

## Cabin Gang: Reminiscences 2020

The dialogue continued years later via Zoom because of the diminished travel during the Corona Virus outbreak. This time the question was to describe an event or experience that still has significance for us.

Jim mentioned that he still remembers the annual report, published and distributed to all parishioners after Mass on Sunday, which listed the annual amount contributed by each parishioner in church via the printed envelopes. His parents went through it with a fine-toothed comb, checking the amount contributed by others in the parish to identify the generous contributors and of course the slackers. Kids got their box of church envelopes as well. The typical amount a 7<sup>th</sup> grader would contribute would be 10 cents every Sunday. We kids were part of that proud tradition of the founders of the parish contributing their nickels and dimes to build St. Stan's Church. And, of course, we checked out the contributions of our classmates. Keeping an account of parishioner contributions was not started by Msgr. Grulkowski, the pastor, who was an indefatigable fund raiser. Whenever he gave the Sunday sermon, we knew it would be short and about money. I have the account book of my grandfather, Nick Sieracki, which indicates all of his contributions for the church and school, including the pew payments. And the amounts are verified with the signature of the pastor, Msgr. Pacholski.

Rich reminded us of the big bonfire we had during Homecoming week. Our junior year he helped gather the wood and cardboard. And it truly was a magnificent bonfire. We don't read about bonfires to celebrate high school Homecoming games. Too much liability. Looking back, we realized the freedom we had to use the playgrounds throughout the city, ice rinks during the winter, the lake beach and the river beach to swim in. We roamed the city at will as well as the bluffs, the forests and the islands on the Mississippi River. Our parents were busy and getting a ride to practice or a game was out of the question. We were lucky if they ever showed up for a game. With our freedom, there came an accepted level of danger that we were supposed to control. But given our bb gun fights, our contact sports, our use of hatchets in the wilderness, our stunts on the river with our powerboats, we occasionally lost control. We spent little time reading or learning to play an instrument. The internet and video games were beyond anyone's imagination. Although we were somewhat naïve and uniformed, we could handle ourselves on the street or in the woods.

### Cabin Gang: Our Houses in the East End

On June 10, 2020 the cabin gang discussion turned to the Winona houses we grew up in. One would think that such reminiscences would only interest those who lived in the houses. But some engaging notions soon became clear.

Jim grew up on Broadway or 6<sup>th</sup> Street, Art on 5<sup>th</sup> Street, Rich on 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, and Charlie on 2<sup>nd</sup> St. – all within close proximity, easy walking distance. And that signals the distinctive pattern of life in the East End. That the houses are small and close together and everything is in reasonable walking distance promotes keeping in contact. And our community was indeed close knit.



The houses were small, but the families were big. And this meant that you had to be considerate. Two kids or more in a bedroom was common. When you share a room, you have to get along, you have to be neat. The best example of that was Jim's house: mom and dad and four sons in two bedrooms and a living room. Everything has to be in good order before you went on your way in the morning. In spite of the fact that the houses were small, there was still room for an uncle or two. After World War II, Charlie, Art and Rich all had an uncle living in the house. Adjustments had to be made. The lights had to stay on at night to keep the calm at Art's house because his uncle had symptoms of PTSD. Also needing special care was Rich's Uncle John, who suffered from multiple sclerosis and died at the age of 26.

We all had relatives living nearby. Rich's Uncle Art lived in the next block. Within a few blocks of my house I remember my cousins' families: Palubicki, Malotke, Rossin, Pellowski. Our parents hung out with both cousins and friends. Art remembers the regular poker game with friends and relatives that his father hosted. For Art and his siblings, sitting on the stairway eavesdropping on the chatter was better than tv. (A figure of speech. In those days, we had no tv.) Kids hung out in the neighbor's yards, depending on who had the swing set or the garage wall for fast pitch with a tennis ball. More often than

not, the alley served as our playground. We would play with our neighborhood friends until our mothers yelled out the door that supper was ready. Our parents were very busy and did not have time to supervise us. We were on our own, but we were not on our own. We hung out with our friends and cousins and the neighborhood was filled with neighbors and relatives; and this community put restraints on any notions of delinquency that we might have had.

