very ill and lying in my bedroom I realized my room smelled just like it did when I was six. How odd. How unbidden. How unwanted.

The smells of your first sex and your first after shave and your first blood wiped from

your nose in your first fight.

Breath them in. Breath them out. It's like watching or listening. Attend.

Sunday, November 18, 2007

Models

Enough serious crap. Let's move on to more important concerns. What to do during the cold months from January to March if you're a fifth grade boy. Models. And not Heidi Klum type models. No. Real, scale models of cars and aircraft carriers and monsters and superheroes. Testors glue and paint and instructions and newspapers strewn across a small desk under a little light at 8:30pm.

My first model was one my father gave me. A Sunbeam. That's this weird car made in the 60's that was half a Volkswagon, half a Fairlane. It was two toned, usually a pale blue with white. It was ugly and we owned one. It was the car my mother got to drive. I guess that's why he gave it to me. As per usual I was given the kit, the glue, and the paint and set to my own devices. Now, in fifth grade I was as awkward as I'd ever be which is to say unable to master any technical skill. Delicate was way beyond my fingers abilities. I could barely color within the lines. This meant I spent several days screaming and yelling at myself and begging my father for help till it was done.

My next model came that Christmas. The Visible Man. This was both an incredible gift and some horrible torture. It had ten zillion parts that had to be glued and painted and then carefully fitted together because it came apart! Jesus, Mary, and Joseph as my father would say. My Visible Man resembled the Terminator in late stages of decay. Some parts were painted, some were not, I may have left out the liver. Glue was smeared all over the clear skin of the Visible Man making him more the translucent, smeary man.


I moved up in class. Hot Rods. These were gorgeous models by Aurora that required incredible amounts of patience and skill. I had none. My friend Terry had all of them and more in reserve. He could apparently assemble a model in ten minutes, not counting drying time, and it always looked just like in the magazines or on the box cover. Tommy Jenkins actually spray painted numerous layers of candy coated red on his cars. They gleamed like they were in a car show. The wheels moved. You could almost see some cool cat from California in a white t shirt sitting next to a leggy blonde in a huge bee hive.

Mine looked they'd gone cross country with the Joads.

Up to monsters. Frankenstein, Dracula, the Mummy. Terry's looked real, mine like monsters, only gluey, misshapen attempts by pathetic, arrogant humans to take on the power of God. Stitched together, missing parts, dripping red everywhere except where it should be.

My room stank of glue and paint. My new desk was splattered with red and green and little hillocks of plastic cement. On the plus side one day Terry's mom found him almost passed out at his desk because he'd inhaled so much plastic cement fumes. That could never happen to me. Before that would have happened I'd have tossed the piece of shit plastic torture machine across the room in a fifth grade rage. Then I'd stalk downstairs

and sit in my favorite chair reading Classic's Illustrated and sucking a jaw breaker in a stink of frustration. God, life was good.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [11:11 AM](#) [1 comments](#) 

Wednesday, November 14, 2007

Secrets

I'm going to cheat today. Because it's important, because it matters. The last post was about what we didn't know about in the homes we entered. What we didn't know about, more than anything, was secrets and those secrets were sexual in nature. We didn't know because we were barely sexual. Because we were children. Maybe we had inklings but it was that and nothing more.

For everyone in Wenonah being sexual was to be a freak. Odd. You married and had children and they came from sex but how that happened was never spoken of. If you had sex and it had nothing to do with making a child it was even more unspoken. Of course there were affairs. Of course there were men and women that had sex. Teenagers, young adults, men and women with great longing, men and men and women and women. But you never spoke of any of this because to speak of this made you a freak. Like Mr. Webb. Why should this bother me. I'm a grown man who has been a sexual being his whole life. I think sex is normal and natural and important. I've never shrunk from expressing my sexuality. My desires. My needs. That is a lie. Of course I have. I couldn't speak of anything outside of sex which wants a child. Not hetero or homo or any other sex. To think of desiring another for sexual reasons was unspeakable and to think that you might be a person who lives for those reasons. Well. You're a freak.

I live with a gorgeous, generous, person named Johanna. She is not a woman. She is anatomically a man. She is a woman. She is a man. She is everything you could want in a lifemate but according to the world in which I grew up she is a freak. And that makes me a freak by association.

When I came home to Wenonah, sick with AIDS, none of my childhood friends came to visit me. My family and a few neighbors, my friend Crystal and my landlord Rachel and my neighbor Mrs Seville were some of the few who said even hello. I was first angry, then saddened. They didn't come because I was different. First, I might die. Second, I was clearly gay, Third, I was nearby. We can all take pity on those in suffering at a distance but to do so with those nearby requires courage and strength most of don't possess. I walk by people everyday who are in deep pain. So, with my childhood friends.

Johanna came to me some months into my recovery and brought me two bunny rabbits. She relished the joys of a spring in Wenonah. It was not where she belonged but she felt it's great beauty.

In a week or two it will be World AIDS Day. People with far less resources and family than I are dying and suffering everyday throughout the globe because of shame and secrets. The simple fact of the matter is that the virus of AIDS doesn't give a fuck about you or your desires or needs or virtuosity. It's a virus. By virtue of your inaction or stupidity or lack of knowledge it finds a host and lives and thrives and the host dies. Or doesn't.


All of us can do each and everyone of our fellow human beings a great service by

remembering this. We can spend a moment on World AIDS Day remembering someone or perhaps more people we've lost and we can commit to never allowing secrets, shame, and being other to destroy a life. We can reach out to people that aren't like us and realize that all of us are exactly the same. Naked. In the eyes of the Lord. In need of prayer and succor.

So please, this Thanksgiving, take a moment to reach out to the people nearest you and least like you and give them some small kindness. And then reach into your pockets and give to those who die from hunger and AIDS and cancer because people don't give.

We can all of us give, everyday, in every way.

God Bless and Happy Thanksgiving!

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [11:19 PM](#) [2 comments](#) 

Thursday, November 08, 2007

Interiors

One thing about money and work. It brought you into contact with a lot of people you didn't really know and more than that it took you into their homes. Not all the way into their homes, just into their homes. Usually just inside the front door. From there you got a glimpse of their lives. Just that. A glimpse.

Wenonah was made up primarily of Victorian homes and a scattering of homes built in the 1920's. On the northeast corner there was a development built in the fifties. But for the most part we're talking homes with porches and entry halls. What someone in a Jane Austen novel might call a parlor. My own house had it's front hallway, complete with a small bathroom which we called the powder room, and the stairs leading to the bedrooms. Just to the right was a living room with a bay window. When people came to visit they entered by this front door and hallway. When friends came they went to the back or side door.

So it was with me and my friends when we went to earn money. When we knew the people, or more precisely, their children we entered the home from the side door or the back door. In Terry Fleming's case the side door was the garage door, for instance. When we didn't we knocked or rang the bell at the front door. Some period of time would elapse and an adult would open the door a bit, perhaps a foot or two, and say hello and ask us what we wanted. We wanted work. But in asking we were also asking to look inside and look we would.

We'd peer around the adult for the secrets within. Most of the homes were a little dark, maybe that was just a trick of the light, or maybe it was a natural inclination to save electricity on the part of older people. The furniture might be old or modern. You almost never heard a tv in the background. There might be a dog barking at their side. The Marx's dog once leapt up and bit me on the elbow. Hard. Don't come in too far. You never know.

Some of the adults were well dressed, some disheveled. Sometimes a man would answer the door on a weekday and that was strange. Sometimes they would hide from you.

Especially if you were collecting for the newspaper. You could hear them inside and you would ring and ring yet no adult would come to the door. That was an interesting lesson. Sometimes a beautiful young wife or stunning teenage girl would answer the door. That

was scary and wonderful all at once. The smells that came from inside were also always different. Musky, perfumes, lavender, pinesol, all the different smells of a house. All just drifting two or three feet away, just past a hulking adult figure asking what did you want after all. What indeed?

Why was the door not opened wide? Why wasn't it flung open? Why didn't they ask us in for a coke or a little talk? It was the rare person who would do such a thing. They had something we wanted and they weren't going to give it up easily. We would have to work hard for what we wanted. To get beyond that door and have them open their wallet or purse and pull out a few crumpled singles for our little hands. Maybe they thought we wanted something more. Maybe we did.

Tuesday, October 30, 2007

Money and Children

It's time for filthy lucre to raise it's head. You've gathered by now that my family was not rich but happy. Nonetheless there was not a lot of cash to go around. In, I believe, 3rd Grade I got my first allowance. 25 cents. Not a lot but much more than Mick's dime. At the time that would buy two comic books and five pieces of penny candy or one candy bar. My friends, for the most part, got a bit more. But I was fairly happy with this.

What I wasn't happy with was my father's new found insistence on work. Suddenly after we finished Church School on Saturdays we were enlisted in a number of "chores" to earn our meager allowances. Raking the lawn, taking out trash, scrubbing the kitchen floor. All tasks that we did poorly and begrudgingly.

By 5th Grade I was raking in 50-75 cents a week but had also discovered entrepreneurship. We could earn money by doing chores for older folks in the neighborhood. And they paid way better than my father. Everyone in my family treated money differently. I spent like a drunken sailor on Saturday night. Mick hoarded and binged. Ted just hoarded. Mary Louise was too small to have any money.

But we did manage to save money to spend when we went to the shore each summer. Money to purchase toy soldiers and rides on the amusements, etc. But mostly we spent our money on frivolities. Spiderman, Famous Monsters of Filmland, Superman, wax candies, jawbreakers, twizzlers, sodas, etc, etc, etc.


I need to talk a bit more about how begrudgingly we performed our chores. My father would invariably grab a rake from our hands and rake the leaves himself screaming that this was the proper way to rake leaves. He was right. It was proper for him to rake leaves. Standing there shaking really wasn't hard work if you think about it. On the other hand we had a penchant for putting tasks off. This was particularly bad with snow shovelling. New fallen snow, even heavy, wet snow, is easily removed. Snow packed by dozens of travellers and frozen into slick patches of ice is not. We never learned our lesson and instead spent hours after school with an ice chopper going over small patches of concrete trying to free them of their ice.

On the plus side we had dough for baseball cards and we could pick up tons of cash by

shovelling the Sacca's house. Sometimes even getting up to five dollars! Five, freaking, dollars. More money than I would see for weeks from my allowance.

Oh sure, we also got money from well intentioned relatives at Christmas and birthdays but that was always removed and placed in our savings accounts at the Farmer's and Mechanic's Bank. The Farmer's and Mechanic's Bank. Jesus. And we would have periodic flurries of collecting soda bottles from various families and trading them in at Margies for the deposit money. But mostly there was raking leaves, mowing lawns, and shovelling snow. Hard, hard work done fitfully and by surly little urchins. Wet cranky little dickheads.

It wasn't till sixth grade that I began my misadventures with newspaper routes. But they would come. They would come.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [7:33 PM](#) [1 comments](#) 

Sunday, October 28, 2007

[Chemistry Sets](#)

My parents, like all the parents of their day and most likely like parents today, felt a need to improve our minds. We needed to learn and explore the world around us. Because they didn't actually observe what we did when we were in the world around us they supplemented the world with "educational" gifts. Sometimes these sucked. Like classical recordings. But sometimes they were marvelous. Like chemistry sets.

A chemistry set was the best birthday or Christmas gift you could receive short of an actual bb gun. Chemistry sets had beakers and test tubes and things to hold the test tubes and bunsen burners and most importantly...chemicals. Shit in it's purest form. Shit you mix up and use to ruin the world. You were Dr Frankenstein or Einstein or the inventor of the next best, great thing to be invented. Since none of my friends were engineers or inclined in that direction we had no real scientific method. We just mixed shit up and watched what happened. These were actual, real, potentially dangerous chemicals. Now they would come with a host of warnings. Then they came with nothing. Oh, wait...there was an instruction book that we never read.


So we took my chemistry set down to the basement. Set it on our play shelf and began to make poison gases and toxic fumes and potent liquids that would peel the finish off our furniture. Bubbling, smoking, egg shell stinking chemical messes.

We were in heaven. We might have been in Bhopal but to us it was heaven. Naturally we supplemented the meager amount of chemicals the kit came with by appropriating chemicals from our homes. Cleaning solvents, pesticides, paints, and other liquids that appeared similar in nature were added to the toxic brew. Oh the wonders of science.

Many of our skills would come in handy in college when we had to measure and sort various illegal substances but that was really the last time any of this would matter. What I learned was that shit stunk and that it was fun to mix shit up and set it on fire.

When I was working at my company Fleetrak I had the opportunity to work on a regular basis with engineers. These are very strange people who actually understand the inner workings of things. If an engineer gets a toy for Christmas he takes it apart to see how it works and then makes it work better. He does it in an orderly, logical manner. I've had engineers ask me what algorithm we were using in our GPS engine. I told him I didn't

have any rhythm but if I did I wouldn't name it Al. He didn't laugh. We were not engineers. We didn't follow any rules. We didn't try to learn anything. We weren't under the direct supervision of a parent or guardian and so we were more like imps in the machine. We just fucked with shit. And had fun. Lots and lots of fun.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [8:01 AM](#) [0 comments](#) 

[JFK and all that](#)

5th Grade is the year we began to understand the world. We were all fans of our president. He was young and he was cool and his wife was beautiful and he had two beautiful children. This was a time before the time we live in. The press allowed us to indulge in this fantasy. If he had a terrible back problem and was a womanizer and if his wife was not so very nice and if their marriage was less than perfect and if maybe he wasn't the best president in the world we'd never know because it wasn't good form to talk about such things in the press. Thanks be to God.

So me and Terry and Kenny and Bob picked up Our Weekly Reader and read about the latest events of the world. We learned how we should join the Peace Corps so we could help save the poor Africans from starvation and ignorance and we learned about how we should exercise and go on fifty mile hikes. This particular bit of presidential insanity somehow rubbed off on my old man who decided Mick and I were flabby little nincompoops. Nincompoops we may have been but flabby was far off the mark. I weighed all of 60 lbs in 5th grade and I may be stretching it at that. In my Sophomore year of high school I weighed in at a cool 115lbs without even trying. Mick was no better. Nonetheless my father challenged us to see how many push ups we could do. Not many, not many. Which led, somehow, to the Royal Canadian Air Force Exercise Manual. A series of isometric and other calisthenic exercises which we were encouraged to indulge in on a daily basis. And like little puppies we did...for a while.


But being good little boys we also indoctrinated our friends and that led inexorably to the Wenonah Olympics. That's right. We staged our own Olympic games in Wenonah. Of course we didn't have a track and we didn't have a discus and we didn't have a shot to put and we had no arenas but we had willing acolytes (Ted and his little friends) and we had imaginations and we did the best we could under the circumstances. We ran the fifty yard dash and someone had a stop watch they borrowed from their dad. We had relay races.

We tried as hard as we could using bamboo poles to do a pole vault. For some reason the pole vault more than any other Olympic or track and field event captivated us. We wanted with all our hearts to be able to launch ourselves twenty feet into the air and land on a soft cushion to the cheers of the crowd (Ted and his little friends).

Sadly we never got over three or four feet. We did a credible long jump and we enjoyed race walking because you looked like an idiot and we passed race walkers in Fairmount Park in Philadelphia so if adults could walk like idiots so could we. And we ran. But then we ran anyway all day long. It was the one thing we did beside ride bikes.

What did this running and jumping and cheering have to do with John Fitzgerald Kennedy and his bride and their two young children? To them, nothing. To us, everything. We were walking in their footsteps. We were playing touch football just like they did. We were active. We were committed. We believed. That's the key word here. Belief. Because now if you picked up Our Weekly Reader you'd say what a bunch of shit.

You'd say this is just propaganda or hooey or nonsense. You wouldn't give a shit if they were building a great bridge from Staten Island to New York City because you'd be sweating the costs. You wouldn't care about bringing water to a small African village because you'd be worried about the ozone or the price of gas or your kid who's got a drug problem. But we believed. We believed we should be better. We believed we could be better. We believed that by dint of hard labor and imagination you could change the world. This was to have dire consequences but for now we were just a bunch of kids in dungarees racing around the block as fast as we could trying to be the best and fastest kid on the block.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [7:33 AM](#) [1 comments](#) 

Saturday, October 27, 2007

[Ruthie Felch and the Man in the Woods](#)

In 5th Grade we did not understand sex. Oh sure, one day the year before at Chris DeHarts we found out how babies were made. It seemed strange to us. How could your penis make a baby? I mean you pissed out of it. Did you pee into the girl? It didn't quite make sense but enough older boys (Stewart DeHart and Bobby McQuaide) had told us so we bought into the whole thing. We were interested in girls, like I said earlier, but it was all inchoate.


One day in school something odd happened. Our teacher came in the class to tell us Ruthie Felch had been molested by a man in the woods by the railroad tracks. She warned the girls to stay away from the woods. Molested. What did that mean? There was much speculation and no clear facts. This was after all a time when no one talked about sex. Remember that we learned where babies came from because older boys told us. Having a parent or teacher explain this to you at 11 would be unthinkable. That meant we were all at a loss to understand what actually had happened to Ruthie Felch. In fact, to this day I actually have no idea what happened. Was she raped? Did he expose himself? Did he touch her? No one but Ruthie and the teachers and the man know what happened.

But this incident brought a bit of darkness into our bright little town. Suddenly there was danger all around us. Much like the Soviet Union menacing our borders there were perverts in our back yards, lurking in our woods.

I had read a number of adult books by now, including "To Kill a Mockingbird", but when sex parts came up I just breezed by them. They made no sense. The author might as well have been describing strange habits of an alien race.

But still, there was a man in the woods. We all knew about the tramp who lived out by the Parker's at the dump. Boys said that he did bad things to them. What those things were we had no idea but we never went past the Parker's in our excursions in the woods. The dump behind the Parker's was by the side of the creek but our trips up the Mantua Creek all stopped at the railroad trestle. We had no wish to find out what the man might do.

So we'd run home from school and play our games and watch tv and go to sleep and dream untroubled dreams. No lurkers in the woods. No communists torturing our families. No danger anywhere in our happy sleep.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [9:11 AM](#) [1 comments](#) 

Wednesday, October 17, 2007

[Girls Against Boys](#)

So here we all are in Mrs. Fuller's class. Girls and boys. Boys and girls. All next to each other. For some reason things seem different. Normally, at least up until now, boys were repulsed by girls. They were in the parlance of the times, icky. We were gross. But suddenly for some reason none of us could put a finger on we wanted them to think well of us.

Being boys we really didn't know how to accomplish this and also because we couldn't put a finger on it we were somewhat ambivalent about it. That resulted in mixed messages. I doubt seriously that any girl is really interested in skunk cabbages or dead frogs but for some reason we thought they might be. We suddenly felt okay with them playing games with us. Not all games but certain ones. Kick the Can and the Gun Game in particular. Also we moved the location of the games to their houses.

All of a sudden we were playing Kick the Can at the Collinge's which was a half block from my house on W. Mantua Ave. Kathy lived next to the Cook's on one side and Sharon Hoffman on the other. The games spilled through all three yards. The Collinge home had a large palazzo type front porch with rock walls and slate flooring and we were able to execute daring leaps to escape capture.


The Cook's house had a small playhouse in the rear corner which was also an ideal hiding place. I think the main attraction of all these games was hiding in close proximity to young women. We weren't sure what that would mean but we certainly looked forward to it.

I developed my first crushes on both Kathy and Sharon and they continued, switching from one to the other till the end of sixth grade. I'm still not certain which of them I preferred. Kathy was bright and Sharon was cuter so maybe it would have been better if they could have become one person. At any rate when I look at their picture I'm quite certain it was not their stylish outfits that drew me to them. Nor mine.

There were older girls who were far more attractive and even more scary. From Peggy Sacca to Cheryl Furey to Donna Hambrecht the world was filled with girls changing into women and really I had no way of coping.

I'd spend my afternoons on my paper route spinning elaborate fantasies about saving them from an invading Russian Army and taking them to live with me and my band of brave guerilla warriors in the swamps of the Mantua Creek. Of course the woodland there was roughly a hundred yards wide so I'm certain I would never have been found by determined Russian soldiers.

I'll leave you then with me on my new red, Schwinn Typhoon. Riding one handed down Cherry Street with a basket of Woodbury Daily Times in a bag in the front. I rise up to toss one to the Fleming house and a Russian drops dead from my well thrown knife. Like a ghost I travel these mean streets. A vengeful, sexy, killing ghost. Alone. Cool. With a flannel shirt and lined dungarees and the sure knowledge I had to be home for dinner in a half hour.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [11:47 AM](#) [1 comments](#) 

Thursday, October 11, 2007


[Identification Issues](#)

I should actually be saying something meaningful about Wenonah but instead I'll give a shout out to Terry Fleming who called roughly four hours after this went up to start puzzling over the names of people and to Bob Thomas who wrote to complain about my formatting...I guess I could rescan this photo but the reality is I made a pdf when I scanned it then had to change it to a jpg to upload it and, well, Bob can't make it as big as he'd like. I'll think about rescanning:)

Then this morning there was a very helpful post from Bonnie Mecholsky with Stanley Landis and Jane Shiflet's names and her correct spelling. How cool is that? Thanks to this blog and you guys I've now officially talked more with all of you in the past six months or so than I did over thirty years since we left Wenonah. There's a lot to be said for the internet.

Again, several folks from Gateway Class of 1970 are working on a reunion. Tentative date is July 5th and thanks to Greg Jones, tentative site is the Holiday Inn in Bridgeport. Greg thinks some of us will get smashed and not be able to move. I think he's probably right. On the other hand we could all rent limos to drive us home. Please send me your names and addresses if you see this so I can keep you up to date as the day nears.

Much as I'm petrified of going back to 1970 I think it will be fun.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [6:35 AM](#) [1 comments](#) 

Wednesday, October 10, 2007


[Mrs Fuller's Fifth Grade Class 1962-63](#)



Top Row from left: Stanley Landis (thanks Bonnie), me (Jack Wiler), Tommy Jenkins, Bob Stokes, David Moffat, Terry Fleming (in a typical class photo pose), Ralph Leeds, David Earnhardt, Don Davis (though I could be wrong), Tim Sellen, Ken Fell, and Johnny Hindman

Middle Row from left: Christine Sabetta, Kathy Gillan (sp?) , Kathy Collinge, Sharon Hoffman, Suzy Parker, Bonnie Mecholsky (Thanks again Bonnie, let's hope I get this right in 6th grade), Caroline Stens, Nancy Garrison, June Lang, Irene Thomas, Barbara Conway, and Mrs Fuller (oddly enough)

Bottom Row from left: Madelaine Pillings, Susan Abbott, Margie Loving, Ruthie Felch, Michelle Smith, Dottie Chattin, Jane Shiflet (thanks Bonnie!), Elisa Contarino, Dolores Lorenz, Linda Smith

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [9:28 AM](#) [1 comments](#) 

Wednesday, October 03, 2007

[Fifth Grade](#)

Fifth grade was different. I was entering new worlds. I was done with Mr. McIntire. My eyes were better. I was better read. I was happier. I was discovering girls and feeling like a different person. Fifth Grade begins not in the fall but in the summer. We belonged to the Wenonah Swim Club now. The swim club had it's heroes and heroines. Great swimmers that competed year round. My friend Terry's brothers and kids from Woodbury were stars in the world of swimming. They walked like gods across the grass of the club. Their parents played cards and perhaps sipped cocktails and we ran like maniacs about the pool. As usual my summer began with two weeks in Ocean City and then I returned to Wenonah. Hot and humid now. Deep greens and thick air. We'd ride our bikes to the pool and drink cokes and eat cheesesteaks and watch the teenagers, cool and serene. We played our swim games, swim tag and we took diving lessons and we were still kids but we were changing. Learning. We showered in the shower before we went in the pool. We wore speedoes and we admired the kids that won meets. I wasn't a kid anymore. I wasn't a teenager either. I was a skinny kid watching how to be. Then we rode our bikes to the school at the end of the summer to see where we'd be in

the fall. Mrs. Fuller's class. Now we were all together. The kids who were smart. The kids who weren't in Ed Campbell's classes. Now we were treated differently. There were still classes well above us. All the way to 8th grade but that would change. In two years we would go to a new junior senior high school.

