

The magical world in the valley of Pucketos Creek

After the Pittsburgh Steelers defeated the Washington Redskins last fall down in DC, the local fans and media moaned about the game and, particularly, the “behavior” of the Steeler fans on and on for four weeks or so. There were too many of them, they dominated the stadium, they were loud and noisy etc etc. I loved every word of it, reading with glee about the whinny people who did not want to face traffic to attend a Monday night football game only to find themselves exposed as second rate to a national television audience, who saw black and gold on and off the field show true championship form.

My favorite was a column by one of the sportswriters who was riding the subway before the game and was put off by the cheerfulness of the Steeler fans. He asked one woman, dressed in full Steeler regalia, if she was worried about being harassed by Redskin fans. “No” he reported she said, “I’ll slug them.”

And I said, “That’s my gal.” Pure western Pennsylvania in heart and spirit, for better or worse. Proud of who we are and proud to defend our friends and our teams. It is the core of our hometown and I like to think I embrace and live up to that noble standard.

Not very far from where we are tonight is where the world of adventure and mystery and dreams began for me. I grew up just up the yonder hill, on a new street called Ben Davis Avenue. It was farmland at one point and rumor had it that one of my grandfathers actually had a patch of land in the exact area as where my boy hood home was built and still stands today.

I never really cared if that tale was accurate or not. And, even as an adult – growing into a person to which “finding information” was not longer a task but an every day pursuit, I never cared to learn the truth on that one. Because it is the first memory I have that talked about a place of humble beginnings that had a special past, and therefore a special future.

That was before the bypass was built and that was when a neighbor, Mr. Lazoravich who lived two doors down, would gather all the local children and lead us on hair raising, fantastic tours of the deep dark forest that poked at the bottom of Kipp Avenue and lead to Pucketos Creek, with minnows that eluded us, scampering rabbits that teased us and deer droppings that always seem to find our feet. Where rocks and trees, noises and smells, and the greater world first introduced itself to me. It was where I knew every path and turn, and how to reorient myself when lost and where later, as I attended Bon Air School, my longtime friend and class mate George Guido christened The White Rock Club, to which all the imagination of young boys melded and produced countless tales of swashbuckling, creative historical revisionism and the certainty that we lived in the coolest place in the world.

I still think we did. To me, Lower Burrell and the Alle-Kiski valley offered what every person needs – a home that is always there, people who always care, educations that really instruct, the moxie to try, the determination not to give up – and, among other things – incredible meals. As a reporter for more than 30 years all over the place, I learned that one of my most powerful advantages was to realize what all people around the world have in common – what they want out of life, what they hope for family and friends. I learned most of that here in Lower Burrell, even if I did not realize it immediately. And I carried all of those, and many more things from Lower Burrell, with me to all seven continents and hundred of places around the world, to the very spots of historic power in Washington DC and Russia and Europe, to the remote hinterlands of Africa and America.

It served me very well.

There have been many zip codes in my life – but only one true home. Never any doubt at all in my mind, nary a nano-second of hesitation. This is where I grew up and it is my intention to return to Ben Davis Avenue to be home again.

So, My Mayor, I am deeply honored that you all have invited me to be part of our city's birthday celebration. It is a ritual for speakers to pay homage to where they are speaking, but I sincerely love a lot of things about Lower Burrell and this magical world in the valley of Pucketos Creek. I can truly say that it shaped my life and gave me the desire to learn, to travel, to do good and to succeed. Each day I carried a part of this city and those I knew with me, guiding me and thwarting me, but in the end benefiting many of the thousands of people I was privileged to report and write about and, in some small way, make the world a better place.