We did not realize it at the time, but this was the very life style of our Polish ancestors – close knit communities that knew how to enjoy the good things in life without much money. They came to Winona with their families and their cousins from small towns and villages in Kashubia. The small “shotgun” houses that they could afford to build in Winona were filled with large families and an occasional relative. That way of life echoed down through the generations to our time in the 1950s. And now looking back after 70 years, we realize all the elements that went into raising happy healthy families in the East End. We think that we have advanced with our wealth and technology, but upon reflection our quality of life in many ways has not improved.

### Cabin Gang: Our Parents

There was a professional glass ceiling for women in Winona in the 1950s. But the same was true for Polish men. One would find relatively few women or Polish men in the professions, in executive positions in business and industry or in government. We knew that unless we wanted to work in a factory, on the railroad, in the service sector, or run a small business, we would have to go to college and leave town for a career. Our parents did not complain about their employment fate, although they struggled mightily to provide for their families on their limited salaries. Our parents also accepted traditional gender roles in the family. The man was to go to work and come home to a good dinner and leave the dishes in the sink. Laundry, groceries, minding the kids was women’s work. On top of this, many women also worked outside the home. Men repaired things, painted and remodeled, maintained the car – one per family – and did the yard work.

Rich’s dad was superintendent of field maintenance of the local power plant, Mississippi Valley Public Service Company. He was in the field on a call one day and called home to the family still in bed to tell them to look out the window. The dome of St. Stan’s Church had been hit with lightning and flames were shooting through to the sky.

Jim’s father was an expert mushroom hunter. It was not unusual for him to return from the woods with a bushel basket of mushrooms. And he was a passionate gardener who produced tomatoes, pumpkins - vegetables of unrivalled quality. He would get a bucket of cow manure from a local farmer, add water, and fertilize the plants with the potent liquid. One day, Jim’s mother was trying to reach something on a high shelf in the

garage, and she used the manure bucket to gain a little more height. Unfortunately, she slipped and ended up with the contents of the bucket on her head. When she rushed to the house for assistance, she was met with the wry remark of her husband, “See, you’re not supposed to be in there!”

My father also was an avid gardener. One day while my mother was watching him at work in the garden, a bee got into his bib overalls. In a panic, he did what any quick-thinking man would do. Down came the bib overalls. Dad was partial to wearing boxer underwear, so it must have been quite a show.



Our mothers were expert housekeepers and fabulous cooks. We were assured of clean clothes, nursing during our illnesses, encouragement in our successes and failures, and meals that we still remember fondly. Rich’s favorite was a meal of potato dumplings, which we called buchtas, sauerkraut and pork chops. And because there were hunters and fishermen in the family, his mother not only cooked the game, but helped with the butchering. She had a kind heart, but was realistic. The four little ducklings caught while duck hunting in the sloughs were pets the first year. But they did not fly south the next season with the migrating flocks. They made it no farther than the dining room table.

I suspect that our mothers occasionally wondered “what if” regarding missed opportunities in their lives. Jim’s mother was pulled out of school in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade because she was ordered to work as a kitchen helper. No doubt these talented women would have gone far if they only had the chance. But in the main they accepted their roles as defined by custom in the East End. And within these roles, they were stars – experts in so many ways in the home. Although there were limits imposed by these role expectations, our parents made the “system” work. The households ran smoothly. Once married, both partners were committed to a stable and enduring union. And although the parents’ roles were different, our mothers were not subservient partners. Rich’s mother loved the outdoors and went hunting, fishing, and camping, to say nothing of her expert mushroom hunting ability. While ice fishing, the men sometimes had to be cautioned about their language: “There’s a lady present.” Because our mothers were

confident in their roles, the balance of power often tilted in their favor. Art remembers the time when the family had to replace the car and his father fell in love with the gorgeous lines of the 1956 Buick. His reveries crashed with the simple quip of his wife: “Leonard, we are not Buick people.”