Suddenly what we had on our backs made a difference. All of a sudden we noticed girls and girls noticed us and we were all dancing an odd dance with no practice and no experience.

We started playing games in the summer nights with girls. We watched them intensely. We watched how some boys were smoother with girls. I always felt awkward. I guess in retrospect all of us did but it was intense for me. But still for two years my ability to know things seemed to make a difference with girls. They seemed to like me. And I like that.

Class was easier than Mr. McIntire. After him everything was cake. I knew the drill. I seemed almost magically to know how to write paragraphs and reports and make them the way teachers wanted. In fact, the thing that most amazes me is that I started to understand I knew what teachers liked.

Our games began to change. Our play began to become more focussed. We were being sucked into the world.

But not in a bad way. We were acknowledged for knowing what we knew. We were encouraged. We read our Weekly Reader and talked about it as though it mattered. We talked about elections. We talked about the world.

It was the oddest transformation and it accelerated exponentially over the next few years. But at least for a few years in Wenonah Public School it was sheltered. We all knew each other. Me and Tommy Jenkins and Kenny Fell and Ralph Leeds had a shared history that kept us kind to each other. We, jeez this sounds dumb, liked each other.

Sunday, September 30, 2007

[What We Wore](#)



Children in the early sixties resembled children in the early fifties who resembled children in the early forties. Look at our photo. With the exception of Tommy Jenkins we may have been in a photo from the dust bowl by Walker Evans. When we were out of school we wore dungarees and t shirts. Or sweatshirts. When we were in school dungarees were forbidden. Note I do not say "jeans". That's because no one would have known what the fuck I was talking about. They were dungarees. These could be made seasonal by purchasing lined dungarees for winter.

We also wore flannel shirts in the winter. My Aunt Gert used to use our old flannel shirts to make flannel board presentations for her bible [classes](#) so at least there was another life for them. Flannel board presentations. Just thinking about that shit freaks me out. There are times when I feel like Henry Adams in the 1910. Besides all his other peculiarities Henry Adams lived from 1838-1918. This meant he went from sailing ships and [horse drawn](#) carts to airplanes, telephones, cars, and tanks all in one lifetime. He had some other shit going on as well and you should read his autobiography, called "The [Education of Henry Adams](#)".

Okay, so we're in flannel and denim and cotton. And for school we wear our "school clothes" which as I recall consist primarily of khaki pants and some sort of patterned shirt. Girls were fucked. They had to wear dresses and apparently the dresses had to be ugly. I don't possess the appropriate vocabulary to describe their dresses except to say they were uniformly ugly. Not one girl was cool. Not even Sandy Fay or Dolores Lorenz. Then they would join Brownies or Girl Scouts and get uglier more. That is a poor construction that accurately describes the terrible descent into fashion hell that takes place when you put on a Girl Scout or Brownie uniform. These uniforms are not even vaguely Hitler Youth. Whoever had the bright idea to put young girls in uniforms should be sentenced to a year as Naomi Campbell's personal assistant.


Tiny white collars, puffy skirts, plaids, little shoes, white socks. It must have been a curse to be a girl. At least our clothes were functional if dull. Sure we could have been midget accountants or garage mechanics but we could run and play and have fun pretty much the same as if we were wearing our "play" clothes.

Then there were our "church" clothes. This consisted of my only suit which was bought for me at Robert Hall. Here's my picture. Snappy is not the word for how cool I looked. Trapped, forlorn, and stupid might be adjectives that leap to mind.

The tie is a clip on. I learned to tie a tie when I was twenty eight. Before then it was clip on all the way. Much like the food we ate. If it was easy that's what you picked. Shoes. Shoes were from Ernie's Shoe Post in Mantua. Usually Buster Brown. "Does your shoe have a boy inside, what a funny place for a boy to hide. Does your shoe have a dog there too? A boy and a dog and a foot in a shoe. Well, the boy is Buster Brown and the dog is Tige his pet and they're really just a picture but it's fun to play pretend." This is an actual jingle played on TV and radio intended to trick us into buying these shoes. As though we had a choice. As though I could somehow cajole my mother into picking Buster Browns if there was something cheaper. Not going to happen. It might work with Frosted Flakes but not with shoes. Shoes were clothes and clothes were her game. We had no say in what went on our backs and feet. We trudged behind her each August and each April and she pulled stuff off racks and held it up and sent us into tiny rooms where we tried it on and then that's what we wore.

Not that I cared all that much. We had occasional flirtations with motorcycle jackets or Chuck Taylor All Stars but the bottom line was the only pieces of clothing I ever wanted were long johns and hip boots. Beyond that I could give a fuck. They all wore out and tore and got small and then my poor brother Ted had to wear them. Ha ha. Too bad for him.

This would all change in Seventh Grade. Let me close the door then gently on Mr. McIntire and Fourth Grade. It's time for Jack to begin his time as a teenager or near teenager. One door closes and the other opens. It's Fifth Grade and our teacher is Mrs. Fuller. We're seated in our class wearing our new fall school clothes.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [7:58 AM](#) [1 comments](#) 

Thursday, September 20, 2007

[Timmy & Surprise](#)

What I didn't talk about in my last post about pets was my feelings about my cats. What they meant to me. I loved those little guys. They each had their own personalities and they seemed to love me back in the way cats love you back.

Remember, they did come home every day. In Wenonah in 1961 you just let your cat out the back door in the morning and it ran around all day long and came home when it wanted. Pretty much that was true of dogs as well. My friend Terry's dog Susie wandered the neighborhood for years. Half blind with what looked like five tails she meandered around from kid to kid, yard to yard, always coming back to Terry's garage.

Same with Surprise and Timmy. Each night they came to our room and laid down on the beds with Mick and I. I can remember with utter clarity sitting on the edge of the bed watching one particularly terrible thunderstorm with Surprise. She lay next to me purring contentedly while lightning and thunder shook the sky and rain poured down in thick sheets.

My mother would go to the Tony Sacca's butcher shop once a week and buy them liver. They ate canned food and drank milk. No water. No dry food. No feline leukemia. They


were fierce animals that craved our companionship and we honored them.

My Nonny Glading hated cats. When she came to visit she'd shoo them out of the house with a broom or pour water on them. She swore they'd smother Mary Lou in her bed by trying to drink the milk off her lips.

There was one other animal in my life that meant the world to me. My father's mother and father had an Irish Setter named Happy. He was in their family when I was born and lived well into my youth. He let me tug his ears and flop on his side while he lay on the floor. He was a great and handsome animal in the way dogs are great and handsome.

This love of pets led me to get a dog in my twenties. A lab retriever. Named Boo.

Actually Boobs a Lot after the Fugs song "You've got to like boobs a lot". My ex-wife Kathy named her but she was my dog to the bottom of both of our hearts. Just before Boo died my girl friend at the time bought me another lab, Lucy. When we split up I got a beautiful Rottweiler, Lulu. Now I have two wild dogs running through my apartment... Cookie and Milo. Cookie's a lab and Milo is a shelter dog and they both enrich my life in ways I can't understand. Linda has two dogs, Ike, a Newfie, and Tina a runt lab and I love them too. God, dogs and cats are wonderful. Too bad for the toad.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [8:14 PM](#) [1 comments](#) 

Wednesday, September 19, 2007

[Pets](#)

Pets were a big, big part of being a kid in Wenonah and most likely all of 1960's America. God only knows why. Pets of all shapes and sizes. Mice and cats and rats and hamsters and guinea pigs and dogs and horses and ant farms and sea monkeys. Our homes were littered with pets of one kind or another. Okay, snakes were few and far between...you usually had to find one in the woods and bring it home and then after a few days in a cardboard box your mother would make you let it go. But after that everything was a pet...toads and frogs, box turtles, birds limping around with broken wings, bunny rabbits, everything...literally everything. Our backyard was a vast pet cemetery. Small wooden crosses over graves filled with rotting creatures.

Most of my pets were of the conventional variety. We had two cats for many years, Timmy and Surprise. Surprise was the oldest and Timmy the youngest. Each of them was actually a purloined cat. They showed up at our back porch and we fed them and then they were ours. They were with us until 7th grade. That's when my mother found out we were allergic to them. Then they were sent to a "farm". This is a euphemism rarely used but essentially my mother lied and had them slicked at the vets.

We had a few half hearted attempts at dogs but my father didn't do dogs well and dogs are a grown man's job, even in Wenonah. We had a dalmation that died of distemper and a shaggy dog my dad brought home from a gas station on Admiral Wilson Blvd in Camden. He lasted not much longer than the dalmation. Towards the end of my time in Wenonah my mother found out poodles are relatively allergen free so we had two small poodles. They hated my brothers and I but loved my mother.

Mostly we loved the cats. Who were killing us.


Of course we had turtles and tropical fish and we'd save various dying wild animals and all that but really it was the cats to which we had a real connection. I remember to this

day the horror of finding Timmy on the back porch one day after he'd been gone a couple days. He'd been shot by a hunter and his left rear leg was shattered by buckshot. We took him to the vet and he recovered but it was a rare brush with death in our little happy world.

Which leads me inexplicably to our experiments with the toad. One day Chris and Terry and Gary and Mick and I and who knows who else found a toad and decided to test it's endurance levels. We buried it in a box for an hour. It survived. For two hours. Survival. Three, four, five, ten hours and still it's beating heart pumped life.

Then overnight. Surely that would kill this lousy toad. But no it rose from it's shoebox grave heart beating strong. Ugly, gray mottled monster. Stronger, smarter, more worldly than we...so we crushed it with the back of a shovel.

Life is short and pets come and go. I have had five dogs now over the years that I treasure as I would a child. Still, I raised up that spade and crushed that little toad with all my might. Later we set fires in the basement. Ha ha

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [7:58 PM](#) [1 comments](#) 

Tuesday, September 18, 2007

[Childhood Illness](#)

In fourth grade my body broke. Not on purpose and not through any fault of my own. My childhood asthma became much worse, probably aggravated by our cats and my parents smoking. On top of that in an effort to help me with my studies my father got me a desk lamp to help me do my homework.

Unfortunately the light bulb in the desk lamp was not a standard bulb but a UV bulb. Hours working under the UV bulb caused damage to my eyes. No one could figure out why my eyes were being damaged. We went to the doctor again and again until after several months one doctor listened to my stupid complaint that it was the light from the desk lamp. For weeks I'd been wearing sunglasses to deal with my eyes sensitivity to light. The doctor said, what kind of bulb is in the lamp and when we told him we solved the problem.

That didn't solve the asthma dilemma. I spent most of fourth grade in a haze caused by the only drugs available for asthmatics at the time. Epineprine. It stopped the asthma but made me a zombie. Concentrating was difficult if not impossible. But I was a kid. You don't blame drugs when you're a kid. You just soldier on. So I went to class and floated in a numb state through the year. And as I've already said it was a hard year.

In retrospect I would have been better without my cats. In retrospect my father should have known what kind of bulb was in the desk lamp but in that place at that time there was really only me bumbling around with a terrible breathing disease wearing sunglasses and struggling to be a good kid.

You'd think this would prepare you for stuff. But it didn't. It only meant I had to lay in bed while my friends were playing and I was wheezing. I had trouble reading because of my eyes. It was a fourth grade disaster.

We changed the bulbs. In the next several years we found an allergist. I got allergy shots. My asthma vanished for the most part. But for two or three years the only place I felt safe was in my house reading. Not a bad place because I loved books. My parents taught me

how wonderful they were and they were indeed life saving.

In books I could breath. In books I could see. In books I was smart and resourceful and brave. In real life I was a skinny kid who got picked last and barely made the baseball team.


On top of all this I wet the bed. This would become a major impediment when I joined Boy Scouts but for now it was just an embarrassment that meant I couldn't stay over at my friends house.

What do you do with this? As a grown up I'm comfortable talking about it. As a fourth grader I felt like a monster trapped in his room. A skinny troll unable to be like anyone else. Only in comics and in books was I alive.

Years later when I became truly ill this was a help. I think I'd prefer that I hadn't had the training. Just as I'd prefer I hadn't gotten ill with AIDS. Shit happens and it has it's benefits but all things considered you might wish you had a pick.

Theodore Roosevelt was my hero because he was an asthmatic as a young boy and he exercised and fought back. I used his example to try to get better. Now I think that just by dint of labor you can't fix anything. But then it served it's purpose. I had a goal. Not to be sick. Not to be limited. To be like everyone else.

What I never asked was what was everyone else like. What were the trials they faced.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [10:05 PM](#) [0 comments](#) 

Tuesday, September 11, 2007

[The Music of Fourth Grade](#)

You could say there was no music. You'd be wrong of course. On our trips to my grandmothers my parents listened to WIP. Their station. Sinatra, the Mill's Brothers, Mancini, Dean Martin. You could say in 4th grade I didn't get music and then you'd be right. I didn't. My parents bought us records of folk music and classical recordings and we'd play them on the radio/hi fi in the second living room. They had Mitch Miller's Sing a Long With Mitch and the records they bought that I guess they thought would connect me with music.

On one level it worked. I know all the words to John Henry. I know the words to Erie Canal. When I hear the new Springsteen sessions in Dublin it's like being in the living room listening to that stuff over and over. But really, I could have cared less. Music meant almost nothing to me. But it was everywhere. The Mills Brothers singing "cross the river from the Alamo was a Pinto pony...", the theme to Hatari, the distant sounds of rock and roll which to us 4th graders might well have been the sounds you hear on a tv on in a room you walk through.

We paid no attention but it was everywhere. We knew about Elvis. When we took music the teacher would invariably try to talk about Elvis but we were totally befuddled. This was a town where music, classical, folk, rock, experimental, popular was confined to background noise for young people.

My parents might be swaying to Frank. They might know about the new Tony Bennett. But me? I knew nothing. I was a knucklehead, soaking in the noise of the radio in the backseat of the Chevy on the way home from Nonny's. In the Still of the Night, See the Pyramids along the Nile all sounds filling the back seat. Watching the houses as we drove

home. To Wenonah.


Where we went upstairs to our rooms to listen to the crickets chirping. Buddy Holly had no place there. Not yet.

We sang in school. We heard music all the time. But none of it mattered.

In less than ten years that would all change. I imagine for some young men and women in Wenonah it had already started to change. Otherwise why would our music teacher be talking about blue suede shoes and Gene Krupa? For a little while music was only the thrum of baseball cards on our bike's spokes, or the themes of TV shows we loved. But in a few short years it would grab us by the back of our necks and drag us into a world we didn't even know existed.

Be Bob a Lula. Rock Around the Clock. I boogied in my room and I boogied in the hall, I boogied in my fingers and I wiped it on the wall. She walked up two flights two flights more. Rock around the clock tonight. Rock around the clock. Yakkety Yak don't talk back.

Next year the Beatles came to America and stuff starts to get interesting.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [10:15 PM](#) [1 comments](#) 

Thursday, September 06, 2007

[Cemetery Hill](#)

South Jersey doesn't get much snow. Maybe a few storms of 4 to 6 inches a year. When I was young it was a particularly snowy era but not really and truly deep snows. In Jersey City in 1996 we got over three feet of snow. That never happened in Wenonah. But we cherished snow. We lived for snow. We waited for it from December till March and it always seemed to come.

When it came we went sledding. You might recall that I've said Wenonah is relatively flat. Flat is not really the word for it. Devoid of contours would be more appropriate. There was only one real hill near Wenonah and that was in Mantua in the cemetery named Wenonah. It was just across the Mantua Creek and every kid from Mantua and Wenonah flocked there once there was an inch or two of snow. There were three main sled ways in the cemetery. The steepest had no graves and led directly to the woods and beyond the creek. The second was just to the right and had a few strategically placed headstones for your slaloming pleasure. The third was the road that wound through the cemetery. The road wasn't always idyllic but since snow was sparse but cold was not the snow would freeze and present an crazy iced run to hell.

The minute snow started falling we'd pull our Flexible Flyer's and Flying Saucers out of garages and wax them up. Then legions of bundled up nitwits would head down Mantua Avenue to the Wenonah Cemetery for the joy of hurtling downhill at breakneck speeds on iron and wood.

Each winter gave up it's own delights. Deep snow here that allowed you to surf standing up on your sled. Icey roads that let you run headlong for hundreds of yards down the road. Snows that let us build ramps so when you got to the end you'd soar, oh, maybe a foot or two in the air, before you crashed like a knucklehead into the brush.

Little kids with older brothers, parents in cars with young kids, teenagers, all of us flocked to the cemetery. To fly like wild people in the snow. Cold as hell, terrible mittens

that never kept you warm, jeans soaked in snow and soggy long johns and down and up we'd plunge.

Cold and sun and snow all around us. Ignoring, not really even noticing the headstones of our forebears all around us. When my mother died my father bought a plot overlooking the creek for them both. When I was very ill I went to visit my mother's grave but couldn't find it. But I could see every route our sleds took! I could see us proud as lions standing on our sleds jetting to our doom.

Tuesday, August 28, 2007

Bicycles

We loved our bicycles. We lived on our bicycles. Everywhere we went we went on bicycles. Schwinn's and Rahleights. English and American. Big ass old school one speed bikes with fat tires that had one up hill speed...slow and one downhill speed...fast. We put baseball cards on them to make noises as they fluttered in the spokes. We shined the chrome and cleaned them and oiled them and knew how to patch tires and change tubes. We rode our bikes up and down the streets of Wenonah, to and from school, to the pool and back. We rode them in snow and rain and sun. We rode them in wild packs of boys, carrying fake plastic and wooden rifles prepared for war in the woods of Wenonah. We rode them with complete abandon.

I vividly recall riding down Cherry St. by Terry Fleming's house en route to Clay Hill for a game of guns one beautiful summer afternoon. We were all riding no handed and shooting our imaginary enemies as we rode. Suddenly my front tire blew. Pow! The bike bucked up a foot or two in the air then came down and sent me skidding down newly macadamed Cherry St. In seconds I was covered in scrapes and the scrapes were filled with tar and stone and dirt and blood. A passerby asked if I was okay and of course we all assured him I was. Then we ran home as fast as we could to my house. I burst into the living room where my father and my Uncle Al were drinking glasses of whiskey and stood in front of them. Blood was running down all my extremities and my face. They laughed and laughed and laughed. Then I shrieked and burst into tears. Up to then I hadn't cried at all. I was being a man. But seeing my father and my Uncle laughing at me left me bereft. I cried and cried; they laughed and laughed.

Then my mother got out the Hydrogen Peroxide and the bandaids and went to work. In a few workmanlike minutes I was covered in bandages and smarting from the burn of the peroxide. My friends were yelling outside so out I went. We had a game to play.


We played one terrible game called the Bike Game. In this game Stewart DeHart and Bobby McQuaide and maybe Jackie Brangan would ride their bikes back and forth in Lincoln Ave in front of the DeHart residence. We huddled in the grass strip between the sidewalk and the street. At their command we ran across the street and they tried to run us down. It was the most terrifying thing I've ever done. No one of us was a winner. We were all mauled and bloody and ridiculed. It was all we could do to get them to stop playing and let us go home.

We organized bike races. Older boys delivered their newspapers on their bikes. All around town bikes were scattered like leaves in front of houses where children lived. We

customized our bikes. We loved our bikes.

One day we rode our bikes from Wenonah to Woodbury. Seven miles. Up Mantua Avenue, left on Glassboro Road and all the way into Woodbury. We bought sandwiches and ice cream and sodas and rode back. We were proud little explorers. Then our mothers found out and that was our last bike hike till seventh grade.

In the days before we turned 17 bikes were our only freedom and we loved them. If they were animals they would have loved us back.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [8:16 PM](#) [4 comments](#) 

Monday, August 27, 2007

[Other things we ate; with apologies to Bob Thomas](#)

Bob reminds me of the fact that South Jersey is the home of the Jersey tomato, sweet corn, ungodly peaches and more fresh produce than you can shake a stick at from July till Sept. My mother and father were not monsters. Yes we got fresh tomatoes and corn all summer long. In fact we grew our own in the digging yard several years. I should and will talk more about that later.

To this day I love going home so I can buy bushels of tomatoes for next to nothing that cost bundles of dough from the same farms in the Greenmarket. I was cranky and hungry last night and could only remember the honey loaf. Thank God for the tomatoes, the apples, the peaches, the corn, the lima beans. That's right fresh lima beans...all summer long. Poor Mick. Poor Jack. Now I have to say something. I love lima beans. Ha ha.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [7:05 PM](#) [0 comments](#) 

Sunday, August 26, 2007

[The Things We Ate](#)

I'm starving tonight. I just came off a stomach flu and didn't eat at all yesterday and tonight, although I've eaten 5 times, I'm still hungry so I thought I should talk about the food we ate in Wenonah.

It was horrible. It was regular. For breakfast every day my mother made us Tang and we had pop tarts. Before pop tarts we ate Frosted Flakes or Cocoa Krispies, or Rice Krispies, or Corn Flakes but it all sucked. Then for lunch we had sandwiches made from this fake ham. I can't remember the name but it will come to me by the end of this post. We drank milk with every meal except after Memorial Day when we had iced tea until Labor Day. Then it was back to milk.

At dinner we had a succession of dull dishes. Tuna casseroles every Friday (we were Catholic), frozen beef in frozen sauce, chicken croquettes, lima beans.

Lima beans.

The cursed vegetable of my youth. My brother Mick may have vomited up lima beans on at least twelve occasions. And we had no dog to feed the food we hated to under the table. It was eat or die. Once a week my mother would make a dish we liked, say cheese steak sandwiches. She would make eight cheese steak sandwiches for six people. Which

meant if you were hungry you had to eat fast to get one of the two left over sandwiches. It was a race to hell. Sometimes I won, sometimes Mick won. Ted always lost.

My father loved chipped beef on toast. I have no idea why he felt this was a good thing to eat. But my mother loved him so we ate it. And we had spaghetti. From a can. Not spaghetti O's but close. When I got to college and had to make my first meal for my roommates I went to make spaghetti with Ragu and my roommate Shelley corrected me. She said, no, this is how you make spaghetti sauce. I had to learn how to cut onions and peppers. I learned that there is a thing called a garlic clove.

Some of this was because we weren't well off. My mother had to struggle to make ends meet. This was something I was unaware of at the time. Some of it was because my mother was a lousy cook. She was. A lousy cook.


My grandmother Glading, Nonny Glading, was on the other hand a great cook. She made us meals each weekend that were marvelous. Truly stunning. Fresh ingredients, meat from the butcher, cooked slow and with care. We had Yorkshire Pudding and roasts that were ungodly. Then we went home to honey loaf. That was the name of the fake ham. Honey loaf. Call it what you want but it was fake ham. Not ham on the sandwiches at Nonny's house carved off the ham with mayo and mustard and crusty bread.

My Nonny Wiler, while she didn't cook, served great meals as well. The best roasts I've ever had. Rich and full of flavor. I've never had a roast beef like she served...ever. We sopped the blood up from the cutting board on pieces of white bread with butter. That's the one thing on all my tables when I was young. A loaf of white bread. A pitcher of milk. A quarter pound of butter.

But all of them, my mother, my grandmothers, my uncles could roast Turkeys. They all knew how to make stuffing. They all knew how to fill us up one day in November with food that made you sleepy and happy. And at the end we had Breyer's ice cream with Creme de minthe and sat back happy. The last pieces of mince pie sitting on our plates. Too tired to argue. Too happy to fight. Years later I had the opportunity to serve Christmas and Thanksgiving meals like those. They are and were a gift. Whether you make them or eat at them. I ate with friends in Staten Island one Thanksgiving and they served LeSeour brand baby peas just like my mother and my grandmother, and they had creamed onions, and there was some dumb ass squash soup but who cared. There was cranberry sauce and wine and beer and people laughing.

So the food was lousy but we fought over those cheese steaks. My mother made iced tea from scratch. The mashed potatoes were on every table, with or without gravy. My brothers and I were arguing. We fought and fought and yelled and we sat together every day at dinner. Like a family.