My home street, where there still are no fences and people are neighbors, always was there to remind me that there were people on the face of every story. It was where Joe "Jazzy" Martin lived across the street, a fountain of good will. Through Mr. Martin I learned the value of jazzy neckties and the joy of selling Christmas trees, which I do with glee now at my children's school. And I will never forget how Mr. Martin took the Little League team no one else wanted and imposed a simple rule --- everyone plays and everyone had fun. And they wound up winning the championship. It was where one neighbor's swimming pool was open to all of us. **And it was were all the neighborhood dogs played a marvelous game of chasing each other round and round the houses, nipping each others ears; I found that trick very valuable in my "negotiations" with a female member of the French national assembly once, so I suppose I should also give public thanks to Bandit, Taffy, Tippy, Champ and their canine compatriots for the many skills they shared with me.**

In Lower Burrell I learned how to **connect and understand** – not always agree – but understand. You had to be able to look people in the eye the next day, as well as look yourself in the mirror. And thus I did. From the nasty warlords of

Bosnia and Africa, to the high-strung fashionistas of the entertainment world to the White House, my Lower Burrell savvy – with a touch of sass – served me well.

Take Mayor Don's good friend Bill Clinton, who became his buddy last year during a political visit to Arnold. I met President Clinton when he was Governor Clinton, speaking to the National Press Club, and I was the moderator. For an hour I had the pleasure to sit next to a wonderfully smart utterly charming brunette wearing thick dark framed glasses. Her name with Hillary Rodman Clinton and her staff never missed the chance to drop me a note in the ensuing years from her and the governor.

Then Bill Clinton became president. That year, at the annual white house correspondents' dinner.... (Story goes here). Kind of like a high school prom.

I have always been reluctant to glamorize my home town. I still am. People tend to think I am patronizing or trying to sound nice. It is not Shangri-La, we all know that. But the truth is that, at least for me, it was the stuff that future dreams were in part made of.

When I hiked in the woods – they seemed vast then – it helped me be **less fearful** in strange new jungles. They made me curious about animals and being closer to nature – and to know when to listen and be silent, to use all of my senses. **(Baby hippos by Lake in Burundi)—people putting their hands up to stop the machete blows.**

When my grandfather took me fishing at Burrell Lake Park (before it was called that), I had tales of fishing to share with a vicious Bosnian Serb general – who I learned was an angler – that softened up enough to agree to be interviewed and then **promptly escorted me to a scene of a massacre – and a scoop over the New York Times.**

When my parents bought me a telescope that let me learn more of the stars from my back yard, that knowledge and fondness stayed with me -- and then **decades later used that knowledge to guide friends through the mountains of Afghanistan.** No panic, just certainty and clarity.

When I listened to Frank Sinatra singing in seemingly every restaurant we would visit, I had no lack of confidence in **correcting a Corsican war lord on the proper melody as he browbeat one of his minions to translate “My Way”** into the local language.

When you learn the miracle of gravy and French fries, you can make anything tasty in the world – **including learning how to scrounge supplies to cook a duck dinner for 40 in Sarajevo during the war with no heat or gas.**

When I could peer over the fence and see movies in the Family drive-in, where the penny candy store actually produce a baseball card of Bill Mazerowski, and yes, when I laid in my bed and heard the classic whistle of the train at night, it caused me to dream of the wonderment of travel.

There were other lessons.

The first letter-to-the-editor critical of an article was from a classmate. On a concert review I wrote. It reminded me that I was not always going to be correct.

It was also here, as a young reporter, where I learn how mean and cruel the system could be. The young women who stuttered and who was raped by police, who never feared a court trial. Children beaten by their parents and teachers saying nothing. I was not a good enough reporter then, but those experiences made me vow that I would be relentless, to be a voice for those voiceless. Those baffled warlords and thieves and bad men and women around the globe never knew that the onslaught of determination they could not shake from me was because of the mocking laughs I still hear that came from those who evaded justice at the expense of others and when I was naïve and powerless.

Ah, but here is ALSO where some teachers pounded into me the better way to do things. My experiences here helped me understand the importance of respect to others—deserved or otherwise; how to stand up to authority; learn that being a good person as often as I could sometimes meant a disadvantage for me -- it's not all a nice world out there -- and the insatiable appetite to learn more about, well everything. It also taught me about the dynamics of a small town, which played no small role in many of the stories I had to cover over the years – from spending many, many weeks going to some very small towns in search of some very tall tales from women who professed to be lovers of Bill Clinton, finding commonality with people in small towns in villages of all seven continents and, including being selected to interview the president of Uzbekistan.

