

A GLIMPSE INTO MY PAST

by Robert Lunaburg



What do pickled pigs feet, 1946, cement steps, and summer have in common? Not much for most, but comfort, safety, family, and friends for me. More on this in a minute....



I grew up living on the south side of Chicago in a nineteen twenties brick bungalow near the Chicago Stock Yards. Chicago was a meat packing center in those days, but is no longer. What a smell! It was really noticeable when the wind blew from the northeast, but I was used to it. It didn't smell that bad to me.

I remember summer days on the south side with warm feelings. Summer always felt hot in the city. As kids we used to dig in the black tar macadam which became soft in the heat of the



noon day sun. It smelled of petroleum...another good smell. We roller skated and played football on that street, but played basketball and baseball in the alley behind my house.

There was a small grocery store about a block away, hidden behind an apartment building. It was housed in a converted garage. You could buy a big loaf of hard crusted dark rye bread for a dime. We would pool our money to buy a loaf, and sit with our backs to the garbage cans in the alley tearing off pieces and sharing with everyone.

We had a city ritual we followed every time we wanted a friend to come out

and play. We would stand at the back of their building and call out for them. You would yell, "Yoah..." and the person's name. It usually took a couple of calls before they would come to the back door.

"Can ya come out?" I'd ask.

"I'll ask."

A minute later and we were playing together.

Don was my best friend in those days. He's passed now. He loved baseball. He wanted to be a professional league pitcher. That didn't happen. He was a Cubs fan even though he lived on Chicago's south side where everyone rooted for the White Sox. I rooted for the Sox. My grandfather was a policeman for the Chicago police department; Sergeant Cooper. He was stationed at Comiskey Park, home of the White Sox, each time there was a night game. I got to see a bunch of games because of that.

We played kick the can when the sun went down. It's a hide and seek game where we set an old tin can up next to a lamp post we used as a goal. Its soft white light bathed the street under it as the person who was *It* faced the post, eyes closed, and counted out loud to some number, I can't remember now, giving everyone else time to hide. The *It* person then had to find the others, yell out their name, and race them back to the goal. If the post was tagged before the person found, the *hider*, could kick the can, that person was *It* for the next round. If the *hider* kicked the can before the *It* person tagged the post, the *It* person had to reset the can and continue looking for the others.

This was life for kids in the big city, on the south side, where Al Capone and the worst of society pretty much ran things. We, however, felt safe. Our little community, a city block, one eighth of a mile square, divided north to south with an alley, was not part of all of that crime and violence. We were just families, living so close you could hear everything everyone was saying, and always smiling and greeting one another when we saw each other.

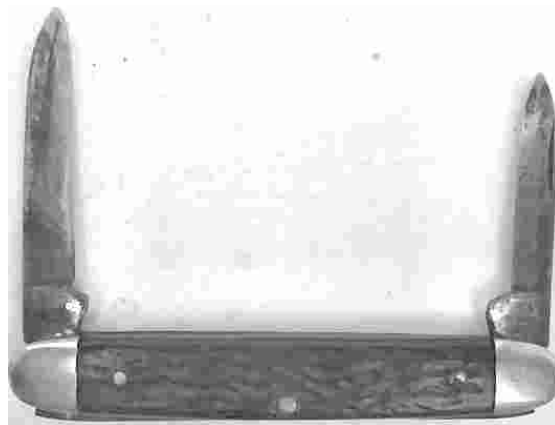
Many was the early evening when my brother and I would sit with mother on the cement stairs leading to our front door. Mother often had a jar of pickled pigs feet open which we would munch on while sitting there. It was an old German custom. Neighbors would walk over and Mom would offer them some, and they would talk of family and hard times. We were third

generation Germans, but our block was a wonderful eclectic mix of first and second generation immigrants. The Carneys came from Ireland. Old man Carney, as we fondly called him, worked for the transit authority. He drove a Red Rocket east and west along 63rd street; he and many other Irish heads of house who constituted most of the CTA, streetcar force.



The Augustines, he worked downtown in an office, lived five houses south of us. They had a car. Son Charlie didn't like sports. He read a lot. We thought he was kind of weird. Then there was Steve and Junior. They were a year older than me, and palled around together. The Brosseaus and the McDowells lived across the street. Don Brosseau was my best friend, and Ed McDowell was in high school. He would talk with us, but he really was too old to pal around with grade school kids.

Old man Zimmerman lived next to us. He must have been at least six hundred years old, and grew grouchier with each year. He had a small patch of grass next to his door steps. It was green and lush and always cut just so high, perfectly level everywhere. I remember one time when Don and I thought that piece of plush green was just the most perfect place to play mumblety-peg with our pocket knives. We hadn't been at it long when old man Zimmerman came out and announced we were killing his lawn, and he was going to call the police. I stayed out of his way for a long time after that. Who knew what an out of control 600 year old man was capable of doing to a kid. I wasn't about to find out. Mom said we were wrong to do what we did. I believed her, but really didn't understand why until many years later when I had a lawn of my own. Green grass tops and roots don't fare well when cut asunder by a pocket knife.



We slept with all the windows open in the summer. My dad made screens for

them to keep the bugs out, but the breezes, when they came, were always welcome. I used to fall asleep listening to the harsh melody of those streetcars as they lumbered by on steel tracks, not far in the distance. That, and the lonely sound of steam engine whistles, as they chugged past each little road, were music to my ears in the night.

Today, some sixty years later, no one sits out in front eating pickled pigs feet in my neighborhood; not even me. It's been so long since I had one, I doubt it would even taste good now. Our neighborhood is mixed with lots of wonderful people, but they are much too busy to take time to stroll and talk of an evening. The kids all play organized sports, and even though we live in a suburb of a city now, we lock the doors and windows at night. Somehow the TV has taught us that crime lurks everywhere. No one is safe. Anyone can be the victim of some senseless crime at any time. Night sounds now are those from tree frogs and grasshoppers. No one wants the noise from street cars and steam locomotives interrupting their sleep. How sad.

If my culture is meant to protect me from harm, and I definitely live within a different culture than before, I guess it's working. I do feel safe, but it's not the same as I remember it was as a youth.

I've gone back to the old neighborhood on several occasions and found that now it is totally different than it was back then. The little store is gone. No more dark rye bread with steel hard crust. And the housing is much smaller looking than I remember, and very run down. There are no lamp posts, just mile high red sodium lights thrust upon the top of creosote wood posts.

Time and circumstance have taken much of my early culture away from me forever, and I miss it, but safety and security these days demands new practices, new rituals, new ways of intermingling with people. These now are the things young people will cherish in their years to come.

I guess the question really boils down to this, "Which provides the most comfort, pickled pigs feet, or the Xbox?"