Yesterday I made barbequed chicken for my friends Oscar and Douglas and Louisa and Frank and Johanna. They made beans with jamon and rice and drank Corona and laughed and smoked weed and I went to bed early with the flu. Could you ask for more?

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [9:39 PM](#) [1 comments](#) 

Wednesday, August 22, 2007

[Famous Monsters of Filmland and Comics](#)

I've neglected something truly important in my youth. Forrest J. Ackerman, the editor and publisher of Famous Monsters of Filmland. Our favorite magazine. We ran to Margie's luncheonette to buy each month's issue. It detailed the great and near great horror films of the 20's, 30's, 40's, and 50's. It was a beautiful mixed up hodge podge of memorabilia by a man who loved horror movies. Today I read in the Times that Ray Bradbury's first work was published by Forrest in the late 30's. He loved monster movies and we loved them with him.

Our personal favorite was The Thing that Came From Outer Space. A movie that scared the shit out of us. But Forrest turned us on to Ed Wood and Frankenstein with equal approval. He didn't diss Ed Wood as an oddball. Plan Nine from Outer Space was as important as any Bela Lugosi film. We were mesmerized.

Chris had seen one of the Frankenstein films and we acted it out in the shell of a house under construction at the end of Jefferson Street. Gary Condell was the Monster. Chris was Baron von Frankenstein. We were various participants in the drama. We all knew how to act even though we'd never seen the movies.

Which brings me to comic books. We devoured them. First, Superman and Batman and the Flash and the Justice League of America, but then Marvel Comics. I bought the first issue of Spiderman as a birthday gift for Ted but took it back. It was too good for him. We devoured all of them. The Fantastic Four, The Hulk, Dr. Strange. It was a wide world open for the taking. All on display in Margie's once a month.

We all wanted x ray specs. I suspect some of us ordered sea monkeys. I know my friend Jack Shephard filled out the forms so he could be an artist!

There were no real monsters in Wenonah. We lurched like Frankenstein in half completed basements. We assembled like frightened villagers to destroy the monster but really nothing was there. It was a joy. A pleasure.

We mounted a play the summer of 1962 to mimic the movies we'd read about but never saw. Gary Condell was the monster. Chris the mad scientist. One of us, who knows who the hero. We wrote a script, sold tickets and were prepared to sell refreshments. Then Joel Cook saw the monster in rehearsal. He was terrified. He ran home in hysterical tears. His parents shut down the production before it ever happened. Little Ed Wood's stymied in our artistry. Mick and I were punished and banished to our rooms. We sat and ate the candy we were going to sell while our friends played outside.

Oh, the vagaries of the artistic life!

But still, perhaps there were aliens among us. Perhaps we were at risk of imminent demise.

Perhaps the siren of the fire whistle might portend more than a minor fire in a kitchen somewhere in town.

Then came the Cuban Missile Crisis.


Now we're talking.

Now it's all real.

Now all the duck and cover nonsense made sense.

Now everytime we heard the fire whistle it meant that Russian missiles were streaking our way. And when they detonated we'd have hell to pay. Zombies walking among us. No food. Horror.

All the stories we made up on the way to school seemed to get a little pale. A little shallow. Maybe we were children in a world not quite so safe.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [10:18 PM](#) [4 comments](#) 

Tuesday, August 21, 2007

[Death and Football](#)

September of 1961 brought another change in my life. In September my grandfather Wiler died. He'd been ill from Emphysema for many years but over the last few months of that summer he took a turn for the worse. Emphysema is a progressive chronic illness that can take years to kill you but when it does it comes on quickly. Technically my grandfather probably died from a heart attack, since his heart would have had to work twice as hard to get enough oxygen from his damaged lungs.

He'd been a life long smoker and that coupled with a stint in the mines as a young man along with a genetic predisposition to Emphysema was all it took. That fall we were involved in a venture of our own and his death, while anticipated, barely brushed me. One day men were lugging oxygen tanks up the porch to his room, the next he was gone. He'd loved Mick and Ted and I but his illness prevented him from being much fun around us. He was a distant figure to us, unlike my grandmother, and I had no real feelings about him or his death. His wife, my Dad's mother, was another story.

My grandparents had moved to Wenonah when my grandfather became ill and needed more care. They bought a house up the block from us on the corner of W. Mantua and S. Jefferson. It was one of the earliest homes in Wenonah and had been owned by the Cattell family, a South Jersey family with deep roots. The house still had the original barn behind it, now used as a garage.

Mick and I played in the garage whenever we could. It held secret passages built by other children long ago and you could jump out the hayloft onto a compost heap below. One half of the garage held my grandmothers gardening tools and insecticides. She was an avid gardener and worked hard at it. As a consequence the smell of DDT and Dieldrin filled the barn. Dusts and concentrates sat in heavy brown glass jars on her work bench. When I went to work as an exterminator I recognized those smells immediately.

In the house, on the sunporch, was where she painted. She was a painter of landscapes and still lives and worked in oils with a knife. Her work was extraordinary but devoid of life. Bare empty warehouses, telephone poles, crumbling chimneys in an empty field. Brilliant and cold and scary. The room smelled of oil paints.

In the next room was the dining room and just off it the kitchen. My grandmother didn't cook and a succession of maids and cooks kept house for her.

My brothers and I were a source of constant irritation with our yelling and noise and roistering. As a consequence we were generally banished to the outdoors at family gatherings.

So here we are in September of 1961 and what am I really involved in. Football. My friends and I have started a football team. The Wenonah Hawks. We've had lemonade sales and raised money to buy uniforms. We've recruited enough boys to fill out a full football team. We found a coach, a man who was a boyfriend of one of my neighbors, Al Frank. We've begun to practice each day. We are a bunch of little kids with no organization that formed a football team in a town with no organized football program and we challenged the local midget football teams. There were teams in Deptford,


Mullica Hill, and Center City. We played them all. We played in a 110lb league despite the fact that only Ted Glenn, our center, weighed 110 pounds. Our defensive end, Chuck Lake, might have weighed 65 pounds on a good day. All I cared about that fall was our team and our practices and our games. My grandfather died and my clearest memory of his death is the smell of hay from the knees of my pants from football practice as I watched the technicians delivering oxygen tanks to my dying grandfather.

Our team was pretty good, and very small but we made it to the Lions Bowl in Glassboro that year where we played the champions from Mullica Hill. A boy we knew from Woodbury, Jim Coombs was on the team. They were large and hard and the game was played in January on a frozen field in Glassboro. We got our asses handed to us.

It was wonderful.

So, yes, my grandfather was dead. And yes, my grandmother remained. But we had football glory. Skinny little geeks in green jerseys covered in blood and grass mixing it up with the big boys. And we did it all ourselves. Me, Chris, Gary Condell, Terry Fleming, my brother Mick, Herbie Danner, Ted Glenn. We were hard. We were strong. It was glorious. Not unlike the poems we memorized.

After the Lions Bowl there was a banquet we were invited to. The Mullica Hill team had tough black kids on their team. They all got up at the end on the stage and danced the Pony. We all knew we couldn't dance the Pony but we could hold our own on a frozen field in Glassboro.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [9:42 PM](#) [0 comments](#) 

Wednesday, August 15, 2007

[The Twilight Zone, Spelling, and Poetry](#)

In 4th Grade my bed time was 8:00pm. Maybe 8:30 on a special night. This was good for my parents and bad for me. Everyone I knew stayed up later. They got to watch shows I only knew from their stories or from listening to the tv from my upstairs bedroom when my parents were watching in the 2nd living room. We had, like all our friends, a black and white tv. We got three stations. 3, 6, & 10. My favorite show was Combat but the show I most wanted to see was the Twilight Zone. It was on after my bedtime so I never saw it till I was older but I heard it...in shards, in pieces. This was a show that answered all my story telling needs.

On the way to school the day after a Twilight Zone episode Terry or Chris would tell us about last night's show. About the tank battalion trapped at Custer's Last Stand. About Burgess Meredith in the ruins of WWII losing his glasses. About the slot machine that haunted a gambler. Brilliant stories told on the way to school in the fall and winter and spring. The walk to school took perhaps twenty minutes. Eight or nine blocks. Two different routes. On the way to school we usually walked up Mantua Ave and crossed at the proper corner by the park. On the way home we trekked over the railroad bridge and down West Street. All the time telling stories. On the way out the stories of the tv on the way back the stories we invented.

In 4th grade Mr. McIntire made us use our spelling words in a narrative. A story. Each of us tried hard to use the lessons of the Twilight Zone to top the other. Stories of O'Henry filled with irony. Stories of gore and death. Stories to scare ourselves. After a while we

stopped caring about the spelling words and cared only about the stories. It was a challenge to top each other. Like poetasters or slam poets or screen writers we wanted to be the best at what we did. I can't remember any of our stories but I know where they all came from.

In 4th and 5th grades and I think in 3rd we were given little yellow booklets with popular poems. Poems from the late 1800's and early 1900's that had a place in the popular imagination. The Frost is O'er the Pumpkin, Trees, etc, etc, etc. We were required to memorize one of these each week and recite them to our peers in class. This too became a challenge. Especially when we were given leave to expand our selections. To move out from the little pamphlets and into the books of poetry that might be in our homes. We were boys. So we found Rudyard Kipling and Stevenson and Tennyson. We craved the poems of gore and horror and tried to top each other with tougher and gorier poems to recite. I memorized The Charge of the Light Brigade and Gunga Din. I mastered The Highwayman. All to top my friends. To show them I was the man.

What an odd pastime. Middle class white kids in the 60's memorizing the heroic dramas of English poets. For glory. For honor. For power.

Years later I read my own poetry out loud at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe. I had never read my own work out loud. I was, I guess, petrified with terror. But I'd done this before. I knew the drill. When I finished the drunk crowd of Puerto Ricans gave me a standing ovation. I knew it was the thing I wanted to do again more than anything else. The same night a professor of mine read and was booed off the stage. Of course. She didn't know the drill. She was interested in her work, in it's care and concerns. She didn't understand that when you stand up in front of people and read you've got an obligation to deliver. It didn't have to be loud. It didn't have to be hard to understand. It almost didn't have to be good. What it had to be was better than the last poem they heard. Like our stories. Like the poems we chose to memorize. Who knew that Mr. McIntire was preparing me to be a poet. Who knew he was teaching me to love words. Who knew that five little kids walking down the street in Wenonah were learning to be artists.

Not all of us are artists in our real lives. Chris worked for automotive interests. Terry works for health care interests. My brother is in law enforcement. But all of us know how to tell a story and engage an audience and we want that audience to listen and attend. They always do.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [10:16 PM](#) [2 comments](#) 


Tuesday, August 14, 2007

[Comments and Gateway Regional Class of 1970](#)

This will be a brief post. I'm writing to ask those of you who read the blog, who have thoughts and comments and memories to post them as comments. It will help expand the world of Wenonah into a larger place.

Also, just a brief note, my friends Suzy Parker, Barb Conway and her boyfriend Charlie, Dottie Chattin and her husband, Greg & Joyce Jones, Chris and Stephanie DeHart, Gary and Debbie Lundquist/Przywara, and Mitch and Terri Chambers have been conspiring to put together a reunion for us knuckleheads. Anyone from the Class of 70 or who knows folks from the Class of 70 please write me with contact info, etc. We're shooting for a

gathering in July of 2008, tentatively the 5th. Please help...these people are driving me nuts.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [8:29 PM](#) [1 comment](#) 

Thursday, August 09, 2007

[The Little Red House](#)

Wenonah is ringed with woods. They were our favorite places. They weren't wide or deep but they were nearly unvisited by adults or anyone but children. Beyond the woods were the swamps of the Mantua Creek. Once, back in the 1800's the creek was wide and deep. But towns up and down the creek dammed off feeder streams to create ponds and lakes for recreation and decoration and by the time I was young it was a stream about 16 feet wide surrounded by swamp. The swamps were home to muskrat and cattails and birds and had a deep swamp smell. They were scary and inviting.

You could run through them once you knew how. How to avoid the deep mud, find the hillocks and firm places. We did so with abandon. I think it was in 4th grade we found the Little Red House. It was down by the sewer plant at the end of Mantua Avenue on the North side on the Mantua border. You had to walk down a dirt road past the sewer plant a few hundred yards and there it was...an old abandoned shotgun shack. Red. Empty.

Falling apart. Me, Chris, Terry, Ed Mossop, Mick, and a few others went several times there to explore. To walk through it's empty rooms and just look.

It was eerie and weird and frightening. And just beyond were the swamps. One day we all walked out to the swamps. We got perhaps thirty feet out when we hit quick mud. This was deep mud that sucked you down. The more you pulled to get out the deeper you went in. Ed Mossop went out furthest and got caught up to his waist. We struggled with panic and terror to free him. It was low tide. If we couldn't get him loose who knew what might happen. He might be sucked all the way in and die. He might drown. Hours of struggle ensued. Mud sucked and pulled and we pulled and Eddie came loose. No shoes. Covered chest deep in swamp mud. We stumbled back. Stunned. Frightened. It was the first time in our lives we confronted a situation in which we might die. We were terrified.

Exhilarated. Stunned.

It became legend.

We never went back. The house sank into oblivion. But the struggle became our story.

We learned how to walk on the swamps. How to avoid quick mud. How to leap and dance and play in the swamps. We ran up and down the length of them from the bridge to the trestle. Perhaps a half mile but it seemed like a league.

We began to find weapons. Cattails were spears and hammers once wrenched loose. We waged epic battles up and down the creek. We tore open skunk cabbage and relished it's funk. We were gods.


We learned you could make money on the swamp. You could set traps and catch muskrat and sell them to fur traders. You made more money selling a muskrat than you could on a newspaper route. We knew how to set leghold traps and live traps and we knew where they lived. My Uncle Al from Pennsylvania told us that in the late 40's he sold muskrats to the black people in his town for food. We were stunned. Amazed.

We loved our swamp. More than the woods. Anyone could walk in the woods...only a

skilled kid could navigate the swamps. We fought wars with kids from Mantua across the creek. We cherished Christmas gifts of hip boots so we could slog across streams and even the low points of the creek.

When we came home, covered in muck, my mother banished us to the basement to strip our clothes. Rich with the funk of mud and death and life.

When I was much older my father in law fed us a meal of channel catfish caught in the south. It tasted of swamp. I couldn't eat.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [10:42 PM](#) [0 comments](#) 

[Maps of Flour Salt & Water](#)

This was the year teachers began to make us do more than make gifts for our parents. We were asked first to make maps that showed geographical forms and places using a paste made of flour, salt, and water. You would first draw a map on a piece of card board.

Usually the cardboard was the cleaners cardboard from your fathers dress shirts for work. My dad got his from G. Wayne Post. It was the only men's store/dry cleaner in Wenonah. G. Wayne was a good guy. A little droll, sharp dresser, and as I recall, a pencil mustache. He would deliver the shirts of the men of Wenonah each week and their wives would stack them neatly in their shirt drawer.

Then when you had a project of some kind there was cardboard without end. Okay, so you draw a map...say, the state of New Jersey, then you identify the important rivers and mountain ranges. The Delaware, the Kittatiny's, the swamps of the the Delaware Bay. Then the important metropolitan centers. Of which you know nothing. Elizabeth, Newark, Jersey City, Trenton, Atlantic City, Camden. Then you mix the paste. Here's a link for the recipe for the paste: <http://www.coe.ilstu.edu/IGA/Geographers%20Have%20High%20Standards/Salt%20Dough%20Landforms.htm>.

You spread it evenly over the area of the map. Where there are highlands or mountains you apply more, wetlands and lowlands and shore lines, less. For mountain areas you use your fingers to lift up mountains. You take a number two lead pencil, say, a Ticonderoga, or a Dixon, made in Jersey City, NJ, and trace the rivers. Then you let it dry. It only takes a few hours. Then using water colors you paint the areas green, or blue, or brown, depending on their geographical make-up. Brown...mountains, green...forests, blue...bodies of water. Then you write with unerring hand the names of these places. Then you carefully pack your finished project in a paper bag, or box, and carry it to school for judgement.

If you are artistic, or have an engineering bent, or can color within the lines, then all is well.


If you are, say, like me, then you are fucked.

You spend hours screaming at your inability to create a beautiful object filled with information. The paste is too watery, it cracks, your colors run, your outlines are blurred, you are in short a miserable, abject failure. Doomed to a "B" in Citizenship.

Doomed to watch others succeed. Doomed to fail again, and again, and again. The only way you escape this terrible mess is to grow up.

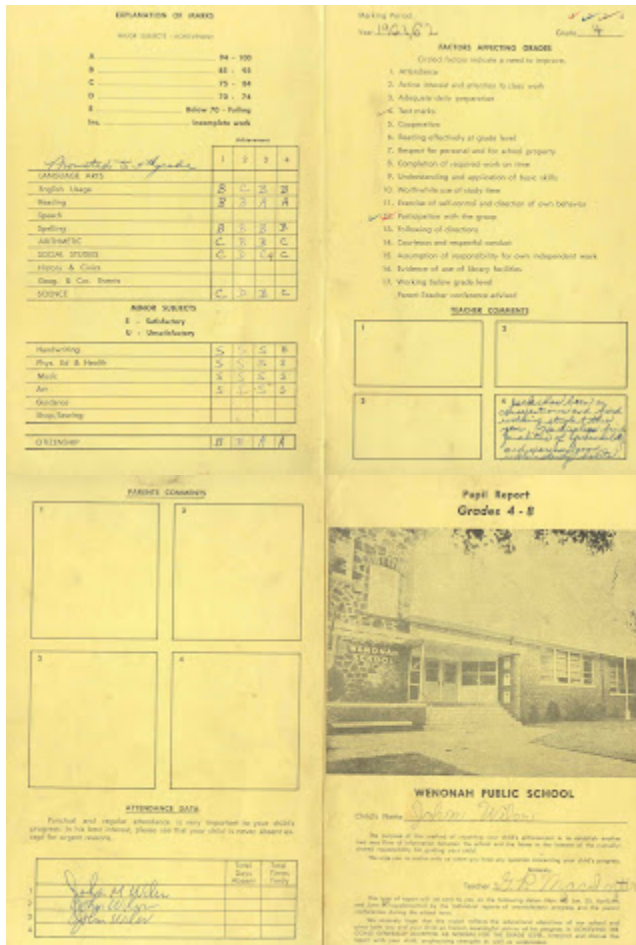
No one does this shit after 6th Grade. Thank God, Praise Jesus!

For me in 4th Grade it was a map of my failures I made over and over and over and over. With rivers and creeks and mountains and miserable printing and poor choices of color.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [8:05 PM](#) [1 comments](#) 

Tuesday, August 07, 2007

[My 4th Grade Report Card](#)



Summary of Marks

Mark	Grade
A	94 - 100
B	85 - 93
C	75 - 84
D	70 - 74
E	Below 70 - Failing
F	Unsatisfactory

Subjects

Subject	Grade
English	C
Reading	C
Spelling	C
Arithmetic	C
Science	C
History	C
Geography	C
Health	C
Physical Education	C
Art	C
Music	C
Handwriting	C
Character	C

Standards

Standard	1	2	3	4
Reading	C	C	C	C
Spelling	C	C	C	C
Arithmetic	C	C	C	C
Science	C	C	C	C
History	C	C	C	C
Geography	C	C	C	C
Health	C	C	C	C
Physical Education	C	C	C	C
Art	C	C	C	C
Music	C	C	C	C
Handwriting	C	C	C	C
Character	C	C	C	C

Teacher Comments

1. [Blank]

2. [Blank]

3. [Blank]

4. [Blank]

Attendance

Month	Present	Absent	Excused
August	10	0	0

Parent Report

Parent's Name: [Blank]

Parent's Address: [Blank]

Parent's Phone: [Blank]

Parent's Signature: [Blank]


Wenonah Public School

Principal: [Blank]

Teacher: S. H. Wiler

Here is the real and true record of my dismal failure in 4th grade. Note the level of my anxiety. I merely received a few "c's & d's" and that alone was enough to send me into a tailspin. Miserable wretch! On my next post we'll talk about the most horrid event of 4th grade: Projects!

But in closing let me say that my hard work and good study moved me into the safe haven of 5th grade!

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [8:44 PM](#) [0 comments](#) 

[UV Lights, Madelaine, and Science](#)

When last we visited 4th grade Ruthie Hammell was locked in a closet. The janitor Nick was soon to release her and we were soon to return to our classroom. In 4th grade I encountered something I'd never bumped up against before. Work.

Mr. McIntire was a harsh taskmaster. His tests were essay types. "Tell me all you know about the Civil War". His comments were brusque and nasty. He had no worries about public humiliation.

On top of this my childhood asthma jumped into high gear. And I wet the bed. And my father, in an effort to help me with my studies, got a lamp for my desk. Unwittingly he outfitted it with a UV bulb for plant growing. My eyes hurt each day following my arduous studies. I was forced to wear sunglasses even in the classroom. I was wheezing. I could barely compete in sports and when I did I was wearing shades. 4th Grade being a poor place for non-conformity this did nothing for my self esteem. I was shuttled to various doctors to determine the problem with my eyes. I kept saying I thought it was the light. Finally after months one doctor asked to see the bulb and solved that problem.

I still wet the bed. I still wheezed like a steam engine. I still failed class after class or more accurately muddled through. The only good part was all of us were just muddling through. There were no stars in Mr. McIntire's class. Though there was one pretender: Madelaine Pillings. She of the pixie collars and flounced skirts and turned up nose. If we knew the right language we would have called her by her right name: stuck up bitch. Sadly we just muttered under our breath: "Teachers Pet". Though this was not true. For miraculously Mr. McIntire detested her right along with us. It was the first time in our little lives we realized adults might think and feel as we did. She was a little dickhead and he hated her right along with us. It's just that he had a job and couldn't torture her like we did.

Now, in retrospect, Madelaine might have been a fine and decent young woman. She may have grown up into a beautiful adult woman, had wonderful children and now lives in a great house with her husband, her kids and a dog named Waldo. But that seemed unlikely at the time. As unlikely as I would become a poet or play softball or ski or marry or stop pissing the bed.

The quintessential, well not really, Madelaine event was one afternoon when Mr. McIntire had to leave the room for some reason. He told us we must be good and he appointed Madelaine our monitor. He gave her permission to rat us out on his return. Sure as shit we were little monsters screaming and running wild and tormenting Madelaine. She was shrieking and crying and upon Mr. McIntire's return did just as he asked. Then he declined to punish us. Then she wept bitter tears. But they hate me! She cried. And hate her we did.

He looked at her and slowly, with great deliberation, said, "I feel for you Madelaine, here..." and fumbled about his body as though for his heart, "or here..." and fumbled again. She leapt from her desk and ran from the room in tears. We were in kid heaven. This was not right. Mr. McIntire displayed little or no empathy. Madelaine was a rat. We were justly vindicated and walked home telling the story again and again. We tell it to this day on the sidewalk on the 4th of July. Like a Greek myth or a great lesson.

I went home that night and had an asthma attack. I wet the bed. I woke up and went back to school.

uesday, July 24, 2007

Mr. McIntire and Discipline

When I was getting better a few years ago I went with a friend of mine to Wenonah [school](#) to work with the children on poetry. When I arrived I was shown to a classroom in one of the two older parts of the building. I was sitting, comfy, and looking around and realized I was in my fourth grade classroom. I looked to my left and there was the supply closet. I asked the young woman who was my escort if this had been a fourth grade classroom and she replied yes it had been and I started to tell her about Ruthie Hammell and she cut me short. Yes, she said, this was the closet where Ruthie Hammell was locked in.

I was shocked and sat quietly for a moment. She said, were you there? My big sister told me all about it.

Yes, I was there. Mr. McIntire, besides being large and stern, was a famous disciplinarian. One afternoon we were all going crazy. Talking and laughing and in general acting like 4th and 5th graders. Mr. McIntire suddenly turned and said that would have to stop and picked one of us, Ruthie Hammell, as the most guilty of us all. He directed her to stand in the supply room. It was a large closet holding our lined notebook paper, our Ticonderoga #2 pencils, our paste, and other materials necessary to our education. It was about 10' by 20'. She went to the closet and sat. Mr. McIntire spent the next two hours lecturing us on this and that.