Of course, not even Lower Burrell could prepare me for all things I would face.

For example, who would have imagine that my slacking off in French One – it took me three years to pass it at Burrell – would have meant that 23 years later I would be frantically trying to use that language to explain to French foreign legionnaire medics in Sarajevo that, yes, I would like some anesthesia “s’il vous plait” before you cut into me.

And then there was that strip search in a rural Uzbekistan airport by two female Russian soldiers, a story line that not even the White Rock Club boys could have conjured up.

But many, MANY things were relevant – even the story of LB's birth of a city. The tale of 40 acres was also a memory of mine growing up, but this one was honed as an adult by George Guido, who probably should be given a statue for all

the history he keeps for us. Last fall when we met for a few beers George related to me how Lower Burrell Township once extended far up the hill into what is now New Kensington and how that city keep sniping land until the 40 acres seizure was the last straw.

Well, that did not seem fair. And, as I mentioned earlier, these incidents from my early years in Lower Burrell all seem to eventually have resonance. So here is how LB's problems with land and greedy neighbors played out for me and, Mr. Mayor, you may take note of this as a possible future strategy. A way, the manner of the birth of the city underscore's part of the teaching I have just mentioned – we were pushed and pushed, we sought to avoid confrontation, but then we acted decisively.

One of the groups I work with today is the Kurdistan Regional Government. And it just so happens that one of its senior leaders was in town recently, again, and the head of the Washington office told him as to how I would be here tonight speaking. He asked why the city was only 50 years old and I told him some of the details. **He was quite quiet.. And then on how to deal with neighbors (tell the Syrian story here).**

How I first met the Kurds was instructive, and again, it was a link to LB. Tonight my high school tennis coach, Marty Bosin and his wife are here. Coach Bosin taught us lots of things on and off the court, -- including the fact that no matter how good at tennis I got and how old he got, he could still beat me. But of more value to me was his quiet reminder that we just we had to out savvy the opposition.

A few months ago Coach Bosin reminded me of a stunt my chum and tennis partner Danny Shields and I used to do. (Tell story here).

That was good moxie and smarts then, and I Coach Bosin's advice very well. Take for example, my attempts to get a resident journalist visa for Yugoslavia in 1992. **(Tell that story here)**. That visa was very important to get have – pay in local currency (black market) bring in equipment.....

Other stories here...

Speaking of mad men, there was Radovan Karadzic, the crazy Bosnian Serb leader. How does one make a decision on if you shake hands with someone you know is a mass murderer? **(Bosnia stories follow):**

- The old woman begging me to take her grand daughter to safety.
- The candy sent and the scarves and gloves sent to the children because of stories I wrote – one person can make a difference
- Leaving the guy in the truck when it exploded.

And sometime else – the sound of a baby crying in Lower Burrell sounds exactly the same as a baby crying inWe all want the same things for our children and out lives...

Alaska was granted statehood on January 3, 1959. In the audience tonight is my longtime classmate Arlene McCutcheon, who reminded me that another friend of ours Nanci Sparrow thought it meant that when LB became a city the following week – it too was on the way to statehood. So, with apologies to Ed Rendell, congratulations Gov. Donald!!

Of course, I left here – the hard job was staying here and making things work. As Bill Clinton told Donald recently, the hardest job in America is a mayor of a smaller town. Leechburg Road just is not as busy now as it was when I covered Lower Burrell council, where there was a fierce debate on whether to make a second parallel road. And of course, it has been decades since my Nonnie and I would play hide and seek behind the golf course where the shopping center now is, to collect my sister at Bon Air School.

I recall fondly and somewhat sadly now, the Friday nights in the fall, after I and my colleagues at the Valley News finished our stories of the local high school football games and would head to Hubby's, a local bar, to chew over the games, talk shop and solve the problems in our valley and around the world.

Hubby, the owner and floor walker, loved reporters. He had been a ward healer in Pittsburgh years earlier, working both parties when the pay was appropriate, and had what I would learn is a rare fondness for reporters. So he would hold a round end of the bar for us to come in, set up the cold beers for us and then, just around midnight, he would go out and get the bulldog editions of the Pittsburgh post gazette for us to read.

