

CHILDHOOD MEMORIES

(Uncle) Fred Baggerman

These are my childhood memories, which I am writing in my 88th year, in an effort to recall my youth. Family history can be found elsewhere.

I was born at the family home on Russel Avenue, St. Louis. We lived there until I was 7 yrs when we moved to a western suburb called University City after Washington University which is located there.

My brother William was born two years earlier at Russel Avenue. We started calling each other 'Jake' and 'Sime' after two brothers who were proprietors of an automobile junk yard where we obtained parts for our old automobiles.

There were numerous children in the Russel Ave. neighborhood and many friendly neighbors. One of our particular friends was Charles Spiegelhalter. An activity that kept us busy for a while was a 'cave'. The 'cave' was a pit dug in the ground in an open lot beside Chas' home. It was covered with sticks, boards and topped off with earth .

Norman Moore, who lived next door stands out in my memory because he made a 'crystal radio receiver' which used a bed spring as an antenna and it really worked. Radios were not very prevalent in those days.

Another neighbor was a railroad engineer who dismantled his automobile each year to keep it in repair and I thought that was impressive.

Speaking of automobiles I particularly remember my Father's first automobile, a Doris. The car was made in St. Louis. Many years later I met George Doris who had designed the car. The car had a canvas top and side curtains which were put up in bad weather. In the winter even with the curtains up it was necessary to cover up with a heavy 'lap-robe'. When driving in the winter Dad used heavy gauntlet gloves.

Jake and I were with our parents when they visited the car show room to examine the car prior to purchase. I was one year old. I somehow got on the in the block. Periodically a 'rag-picker' would drive a horse drawn wagon along the alley and pick out the recoverable material from the ash pits. He would jingle a bell and call out 'Any rags today' as he went along. What was not recovered from the ash pit was periodically burned and the ashes, together with ashes from the house coal fired heating furnace were removed by the 'ash-man'.

The street lights along Russel Avenue were gas fueled. This required the lighting of each light by hand. A 'lamp-lighter' would make his rounds every evening at dusk. At Grandpa Peters' house which was nearer to the center of the city, an organ grinder with a monkey would sometimes come along the sidewalk. Also, a hot-tamale vender would make his rounds. His call was 'Any

hot tamales today'. A hot tamale was a sausage shaped ground meat and crushed corn delicacy encased in a dough sheath. It is of Mexican origin.

There was a considerable difference in numbers between my mother's family and my father's family. My mother had been one of ten children, however, three had died prior to Jake and me being born. Her parents lived in the central part of St. Louis. My father's family consisted of his mother, Grandma B, who lived in St. Louis, and his sister, Aunt Yetta, who lived in Sulphur, Oklahoma. Dad's father had died when Dad was 5yrs old.

With the size of Mom's family it seemed natural that we would celebrate Christmas and Easter with Mom's family. Something like 50 aunts, uncles and cousins would gather at Grampa Peters on these occasions. At Christmas many small stockings filled with candy would be hung at the fire place, one for each person. At Easter there would be an egg hunt and egg cracking contests. The contestant whose egg cracked first would have to give it to the winner.

Most of the cousins were considerably older than Jake and me, however, there were two, Bud and Sis Peters, who were our age. Bud and I used to 'get into mischief' when we had a chance. Grandpa Peters used small white sugar pills for medicinal purposes and he kept a bottle of them in a cupboard in the bath room. The pills were like candy to us kids and Bud surreptitiously put a hand full of the pills in his pocket. Later we were playing with Cousin Walter, who was older, but not much older, than we. Playfully Walter held Bud up by his feet and the pills poured out of his pocket. Bud was very embarrassed but he was not disciplined.

Aunt Martha, Mom's sister, lived with Grandpa and Grandma Peters. She was Cousin Walter's mother. Her husband, who had been a college professor, died when Walter was young. She was our favorite aunt. She and Mom were very close sisters and would have long telephone conversations daily.