The bell rang and we all went home.

The next day we returned to find that Mr. McIntire had forgotten poor Ruthie. He went home as well. She was discovered several hours later by our erstwhile janitor Nick.

She became instantly famous. Mr. McIntire never said a word of this to us.

I would imagine he was chastised by his superiors but we heard nothing. We only knew that he was almighty, all powerful, and not a man to be fucked with. No one challenged him again.

We learned fast and we learned well.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [11:17 PM](#) [0 comments](#) 

Monday, July 16, 2007


[Mr. McIntire's 4 & 5 Grade Class 1961-62](#)



Here are the [students](#) of my fourth grade along with my fifth grade confreres
 Top row from left: Me, Jack Wiler, Jimmy Marchione, Mario Contarino, Dave Porter, Chris DeHart, Rob Lowe, Dave Trost, Barry Stockinger, Ken Fell, our teacher, Mr. McIntire, Bruce McWilliams, Dave Moffit, Doug Kummer, and the ever stylish, Tommy Jenkins (note the cool tie).

Bottom Row from left, Diane Evans, Caroline Stens, Sandy Fay, Terry Howarth, Diane Eberly, Michelle Smith, Janet Shoemaker, Ruth Hammell, Jane Bowker, Madelaine Pillings, Linda Smith.

I'm getting smoother at this thing as we move up in years. Both Ruth Hammell and Madelaine will have crucial roles to play in the coming year. Ruth in particular will live forever in Wenonah [history](#) as one of Mr. M's unwitting victims. Jane Bowker's family ran the town grocery store. The fifth graders were impossibly cool and the girls impossibly beautiful. Especially Diane, Terry, and Ruth, with Janet coming in a neat fourth as an Amazon goddess.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [11:28 PM](#) [1 comments](#) 

[Who Looks the Dearest](#)

It's the summer before fourth grade and then it will be the fall of fourth grade and we're in front of Terry Fleming's grandparent's house playing my favorite game. It was my favorite game because I was good at it. The game was "Who Looks the Dearest". I've heard of variations of the game played elsewhere. To my knowledge though it has no real provenance. Kids just invented it. Maybe through some kid network it spread but certainly not via any real world network. Not on tv or radio or in a magazine or newspaper. My parents didn't know about it. But we did. And we played it like it was the last game we'd ever play.

The rules were fairly simple. One person, usually Chris DeHart, was IT. He sat on the steps of Terry's grandparent's house with a play gun of some sort. BB Gun, air rifle, plastic Thompson Sub Machine Gun, pistol, Civil War rifle, didn't matter. You just needed the porch and a gun. Terry's grandparent's front lawn had two large pines flanked by a circular sidewalk leading to the steps. We'd crouch behind one or the other of the pines and wait on Chris or whoever was it. Then he'd call a name. The person whose

name was called would run out into the open, charging as though in a battle, and Chris would shoot. Boom. Then you'd drop dead. And stay dead. Chris would call another name. Another dead kid. Till the front yard was littered with four foot corpses in various poses of the dead. Then he'd walk among us. Evaluating our deadness. Looking for faint signs of breathing. For movement. He'd evaluate our fall as we took the fatal bullet. He'd combine the fall with the death pose and come up with the winner. Whoever he picked was IT. He was the one who looked the deadest.


It was a great game.

It was of a piece with our general paranoia and fascination with war. In the fall of 1962 things moved to a head but throughout our childhood we learned the rules of war. We learned to duck and cover. We learned how many blasts of the fire whistle meant an enemy attack. We learned how to prepare for nuclear disaster, how to live on canned goods for months. We learned some of us would probably die. We weren't stupid. We read about the range of an atomic blast. We knew we lived just south of New York City, just east of Philadelphia and it's Naval Yard, and not too far north of DC. We were fucked. Wenonah was just going to be one big sheet of glass.

We read about Hiroshima. We saw Japanese monster movies...Godzilla and Gorgo. We were ready. If we lived we'd fight the Russians in the swamps like the Swamp Fox. If we died we knew how to look cool. We were ready to die young and leave a beautiful corpse.

Then we got up, jumped on our Schwinn's and rode off to Clay Hill to blast the dinosaurs that threatened our families.


The world was a dangerous place. Next posting...the little red house and Mickey Killer Islands.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [8:29 PM](#) [1 comments](#) 

[Final Photo Third Grade; Everyone Id'd](#)



Thanks to Barb Conway for the last piece of the puzzle and to Bob Thomas for the update. Here's the photo with everyone's name:

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [8:27 PM](#) [0 comments](#) 

Tuesday, July 10, 2007

[Mary Louise Wiler and May of 1961](#)

In our rush to move to the present what are the things we overlook? To begin with the birth of my sister, Mary Louise. She was born on May 19th 1961. My brothers and I had been eagerly anticipating our newest family member for months. When she was born we were stunned. A girl. A tiny, little, beautiful girl. What do you do with this?

Our boy brains were incapable of coping with this new development. We had no way of dealing with girls. They were alien creatures. Now there was one in our midst. So we just stared at her in her crib. My mother and grandmother held her up to Mick and I to hold. We were scared to death. She was so small. So tiny. So easy to break and we were so prone to breaking things. Her crib was in the dining room, a room filled with light. Her birth was a great day but for our mother a difficult day. Like many women my mother suffered from post partum depression following Mary's birth. She required care and my father enlisted first my mother's mother and then a neighbor, Mrs. Paolo, to take care of this while he cared for my mother.

My sister was born ten years after me. After her birth there were no other brothers or sisters. Who cared? We had each other. Mick and I tormented each other and in turn tormented Ted. Ted in his turn tormented Mary Lou. Each of us envied the others relative freedom as our parents grew older and more relaxed in their parenting.

But for now, on a warm day in May, my sister lay in her crib. My uncles and grandparents and brothers and parents pressed in around her. What a gift. What a day.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [9:08 PM](#) [0 comments](#) 

Monday, July 09, 2007

[Fourth Grade](#)

I'm tired of Third Grade. Who knows what we learned or didn't learn. It was in Fourth Grade that life began in earnest. It began when we rode our bikes up to the school at the end of the summer to see who would be our teacher. Mr. McIntyre. The toughest teacher in Wenonah. I was to be in a split 4th and 5th grade class with the toughest teacher in school. Life was about to get very weird.

Mr. McIntyre was tall and gawky and rough edged and rude. He had no niceties. He was intellectually superior to us which wasn't hard because we were in 4th and 5th grades. He was sarcastic. He was tough. He brooked no excuses. From day one it was very clear things were going to be very difficult.

At the same time this class was a bonding year for my friends Chris, Terry, and myself. All of us were smarter and more aware and starting to be more in the world for good or ill. To have a teacher like Mr. McIntyre was not a bad thing but not a good thing either. His tests were not like anything else we'd ever seen. Before this it was True or False. It was A, B, C, or D. It was the answer to 2 and 2 is four. Not in his class. His history classes had tests with essay questions. Write everything you know about the battle of Gettysburg. What? Huh? Everything I know? We were fucked.

Then there was recess. He loved football and he played it with abandon. The problem was we were four feet tall and he was six four or more. He'd do end runs with his sport coat and tie flapping in the breeze and a dozen little chowderheads chasing him down field. He knew he had us beat and reveled in it. And we hated him for it and tried to beat him whenever we could.

He assigned us spelling words. Only we had to write stories with the words in them. We fixed him. We wrote brilliant stories! Variations of Twilight Zone episodes or horror movies or westerns all chock full of his words. We walked to school and compared stories. Whose was best? Whose was coolest?


We had to memorize poems and recite them out loud. We were give little yellow booklets with crap like the Frost is O'er the Pumpkin. We plumbed our parents meager poetry reserves and memorized The Highwayman or Gunga Din or the Charge of the Light Brigade. He couldn't break us. He wouldn't break us. We were smarter than him.

My grades sucked.

I'll post them tomorrow.

But he roused us all to levels we didn't understand.

Wild man running down the gravel holding out the ball for anyone to take. Laughing at our puny attempts.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [8:33 PM](#) [0 comments](#) 

[Altar Boys, Baseball, and more](#)

Well, I spent the 4th in Wenonah. Chris DeHart and Dot Chattin and Suzy Parker have filled me with memories that will be addressed. But for now I thought it would be good to talk about vocations and recreation. My parents volunteered me to be an altar boy at the Church of the Incarnation when I was in 3rd Grade. it was winter and I went several times a week to learn the rituals of the mass. When to ring the bells, when to fetch the wine and host. We learned our pieces of the mass. It was Latin then. Ad deum qui latificat juventutem meum. The first words of the mass.

We learned our places before the altar. We were issued our robes and prepared to serve mass.

As I completed my training it was time to try out for minor league hardball in Wenonah. We played for American Legion Post 109 and all or most of the boys in town that were 8 years old turned out for tryouts. We ran down flies, caught line drives, ran bases, and in general embarrassed ourselves. I sucked.

After two weeks they announced those boys who would join the team. My name was not included. My brother's was. I was devastated. I rode my bike home in tears. Hours later my father came to me to say there was a mistake. It was me that should have been named. I was so happy. In retrospect I think this was all bullshit. I think, because I know I sucked and my brother didn't, that they really picked my younger brother. I think my father prevailed upon them to put me on the team and they did.

Because baseball conflicted with some elements of serving mass I had to resign my post as an altar boy. I was not sad. It seemed weird and stupid and strange and I much preferred right field to standing in front of the throne of God.

And right field was where I went.

When you stink in baseball and you're young you get right field. That's because young

batters have trouble hitting to the opposite field and there aren't many left handers. This means you spend your time standing in the outfield in terror that someone will hit the ball to you.

The good part was no one ever put me in the game. This was before the time when kids were played routinely regardless of skill levels. In the early sixties if you stunk you didn't play unless your team was either killing the other team or so far behind it couldn't hurt. There was no eleven run rule.


I got two at bats that year. I had a baggy thick woolen uniform that I loved. I had a Ted Kluszewski autographed model glove and I cherished it with all my heart. It had been my father's.

I was horrible but I loved sitting in the dugout and I loved chatter in the outfield. Come batter, come batter, batter. He can't hit, he can't hit, he can't hit.

I love practicing sliding, I loved catching ground balls and I eventually could catch flies. What I couldn't do was throw for distance. Thank God for cut off men.

So my brother Mick had to wait a year to be a better player than me. And God had to wait a bit more for me to serve Him.

But I learned the crack of the bat, the smell of neatsfoot oil, the cold sodas we got at Margies after a game. Digging deep in the cooler for a grape or pineapple soda. Hanging around with boys who played baseball better than you but still there. Still in the game.


Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [8:11 PM](#) [0 comments](#) 

Thursday, July 05, 2007

[The Bonsal Blues Hobo Band Throw Down](#)



Here's an out of focus shot of the infamous battle of the bands, mid parade. Note the contrast between the militaristic Bonsal Blues and the Hobos. My brother Ted was weeping.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [7:48 PM](#) [0 comments](#) 

[The Glorious Fourth](#)


Well, I spent most of the day in Wenonah. It was, as always, a treat. I saw many old friends and passed the word about the blog. Dottie Chattin, Barb Conway, Chris DeHart, Suzy Parker, Doug, Jack, and Dick Wesh, the giant Seville clan, Margie Loving, my brother's friends, my step brother's friends, Richie "ratkid" Young, Paul and Dave Earnhart, Carey DeGeer, my sister's friends, my parent's friends, Ralph and Rachel, Dave, Steve, Helen, and Mr. O'Connor, Mrs. McQuaide, Victor Anderson, so many, many good friends and so many memories.

Too much to deal with today but next week should spawn a host of posts. Dottie and Barb have said they'll help id the girls in the photos, Chris and Dottie both provided me with mucho grist for the mill, from the Wildcats to the Bike Game to Who Looks the Deadeast. It was a long, long day.

Suzy and I drove down at six am from Jersey City and arrived at my brother Mick's at 8am. We jetted over to Wenonah with a brief stop at the Hollywood Diner for sustenance and arrived just as the flag and Uncle Sam and his nephew arrived at Jefferson Ave. As we were parking we ran into Debbie Mix, ne Lake, and her husband Mike.

I grabbed a small beer at the O'Connor's blast and the hunt was on.

I know for now I've neglected many, many potential memories but they will have to wait. Tomorrow I leave for work at 7am and at noon leave for scenic Portland, ME and the Stonecoast MFA. For some reason they have hired me to sound my barbaric yawp from their stage. I'm psyched, tired, and anxious. It's all a wild ride Mr Toad...hold on to your hats!

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [7:40 PM](#) [0 comments](#) 

Monday, July 02, 2007

[An apology](#)

Dear readers,

I guess there are ten or twelve of you. I apologize for my lack of posts over the past several days. The death of Divina was devastating to us both and we've been struggling to rejoin the real world.

Now the real world drags me in whether I want to go or not. I'm off to Wenonah on Wednesday early in the morning with my friend Suzy Parker. We'll watch the parade and drink some beers at the firehouse and visit my friends and family. No doubt I'll say hello to my old landlords Ralph and Rachel and stop by the O'Conner's for a beer during the parade.

I'll say hello to many old friends and fail to recognize far more.

From there it's down to Suzy's parent's house in Townsend's Inlet and then for me...back to NYC on Thursday. Friday I go to the Stonecoast MFA program in scenic Maine to read my poems and talk about poetry. I'll see my dear friend Baron and some newer friends and perhaps drink a bit too much. I'll yell and scream and raise the roof.

Then back to home Sunday and off to work again

I'm going to read some poems I've written about Divina in Stonecoast and hope I make it through them without embarrassing myself. We shall see.

Have a wonderful 4th of July! It's my second favorite holiday and I'll be in the town where it's done right. The Pitman Hobo Band and the Bonsal Blues will play their tunes,

the children will amble down Mantua Ave and for a few moments it might almost be 1959. It's been like this for so many years. What a rare joy! What a deep pleasure! God Bless America and for what it's worth screw Dick Cheney!

Friday, June 08, 2007

Clay Hill

I've said we played in the woods at the end of Lincoln Avenue. But mostly we spent our time on Clay Hill. Clay Hill was the remnants of a washed out railroad trestle. At it's base in the Mantua Creek were the worn stumps of the railroad trestles. Where the railroad went and what it was for were long forgotten. It was just a hill in a small woods at the end of our street. Most of the forest there was new growth. The trees were less than twenty years old. We raced through them as though we were in a forest in an ancient world. To the left of Clay Hill were the swamps of the Mantua Creek. They resumed again some hundred yards away to the right till they reached their largest point right by the bridge between Wenonah and Mantua.

The swamps were filled with cattails and skunk cabbage and muskrats. I suppose there was other wild life but we paid little or no attention to it. The creek had catfish and some sunnies and a few smallmouth bass. It meandered it's slow way to the Delaware from a point a few miles from Wenonah. Once it had been larger but it had been dammed off by various developers over the years to make lakes and ponds and now was largely ignored by everyone but children.

For us it was heaven.

It was a world without parents or rules or a point. We fought wars on Clay Hill. We refought WWII. We fought WWIII. We saved the world from alien invasions. We eventually got up the courage to run through the swamps. We'd leap from hillock to hillock all the way to the railroad trestle by the Parker's house. We braved quick mud and mosquitoes and we were rangers in a guerilla war. My favorite Christmas present for many years was hip boots so I could run through the swamp.

We'd come home and my mother would send us into the basement to strip and clean. We smelled like swamp.


We smelled like skunk. All within two hundred feet of our homes. No adults went into the woods. No teenagers went into the woods. Just us and our ilk.

One day in a pitched battle between Chris DeHart and my friends I found myself staked out and had ants dropped on my chest. I was petrified with terror. My brother Ted raced home to get my father to save me. From what?

Terry nearly had his ear blown off by a firecracker on Clay Hill.

Kids were shoved from the top of Clay Hill on bikes and narrowly avoided spilling into the creek. For some reason none of us would swim in the creek. We'd sit for hours at the base of the hill and talk and talk and talk about bullshit. We speculated about everything. Where babies came from, what sex was, would we kill a man in battle. We argued about baseball and football and organized our mad events. Our theatrical presentations, our athletic games, all were hatched here or on my porch or in the DeHarts house or in Terry Flemings basement.

Clay Hill was as large as the world got at that time and place. It was huge and seemed to go forever. It had mystery, access, and privacy. It was perfect. We built forts in groves of sticker bushes. We made tree forts and dug foxholes. We dammed a stream further down by the old dump and flooded the woods for hundreds of yards. We were very busy but of course told no one about any of it. Till we were older, with kids of our own.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [11:36 AM](#) [0 comments](#) 

Wednesday, June 06, 2007

[Tommy Woods, Madelaine Pillings, and Me](#)

I mentioned Tommy Woods several postings back. He's the odd looking kid in my first and third grade photos. He seems twisted up just looking at him. I remember Tommy not because he was my friend or an acquaintance but because he was odd. Strange. He wasn't stupid. He was in our class after all and my classes in Wenonah Elementary were the smart classes. You'd think in a town this small it would be hard to separate children based on anything but we were separated. Based on abilities. Sometimes this was obvious. I could read easier and faster than other kids my age. I might have a lot of trouble playing dodgeball but I had no problems with Dick and Jane. Other kids had problems with things that were easy for me. Schools in the fifties and sixties segregated us to make our lives easier, better. I'm still not sure if this was good or bad. It wasn't always obvious at the time, although after some years even the dumbest of us could figure it out.

But Tommy Woods was always in my classes. Tommy could barely figure out how to walk and chew gum. I can't remember any examples of his intellectual prowess. I can only assume that he tested high somewhere down the pike but that the tests erred on his social abilities. That left him meat for our games. We were cruel, vicious shitheads and Tommy Woods was our prey. Even for me Tommy Woods was an idiot. He was lost in social encounters. His clothes were odd, his abilities to interact with us were non-existent, in short he was fair game for everyone. Even geeks like me. Tommy got caught in his own chair at school. He had difficulty talking. He was odd.

Madelaine Pillings was equal meat for the opposite reason. She was everything Tommy couldn't hope to be. She was bright, socially able, and knew the rules. Too well. She was, in short, a teachers pet. She would rat you out in a heartbeat. That meant she was hated with every breath we had. She was like some wicked version of a Hollywood star dumped in our laps. Like Hayley Mills or Shelley Fabares but without their cunning. She didn't know how to appease us only adults. She could pick a side and she always picked the wrong side. She assumed that since adults ruled the roost they were the ones to pay attention to. Bad pick.

We vilified her relentlessly. Her clothes, her smile, her demeanor were all fair game. We hated her. Hated her more than we hated anything or anyone. I honestly can't think of anyone who played with her or went to her house for fun. She was doomed. Doomed. You'd think the rough tough cream puff would have an ounce of compassion for misfits like Tommy or Madelaine. You'd think that and you'd be wrong. There is a pecking order everywhere in human society and these two chowderheads were at the bottom of ours. Worse than bullies or sociopaths. Worse than kids that set cats on fire. They were neither feared nor admired. My friend Terry sent a note about Milton Webb after my last posting.

He expressed his distaste for how our little world didn't allow an ounce of compassion because of its rigid conformity. Well, Tommy and Madelaine were the bottom of that society and suffered all the pains that we could inflict in all our myriad ways. Not that we would beat them up, or steal from them, or deprive them of food or water. Only companionship and friendship and the worlds we provided each other. They were kept apart from us with a vehemence that was surprising and viscous and real. Ask me anything about these two children and I can at most provide you with a few anecdotes making fun of them. Even our teachers made fun of them at times. Here in this little town, with no problems, no worries, and pleasant surroundings we found a way to punish people with a cruelty that was unshakeable and unmerciful. We were more like monsters than we could understand. I might have been Atticus Finch in my dreams but in my real life I was a nasty little bigot. Ha ha ha. We ran through the woods defending America from German troops and invading Russians and then each day in school punished the easiest marks we could find. And it was fun.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [12:19 AM](#) [0 comments](#) 

Tuesday, June 05, 2007

[Public Men and Women](#)

I talked last of Ed Campbell. One of the few public role models we had as young boys and girls. You might ask who else we saw during the day in Wenonah in 1960. Not a great number of people but several, several. There was George Bowker and his wife Jane who ran the grocery in the middle of town. There was Tony Sacca who ran the butcher shop attached to Bowkers grocery. We had one police officer. His name escapes me but he lived at the end of Jefferson Street by the lake and his primary duty was helping us cross the street by the corner of Mantua and West Street each day coming and going from school. He was a pleasant enough man with little or no crime to combat.

The firemen in our town were volunteers. They were our fathers and neighbors and so, for the most part invisible except when a fire swept through a house or yard or on the 4th of July when they had an open fire house with beer and hot dogs and gave rides on the firetruck for children at the park.

There was G. Wayne Post who ran the men's store in town. He had a small business cleaning men's shirts as well and delivered my father's crisp white shirts each week in a cardboard box. This served two purposes, one my father looked sharp and two I had ample supplies of cardboard for school projects.

There were various men running a Sinclair gas station in the center of town, though Chuck Forsman ran the more popular establishment just across the Wenonah Creek in Mantua. Chuck dressed as a clown each 4th of July and pattered up and down Mantua Avenue on a small motor bike for the amusement of the children and himself.

There was the local librarian, who beginning in 1962 or so was my mother, Louise Wiler. Later Dot Nugent assisted her in her duties. There were, of course, the teachers and administration of the school, the post men and women, and a few other local businessmen. Among them was an insurance man, Don Mawson. Don's shop was on Mantua Avenue just before the gas station in the center of town. Don's best friend was

Milton Webb.

Each morning and each afternoon we passed Don on the way to school. He was, how to say it, a fag. At least, that's how we described him. Young boys and girls with no real sense of what we were saying. He was unmarried, dressed well, and lived by himself, though he had one close friend, Milton Webb. Both men seemed vaguely effeminate, though by the standards of later years hardly flaming queens.

I don't know if Don was a vet but Milton was, having served honorably in the Korean War. Milton spent several years as a prisoner of war. Both men were ridiculed by us as figures of public humiliation. Both men lived honorably and bravely in a small town with small minds.

Milton Webb passed away several years ago, shortly before I returned to Wenonah, ill with AIDS. He died of natural causes and had many dear friends in the community. He was in many ways one of the town's historians and worked with a number of people in South Jersey to keep our mostly unremarkable history alive. My landlord in 2001, 2002, and 2003, Rachel Knisell admired him and his work on the town's history. He was active too in keeping the town green, helping to establish, along with Mr. Campbell, Mr. Eggert, the Middleton's, the Lentze's, and others a band of green woods around our town in the early 70's.


I don't know for certain if Milton Webb and Don Mawson were gay or homosexual, though, if Johanna were to have met them, I'm certain she would say yes. I'm sure she would say, "I can smell my people". Certainly, all the small, little bigots of my acquaintance, including myself, thought they were and worked tirelessly to make them feel unwanted and out of place.

When I came back home, sick with a disease that ravaged the gay world, I thought a great deal about Milton and Don and their world. There were a few more gay men and women in Wenonah by then. Some of them worked hard to help the sick and damaged beginning in the eighties. Their legacy was real and brave. But I can't help but think, that like Ed Campbell, Milton and Don were heroes too.

Milton was a war veteran just like Ed Campbell. He served honorably and then faced the Chinese in their camps. He braved far worse than a dozen or so idiot children ridiculing him behind his back. He involved himself in his world though his world often turned its back on him.

Courage is a funny thing. Role models take lots of shapes. There were lots of people in Wenonah when I was growing up but only two men that I could say seemed to be gay. Only one black family. No Jews. Six Catholic families. A town where being different was a curse.