Those were great days and we thought there was nothing we could not do as reporters fighting the good fight. In those days, I received my first dictums from Mr. George Stuart, the editor of the valley news dispatch, on mimeograph paper. I still have them, even though that blue ink is fading. But I don't need to read them to remember them, including:

“You are the eyes and the ears of the people who cannot be here.”

“Your opinions should never enter a story.”

“If you see a man digging a hole, find out why.”

“A newspaper is a voice for the voiceless.

Those were very good guidebooks for a young reporter, and a young man, to be given by the editor of his first paper, who by the way had been that paper's first reporter. I did not get my first byline for more than a year and, to further heap good-old-days nostalgia on you, we used manual typewriters and smoked in the newsroom. Those are two important things because on more than one occasion some crusty pain-in-the-ass editor would actually rip up my Pulitzer prize

winning copy into large confetti and sprinkle it into the waste can or -- and this actually happened twice -- light the copy on fire. No one seemed to think this was unusual.

Now some may say that this approach to teaching journalism is akin to throwing a child in the deep end of the pool as a way to teach swimming. But what they were teaching me, beyond the theatrics, was basic reporting skills, common sense, respect, and courage. They threw telephone books in my direction as a way to teach me how to do research. They poured over my copy and my performance and my questions to them and to news makers in order to teach me -- pound into me -- objectivity, hard work, caution, creativity in acquiring information, determination, patience, being quiet and listening, confidence, a dash of cockiness and a love for the craft and the profession, among other things. Look for the unexpected, don't take no for an answer, there are at least three -- and usually at least four -- sides to any real story. When the chance to explore beyond Lower Burrell came, they knew and I knew I was ready to start the journey.

I may have been raised in a small town and started by career at what is called a small town newspaper, but there was nothing small town about the values and work ethic and pride and instruction I received on how to be a reporter. I also eventually realized that most of the people who were at that paper could have gone on to bigger sized papers in larger cities had they chosen. But their choice was to stay in their home town -- like most of you -- and give their friends, families and fellow citizens the best damn newspaper they could. And they were right.

Can you ever go home again? I have often wondered about that. Certainly, when I was far far from Lower Burrell and this valley, the various comforts of home -- the things that make a place special -- would be in my mind. As a shield against the cold nights without heat or the food that was nonexistent or the hate.

I managed to have a vast career in journalism for many reasons, but one stands out and looms larger than the others -- it was where I had my start. At the Valley News Dispatch in the 1970s and coming from here. And I always said wherever I went there was a little piece of the all of those who worked with me, who taught me, and passed along the knowledge. Solve things. Build things. See the person inside the stereotype.

We in war correspondents game like to joke that a journey of a thousands miles begins with a broken fan belt and a flat tire. But is a journey, if it is to be successful, that is fueled by passion, craftiness, agility, determination, bravery and cowardice, elation and heartbreak and, hopefully, ultimately, the story.

My car has broken down many times -- including last week -- but eventually -- when you are clear on the destination, you will arrive.

To me there is **nothing like the friendship and embrace that Lower Burrell** has given me all of my life.

Today I see new children along Ben Davis Avenue and get called Mr. Squitieri instead of Tommy Boy. I encourage the new dogs to chase each other and bite their ears.

Joey Martin, Chris Fazio and Johnny Resetar are still the friends I grew up with and Danny and I will always be teammates. Bon Air School may now be more than one level, but it was where I first blew a trombone. The tennis courts where Coach Bosin taught us our savvy are the parking lots officially they were always meant to be. Braeburn Beach is still not worth swimming at. George moved the White Rock Club to Burrell News. And Fritz and Terry's, Maggie's penny candy store, the Family Drive-In and lots of other things are gone.

But, on occasion, I still see deer emerging from the vast forest I first explored. Last fall, the last time I slept on Ben Davis Avenue, in my bedroom, I heard those train whistles blowing again, and again I dreamed. I know they will be calling when I return, to welcome me and remind me. And I can already smell and taste those great chicken wings now.

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