Bud and Sis [Francis and Eleanor] were Aunt Nora and Uncle Frank's children. They were twins. Their home was in University City not far from ours. We were good friends and often together.

During these years we had a Beagle hound dog named Sport. Cousin Walter thought this was a particularly inappropriate name for a dog with such unobtrusive manners. Dad would sometimes take Sport rabbit hunting, something she thoroughly enjoyed. She also thoroughly enjoyed hunting rabbits in the neighborhood with her friend 'Pal' who was a large German shepherd. Sport would wait in the front yard until Pal came by and they would go off together. We have seen them on occasion when Sport would start up a rabbit and Pal would take over the lead and catch the rabbit.

Another pet we had for a time was a coyote cub named 'Little Joe'. There was a popular song at the time with a line about 'Little Joe with your eyes as black as coal---'. The animal was given to Jake by a friend who had found it in the woods while hunting. Jake brought the animal home and made a bed for him in the kitchen. Mom was away at the time so he left a note telling her that a 'wolf was tied up in the kitchen'. This gave Mom a bit of a shock.

We kept Little Joe for a year or more tied up to a dog house in the back yard. We would occasionally let him loose and he would play rather roughly with a dog next door. When he grew older he became hard to handle and would sometimes get loose which would lead to a wolf hunt in the neighborhood. I don't think the neighbors liked this very much. We eventually gave him to a farmer who kept him until he killed too many chickens. By some means Little Joe came into the possession of an undertaker in Maplewood, Mo. Jake was subsequently surprised to see a newspaper article reporting that a policeman had shot a wild wolf in the Maplewood area.

Wild West stories were popular in those days. The life of a trapper of fur bearing animals had a particular appeal. In our case, the fur bearing animals were rabbits which were reasonably plentiful in our neighborhood. To catch the critters we built a box- trap out of wood. The door to the box was connected to a stick which held the bait inside the trap. If the bait was touched the door would fall and close the trap.

We set the trap in a wooded area along the River Depere, not far from our house. One morning we checked the trap and found an animal had chewed a hole in the door and had crawled half-way out. This was alarming. The animal turned out to be a muskrat and muskrat fur had a monetary value. Being out-doors men we learned how to skin the critter, stretch the pelt over a wire clothes hanger, bent to the right shape, and tan the hide with an application of powdered tannic acid. We acquired two or three skins in this manner and Jake took them down to the Hill Brothers Fur Co. on the Missouri River levee at St. Louis and sold them. We thus became full-fledged trappers.

As Jake and I grew into teenagers we became very interested in gasoline motors, motorcycles, automobile racing and racing cars. Our first move in this direction was a Shaw Motorbike. We purchased the essential parts as a 'kit' which provided the motor and parts needed to convert a bicycle into a motor-bike. With some difficulty we finally got all the parts together and then spent considerable time pushing the motor bike in an effort to make the engine run.

I don't remember for certain but I think our next move was to make a 'push-mobile' and install the motor-bike motor in it. A push-mobile had four wagon wheels attached to a board chassis. There was a hood in front and a seat-back in the rear, with a space between for the driver. The Shaw motor was installed under the hood. A belt drive from the motor ran to the rear wheels.

We pushed this machine further in an effort to get the motor to run than it ran on its own power, however, it did finally 'operate' to a degree.

When we first lived in University City the secondary schools were having difficulty keeping up with the rapid population growth in the 'west end'. As a result when Jake and I finished grade school we were enrolled in John Burroughs School located further out in the county.

About this time a well known racing car driver named Peter DiPaolo came to St. Louis with the annual Auto Show. Jake, a friend Larry McDaniel, and I went to the show. It may have been a boring day for Peter DiPaolo or for some other reason, he was agreeable to talking to three teenagers. As a result, we had a pleasant conversation with him about the Indianapolis Race which he had won once and done well in other races. Larry McDaniel was the boldest of the three of us and asked Peter if we could take him to dinner the next evening. He accepted and we took Peter and his wife to dinner at the Missouri Athletic Club. It was a memorable evening and we got thoroughly enthused about racing.