I'm off to Wenonah again this year for the 4th of July. With luck I'll return with many pleasant memories and some pictures. Here are two from my memory. Ed Campbell racing down a soccer field, laughing and screaming at a bunch of ten year olds. Don Mawson on his porch, graciously saying good morning to us as we walked each day to school. Tall, dressed impeccably, enjoying a crisp fall day in a small town in southern New Jersey.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [1:36 AM](#) [0 comments](#) 

Sunday, June 03, 2007

Ed Campbell

Third Grade you'll note was taught by a woman. A woman with a young son. First and Second as well were taught by women and Fifth and Sixth. Teaching was widely perceived as a woman's job in America in 1960. It was underpaid and the women who held the jobs were considered either to be in search of a husband or supplementing a man's income in the family. My world and Mick's and Terry's and Chris' was filled with women. We left for school without seeing our fathers. We returned from school to our mothers. Many of the men in town took the train to work in Philadelphia. We'd see them walking home just before dinner in their suits and hats. They were far away figures. We had yet to participate in organized sports. We had no coaches and few if any male teachers.

Wenonah Elementary had two exceptions, my Fourth Grade Teacher, Mr. McIntyre, and Ed Campbell. Ed Campbell was assigned the problem classes. The Second and Third graders that posed a difficulty. My classes were filled with good cooperative kids. Mr. Campbell's were filled with kids with learning problems, with discipline issues. It was thought that only a man could bring them in line.

Mr. Campbell was that man. He'd served in the Korean War. He was a father as well. But more than that he was a robust, energetic man who engaged his students in ways our teachers didn't. If a kid wasn't paying attention he'd toss an eraser at his head. Mike Smith, the younger brother of Michelle, was once hung out the window till he cooled down. He played football and soccer with us on our gravel schoolyard. Especially soccer. We played a robust game with few rules and lots of contact. The only referee was Mr. Campbell and unless you were a bully or a cheat you got away with everything within the rules. It was always a joy when we were allowed to join with his classes in soccer or football.

In summers he was a lifeguard at the Wenonah Lake. He'd plant himself on the raft in the middle of the lake and take on all challengers. We'd try to take the raft and he'd toss us off. He was a war hero and a man and everything we could want to be. He was fearless. Of course, he was dealing with boys and girls under the age of twelve so it's doubtful he was physically afraid of us.

You had the sense though that he expected better of you. That you could be a better man, a better person, a better scholar, by following in his footsteps. He was, most importantly, not our father. He didn't belittle you or make you feel stupid. He simply asked you to do the work you were assigned. He was never my teacher except in the way a male role model is for a young boy. Like my Uncle Al or my Uncle Ed he showed me the way to be a man.

It was a strange world not having men in it. Your father, my friends fathers, never involved themselves in our lives the way fathers do today. They came home, had a cocktail, ate dinner, asked you about your day, chatted with our mothers and went back to work. Their life was a mystery. But Ed Campbell was there with us daily. Striding the schoolyard like the cock of the walk. Loud, boisterous, argumentative, challenging. In my town most of the men went to war. WWI, WWII, the Korean War, the Vietnam War were all a real part of the landscape. The county draft board was headed up by a man who lived in Wenonah. Nolan Cox. He lived in a large, dark Victorian home off the park. He seemed to take great pleasure in sending young men to battle.

Ed Campbell was one of the men of South Jersey who served and then came home to serve again in a largely woman's world. I have no idea how he might have felt working with the women in the school. He certainly never would speak of it. He seemed to say you should live your life as though every thing you do matters. As if it could all be gone in a second. We responded to that with an energy almost unchecked. Every boy, from the smartest, wimpiest among us to the most nasty, bullying thugs, loved him. And when he brought us together we played together. The private wars we had vanished in the joy of kicking a ball or tossing a football or stopping a run. My brother Mick had a good deal of trouble as a boy with scholastic endeavors but he worked hard for Ed Campbell. His friends and mine loved the man.


So.

I can imagine Ed Campbell feeling diminished each time he saw a man step off the train at 5:40 after a days work in Philadelphia while he spent his days with boys and girls. I can imagine him trying to learn what drew him to this vocation. More than that I can remember going to his house each Halloween and having him take the time to guess who each and every one of us was beneath our monstrous masks and grotesqueries. He was never wrong. No one ever took the raft.

Maybe you think about your job and what it means. Maybe you have sons and daughters and try to raise them up right. Maybe you fret about the men and women who teach them each day.


But in Wenonah in 1960 no one worried about this. You went to work and did the work you had to do to feed your family. You came home and ate your dinner with your cold milk and bread and potatoes. You smiled at your children and asked how they were doing and probably barely listened to their half hearted recitations of the days events. You trusted your children's lives to women and a few men with little or no knowledge of who they were or what they did.

It still amazes me I know almost nothing of their lives. I know Miss Quigley married a few years after I left Second Grade and became Mrs. Scott. I know Mrs. Kaufman lived at the end of my block for twenty odd years but I never had an adult conversation with her till I was in my thirties on the 4th of July. I knew Mrs. Fuller's son Greg but nothing of her or her husband. But Mr. Campbell strides through my life like a God. Strong and brave and fierce. A man like I wanted to be. He made books seem less like the world of ladies and more like the world. Not a bad thing for a guy in a little town in South Jersey.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [8:11 PM](#) [2 comments](#) 

[Third Grade Only One Girl Left Unnamed](#)



Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [3:15 PM](#) [1 comments](#) 

Friday, June 01, 2007

[1960 JFK Mary Lou and more](#)

So it's 1960 and for the first time I'm aware of a presidential election. John F Kennedy is running against Richard Nixon and we watch the news and see the Kennedy's the Nixons and more. My mother is pregnant with my sister, Mary Louise. I'm in third grade and life in Wenonah is sweet.

I walk to school each day with my friends Terry and Dottie. I go to class with children I've known now for two years. We are friends in a way I hadn't experienced friends before. After 2nd grade I'm now closer to boys and girls a grade ahead. Chief among them Chris DeHart who lives down the block from me on South Lincoln. Chris has two older brothers, Tommy and Stewart and a southern mother, Clara. She's passed along a lot of her heritage to her children and they share many of her beliefs and ideals. Chris' father is in the family business, DeHart Trucks.

Terry has two older brothers as well, Mike and Tim. Mike and Tim are smart and handsome and cool in ways a geek like me can only vaguely comprehend. They make fun of me for reading all the time. I go to Terry's house to play early every weekend, when I wake up. Terry's family does not get up when Mick and I wake up. Everyone sleeps till 9 or 10 in the morning. Mrs. Fleming greets me at the door, a vision in hairspray and gruff Irish beauty. She can't figure out why in the world I'm awake.

At school we're excited when Kennedy is elected. A new generation with new visions has taken the reins of power. At least that's the way it feels to us little kids. We have long passionate arguments about civil rights and white flight. We're in third grade or fourth grade so these arguments are stupid to say the least. Chris takes the traditional southern view. If niggers move in his family will move out. Not that there was any chance of that happening but still we discuss it at length.

Meantime my brothers and I anticipate Mary's arrival. We're hoping for a fourth boy but I can bet my mother is praying for a girl. We were a handful. Mick and I and Ted drove her crazy. She was quiet and bookish and sweet. We were loud and insistent and out of

control. Years later my Uncle Ed, my father's brother, would tell he thought my father had no control of us.

We played football, tackle, in the backyard, with only the rudiments of understanding of the rules. We watched TV from 7:30 to 8:00 and went to bed. I read and read and read. It seems to me that I read *To Kill a Mockingbird* in third grade. That might be historically impossible and I have no intention of verifying that. But the central theme of the book, the battle against the poison that was racism and the heroism of black and white men and women in fighting it struck me with all the force it struck the rest of the nation.

I read the Hardy Boys too. Every last Hardy Boys book. My mother's brother, Al, had some of them in his collection from the forties. I ran through them in a few months. Roadsters and gangsters and smugglers and mysteries and all in New Jersey! The Hardy Boys were from a shore town in Northern New Jersey but from my perspective they were from strange place by the shore with cliffs and caves and violence. In Wenonah the only violence was child on child violence.

I began to learn to ride my bike. It being too big I had trouble stopping it so I adopted a strategy of running into curbs to stop. Mick and I launched our sibling rivalry in earnest. Each of us was what the other wanted to be and this would extend for years.

Mick was athletic and personable and funny. I was smart and awkward and I don't know what. We began a series of battles each day at breakfast. Mick would look at me across the table and start in. Bla, bla bla bla eh eh eh. Nonsense syllables that drove me crazy. I'd scream at him to stop and he'd do it more. My mother would say, ignore him and he'll stop. Might as well ask the sun not to come up. Ignore him? How? He was relentless in picking the scabs of my insecurities. I never figured out that it was me that made him nuts. We'd end up rolling around on the floor kicking and punching till our mother booted us out.

And out we went into the extended games we all played. We discovered the woods. Clay Hill and the Mantua Creek were just two blocks from our house and all of us spent hours there each afternoon. Walking through the woods imagining ourselves assaulted by dinosaurs or Russians or god knows what. Shooting our plastic guns at imaginary monsters and rolling for cover.

Chris invented most of the games. That was his forte. He saw more movies than any of us and when he'd return he'd tell us the stories and we'd reenact them. *Frankenstein* or *Dracula*, *Wolfman*, *Liberty Valance*. All of them elaborately choreographed plays Chris would direct. The two most intense were *Frankenstein* and *Liberty Valance*. Each of us would be assigned a role and Chris would give us lines and tell us when to enter. We revelled in the detail. *Liberty Valance* was my personal favorite because for once I wasn't a geek. I usually played the Jimmy Stewart character, Rance Stoddard. Chris was always *Liberty Valance*. Terry was John Wayne's character. Gary Condell played Pompey. My brother and his friends played everyone in the town.

Years later when I saw the film in Livingston College in Al LaValley's film class I was astounded to realize I knew all the dialogue. Chris had drilled it into us. Pompey hand me my gun.

We played with our school work. Walks to school had us telling stories based on our spelling words. We each tried to use our spelling words in elaborately crafted stories. Monsters and GI's and war figured heavily in everything we wrote. We tried to top each other with the best story till we forgot about the spelling words.

A note here...I've been away from the past for the last few weeks and am just getting back into 1960. It's odd to put yourself back again, especially when you're worried about the present. Forgive the disconnect. Bob Thomas has been helping put names to the picture. I hope to be done soon. In the meantime I'm going to post his most recent reconstruction and if any of you can help fill in the pieces I hope you will.

Monday, May 21, 2007

[My Grades](#)

Well, now it's clear. I was an egghead. Although an egghead with poor cursive writing skills. And after looking at Mrs. Ferrera's handwritten notes I know I was far from her goals for my cursive writing. Looking back I was grateful for the day that I could just print in caps. I do that well. Thank God for Industrial Drawing in 8th Grade.


In the meantime we can deconstruct this relic from the past. The black and white photo of an entrance to the school none of us used. The teachers comments. Her references to me as Jackie. The fact that I read too much. Read too much! What a curse to spend my time doing what they taught us to do!

Note too the principals signature rubber stamping our efforts and the signature of my father. John M. Wiler. A signature I would use a million times as an adult as I am his namesake. Seeing it there chills the spine.

Another man signing your name again and again attesting to the scholarly efforts of his son. A man who knew little of what happened in his son's classroom. Who assumed, rightly, that the same things were happening there that had happened in his third grade classroom. Who sent me to school alone each day with barely a nod. In fact, if I remember correctly he was usually gone by the time we left. We were home for his arrival at days end. It was almost always a celebration. Of what I'm not sure. But happy we were to have him back in the house. Like dogs waiting for their beloved master, tails wagging, twitching with expectation. Oh sweet joy.

Jackie loved third grade. He loved to read. He read too much. He didn't learn enough but how much he didn't learn is for the subject of later posts.

In the meantime we'll id our classmates and talk about the impending birth of my beloved sister in the next posting. See you all on the other side of my splenectomy.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [7:12 PM](#) [0 comments](#) 

[3rd Grade Report Card](#)

storm brewing and Luis and I and Willa were hastily moving things into a small enclosed room. Some of the things were my books. Books from my childhood. We were moving not just Acme but our own possessions. The owner of the company was weeping over the death of his father many years before.

I woke suddenly and wrote this down. It's three am. Acme Exterminating is in fact moving in just a little while for the first time in many, many years. The man who founded the company, Harry Stien, will not be moving with it. He died a few years back. He was a big, ebullient man of great joy and passion. He served his country well in WWII and left his son and his employees a company with a proud record in an industry known for it's family businesses.

What does this dream mean? What do any dreams mean? John F Kennedy was a new President in a young country that had just fought a bitter war across the globe. The men and women of his generation sacrificed much, achieved much, and believed that they could do anything. They passed that belief along to boys and girls like me and Mick and Ted and my soon to be born sister, Mary Louise.

Harry was JFK's contemporary, though from a very different background. He walked out of WWII and built a business in one of the toughest markets in the world.


Bob and I and Luis are the heirs of that business. Luis and I and Willa and Bob are a family as much as Mick and Ted and Mary Louise and I are a family. There is a roof over our heads in the new Acme Exterminating. That's a bit of what the dream means.

I was wrong. There is a roof over our head in the new office. The new office is just around the corner from the old.

So Makenzie Marie...welcome to a world that is the same and different. Just a few moments ago you weren't here. Now you are. Everything we tell you, everything your mother and father tell you will be the truth. None of it will be the truth. You will wake up one day in the year 2064 and look around you and say, wait, where is the roof? Why is it raining? When did we move?

Then you'll realize, as we all do, it was just a dream. A beautiful dream we hold in our hearts for a short span of years. Like all dreams it's filled with terror and sex and laughter and tears. Cherish your dream Makenzie as we cherish you.

Goodnight Mr President. Goodnight Harry. Goodnight Luis and Willa. Goodnight Ted. Goodnight Mick. Goodnight Mary Lou. Goodnight Louise. Sleep tight wrapped in your cherished dreams.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [3:09 AM](#) [1 comments](#) 

Sunday, May 06, 2007

[Little Men](#)

Third grade began with a momentous Christmas. First, I caught my parents assembling bicycles for Mick and I. Then I told Mick and destroyed his faith in Santa. Actually he held on for about six hours until we came downstairs and found the gleaming new bikes. Then I got a bike! A beautiful red bike, a two wheeler, a giant red bike...so big I could barely get on it. Mick received a smaller black bike. We were both really excited but it was too cold that Christmas to do more than look at them. What a curse. Then there were little men. Army men. Plastic figurines of WW II soldiers and Civil War soldiers. Mick

was entranced by the Civil War and both of us were fascinated by WWII. These were the years of war movies and heroism, japs and jerries getting blown to bits by brave GI's. We set up our men throughout our room or the second living room or outside in the digging yard and made gun noises. I can still do a creditable machine gun. Later in life we bought Airfix HO scale soldiers from nearly every army in the world. Suaves and grenadiers and doughboys marched everywhere in the Wiler home. They were melted and torn apart and lost forever down sewers and drains and in holes. My mother and father unearthed them for years in the vegetable garden they planted in the digging yard once we'd moved out.

The figures frozen forever tossing grenades or half crouched firing tommy guns. Officers urging the GI's to greater glory, pillboxes to hide and fire machine guns. Planes and rafts and cannons and mortars and barbed wire all to serve our brave soldiers as they moved across the roots of a great black maple or tunneled deep in the digging yard.

The Airfix men became part of great tableaux we created in a box that had once been a baseball game. It had sides about two inches high and was roughly 3' by 6' and we'd fill it with dirt and rocks and create vast battlefields. We strung model planes on thread from the basement ceiling and lit them afire to have molten plastic land on our hapless heroes. All to the chatter of guns and the shrieks of children playing at war.



We played at war constantly. We invented our own game for the summers, based loosely on Kick the Can or Capture the Flag, which we called "The Gun Game". One person was it and had a gun. The others scattered in hiding to evade capture. The person who was it simply had to see you and call out your name and rough location. "Mick, behind the bush" or "Jack, in the tree" or "Chris, in the sewer" and you had to go back to the base. All the captured or basically living dead players could be freed by one person running in while the person who was it was away and touching the base. No warning or siren gave notice this was happening. This meant it could be a long night for the person who was it. Sam Stewart was our prize chump. He must have spent thousands of hours patrolling my yard looking for us in the garage or in the crawl space or up a tree or just beyond the porch. The borders could be expanded to include the McQuades yard but that was it. Even with just two yards it was tough to win. Almost like being on patrol in the Nam or walking a line in Korea. Except people laughed at you instead of trying to kill you.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [7:41 PM](#) [1 comments](#) 

Friday, May 04, 2007

[Mrs Ferrera's Third Grade Class 1960-61](#)




Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [6:45 PM](#) [0 comments](#)  

Tuesday, May 01, 2007

[My brothers and I](#)



In the absence of my third grade class picture here are two unforgettable portraits of myself and my brothers. One is all three of us together. The second is Mick and I on the fishing pier of the 59th street pier in Ocean City. In 1962 this pier would be a part of the ocean.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [11:19 PM](#) [0 comments](#) 

[Third Grade](#)


Oh and this brings us finally to Third Grade. Mrs Ferrara. The dawn of life. Kennedy and Nixon. The birth of my sister, Mary Louise. The beginning of my rich life outside of my house. Models and games and fun! Desperate attempts at learning. 1960 and the dawn of the new decade!

Where oh where to begin. We all went to school again with just each other. In Mrs Ferrara's third grade classroom. Mrs Ferrara from Pitman, NJ. Mrs. Ferrara, loud and brassy and fun. I read To Kill a Mockingbird. I walked to school and I wasn't the rough tough creampuff. I played in a baseball league. I tried to be an altar boy. I was confirmed by the Catholic church as a soldier of Christ. I began to be me. I found Superman and Batman and the Flash! I found Aquaman and Hawkman and the Justice League of America! What a glorious time. It's true I still dressed like some awkward child of the Depression. It's true my mother still could not cook. But we began our rich life of play and imagination and creation.

Here then are the children of the sixth decade of the 20th century in all their stupid glory. Black and white and dumb but ready to learn.

God I loved this year.

Picture to follow. Terry and Bob and all my friends...let's give us all names:)

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [11:07 PM](#) [0 comments](#) 

[Second Grade and the Lake](#)

I can't remember anything I learned in Second Grade. I remember Miss Quigley being beautiful. I remember learning to write and read. I can't remember a thing of arithmetic. I've asked my friends what they recall and the answer is the same. It's a strange thing to say but I passed through Second Grade as an innocent. It was the last year I believed in Santa Claus. It was the last year my parents were my whole world.

It was also one of the last years I spent at the Wenonah Lake. After school ended there wasn't much to do but play. Wenonah is a hot humid town near Philadelphia. When I was getting better and living in the Knisell's home Rachel told me that homes used to have outside kitchens to deal with the heat of summer. What we did do was go to the lake.

There were several bodies of water in Wenonah. The Wenonah Lake was a community association that dated back to the 1880's when Wenonah was a resort town. There was the recently formed Wenonah Swim Club. A clean chlorinated pool with a snack bar and a kiddie pool and tennis and basketball courts. There was the Mantua Creek and the swamps. There was Parkers lake and Sinnott's Pond and another lake by one of the mansions in town. Only the Wenonah Lake and the Swim Club were open for recreation. It's a long standing fact of life in Wenonah that young families begin their lives at the lake and migrate to the pool. Young children have no sense of cool so the lake was fine. Once you were older the brown water and lack of facilities made it less than cool.

My friend Bob has many memories of play at the lake. Ed Campbell, one of the teachers in our school, was a lifeguard and regularly roughoused with kids on the raft of wood and 55 gallon drums in the middle. Kid's sold snow cones and families barbequed and there were rudimentary swimming lessons. The swim club had a world class swim team. Kid's from the Wenonah Swim Club competed in Philly and all across South Jersey. Their swimming records were all over the walls of the club. When you swam in the lake you emerged in a brown tan from the cedar water. It was neither clean nor cool. No one raced. Instead you ran willy nilly and cannon balled off the pier.

When I went back to Wenonah to recover from my illness (AIDS) I went each day to the lake. I sat there the only adult male in the place and watched mothers and young children having fun.

On the 4th of July there were competitive races at the lake. The 4th of July was the greatest day in Wenonah and remains so to this day. My friends come back year after year to sit on corners they sat on when they were children to watch the same silly little parade. It's beautiful. The Pitman Hobo Band and the Bonsal Blues Band square off mid town in a burst of John Phillips Sousa. Raggedy fake hobos and military nincompoops all playing their hearts out and everyone cheers and salutes. Politicians pay homage and walk the streets. You can say hey to the local representatives, laugh at the presumptions of small businesses and guess as to this years theme. I'll have a lot more to say about the 4th in years to come.

But always, on a hot day, when you were in 2nd grade you went to the lake. You caroomed off the pier. You laughed and scared your parents. You begged for a dime for a snow cone.

I'm going to break protocol here and put in a poem I wrote when I was stuck in Wenonah in 2002-2003. Please read it for it's great joy and nostalgia.

We're All Going to the Lake

We're going to the lake!

All of us.

We're loading up the minivans.

We're slapping up the kickstands.

We're running around the house,

screaming about how we can't

find our badges or our high band

or our favorite suit.

Which was right here and

we're getting up slow from lunch

and walking out to the car.

We're going to the lake!

Eight housewives, twenty five kids,

three lifeguards, one kid in the refreshment stand to dish up the water ice,

me and once in a while a dad and maybe some teenagers,

who are loud and look scary but

swim like shit once they hit the water

and smack!

What a lake to dive into!

A long brown ribbon of cedar water.

Trees brushing it's sides, bright blue skies

fill it with clouds

and turtles strung out on a log.

They're so tired from this hot, hot sun they forget to eat.

So the crappies and minnows

are all over the shallows.

Gotta get while the getting's good.

Far, far out on the lake a big bass leaps up, flops down

and nobody sees the water ripple out.

They're riding their bikes

down Jefferson or Monroe.
Towels over their shoulders
snapping in the rush.
A whine of spokes and muscle that's been going on for fifty years.
Fifty years of kids hauling their
bodies trawling streams of brown water,
small muscles stretched,
yelling, running, tight little balls that
cannon into the water!
O Joy! O headlong rush to water!
O the whirl of spokes!
The shrieks!
The gossip!
The affairs.
Bodies lying in beds, dreaming of other
bodies last night, last week.
Husbands, lovers.
Heat raising tiny beads of sweat,
the bathing suit tossed heedless on the chair.
The brush of finger to breast.
The wives dreaming of sweat;
muscle backs, thick bellies.
The drop falling from his chin,
running down her breast.
But then the kids are yelling!
We gotta go swimming!
Insistent!
Water calling water.
Awkward crawl
head out of water
crazy seven year old treading water.
mad dog paddle.
Mom watching, feet in water,
not really there,
but cool and wet on a hot, hot day.
O Wenonah Lake!
Canoes, boats, rafts,
big fat guy, belly up,
floating.
The only husband here today.
Me, watching housewives,
watching kids,
splashing dad,
slap of hand on water.
Ripples that go all the way to shore.
We're all at the lake!

We've brought everything we need.
Life jackets, blankets, sunscreen, towels, badges, bands,
balls, rubber killer whales, sunhats, sun glasses, coolers,
cocktails cleverly disguised as lemonade, water,
watches, buckets to carry water and
desire.
All for the lake!
On a hot, hot day.
We go to the lake for the water.
Come in!
Come in!
Come in!

That's my lake. That's my town. Soon it will be summer and the snapping turtles will be on their logs, the bass will be leaping from the middle of a small brown lake and children will be screaming at their friends. Oh God. This is a beauty that can never be recovered

Saturday, April 28, 2007

Television and my world

There were three channels. 3, 6, & 10. We went to bed each night at 7:30. That meant [television](#) had it's greatest impact in the morning. Like most cities Philadelphia had children's televisions progrms week days between 7am and 9am. I'm not talking about national programs like Mickey Mouse Club or Howdy Doody or programs of their ilk. These were cheaply produced programs primarily designed to bracket either cartoons or filmed material readily available to their libraries.

