

Microcosm of the East End: Paper Route II

Each of the seven blocks of the paper route had its own story. My first customer on the first block offered one of the more interesting stories. Rompa's Tavern. I always wanted to be able to buy a beer in the tavern, but it closed before I turned 21. Rumor was the new "come here" police chief closed it because it was too close to a grade school, St. Stan's – my school. The tavern was there on the corner about as long as the school existed at its corner. New chief, new enforcement, I guess. Jerry Rompa, the bar owner lived with his ailing wife on another block on my route. I was allowed to park my bike in their back yard. My older brother who used to have the paper route did the same thing. But he never explained exactly as to how he earned that right. My oldest brother Jerry used to chum with Josh Jerusal from Chicago when he lived at Rompa's. I think they were his grandparents. So this friendship may have led to parking the bike there. But there is another connection with Rompa's Tavern.

When doing family genealogy, I learned a family secret that my paternal grandmother was conceived before her mother was married. Ultimately, my grandmother's mother did marry a Wojciechowski and had a son, Martin, nicknamed Skorpy. I began to wonder who my grandmother's father was. I happened to be driving my elderly Aunt Sallie one day and casually asked if she knew who it was. "Yes," she said. His name was Cisewski. The Cisewski name is among the first Polish settlers in Winona. The Clem Cisewski family lived across the alley from our house on Second Street. Mark Cisewski used to substitute for me on occasion when I couldn't deliver my papers. So I asked my aunt where this Cisewski worked. And she replied at Rompa's tavern.

Down the same block lived the Gabrych family. The East End baseball park was named after Gene Gabrych, a soldier who had lost his life fighting in the war. I suppose they were related, but I never asked to confirm that idea. Around the other side of the block lived the Poblocki family in the basement of a house that did not have a first story. For the entire five years that I delivered newspapers the first story of the house was never built.

On the corner of the second block was a little shop, probably a former grocery store. The old neighborhoods all have a corner grocery store. The selection and convenience of supermarkets drove the corner grocery stores out of business. This little shop housed a most unusual business. Three people or so sitting among stacks of comic books were engaged in cutting the titles off the covers. I suppose there was some sort of refund for unsold comic books. On weekends after collecting from my customers, I would pick out two Classic comic books – the sort that portrayed classic adventure stories and go home to enjoy my little treasures. I think I bought them at half price.

Across the street on the corner of the third block lay a big old brick house with a little glassed in porch in the rear. I hardly ever saw this customer. He explained to me when I took over the route that he would leave the payment (35 cents at the time) on a table on the porch. The money was in a tiny box out of sight underneath the window ledge. In the winter, it was dark before I got to that particular house. There was no light at all on the porch. I would have to feel my way to the table and take the coins from the little box. That was always a test of my courage, but money always won. In the middle of that block was the most popular tavern on my entire route: Jack's. Thursday and Friday nights would feature men filling the bar and sometimes a row of men standing behind those seated on the stools. No women. Just men stopping for beer on their way home from work. I suppose bars were so popular at first because homes did not have refrigerators, only ice boxes with limited space. So if you wanted to escape from home to drink and joke with your buddies, the neighborhood bar was the place to go. On the corner next to Jack's was another bar, the Athletic Club, a social organization founded by East End Polish that featured a bowling alley, hall, and bar. It was a handsome brick building that drew cold water from a well as part of its air conditioning system. During hot summer days a jet of water streamed into the gutter all day long. One of the benefits of my father being a member was that we kids would receive a grocery bag full of goodies given to us by Santa. (link to Athletic Club)

Across the alley on the other side of the third block, lived the Bilder family. My buddy Frank used to live there. He went to St. John's grade school, not St. Stan's. The emigrants from Czechoslovakia (Bohemians or Bohunks, as we called them) had their own church and school. Anyway, Frank was a great buddy and a really good baseball player. We all used to play in the Park Rec leagues. His favorite player was Ernie Banks, and hence came his nickname. Now in our late 60s, Frank is still known as Ernie. A couple of houses down from Ernie's was the East End Theatre. Television put an end to that and it was converted into a grocery store. Supermarket competition put an end to that.