Over the years we made several trips to Indianapolis for the race. Before we were old enough to drive we talked Dad into going with us.

Out in St. Louis County there was an amusement park Creve Coeur Lake. It was at the end of a trolley line that made it available to city people. There was an automobile race track at the park. It was a dirt track and was in a bit of a dilapidated condition but they still held an occasional race.

Jake had acquired a second hand racing car, the one with No. 57 painted on its tail. We worked over the car with the help of a friend Bill Alan to increase its horse power. Bill was an excellent mechanic and had a work shop in his basement.

When we first got to know Bill Alan he and another man, Ed Hanger, were in the business of building airplane motors. Bill had designed the motor and they built it complete in their shop.

Jake and I had some fun with the old 'racing car' driving it around an area which was intended to eventually be a housing sub-division. The roads had been constructed but no houses had been built. This became a little dull after a while. Jake happened to see in the newspaper that a 'junk' automobile race was planned for Creve Coeur. We thought this was a real opportunity. We would put the motor from No. 57 in a junk chassis and win the race.

With Bill Alan's help we transferred the motor to a chassis we had obtained from an automobile junk yard. To increase the performance we eliminated the transmission, it was a Model T Ford engine.

It was the day of the race and we were waiting to go on to the track when we heard the announcer say over the public address system that as an added feature the race would be run in reverse. This was an impossibility with a car without a transmission and our hearts sank.

Sometime later Jake acquired another 'race car'. This one had a number 7 painted on its tail. There was another race track in St. Louis County which had passed its prime. It also was a dirt track like Creve Coeur. We were able to talk the track maintenance man into allowing us to 'practice' on the track in preparation for a subsequent race. We took turns driving the car and we thought we were doing pretty good, coming close to the stopwatch 'times' of the regular racers, however, I went into a turn too fast and the car turned over. Unfortunately I caught my

arm between the cowl and the ground. It was somewhat crushed and ever since I have been able to 'blow it up' to the amazement of all onlookers.

Luckily at the time I turned the car over I was wearing a hard helmet which Jake had obtained in England. The helmet received a pretty big gash but my head presumably was not damaged.

Another machine I had as a high school student was a Neracar motorcycle. It was unusual in that it had a two-cycle motor and a chassis with side rails like an automobile. I would sometimes ride it to school, John Burroughs, which was out in the County on Price Road. One morning driving out Ladue Road, which had a railroad crossing with just a bell-light warning signal, the sun was in my eyes and the Neracar had a loud exhaust noise, because I had removed the muffler, the railroad locomotive and I reached the crossing at the same time. Luckily I was able to turn off into a ditch beside the tracks and no harm was done.

The teachers at Burroughs were very good, particularly Mr. Haertter who taught Math and was the baseball coach. Later he was made school Head Master. All students engaged in sports. The sports in which I participated were football, soccer, baseball and wrestling. We did not compete with other schools in wrestling but we did compete in the other sports.

John Burroughs had a good Boy Scout troop. The Scout Master was Coach Leland who was also the head of the Athletic Dept. During my last year at Burroughs, the International Boy Scout Organization promoted an international Jamboree which was to take place at Godolla, Hungary. The Boy Scout Council of St. Louis decided to send a contingent and Coach Leland was chosen as leader.

The purpose of the Jamboree was to bring together scouts from different countries to promote good will and understanding. Each country gave an exhibition unique to that country. Scouts made friends and exchanged items of clothing and equipment to promote goodwill. I became particularly friendly with a Hungarian boy with whom I corresponded for some time afterward.

In addition to the Jamboree our contingent did considerable sightseeing, visiting England, France, Germany, Italy, Austria and the Netherlands. In summary it was a very pleasant summer. In the fall of that year I enrolled at MIT.