If you are from New York you watched Officer Joe Bolton and the Our Gang movies. We had our own bizarre programs. Sally Starr, Chief Halftown, Pixanne, Gene London, Uncle Pete's Gang. Bizarre not because of the bulk of their content but because of the odd sketch material that was created to bracket the content. Sally Starr wore cowgirl clothes and Chief Halftown American Indian Garb. Pixanne was of course a pixie. Whatever the fuck a pixie was. Gene London was his own version of a pixie. If pre 1970's Philadelphia was ready for a gay man Gene London gave us all he had. In 2007 he lives in New York and presides over a collection of movie stars and theatrical gowns. Guess where his sensibilities lay.

That said the content was brilliant Warner cartoons and MGM cartoons and the Max Roach Our Gang series. No one could complain about the genius of what we were shown. And being children who could complain about context. Fake cowgirls and Indians and Pixies and a shop keeper with a gay streak a mile wide.

Our Gang movies were my favorites. Rich, multi ethnic movies about wild children. I loved them and their anarchic spirit. How glad was I to read about them later in Ragtime.

Alfalfa and Whitey and Froggie and Buckwheat. My dearest friends. Constructing crates of junk and careering down the streets. Lost in fantasies only children could understand. You can imagine my delight later in life when I learned Roach said to them... just do what you like and we'll film it. No plan, no ideas just children being idiots. Like me, like my friends.


And Bugs and Daffy. And all the Warner brothers cartoons. Adult beyond my measuring. Smart and cool and suave and wild. Who wouldn't love cartoons like that.

That was the morning.

In the afternoon there was only one show. The Early Show. A movie program that showed films of the 30's, 40's, & 50's. We lived for monster movies, for horror movies. For "The Thing", for "Frankenstein", for the "Mummy". We'd all sit in my second living room in terror at 4 in the afternoon watching monsters.

How much better to watch an alien possess and devour men on an arctic outpost then to deal with the problems of flowering plants in Wenonah. Or more appropriately the negroes next door. But in Our Gang the black kids and white kids played together and the jews made the movie. Go figure.

As we got older we made movies a richer part of our lives. For now our gal Sal was the best part of the day.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [10:47 PM](#) [2 comments](#) 

Friday, April 27, 2007

[Sleeping Beauty and the Starlight Drive In](#)

The first movie I saw in a movie theater was Sleeping Beauty. My grandmother Glading, no my Nonny Glading, took Mick and Ted and I to see it in late 1959 in a theater in suburban Philadelphia. I was amazed. The witch was terrifying, the screen was huge and all of us could talk of nothing else for weeks.

We rarely went to movies when I was young after that. Not until the end of 2nd grade and on into my early youth did we routinely visit movie theaters. When we went to indoor theaters we usually went to one of two movie theaters in Gloucester County. The Wood Theater in Woodbury or The Pitman Theater in Pitman. Both were old vaudeville playhouses that had been converted to movie theaters. When I was under 17 we went primarily for Saturday matinees. A feature, a B movie, cartoons and a theater filled with screaming children, tossed popcorn, and enough sugar to power a small nation.

Birthday parties were the primary vehicle for these jaunts. Parents would gather a group of us together on the pretext of celebrating one of our birthdays and schlep us off to the movies where for three hours we'd be happily ensconced in the rich glow of cinema. Our parents, when they took us to the movies, took us to the Drive In. South Jersey was the place where the drive in movie was invented. No shit. A drive in in Pennsauken NJ was the first drive in in all of the Americas. My father and mother's favorite was the Starlight Drive In. We could see the screens of the Starlight and other Drive In theaters as we rode home from my Nonnies house in Pennsylvania. We could imagine the dialogue and guess at the action and then we were by and the images were gone.

A drive in was a crazy experience. You paid by the car and by the number of people in the car. You'd drive in, pay your admission and proceed to a spot where a sound device

was hung on a pole. This device was then moved from the pole to your driver or passenger side window so you could hear the movie. Drive in's were made for two groups of people. Young adults with cars and young parents with children.

My parents in the 60's were the latter group. We'd load up the family wagon, the Plymouth or the Chevy depending on the year, fill it with blankets and pillows and head to the Starlight. They'd be showing some great epic. Spartacus or D Day or whatever. We'd sit rapt for perhaps a half hour then fall asleep. My parents would have an hour of peace, we'd have a treat, and maybe they'd neck.

Teenagers only went to drive in's to make out. For further information on the uses of drive in's and the middle of the 20th century see any number of horror movies made at the time. Only bad things could come of this.

You got refreshments from a stand in the middle of the vast field of cars. Otherwise it was a movie theater with beds.

The movie I remember most was the Guns of Navarone which was released in 1961 so I know I'm cheating here but still.

I'm going to have my spleen removed on the Friday before Memorial Day weekend. I'll spend the three day weekend eating jello and bantering with women from South Jersey, some of whom may have visited the Starlight. Maybe their children were conceived in the Starlight. I'll lie in bed and watch bad television and read and think.

On the way home from my grandmothers we were always in a fugue like state. Half full of energy, nearly asleep. We lay with our heads on the car cushions and looked up to the stars. We'd pass a field with a huge screen filled with movies. The movie had no sound and was gone in minutes. It was the way you experience adults or nature when you're young. One moment you're transfixed, the next moment they're gone. My parents were young people with desire and needs. They worked hard raising us and making money. They came home and acted as they thought parents should. What did they do when we weren't around? What were their desires? What were their needs? They were young and beautiful and passionate and we cared nothing for that. We glimpsed their lives for just a second. A flash as the car passes a drive in movie screen.

Perhaps you remember a moment of anger or a hated chore. Perhaps your parents were monsters that lurched in and out of your life like Frankenstein or Barbara Stanwyk.

Perhaps you cherish a few moments cuddled on a couch with a book open and the drowsy drone of your mothers voice. Images on a large screen on a hot summer night. The words unknowable. The context unreadable. All we have is that.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [12:27 AM](#) [1 comments](#) 

Tuesday, April 24, 2007

[Cemetery Hill](#)

Christmas 1959 passed with no ill effects. It was the last year I believed in Santa Claus. The winter of 1960 was mostly unremarkable except it began my practice of sledding at Cemetery Hill. The winters of the 1960's were above average for snowfall in South Jersey. South Jersey normally gets perhaps one big snow a year that melts within a day or so. The 60's were filled with snow which for a young boy was a god send. With the first great dumping of snow our father took us to Cemetery Hill to go sledding. After this year

we went on our own.

My birthday had a tenuous relationship with snow and winter. My father insisted I was born in a blizzard though the NWS shows only a five inch storm that day. It really doesn't matter. Winter isn't winter without snow and the removal of snow and playing in snow. My father loved shovelling snow and he instilled that love and it's precision in his sons. It may be that when we were very young we thought he was nutty as a fruitcake but now whenever it snows I want to shovel. I'll clear any walk, anywhere, for free. I never hurt my back or over exert but my walk is clear throughout a storm. My father was a guru of two things. Snow removal and lawn mowing and I share both.

He was also a man who loved to play in snow. In Woodbury when I was in kindergarten there was a huge winter storm. He helped us make an igloo and showed us how to make snowballs. In Wenonah he grabbed his childhood Flexible Flyer from the garage and dragged Mick and I across the Mantua Creek to Wenonah Cemetery (in Mantua) to go sledding. Wenonah Cemetery is where my mother's bones are at rest. It overlooks the Mantua Creek, a thin ribbon of swamp water where over the next nine years I would spend most of my best moments. They all began that first winter's day.

There were basically two hills in the cemetery. One on the south side and one on the west. I think. You'd start at the top of a hundred foot hill and hurl yourself down on your sled. Then you'd trudge up from the bottom to do it all again. You'd get wet and tired and sweaty and cold. You'd try dumb things like sled surfing (standing on your sled holding onto the rope to maintain balance and stance) or practice sled battles with other kids. You sledded between row after row of tombstones. Remember my mother is buried there and not without deep sentiment. Not for the place but for the sledding and the creek and the swamp.


On the one side, I believe the south there was a large statue over one grave of a doughboy. It was once featured in Weir New Jersey. I knew the names of most people in the cemetery, if not the first, certainly the last. I can remember kids in a toboggan toppling more than a few headstones during one heady Saturday run sometime in the mid 60's.

If it was cold and icy and really snowy you could hurl yourself down the road of the cemetery. This was a quarter mile run of great peril given that some person of sorrow might be driving up to visit a loved one. Nonetheless it was a heady rush of speed and cold and ice and joy.

As we got older we went on our own. In the years to come we got our own Flexible Flyers. Short or long. But always sturdy and dependable. We'd wax the runners and trudge the half mile or so to Cemetery Hill. Chris and Terry, Gary and Robbie, Mick and I. Ted and his friends Joel and Robbie and Evan. We shared the hill with kids from Mantua and the smell of new snow and the feeling of frozen toes was universal.

Fuck problems. Who cared about homework. Who worried about being odd or not fitting in. We just stood on top of the hill and threw ourselves down. Like small rockets in blue jeans and hooded sweatshirts. Sledding was a complete joy. There was no competition. There was no status. There was no position. The snow would be there for only a day or two and you had to sled while you could.

Among the graves and decaying flowers and lost loves we hurtled down small hills in a town without hills screaming with joy.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [11:38 PM](#) [0 comments](#) 

Monday, April 23, 2007

[Ed Sullivan and life in 2007](#)

My apologies for not posting over the past week. Life has a way of intruding into writing lives that we don't often anticipate. My young niece, Louise, had a party on Saturday to celebrate the upcoming birth of her first born and her engagement. I had the occasion of talking with my doctor regarding a medical procedure he's advised I undergo. Some of you know I'm HIV positive but I'm also positive for the virus that causes Hepatitis C and it's been wreaking havoc on my liver since the HIV virus roared into high gear. Twice in the past four years I've attempted the cycle of drugs to control the virus and each time have had a difficult time dealing with the effects. Basically I take a drug much like a chemo therapy drug that acts to destroy fast growing cells in the body. There are several fast growing cells in your body. Hair. The virus and it's ilk. Bone marrow cells. During my last round of treatment last year I achieved great reductions of the Hep C virus but unfortunately my red and white cells and my platelets also tanked. I kept my luxurious growth of crewcut hair. Once before I required a transfusion to deal with the near complete extermination of my red cells. This time it was my platelets that were a concern.

My doctor has suggested a splenectomy to allow my platelet count to rise. Your spleen and mine has little to do with actual spleen. It does however remove some old immune cells from the body. By removing the spleen they hope to allow my platelet count to rise to a level at which I may tolerate a vicious assault on my bone marrow cells and by coincidence the virus that causes Hepatitis C. So Wednesday I'm going to see a surgeon to determine if I'm able to endure this surgery. What an odd operation. They're going to remove a perfectly healthy, functioning organ in hopes of saving a damaged, dying organ so they can save my aging husk of a body. To say this concerns me would be an understatement.

Nonetheless it has helped propel me once more to Wenonah in 1959 and 1960. Dwight David Eisenhower is our President. Soon to be replaced. I am small. Negroes are relegated to the outer darkness. My friend Bob writes to remind me the pig farms were in New Sharon, not Jericho. How nice to note small errors. There were still no white folks there. He also notes the origin of the term "shotgun shack". A shotgun shack was any building you could discharge a shotgun in the front door and the shot would pass through the back door with no damage. Some anthropologists suggest it's older origin lies in West Africa with the term Shogun or the word for house. The long nature of the structure is analogous to the structure of the building in the US. Note my odd use of locution.

What is more pertinent to my previous post was not the West African or Southern meaning of the term but the adjacent outhouse. The lack of good schools. The lack of choice in job advancement. The fact that Mrs Irene Smith had to purchase a home in the oddest corner of my town in order to say she and her children lived in Wenonah and to allow them to attend our little school. This understatement is consistent with my refusal to confront my own current fears regarding my possible death during surgery. The spleen is connected intimately to the heart. You take it out and you may rupture the heart. Break it. You fuck with a system of life that has been in place for many years and you can break it. All hell might break loose.

Dwight Eisenhower, unlike our current sitting President, was a war hero. He'd actually served in real wars. He knew the cost of aiming a gun at someone. He wasn't all comfy with that. He made, like Harry Truman, hard choices regarding that.

He grew up in Oklahoma where black folk were regarded pretty much like they were in Wenonah. In the Senate, Lyndon Johnson was presiding over legislation to change the ways we allowed black people to vote. He grew up in Texas. With brown and black people. With poor white people. They probably lived in shotgun shacks. They most certainly worked at the only jobs people would let them work at. This is poor grammar but fact.


The wind that was bringing the stink of the pig farms to me, the wind that my mother asked me to cover my face for to keep out "the polio", the wind that kept queers and niggers and spics at arms length was still strong. But there was another wind growing. It seems odd to say Lyndon Johnson and Dwight Eisenhower were helping to make that wind but they were. So were gentle men and women throughout the South and the country. Brave men and women who were taking courage from the struggles and victories of WWII to make a change here in the United States. Me, I was just a little boy. My friends and I were playing games and learning arithmetic. But every night we watched the news.

On Sundays we watched Ed Sullivan. What an odd show. A variety show. Like vaudeville but on TV. Jugglers and circus acts and comics and musicians all performing for a few moments under the auspices of a bland host. I hated Ed Sullivan. My parents and grandparents loved him. So every Sunday after Lawrence Welk we sat down to watch a succession of crazy quilt entertainment.

I share my home and heart with Johanna, a transsexual from El Salvador. All her friends are undocumented aliens. Their favorite show is Sabado Gigante. It's Ed Sullivan in spanish. It's real message is home. They hunger for it's tales of families reunited, of lands they can no longer visit, of music they all share. It's as hokey and odd as Ed's show was. Reggaeton mashes up with Mariachi much like Ella Fitzgerald would share a stage with Elvis.

There would come a time in the next few years when the winds of change would sweep Ed Sullivan off the air. New music and attitudes and power would show him to be the vaudeville act he always was. A quaint reminder of a long gone age. Someday Sabado Gigante will seem equally quaint. Different winds blow at different times but they blow hard and long and they don't stop till they're done.

Let's leave this post with Jackie and Mickie and Teddy all clustered on the floor with their parents and grandparents watching Ed. Senor Jimenez is making jokes in some fake Mexican accent or Jackie Mason is telling cleaned up versions of oft repeated dirty Catskills jokes. A troupe of Russian acrobats is twirling in the air. They will defect the next day, never to return. Kruschev is pounding his shoe. Missiles are poised at the ready. Men are boarding unmarked planes for southeast Asia to control the uprising of the Vietminh. Life is about to change. Someone is holding a shotgun and aiming at the front door. It's not the shot that carries the charge it's the blast and the powder. In ten years no one will be home.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [10:47 PM](#) [0 comments](#) 

Monday, April 16, 2007

Rain and water and steam and pigs

I was going to talk today about rain. About what we did when it rained. It rained hard in the spring and early summer in Wenonah. Thunderstorms were a regular feature of life. Sudden rushes of heavy rain and then we'd run out to the curb to float boats made of popsicle sticks or logs in the torrent by the curb. We'd run down the street following our boats and I was going to say something meaningful about that.

Then my friend Bob Thomas reminded me about Pig Farms. All around the northern boundaries of Wenonah in Deptford, really, in Jericho there were Pig Farms. Lets just un cap that. pig farms. They were owned by Italian families and worked by black families. The black families lived close by the pig farms. The garbage came from all the adjacent towns. Bob reminded me that the garbage came from Wenonah. Or Woodbury. Or Sewell. In our back yard you'll remember there was a can for garbage only. That garbage was collected by garbage trucks and it had a destination. The pig farms.

The last stretch of my rides home from my grandmother's house in Pennsylvania was always through the pig farms. The stench was ungodly. Newark had nothing on this. There were miles upon miles of pig farms. Butted up against them were the homes of the black people that worked the pig farms. Their shacks, really. Shotgun shacks in the parlance.

The garbage trucks were outfitted to process the garbage for the pigs. They were designed to collect, process, cook and deliver our garbage to the hungry pig population. The trucks could be heated with steam and then the garbage fed to the pigs.

On the one hand this was an entirely eco friendly way to process organic matter. On the other hand the workers who handled the pigs lived a hundred yards from the stench of garbage.

There were no white families so far as I know that lived by the pig farms. One family in my town owned one of the biggest farms. The Villari's. Good people with a nice home in the newer part of Wenonah.

Their children worked in the farms the same way the black people did. They learned their trade. From the pigs came sausage and offal and food. For the Italian Market in South Philly, for meat processing plants across the country. I only knew how bad it stunk. I only knew that the shotgun shacks didn't resemble the Victorian homes in my town. We'd pass through in the night and say ooh hold your nose. It's the pig farms. The wind never wafted over Wenonah.

Maybe it did. Maybe you could think lots of things about this way of doing things. Farm workers using organic materials to make home grown pork. Local people employed in natural ways. Maybe that's just pig shit.

Maybe it's easier to pretend there aren't any pig farms outside your town. Maybe it's easier to ignore the shotgun shacks and outhouses. Maybe it's simpler to say black people are animals and they can't do anything else but this.


But then I had Michelle Smith and her brother Mike in my school and they didn't seem to have anything to do with pig farms. And when I got older I met people from Jericho and Hammond Heights and it turns out they had a real town with dreams and aspirations. There are lots of questions you can ask about where your food comes from. I know that when I was young any Italian sausage I ate came from a pig farm that stunk to high heaven in Jericho. It didn't seem very cute or nice or organic. There's a good chance it

wasn't.

There's every chance that just like every farm stinks a bit these farms stunk a lot. Right now in South Jersey there is a big argument that farms make the neighborhood less attractive. The fertilizer. The machines. The dirt. Back then I'd say the dirt was the laborers. The men who had no other options.

We almost always forget what it was like in 1960 in the USA. How black men could only aspire to be railroad porters or garbage men or pig farmers. We make jokes about Mexican laborers and how they're taking work away from people but I note that the pig farms are gone. I note that black men and women can aspire to be President. That's a far cry from the cry of crows over a stench filled farm in South Jersey.

The really sad thing is that even though I have lots of nice photos of Wenonah with its lovely homes and lawns there are no photos of the shotgun shacks. No photos of the men who worked the pig farms. I drove through when I was sick and getting better hoping to see things as they were but they were gone. That's the way it is America. We love the invisible. It makes life seem nicer somehow.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [9:25 PM](#) [1 comments](#) 

Saturday, April 14, 2007

[The Names of Children](#)

My thanks to Bob Thomas and Terry Fleming for their help with the names of my fellow 2nd and 3rd Grade classmates. This one was smoother but we're missing two names. If anyone can help it would be much appreciated. My time in South Carolina was well spent. I talked with my father and Uncle Ed at length about our family and their memories. It was a lovely time and made me regret all the times I hadn't spoken of those memories. Maybe you have parents or relatives still with you who can share their memories of their youth with you. It would be wise to take the time to ask. To bask in their memories. We all spend too much time in our own skins and not enough in the skins of other people.

Bob has particularly rich memories of Wenonah, Terry and I have shared memories that are a joy to share once again. To hear my father talk about my Aunts and his mother and father was like taking a sip of rare whiskey. Intoxicating, sharp, frightening.

Memory is a heady drink but one we rarely lift to our lips. We watch our children grow, our loved ones sit in the chairs opposite us, the men and women we work with grow old and never take the time to savor those moments.

I think what I'm saying is that this attempt to talk once again about my childhood has been an experience that I didn't expect. I'd bet you might find the same thing about your own. Our parents are soon to leave us and we our children. Now is the time to talk about the times we spent together. Good or bad.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [2:54 AM](#) [0 comments](#) 

[Miss Quigley's 2nd & 3rd Grade Class w/names](#)



Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [2:52 AM](#) [0 comments](#) 

Wednesday, April 11, 2007

Cigarettes, Pipes, and Smoke

It was legal in 1959 to burn leaves. My father would rake the leaves from the lawn to the curb in a series of small piles and then set them on fire. He'd tend them for an hour or so till they were ash. In 2001, 2002 when I was in Wenonah leaves were collected by huge machines. Back then their smoke filled the sky with a rich, pungent odor. Fall was a time of burning.

While my father burned our leaves he'd smoke a cigarette. Usually then it was a Kent. He'd change brands over the years but only a grown up could tell the difference. it was all cigarette smoke and it filled the air as much if not more than the burning leaves.

Everyone smoked. My father, my mother, my Aunt Gersh, my grandmother Wiler, my grandfathers, my uncles, my friends parents. Ashtrays were everywhere and smoke was everywhere. While it was true people knew in their hearts it could kill them they still took long drags of their favorite brands.

Pall Mall, Chesterfield, Winston, Kent, Camel. TV was filled with ads for cigarettes, movies and tv were rich with their tracings in the dark. Cigarettes were the transition from youth to adulthood.

My grandfathers both died from emphysema. Part of their disease began when they were young in the mines but really it was cigarettes that killed them. But it was tobacco that gave them succor and cool and calm.

In Second Grade Chris DeHart and Terry Fleming and Gary Condell and my brother and I went down to the dump at the end of Cherry Street to smoke cigarettes Chris had stolen from his mother. We didn't do well and my brother Mick ratted us out and that was my last cigarette save a puff or two holding someone else's cigarette year later.

My father periodically would try pipes. His paraphenalia would litter the end table by his spot on the couch and the smell of pipe tobacco would fill the house. The smell of old pipes and the oil of old tobacco were everywhere. Since I was asthmatic this was not an easy row to hoe. Since I was a strange little boy with his own angers and fears it was even

harder. Still, my father was cool with his Kent in his mouth. My mother and her friends were beautiful at parties with their heads tilted back, exhaling rich tobacco in the night. Aunt Gersh tried to stop for many years. When she finally succeeded in the late sixties she always told us of her dreams of smoking.

Dreams like movies.

Dreams like fantasies.

Dreams with piles of leaves smoldering on Lincoln Ave with boys running up and down the sidewalks laughing. Dreams with parents at parties laughing. The wild sound an adult woman makes when she's a little drunk. Crazy. Me and Mick upstairs in bed listening intently to a world we only were privy to the next morning when we'd walk among the half empty glasses of cocktails and overflowing ashtrays. The cherries still sweet and rich with whiskey.

The ashtrays overflowing with cigarette butts and an adult world we didn't, couldn't understand.

Later we'd stand by our father as he raked the leaves into the fire. No talking. Just the smoke from the leaves and his Kent filling the air.

Think of a room filled with women in dresses and men in dress pants and LaCoste shirts. Think of crewcuts and tans and one piece bathing suits and whiskey.

This was one of the scariest, most beautiful parts of my youth. Breath deep. When you pass a girl smoking a cigarette on the street as she exhales, breath deep. It's memory you're inhaling.

Friday, March 30, 2007

[206 W Mantua Avenue \(as per Bob\)](#)

While I can't remember much of my [academic](#) life in second grade my house is rich in memory. I haven't spent enough time describing the house. Here is how it looked. The house sat on a corner lot, 1/4 acre. It had a basement, a first and second floor and an attic. There was a front yard, side yard and rear yard and garage and behind the garage a smaller yard. We called this smaller yard "the digging yard". You'll see why later. At the rear of the garage was a tall tree with a small tree fort in crumbling disarray.

The first floor had an entry hall, small powder room off the entry hall, a formal living room, a second living room, a dining room and a kitchen. The second floor had two large bedrooms, a bathroom with shower/bathtub, and a smaller bedroom and a smaller room that could function as a den or bedroom at the occupants discretion. The attic was finished but unpainted. The attic held a large [exhaust fan](#) that would cool the whole house in summer. A crude, early form of air conditioning. The basement was [unfinished](#) with three distinct areas. At the base of the steps (arrived at through the kitchen) was a laundry area with sink. Immediately following that to the left was the furnace, oil tank, and my father's workbench. The larger area, beneath the formal living room and entry hall was an unfinished space that served as our play area. It was lined on the sides with huge waste lines. These were cast iron pipes, roughly six inches, that wrapped the whole basement at a height of three feet. We'd play on these like a jungle gym.

We'd also venture into the front crawl space, which was beneath the wrap around front porch. The crawl was fecund with a pungent aroma that I now know to be chlordane. The home must have been treated for termites either just before or shortly after my parents purchased it to eliminate a termite infestation. Chlordane has a strong odor that I came to know years later when I became a pest control operator. We crawled happily through the sandy soil of the crawl. In the furnace area, just behind the furnace there was a break in the foundation that led to a second crawl space. This was beneath the kitchen. The kitchen was a recent (20's or so) add on and this too was fecund with insecticides. We'd make this a clubhouse in fifth, sixth, and seventh grades. Hung on the sides of this area we found leg hold traps for muskrat.

We loved this basement. We played here on rainy days. We were banished here covered in swamp mud later in life. We'd strip our clothes and run up to bath and change. We had huge wars and games of hide and seek and once we got a ping pong table beat the crap out of each other with tiny white balls.

The attic was scary as shit. It was finished with unpainted white plaster. There was graffiti on the walls scrawled in black charcoal. One piece read "Peggy Sacca says her mom smokes cigarettes". The Saccas were the previous owners. Peggy was the leggy girl that walked me to first grade. She was and, as my friend Suzy said, is, stunning in a classic Italian manner.

The house was ringed in Black Maples. Easy to climb with limbs just four or five feet from the base they were hideouts in games, bases for wars with little men, and filled with carpenter and pavement ants. Moss sprawled out from their base which we'd cut out and toss at each other or marvel that it would retain it's shape.

The space by the kitchen on the side had a small, ivy covered, garden. In one corner were several lilac bushes. My parents had a cement St Francis statue placed there and irises grew there as well. Around the yard were various ornamental bushes, including lilacs. On either side of the home were two evergreens that grew eventually to a great height. The wrap around porch was encircled with bushes that left you able to see out in the summer but no one could see in. Our life was lived completely on that porch in late summer.


The garage eventually crumbled into dust, destroyed by carpenter bees and dense wisteria. At the rear of the garage was our tree. We climbed it relentlessly. I climbed higher than anyone but Charlie Flitcraft's sister Susan, nearly to the top. The limbs swaying under my tiny frame. Probably close to fifty feet.

We'd use the tree to gain access to the garage roof and then leap to our near deaths in the digging yard (eight feet or so). My father hung his rowing oar from his sculling days at the University of Pennsylvania in the garage and besides a variety of cars over the years it held our bicycles, Flexible Flyers (including my father's from his childhood), and shovels and rakes.

The rear yard for many years had a hole with a garbage can in it to hold organic garbage which the town emptied once a week. The milk man delivered milk to the back porch until I was in fifth or sixth grade. We received several bottles of milk, half and half, and one of chocolate each morning.

It sounds like some magical place. In the morning in the spring the air was rich with the scent of a thousand blossoms, most notably a flowering ornamental peach by the garage. When I was older and returned to Wenonah to get better Johanna came to stay with me shortly before Easter. One day in late April she walked out onto my porch, a swirl of

blossoms filled the air and she screamed for me to come out. Popi she said, I've never smelled air like this before! I had. Every year for many years. Each spring in late March the ground would erupt in crocus blossoms. I imagine that right now Wenonah is bright with forsythia and daffodils. As it has been for years.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [1:32 AM](#) [2 comments](#) 

Thursday, March 29, 2007

[Thank you's etc](#)

I'd like to send out thanks to several folks who contributed to the names on the first grade picture. First, Suzy Parker, a great writer from the Bay Area (read her book "Tumbling After"), second, Bob Thomas, a man with a great memory who lives in the middle of nowhere New York, and finally Ralph Leeds and his sainted mother who actually put together the final pieces of the puzzle.

You guys id'd everyone, especially the women (girls) and Harry Howie who to be honest I can't recollect for the life of me. Terry Fleming reports he doesn't know who the fuck Harry Howie is either. Harry if you're alive and read this tell us what's the what.


I'd also like to mention that one of the beauties of this blog is that you can get alternate views of my life, town, and memories. Bob has contributed some lovely comments about Wenonah, in particular the 4th of July Parade, and I encourage anyone from Wenonah who reads this to weigh in with their own reality. My writing is highly subjective, radically skewed to my assignment, and since it is based on my disease addled memory, faulty at best.

Please post your memories here and let's build an elephants graveyard of Wenonah memorabilia, flotsam, and jetsam. Some of it will be true, some lies, some bragging. Who cares! Let's build a Wenonah of the soul! That lives and breathes in a way that the real Wenonah we lived in can never live and breath again. It being long past...dead...historical.

My apologies again for rushing through first and second grades. Carolyn in my office is peeved but to be honest based on my assignment to myself I'm screwed. I don't remember shit about 2nd grade. I might as well have been in Antarctica.

I'll try to fill you in on what I do remember, my friends, my tribulations but the whole gig kicks into high gear with the lovely Irene Ferrera in 3rd grade. And oh what happens with Mr. McIntyre! Ask Ruthie Hammel about her stay in the closet. In Wenonah school they still remember that legendary day.

So please, buckle up, raise a glass, and let's have some fun.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [7:55 PM](#) [1 comments](#) 

Wednesday, March 28, 2007

[First Grade w/Names](#)



Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [8:09 PM](#) [0 comments](#)

[2nd Grade 1959](#)

Sorry it's been so long. Normally I wouldn't comment but I've been busy with personal issues. Let's move right into my second year of grade school. It was the last uneventful year. I had friends. I played. I walked to school. I was still largely a child. The failures and successes of growing up were yet to come. I went to church each Sunday. My friends and I were excused from school for a few hours to attend Mass on Holy Days. All Saints for instance. This was the first year I went trick or treating. My brother and I dressed in costumes and in the company of our parents went door to door seeking candy. In Wenonah a great deal was made of who was behind the mask. Everyone knew everyone else so everyone offered opinions as to your identity. We collected a bag of candy and devoured it in our room.

Our room. My room and Mick's room.

Two small beds. Red, wooden beds. Small.

Three windows, no, maybe two.

One on the side yard, one on the rear.

Mick and I fought fiercely. Mick was now in First Grade and our lifelong rivalry was now entering it's richest phase. My brother Mick could enrage me with the most foolish acts. He'd sit at the table in the morning and look at me and say yah, yah, yah over and over till I could kill him. My mother said, "Ignore him, he's looking for attention" and attention he got. We'd spill into roiling fights across the linoleum floor. We'd fight over anything. I detested him.


Funny.

Now he's a beloved brother who saved my life. Then he was a monster from hell. A fat, squat monster, that belched evil curses that demanded recourse.

Plus, everyone liked him. My friends. His friends. My parents. Other parents. He was likeable, amiable, and cute. Evil, little spawn of hell, I hated him.

My brother Ted at this time was just becoming more than a pawn in our games. He was truly mobile and alive. Five years younger than me he was found one afternoon perched on the kitchen table with a stick of butter wedged in his mouth. A boy of prodigious appetite and imagination he dreamed of tools and trucks. As he grew older he loved

Tonka trucks but even at this age or perhaps just beyond his favorite toy as a hand propelled, professional grade, Sears push lawn mower. Not motorized. The older variety. A deeply deranged young boy with his own mark on the world. Together the three of us over the next two years would bumble through the world. I'll post a photo of Miss Quigley's second grade class tomorrow as well as the photo of Mrs Kaufman's class with names and identities for all the world to see. You might ask where are the public events in Wenonah? For a second grader during the school year there were none. There were lighted displays in the park for the Christmas Holidays but beyond that we had no role in the life of the town. Happily. We were content to play our games, roam our blocks, fight our foolish battles and dream of the day we could enter Cub Scouts or play Minor League baseball. It was in 2nd Grade thought that Mario Contarino joined us. His family emigrated from Italy and Mario spoke barely a word in English. But by the end of the year he was as fluent as any of us. What a tiny world. What a small place.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [11:07 PM](#) [1 comments](#) 

Thursday, March 22, 2007

[TB](#)

When we were growing up disease was still a real presence. On the way home from my grandparents outside Philadelphia, as we passed through Camden, my mother would make us hold handkerchiefs over our faces to protect against Polio. Smallpox was a real disease. Later in life one of my high school teachers bore the marks all over his face. The janitor of our school was found to have tuberculosis. This prompted a mad scare. We were herded en masse to the nurses office and tested. He was sent to a Sanitarium. It's odd. I can remember the disease, the fear, the sanitarium but the poor man's name is lost to me. Just as the names of the children in first grade were lost to me. Or the name of our crossing guard. You'd think names would be the thing we cling to, like a lifeline but instead I cling to something else. Second grade was pleasant enough but unchallenging. We moved past Dick and Jane, I guess we had arithmetic but I can't recall any of it. I was by now socialized and spent a good deal of time playing with my friends. This was probably the last year of my life that was centered in my home. The center of my family year, after the trip to Ocean City, was Christmas. Christmas was our special time. My father bought the tree two weeks before, roughly around the time of his and my birthdays and put it by the side of the house in a bucket of water. The same day he'd put the lights up around the porch. Of course Christmas began for us in October. That was when the Sears and Roebuck catalog came to the house. My brother Mick and I would spend hours looking at the toys, the sets of army men, the plastic guns, the bikes, all the promises of Santa Claus' visit. And of course we were watching tv now so we'd badger our parents about toys we saw on the tv. This process became more intense as we grew older and now in 2nd grade it was somehow still innocent and filled with joy. On Christmas Eve my father would bring the tree into the house in the morning and put it up. Wires were strung to keep it from falling and then we'd settle in to wait. After dinner the ornaments came down from the attic. Old european glass balls, thick

glass lights, tinsel. My father was a stickler for proper Christmas tree protocol and taught us well how to put the balls and decorations on the tree. Lights first a few hours before the rest, then smaller balls at the top, medium in the middle, and largest at the bottom. Variation was key. You couldn't have too many red balls or green balls in one place. After the tree was decorated my mother would sit down on the couch with me and my brothers, and later my sister, and read. First an abridged version of the story of the birth of Christ and then "Twas the Night Before Christmas". She did this every year until the year before she died. It's my sister's fondest memory of her and I must admit it was a wonderful moment in our lives. In my Senior year in HS my friends, Suzy and Gary, came over to hear as well. It was worth it.


Then it was time to bed although first my father would tune the radio for the reports of the movements of an unknown flying object originating over the North Pole.

I don't think I ever slept more than an hour on Christmas Eve. My brother Mick and I shared a bedroom till I was in 7th grade and we'd lay awake and talk and speculate as to what would be under the tree and when Santa would come.

Then at around 7 in the morning when we could take no more my father would allow us to leave our rooms and sit at the top of the stairs while he went downstairs to make sure everything was ok. It always was and we'd race down to find our toys, Santa's cookies and milk devoured, and a tree rich with light.

This was the last Christmas I believed in Santa Claus though I knew in my heart it was a fantasy. I'd find the truth the following year along with multiplication and To Kill a Mockingbird. No Santa. Just my mother and father frantically assembling toys into the night.

Just as they'd assembled us and the tree. Without much of a guide or instruction. Just memories of how their parents had done it and conversations with friends and co-workers. No wonder the tree needed wire to keep it up.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [7:55 PM](#) [1 comment](#) 

Monday, March 19, 2007

[Ruth Felch and the forgotten](#)

I'm back from New Hampshire and Maine. I should have prepared a proper posting for today but alas the real world has intruded. I did spend several days with my friend Baron Wormser and his wife Janet Wormser. Two wonderful artists but more important two real people. We talked of many things from the troubles of being a parent to the vagaries of poetry to the photos of William Eggleston.

It was a nice idyll and for several days I saw no television, drank wonderful beer, and lived the life of the itinerant poet. Oh joy.

My friend Bob Thomas has discovered my Wenonah postings and weighed in with numerous bits of help. Most important he and his sister have given names to some of my first grade class mates. For the moment I won't put the name with the face but only give you their names. Nancy Allen (Bunny to all of us), Margie Loving, Ruth Ann (Ruthie) Felch, Jack Wesh, and Jane (Jabby) Bowker. Beautiful children, great women and men, lost people.

Let us take a moment, bow our heads and remember all those we've lost to the swamp of


time. All people with lives of complexity and struggle and joy. Who had friends we've forgotten, married men and women we never knew and grew rich or died according to their inclination. My classmates. My lost friends. My beloved confederates.

May I take a moment now to suggest you take the time to read the poetry of Michael Casey, Dave Moreau, and my friend Baron Wormser. Please also raise a glass to all who didn't make it out of childhood. One of those in the photo was Johnny Budd. In the early 1970's for reasons all his own Johnny took his life. However each of us might feel about suicide and loss we can at least bow our heads in prayer for Johnny at least in sympathy with him and others who find this world more than they can bear. This place is rich with many blessings but equally so with many difficulties and for the young especially it can be a heavy burden. I spent two days in Littleton NH talking with young men and women who lost a friend to a tragic car accident. The loss felt more than they could carry. We older men and women know this isn't so. We know you can and will pick up and go on but we also know that leaving a fallen friend by the way hurts like the pain of losing a limb.

Please then, say a prayer for the young men and women who leave us every day. In war, in accident, by disease, by whatever terrible means and more importantly pray for the boys and girls left behind.

Yo, this is a tough world we live in. But we can make it a haven for those in pain and give them grace and respite.

Then we can ask them to join us in a game of dodgeball. But that's another story.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [11:37 PM](#) [1 comments](#) 

Thursday, March 08, 2007

[Socialist Revisionism and Wenonah Public Schools](#)

The Wenonah Public School had a small library. But it was very interesting. It was only when I was older that I realize how interesting it was. The books in the library were filled with biographies of famous Americans. Steinmetz, Darrow, Lincoln. They were all about the struggle of the working man against the interests of big business. Steinmetz vs Edison, Darrow working to save the lives of union men.

This was odd because no one in Wenonah could give a fuck about this shit. These were books the school purchased in the thirties and forties, probably as part of some weird government program that gave them the books on the cheap. We're talking Socialism. We're talking neo-Communist lit. I remember one book about the heroic struggles of a young Soviet worker and his tractor.

All in middle class Wenonah. Darrow fighting for Leopold and Loeb, fighting against the ignorant in the Scopes Trial, fighting for big Bill Haywood and the IWW. The IWW! In Wenonah. A town of insurance agents and commercial interests and moms and dads. What could be stranger. I read these books like a hungry man. Charles Steinmetz was a God! Clarence Darrow a God! I wanted to be an attorney representing the rights of the little man. I saw in his battles my own. I was downtrodden. I was the rough tough cream puff. I was a thin little fool. I was inconsequential. These books gave me hope and it still amazes me they were in my library.

Thank God for the WPA because as far as I can figure that's why these books existed. A

bunch of reds in the WPA wrote school books that were distributed on the cheap and our school bought them cuz they were cheap and being parochial nitwits no one ever read them.

Today a town like Wenonah might be battling about evolution and creationism. Then, Clarence Darrow was a god who brought enlightenment to ignorant communities in Tennessee.

In the years to come we would debate endlessly how black people and white people could co exist. We would sit on our porches and talk about what our parents would do if a nigger family moved onto our block but in the basement of the Wenonah School I read about heroes of social injustice.


It's like someone accidentally planted the seeds of social change.

It sort of worked.

For me it did work.

Clarence Darrow was my God and rational examination of the world became my goal. In second grade. In third grade things got even more out of hand.

Meantime, there was dodge ball.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [9:48 PM](#) [0 comments](#) 

Tuesday, March 06, 2007

[The Architecture of Wenonah Public School and Its Effect on the Young](#)

Second Grade had a lot more challenges than First Grade. But before I talk about what we actually learned let's talk a bit about how the school was laid out. Wenonah Public School looked a little like a barbell. At either end were the older parts of the school. I wish I knew which was oldest but honestly I don't. I do know that the end closest to the Water Tower on the north end of the barbell held the Nurses office, the Janitors office, and the Library. When I first began school this was where the 7th and 8th graders had their classes. I was in the last group of children to go through a school that went from K to 8.

Because of population pressures a regional High School was built when I was in 6th grade. It would take the students from 5 sending districts and relieve overcrowding in Woodbury HS. We'll get there eventually but for right now I'm jammed in a school with kids that are near toddlers and others that are teenagers. All of us dress the same.

The other end of the barbell held the 4th, 5th and 6th graders. In the middle were us schmoos. The kindergartners, the 1st graders, the 2nd graders, the 3rd graders. Because of the same population pressures we were often jammed into combined classes.


The baby boom was too much for Wenonah and too much for large swatches of America. Loads of us were jammed together with older or younger students just as in later generations they'd be jammed into trailers. It's all the same.

You might be asking why they just didn't build a bigger school. That's a larger political question. New Jersey has this fucked up tax structure that basically funds a town's school system with the taxes of home owners. What that means on a practical basis is that in a town like Wenonah with a number of older residents whose children were grown, coupled with a number of families with young children was that you create class warfare. Every year some knucklehead young parent would lobby hard for an addition or whatever

and every year the old people would come out in droves to the polls to defeat it. This continues even today. When I was living in Wenonah in 2003 there was a school improvement initiative on the ballot. My landlady Rachel asked me how I was going to vote and being a progressive, thoughtful man I said I was going to vote yes. She said I can't afford to have my taxes go up and if they do so will your rent. Thank God in America your vote is your secret.

At any rate there I am in 2nd grade with a group of 15 3rd graders. This is the dawning of hierarchy. I start to understand I know nothing. The 3rd graders make it clear I know nothing. They can read and write and spell and multiply. I can print and read Dick and Jane and maybe add. I think I could count to 100. I was fucked.

Plus I'm tiny, skinny, and smart. A bad combo. Egghead. Even in 2nd grade I'm a marked man. I might as well have been wearing a target. The only nice thing was I discovered the school library. Next post: Revisionist, socialist literature in a tiny white Republican community and it's effect on 2nd and 3rd graders or how I learned to love Clarence Darrow.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [8:04 PM](#) [2 comments](#) 

Monday, March 05, 2007

[One foot in One foot out](#)

Here's the thing about Wenonah in 1959. I have one foot in the future and one foot in the past. Look at Mrs. Kaufman's clothes. It could be 1899. Take a closer look at our scuffed shoes in the picture. We could be in a Walker Evans picture. Shoes scuffed and timeless. They could be the shoes of a newsboy in 1912.

They're not.

We don't know anything about our history. We're little kids in a world about to erupt in change. We play games children have played for fifty years or more. We walk streets children have walked since 1888. We're obedient. We don't know about anything beyond our town.

My father's family did what they had been doing for nearly fifty years, if not longer. Men went to work. Women stayed home. Further south of Wenonah there were farms that were farmed the same way for hundreds of years. The connection to the past was long and hard. Our values, our perspectives, our beliefs were all formed fifty or more years ago. Yes, our father's fought in World War II as their father's had fought in World War I. Yes, we hated negroes. Yes, we went to church on Sundays. Yes, we learned reading and writing and prepared for a life just like our fathers.

That was all to end.

If you could see my brother Ted's photos or my sister Mary's they'd be different. My parents changed, everything changed. There were riots. There was a war. There was rock and roll. There were drugs and sex and loud arguments. But for now we are suspended in a strange time warp.

A time warp that had to end.

Over the next 11 years the world would change in ways we didn't yet understand. For better or worse.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [10:02 PM](#) [1 comments](#) 

Sunday, March 04, 2007

[My New Suit/First Holy Communion](#)



Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [10:52 AM](#) [0 comments](#) 

[Summer 1959](#)

First Grade came winding down. I received my first Holy Communion. My parent's bought me my first suit of clothes, from Robert Hall, and I trudged with a couple dozen boys and girls to the altar to taste the Body and Blood of Christ. Then it was summer. And just like school changed the world into weekdays and weekends, so school gave us summer vacation. Three long months that had a rhythm and structure all their own. My family took a two week vacation at the end of June each year. We would rent an apartment in Ocean City, NJ and spend two weeks at the shore. The day consisted of waking up, going for a long walk on the beach, to the point perhaps, and then going home to get our towels and toys and going back to the beach. We spent the day on the beach except for lunch. Lunch was a rushed sandwich, tuna or cold cuts or PB & J, and then back to the beach.

We'd body surf and try to float. We'd make great sandcastles. Most of the time we stayed near 59th Street in Ocean City. Until 1962 it had a long fishing pier that stretched well out into the ocean. It also had a row of great Granite blocks dumped along the shore to hold the beach in place. We'd play inside the spaces between the blocks. We found sand sharks in gullies and learned how to find shells in the morning.

Sometimes my father would play box ball with us or handball. It was my father who taught us how to body surf. How to catch a wave just right. In the evening we'd eat seafood from Campbell's and then if we were lucky go to the boardwalk and ride the rides.

My father had been going to Ocean City his whole life. Ocean City had long ties to the

Philly Irish community. The Kelly's of Philadelphia had a big house that my father never failed to point out to us. Our Uncle John had a home on 42nd Street right on the beach and we'd walk up and visit Uncle John and Aunt Ellie and my father's cousins, including Aunt Alice who I thought was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen.

On the boardwalk our father taught us how to grab the brass ring on the merry go round and took us up high on the ferris wheel. We'd watch the great summer moon sink into the sea and then get up and do it all again.

By the time we returned to Wenonah it too was different. Wenonah in summer was hot and humid beyond belief. Nothing moved except the children. That first year we joined the Wenonah Lake and went there to take rudimentary swimming lessons. We played in the kiddie part of the lake and cooked hot dogs and ate snow cones.

We began to expand our world that summer. Mick had gone to Kindergarten that year and now had friends of his own. Some of my classmates were members of the Lake as well as his so we all joined together in games. Hierarchies had not yet been established and we knew nothing of cool. We were just having fun.


In the evenings we could play outside till 8pm when it was time for bed. There was really nothing of consequence on television so we began our long games of Kick the Can. Our friends played it for hours after we'd gone to bed and we could hear the can rattling along the sidewalk from our beds.

Thunderstorms would come rolling through and I'd lie at the end of my bed with my cat Surprise and watch the terrible skies light up. Great trees would fall and crush a house or lie across the road.

Each summer the town would put new macadam down on several of the streets. The smell of hot tar would fill the afternoon and the stones were new and fresh. We had yet to really explore the woods but that was soon to come.

Finally the summer wound down in a long, long slide that took us inexorably back to school. A few days before the first day of school we could walk up to the school and they would have our class listings posted.

Second grade for me would put me in a class with Third graders. Miss Quigley was our teacher. She was blond and pretty and looked a bit like Donna Reed. I was as glad for summer to end as I'd been for it to begin. I was bored with play and wanted something new. Something new I would get. Each September.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [10:50 AM](#) [1 comments](#) 

Thursday, March 01, 2007

[The One Black Girl in Mrs. Kaufman's Class](#)

My friend Carolyn in my office has asked me to talk more about Michelle Smith and her family. I've resisted because I thought we should wait for the full thrust of time and society to give her and her family weight. Maybe I'm wrong. Michelle's mother was Irene Smith. She was and I believe still is an strong and powerful advocate for the black community and African American's in South Jersey. Their lives in 1958 were severely circumscribed by the society of the day. I mentioned we drove home from my grandmothers through the pig farms. The pig farms were largely worked by the black

people of Jericho. They lived next to them. When I was in high school we rode our buses through Jericho and we could see the outhouses in the backyards. This was a world ten steps away from ours. This was a caste system just like the one that separated Ramesh and his Indian bride. This was and is a great divide.

Irene Smith believed strongly in establishing a strong black presence in South Jersey. She bought a property in Wenonah. It must have been a great struggle. As it was it was just one the outside of everything nestled close against Jericho. She was outspoken. She was proud. She was what black people needed in a time when black people were nothing in South Jersey. When I was growing up South Jersey most closely resembled the deep south. There were long arguments among my friends about what their families would do if blacks moved into our neighborhood. My friend, Chris DeHart's mother, was a southern woman and he had deep antipathies to black people. Most of my friends believed black people didn't belong in Wenonah. When I moved back to get well in 2001 there was a house on Mantua Avenue flying the Confederate flag. It was not because of Southern sympathies. It was because the man who owned the home hated niggers. In my family that word was forbidden. My mother's father, my grandfather, had deep seated hatreds against foreigners, Jews, Catholics, but most of all, niggers. He railed against them at the table each evening. Philadelphia was a deeply divided city and remains so. For all the good Quakers there were a thousand racists. Frank Rizzo was Philly's hero and Frank fought the Negro menace.

My mother hated racism and her father's bigotry. Nonetheless it was part of her. Wenonah was a white as white can be. Michelle and her brother Michael were of our town but until the late sixties never really part of it. I hate telling a story early but part of what this story is about is how my world changed. I had to leave a party when I was seventeen with two of my friends and my brother with our backs against the wall and fists up because we were "nigger lovers". Nigger lovers. What a sad phrase. I know all the words for black people. Spearchucker, porch monkey, spook. I knew boys that tried to run down black hitchhikers on Glassboro Road for kicks.

When I went to work at Cornell Steel in college my co-worker Jim Sterner said he went to Senior Year in HS with a shotgun in his bag to kill any nigger that got out of line. Got out of line.

My mother had a series of housekeepers from Catholic Charities. They were all black women who worked for a few months or so helping an overworked woman cope with three overactive idiots. They were paid nearly nothing. That was the only reason my mother could afford them.

I know nothing of the internal life of Michelle Smith. I don't know who she loved, who she gave birth to or where she went to college. She and her brother were the only black people I came in contact with till I went to college in 1970. This is an America that we don't need to go back to. You can guess at her alienation from my own. It's just a guess. You can wonder why this country discounted so many people just because of the color their skin. But we all danced to nigger music.

So all I can offer for right now is this: Motown was the music we all loved. Philly was the heart of Soul. White kids loved nigger music. Something there is in this country that won't let us become a balkan state. I envied the black people I saw because they were comfortable with their bodies. Maybe they weren't. I envied their music. I loved it. With all my heart I wish I'd never heard the word nigger.

In my office people use that word cavalierly. People who don't know the hurt it carries. They don't know that if I use it I don't mean nigga; I mean nigger. It's not an expression of familiarity, it's an expression of derision and hatred and disgust. No, it's an expression of negation. Cuz niggers don't count. They're not even there. Like a lot of people. Like Ramesh. And really like me.

Wednesday, February 28, 2007

[Who's who in Mrs. Kaufman's class](#)


I spent about an hour trying to figure out who everyone was in this photo. My friend Suzy Parker thought Michelle Smith started [school](#) in 2nd grade. How nice to see her tall and black figure in the second row. Tommy Woods is in the back row on the right looking all twisted. I'm obviously in the front row, right, looking worried. I look that way in all my school photos. That probably means something.

My Aunt Gert wrote to tell me that Ramesh went to work in LA for their subway system and married an Indian woman. There were problems with caste. There are problems with caste here but not so obvious. I knew all the boys except two and I'm sure my memory could be jogged with help.

Time is a strange thing. Photography a trick with light and chemicals. All of us are older. Older than our parents then, older probably than our grandparents. We look worried and clean and dare I say it, eager.


I welcome my fellow Wenonah friends to help me along this path. Who the fuck are all these girls? I only spent time with boys.

When I said that in the office they all made gay comments but of course what self respecting kid in 1958 hung with girl. Ick. So, help!

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [9:31 PM](#) [0 comments](#) 

[Mrs. Kaufman's 1st Grade Class 1958](#)



Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [7:33 PM](#) [2 comments](#) 

Tuesday, February 27, 2007

[Weekends at Nonny's](#)

Our weekends with my Grandmother centered on a big meal, either on Sunday or Saturday. It's important to note that for two reasons I wasn't used to good food. The first is that while my father was a good provider, we weren't rich. That meant my mother had to make do with less expensive meals. We're talking hot dogs, hamburgers, meatloaf, the standard hodge podge of middle [class cooking](#) in 1958. The second is that my mother was a terrible cook. I don't know if that's because she was a product of her age or what but cooking was not her finest moment. We did have fresh milk on the table and in the tradition of the fifties a loaf of [white bread](#) and butter. We ate fish every Friday and almost never had chicken because my father hated it.

My Grandmother, my mother's mother, was a wonderful cook. Everything was fresh and from the butcher or the grocer. Rarely were canned ingredients part of a meal. The table was always full and the desserts were fantastic. Homemade pies and cakes. After the meal the adults would sit and talk. If it was Sunday we watched a bit of television. First Lawrence Welk, then the Ed Sullivan show. I hated both until I was in my early teens. I always hated Lawrence Welk but the toxic mix of European circuses and lounge acts and comedians who appealed to adults on Sullivan bewildered me. At any rate when it was over we'd pack ourselves up in the car and head back to South Jersey. I knew the way so well that when I first got my license I drove there without directions.

We boys were all jammed in the back seat with mom and dad up front. Like most young boys we spent half the way fighting and half gazing out the window. We'd move first through the suburbs of Philly, just off the Main Line. At Christmas you could tell when you moved through a Jewish neighborhood, no lights. Then onto the Schuylkill Expressway, past the Sunoco Oil Refinery, the company my father worked for, and over the Walt Whitman Bridge. Going over the bridge was the stink of the whiskey brewery at its base. Past the bridge and Camden then on through Deptford and into the pig farms of Jericho with their rich smell of garbage to home. Home. Some nights when we came home in the summer the porch was covered in tree frogs. Some nights it was cold with frost. Always it was home.

My brother Ted was always out like a light by the time we got to Wenonah and it was straight to bed. I hadn't begun the morning ritual of showers yet and so got my bath each night before bed.

I'd go to bed each Sunday, clean, and tired, and ready for a new week of being chased to school by my beloved friends. The rough tough creampuff was me. Each Monday began my torment and it didn't end till Friday at three. In between were my friends Dick and Jane and Far and Away and Here and There and the library in the basement began to beckon. Second and third grades began to open the world to the asthmatic, skinny wretch that was me. Little fool running home chased by two other little fools shouting made up nonsense. The hierarchy of the ignorant. I loved them all; I feared them all; I couldn't wait to grow up.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [7:50 PM](#) [0 comments](#) 

[Weekends at Nonny's](#)


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Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [7:50 PM](#) [0 comments](#) 

[Weekends 1958](#)


The rest of the weekend in those first few years in Wenonah was bliss. I had yet to get chores assigned to me and my world revolved mostly around my family. I spent many hours just playing in the house with my brothers or watching tv. I can't even tell you what

we did. Explored the dark basement, climbed the tree behind the garage, played catch with my father. Not much. No organized ball, no work, no anxieties to speak of. Many weekends were spent at my Grandmother Glading's. She lived in a suburb of Philadelphia in a nice little house with my Aunt Gersh (short for Gertrude). For a while my Uncle Al and Aunt Gert were also both there though they ultimately moved away as they grew up. This was heaven for me and for my brothers. They doted on us. We got to eat good food. I have a feeling my parents packed us away so they could go have fun but who cares.

We got to stay up late and drink a half a Piels and eat ham and cheese and watch Mike Hammer.

Oh joy. We explored their attic and played in the back and half listened to the alien conversations of adults. My Aunt Gert brought home a boyfriend once who was black. He was from Tanganyika. His name was Ramesh. He was alien and spoke differently and fascinated us.

I never thought how he might have felt or how my grandmother felt. We wanted to hear about lions.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [5:57 AM](#) [0 comments](#) 

Saturday, February 24, 2007

[Weekends and Catholicism 1958](#)

Weekends were a new thing for me. Before first grade every day was a weekend. Now the week was bracketed by Saturday and Sunday. Saturday was always the best because Sunday marked the long count down to Monday. A pattern that never ends until you retire. Weekends also marked my initiation into the mysteries of Faith. Yes, that's right, First Holy Communion and the Catechism. Who Made Me. God Made Me.

Every Saturday morning until I was 15 I went to Mantua to learn the vagaries of the Catholic Faith. That first year I was educated so I could accept the body and blood of Christ. Remember, I was six going on seven. Who gave a fuck who made me. I wanted to run in the woods. I wanted to play with my little men. I wanted to annoy my little brother Ted but instead me and about six other little kids from Wenonah were trucked off to Mantua and the Church of the Incarnation so that we could receive the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

We spent about two hours every Saturday morning being tutored by either nuns or the laity (shorthand for old Italian ladies from Mantua). We recited our Catechism and prepared to accept the Sacrament. It fucked up Saturday like nobody's business. There were only about six Catholic families in Wenonah so this was an opportunity to learn about diversity. Or more appropriately about difference. Nobody else in my town knew what I was doing. They went to church school on Sunday, then church, then they went home and had fun.

Not me. Not my friends. We went to listen to dour, nasty, old women talk about topics that to a seven year old had almost no value. Pure, unadulterated torment. I know some people profess to love the trappings of the Mass. It's rituals and robes. The incense. The mysteries. Fuck that shit. I used to gnaw on the back of the pew in front of me. I grew to love the taste of varnish. In summer I would faint. This was before air conditioning after

all. The only time the church was nice was Christmas. The Church of the Incarnation was beautiful at Christmas. There was a holiday bazaar and we had a little party with gift giving. Everyone was kind and thoughtful till Christmas day when the priest told us we were assholes for only coming to church at Christmas. I never understood this because I was there every week. Come hell or high water. Sick, well, sad or happy, I was there to worship the Lord.


I should mention there were also no Jews in my town technically when I arrived in 1958. One family, the Parkers, were sort of Jewish. Their father had changed their name from Katz to Parker but they didn't technically live within the towns borders and they were never brought up within the Jewish faith. For all I know they went to the Presbyterian church. I think this means they were assimilated.

Most people in town were either Methodist or Presbyterian. Wenonah was primarily Methodist. A dour little religion. No gambling, liquor, or cursing. No fun. Wenonah was a dry town because of Methodism. A lot of towns in South Jersey are Methodist, including one of the great shore towns, Ocean City. No liquor could be bought or sold in Ocean City but the largest liquor store I've ever seen was right across the bridge in Somers Point. Next to the Dunes till Dawn, one of the great roadhouses of the world. Fun, fun, fun, till your daddy takes the T Bird away.

It was a sin for Catholics to go to another church. At least that was what we were told. You could get dispensation for special circumstances, like camping trips or a funeral. I only went to a service held by another religion once in my young life. I was in Boy Scouts and we attended a Methodist service in the Pine Barrens. Dull as dishwater. Hard to believe but Methodism is kind of like Communism. It was a mass movement founded by urban activists in England and Europe in the 17 hundreds to fight the excesses of drink and gambling caused by the changes in lifestyle brought on by the Industrial Revolution. See George Eliot for more details.

There are also bunches of Quakers in South Jersey. Several of my friends were Quakers and their services sounded interesting. You just get up and talk once in awhile. No host, no wine, no God really. There is a strong pacifist presence in South Jersey and Philadelphia. My town sent lots of young men to war and our local draft board gave out no exemptions but several young men went to Canada in the 60's because of their Quaker beliefs.

Anyway, that was the first two hours of my weekend. In two days we get the next 46. Ha ha.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [4:10 PM](#) [0 comments](#) 

Thursday, February 22, 2007

[Recess; September 1958](#)

Here we are in the schoolyard of Wenonah Elementary School. Twenty or so spindly kids with our nice clothes on. Girls with peter pan collars and dresses just below the knees. Boys with plaid shirts and khakis, all of us wearing one style Buster Brown's or another, all bought at Ernie's Shoe Post. Standing in line in order of height on the edge of the yard. The schoolyard was yellow gravel with a raised and asphalted section at one end. On the asphalted section there were two basketball hoops, a tennis net and a swing set.

Monkeybars too.

We were ready for our first recess. All but one of us is white. The lone black kid, a girl, Michelle Smith, stands out even more as she's the tallest.

Wenonah school is a mish-mosh of three buildings; on each end are the older school buildings dating to the 1880's and in the middle is a one story fifties set of classrooms. Most of us have never met until today. Now we'll spend six years together.

We have recess twice a day. Once in the morning and once in the afternoon. In first grade recess is fairly simple. We play Dodge Ball or we play Kick Ball. No football, basketball, baseball, or track. Both sports are horror shows for kids. They're all about hierarchy and torture and pain. Plus they're good exercise. For someone. Not for me. We pick sides for our games. The boys and girls play separately. Good plan. We're picked by children the teacher names as captain. The captain picks kids who can do well. He picks children based on their physical abilities. While all of us have some limitations a few of us are severely limited. The worst is Tommy Woods. He must have been borderline retarded. One day he got his leg caught in the bars of his chair. His agility rivaled a milk carton. Then there were the one or two fat kids. Then the skinny and half blind. I was skinny, inept, and full of drive. I always got picked close to last.

That didn't mean I wasn't popular on the field. Dodgeball involves hurling a rubber ball as hard as possible at several chowderheads lined up against a chainlink fence. Like an execution but you never die. Kids seemed to like throwing the ball at me, the ball seemed to like hitting me and so Dodgeball became one of the joys of my youth. That and vomiting.

Kick Ball wasn't quite as bad. I just got picked next to last and fucked up repeatedly on the field and then was reminded over and over again by my peers what an idiot I was. Nice.

After recess and our hour of fun we went inside to study. Outside recess took place everyday unless it rained. It never rained often enough. Our studies started simple. The ABC's. Sentences. Then "Fun With Dick and Jane". Oh Spot! Oh Jane! Oh Mother! Oh Father! Oh great stories spun out each day the winter of 1959. The world began to open. Then each day, twice a day, it would close again in an onslaught of brown rubber balls. I walked to school each morning after that first morning and returned each afternoon with my friends, Terry and Dottie. Over time they found a way to expand the joys of Dodgeball to walking home. They called it Rough Tough Creampuff. Guess who was it? Next post...what to do with your weekends when you're six.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [7:56 PM](#) [0 comments](#) 

Monday, February 19, 2007

[September, 1958 First Grade, First Day of School](#)


I began First Grade that September. I attended Wenonah Public School, which at that time was grades K through 8. After that you would go to Woodbury High School. Because my mother had two small boys she couldn't take me to school my first day so she arranged for the daughter of one of our neighbors to take me. Her name was Peggy Sacca and her family had owned our home before we moved in. Peggy was a grown up in my eyes but actually was an eighth grader. Her father Tony owned the local meat market

which was located at the back of Bowker's Grocery Store in the middle of town. Her uncle ran a fruit and vegetable truck that sold produce to stores and also door to door. I thought Peggy was really beautiful and the walk to school seemed okay to me. We only had to walk a little over 1/2 a mile. Four blocks up to the park in the middle of town where we'd cross Mantua Ave and walk the last two blocks to school. Across the street from the park when I was growing up was Margie's Luncheonette. It would be awhile before I'd cross it's threshold but it was one of the placest I liked best in town.

First grade was taught by Mrs. Kaufman. She lived two blocks down from us on N Lincoln. She was an ancient wizened crone who'd already taught most of the people who lived in Wenonah. Throughout the school year she called Terry, Tim, who was his older brother by nearly ten years. She taught Tim. Eventually she taught my youngest sister. I don't believe she retired until the late 80's. A long time with young children. She taught us to read.

She taught us math as well; beyond that subject matter was kind of vague. But I remember reading as being magical. It was something I could do and do well. She taught us to write.

I had the same children in my classes for nearly six more years. Tomorrow we shall meet them. Preferably at recess.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [3:46 PM](#) [0 comments](#) 

[Wenonah, 1958](#)

So here we are at last. August, 1958. Wenonah, New Jersey. I'm 6 years old, about to turn 7 in December. Mick is 5 and Ted a mere 2. My mother is 31 and my father 30. To me they are old. Grown ups. My grandmother Glading was probably younger than I am right now but she was ancient to me. It's late summer and early evening. Summer evenings in August in Wenonah were hot but Mick and I ventured out of the house to meet our new neighbors.

Our house was located on the corner of West Mantua Ave and South Lincoln Ave. Our address was 206 W. Mantua Ave. S. Lincoln was only two blocks long, ending in the Wenonah Woods, then known to me only as "the woods". It was in the woods that I would spend most of my young life. (here's a link to the Wenonah Woods that I found today: <http://www.geocities.com/woodsofwenonah/index.html>)

Thanks to WW II and the baby boom there were several children my age and Mick's age up and down the street. Our nearest neighbors and the boys and girls who would become our friends were Terry Fleming, Chris DeHart, Gary Condell, Charlie Flitcraft, Robby Cook, Dotty Chattin, and several others we will meet in the months to come. All of our parents were roughly the same age and worked in a variety of trades. My father was a salesman for the gasoline industry, Terry's father was a dentist, Chris' father worked for the family trucking business, Gary's dad worked in the oil refineries along the Delaware. Mr. Flitcraft worked in Philadelphia. I have no idea how he made money. I'm not even sure if Mr. Cook existed. I can't remember him at all but then adults played only a passing role in our lives then. Teachers and other children were the people who made up our world. Everyone else was just part of a larger mystery. One we learned about bit by bit.

This evening Mick and I would meet Gary and Chris, Terry and Charlie. They treated us

like the outsiders we were. They wouldn't let us play in any reindeer games. We stood around and watched them play their elaborate games and waited to be invited in; then our mother called us into dinner. We were in bed shortly after. Every night till I was 9 I had to be in bed by 8pm. This was a slow torture because Mick and I would lie in bed and listen to the distant shouts of playing children and the murmur of the TV downstairs, all the time wishing we were older and able to go out like everyone else.

So what was this house like? It was a three story Victorian on a corner lot. All the blocks in Wenonah were the same size; roughly 500' by 300'. Most of the southern part of town and the bulk of the northern part were Victorian homes. They'd been constructed in the late 1880's as a development meant to attract vacationing Philadelphians. The railroad and the nearby man-made lakes were the attraction but it quickly became a bed room community for business men who worked in Philadelphia. Later the oil industry built refineries and tanks along the lower Delaware and the men who worked there came to live in the nearby towns. You'll note I have not once said, men and women. That's because most of the women of that generation stayed home to keep house and raise the children.

At any rate my block had four houses on our side of S Lincoln and of course four on the other. Along Mantua Ave there were also four homes (including our own). We knew the names of everyone on the block and the adjacent blocks. It was a rare house that didn't have a name associated with it. Of course, since we were children, the further you moved from our block the less likely it was for us to know the people there. That would change slowly as we grew.

The street was lined with Black Maples, mature trees all. There were a few oaks and on Cherry St a number of Sycamores. Farther down Mantua Ave, closer to the Mantua Creek, there were taller trees. Not being a naturalist I don't know their names but now and again in a rough summer storm or hurricane they'd come crashing down.

Once tramping through a part of the woods we'd only just discovered we found an immense Elm. So big four of us could just barely encircle it, arms spread. We thought it was the largest tree in the world.

Eventually we became part of Terry and Chris' games. Some of them were familiar, others new and completely made up. Kick the Can, Capture the Flag, yes, but also, He Died at the Foot of the Werewolf Tree, and Who Looks the Deadest. We left the house at 7:30 and ran out to play and play and play. We returned to wolf down peanut butter sandwiches and hershey's chocolate milk and back out again. Talking about it now it sounds idyllic. But idyll's have their hollow cores and children at play aren't just playing. I was an asthmatic.

I think I left that out.

Mick was as well but only a bit.

Ted eventually was as well and his asthma was severe.

But it was asthma that made games both a joy and a curse.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [10:38 AM](#) [1 comments](#) 

Sunday, February 18, 2007

[How Wenonah is Laid Out](#)

Wenonah is a small town. Before we join my youthful self in 1958 you should know how it's laid out. It's bisected east and west by the West Jersey Railroad, a now mostly unused railroad line that was in fact the reason the town was built. North and south it's cut in half by Mantua Ave., the main street of Wenonah, which turns into Wenonah Ave. when it rolls into the adjacent town, Mantua. The northern end of town is bordered by Woodbury/Glassboro Road and the southern end by the Mantua Creek which originates in the Delaware, a few miles upstream.

The town is surrounded on the eastern, southern, and western borders by a small woodland area. This area is called the Wenonah Woods and was purchased through a gift by a local naturalist in the early 1970's. Here is a link to the google map of the town:


[http://maps.google.com/maps?q=08090+\(Wenonah\)&ie=UTF8&z=13&ll=39.792051,-75.153351&spn=0.066082,0.154495&om=1](http://maps.google.com/maps?q=08090+(Wenonah)&ie=UTF8&z=13&ll=39.792051,-75.153351&spn=0.066082,0.154495&om=1)

Mantua, the town on the southern edge was a largely Italian working class community. Just past Mantua farms stretched for miles and miles. Tomatoes and peaches as far as the eye could see. The northern, eastern, and western edges were part of Deptford Township. Deptford was an amalgam of small settlements and suburban developments that in the 1960's began to grow. The area directly east of Wenonah in Deptford was known to us as Jericho. It was an African American community with long standing roots. When I was young it was mostly working class black people. People in Wenonah didn't talk to people in Jericho. More on that later.

The next town up the road on the eastern side was Woodbury Heights, then Woodbury. My father lived in Woodbury as a teenager and it was this connection that led us to Wenonah. My father moved our family from a Levittown development outside of Philadelphia in 1957, first to a rental property in Woodbury, and then to Wenonah. None of us live in Wenonah now but all of us carry pieces of it with us. You don't really get to leave Wenonah.

We moved to Wenonah just after my Kindergarten year in Woodbury. Our family consisted of my father, John Sr, my mother, Louise, and my brothers, Ted and Mick. More accurately, Edward and Michael. Ted was the baby and Mick was a year and half younger than I. My father's parents helped him with the downpayment on the mortgage and so we came to Wenonah.

We first saw the house about a month before we moved. My father showed us the treehouse in the back, the yard, the neighborhood, the damp basement, the spacious rooms. We were used to moving (this was our third since I'd been born) so it seemed like no biggie. Mick and I were excited. I have no idea what our parents thought. That brings us then to August of 1958 and my first days in Wenonah. You'll have to wait a bit for more. In the meantime if any folks that lived in Wenonah would like to contribute memories or photos let's find a way to link them up. This isn't just my story. I know my friend Bob Thomas remembers way more than I do and I don't know anything the adults thought about. I hope you'll find a way to mash these things together.

Posted by [Jack Wiler](#) at [6:23 PM](#) [1 comments](#) 

Friday, February 16, 2007

[Wenonah, now and then](#)

Starting today I'm going to be writing a series of pieces on my hometown, Wenonah.

Bear with me. Some of you know a little about my hometown, some a great deal, some more than me. These are my memories of a town that made me.

In order to talk about my town let me say this. I'm going to begin briefly with today, then go back to my first days in Wenonah. It's like a time machine without any distortion except my faulty memory. All of this is past. None is prologue.

I was last in Wenonah about six months ago but more meaningfully three years ago. I left for the second time on January 10th 2004. I arrived the second time October 31st 2001.

When I arrived I was fresh from the hospital. I weighed 90 pounds. I still had some hair but that would soon end. I moved into the first floor of a house at number 4 South Monroe Avenue. My landlords were Rachel and Ralph Knisell. They lived next to me in a house on Mantua Avenue. Mantua Avenue is the main street of my town. They were devout Methodists. My apartment was one bedroom, a den, a living room, a bathroom, and a kitchen. I had access to a basement with a washer dryer. When I moved, my brother Mick lived across the street in another apartment on Mantua Avenue. He lived there with his two children, Louise and Doug. The second floor of my building was occupied by a man I'd known since childhood, David O'Connor. His family lived one block away on the corner of Jefferson and Mantua Avenue. I grew up two blocks away on the corner of Lincoln and Mantua Avenue. I knew almost everyone in town.

They all knew me.

The town was built, for the most part in 1888, 1890. A second section was developed in the early fifties by a man named Sinnott. One smaller section was finished in the latter part of the 1960's. Wenonah is one mile square. It's population has been at or around 2000 since it's founding. It was built originally as a vacation destination around the newly built West Jersey Railroad. It became a bedroom community for people working in Philadelphia very soon after it's founding.

It was and is a town of white middle and upper class Americans.

When I moved there I was recovering from complications of AIDS. I was close to dying. Obviously I didn't die. When I moved there the first time it was 1958. No one had AIDS. Homosexuals were invisible. Black people were invisible. The town looked remarkably like it did when I moved back in 2001.

In two days we will go back in time to 1958. Buckle up. It's a wild ride.