Across the street from the Athletic Club on the corner of the fourth block was the Hugh Orphan Upholstery Shop. My guess is the building was a former grocery store. Hugh was a pitcher on the Winona Southern Minny baseball team, famous for his submarine ball. Hitters from the opposing teams were not fooled by his underhand pitches. Next to his shop was Jim Yahnke's Barber Shop. He told me that years ago he would give a lot of shaves. I suppose at one time the barber had a lot better razor than what you would use at home. Gillette changed all that with the safety razor. In the middle of the fourth block in a tiny house lived an old couple named Wnuk. Wnuk means grandson in Polish. I used to know another guy in the East End whose name was Dave Wnuk. Now I wonder if they were related. And I wonder what their emigration story was. Nothing of this sort seemed interesting at the time. The Wnuks were one of those charming, friendly old couples who grow old together gracefully. They were easily in their late 70s. I would

knock on their back porch door to collect. They would invite me into the porch. It was finished with windows and they were covered with newspapers, maybe to cut down on the glare of the sun. And it was unusually warm on the porch thanks to the sun. Mrs. Wnuk would dig into her little black purse with her wrinkled old finger and always find a quarter and a dime for me. I expect their whole lives were orderly, peaceful – and warm.

On the other side of the fourth block lived the Wronskis. Leo Wronski was our milkman. Every few days he would show up with a cigar butt in his mouth and iron baskets with milk bottles in his hands, and he would joke with my mother in his loud voice. One day Mrs. Wronski came to the door to pay me dressed in a skirt and a red bra but without a blouse. Leo fussed at his wife, but she said, never mind, he is just a boy. What a couple!

After delivering papers to these four square blocks lying in a row between Zumbro and Chatfield, I would turn to finish blocks 5, 6, and 7, which paralleled the first four.

On the corner of block five was located a bar called The Happy Corner. It was a good name for a Winona bar. Most of them were indeed situated on corners. Anytime anyone mentioned someone being at “the corner” or going “to the corner,” the euphemism was always understood. My father and his brothers would be sent “to the corner” (Loshek’s bar) to get a pail of beer for my grandfather. No marketing with bottle labels or fancy packaging, just a pail of cold beer straight from the tap. The layout of the Happy Corner is etched in my memory forever. It has a tiny vestibule. It is where I stood after delivering papers to block 7, refusing to finish blocks 8 and 9. I was about 11 years old and helping my brother deliver papers before I got the route in my own name. He was going to deliver the first four blocks, and I was to deliver the last three. But it was one of those incredibly cold days in the 1950s, the likes of which are seen no more. My brother found me in the vestibule and graciously took the remaining papers to finish the job.

It was outside the Handy Corner that while delivering papers one overcast day I was asked by another friend if I knew Dale Weber. I said yes, I knew him. Oh my friend said. Then you knew that he drowned. I had not intentionally meant that, but I did know that Dale had drowned that afternoon. He and some friends had capsized their boat. Two of the boys stayed with the boat and were rescued. Dale tried to swim to shore but didn’t make it.

The Handy Corner was not a very successful bar. It had a string of owners. One owner I found particularly strange, friendly but strange. One morning when collecting, I found him asleep on the bar, perhaps because of financial difficulties. Later he showed me the gruesome wound in his temple where he said he had brain surgery. Fifty years later my brother and I were walking from Loshek’s bar back to our mother’s home on Mankato Avenue. We passed by the Happy Corner, and I asked Robert to stop in for a beer. He

said the place had turned very rough and to be careful. As usual, Robert's information on bars was impeccable. A lot of the fellows in there looked like they were looking for a fight. If I remember correctly, Robert said that the Vietnamese bartender one night had to chase one troublemaker out of the bar at the point of a knife.

Mary Perszyk Walinski and her daughter Eva Walinski lived at 710 East 5th St, a couple of houses down from the bar. My mother said they were cousins of my father, but she didn't know how exactly. Thanks to a genealogist on geni.com, I discovered that Mary Perszyk Walinski was a second cousin of my Grandfather Nicholas Sieracki. Their great-grandfather (my great-great-great-grandfather) was Maciej Kuklinski. The Winona Daily News did a charming interview of Mary on the occasion of her 92nd birthday in 1969. My cousin gave the reporter a loaf of her home-baked bread and spoke of her father who used to work for Youmans lumber mill. Just a few houses down from the Walinski's was a little house, 716 E. 5th, where my great-grandfather Joseph Sieracki, who also worked at Youmans lumber mill, used to live. That house had stayed in the possession of the family. My second cousin Rich Rossin used to live there with his mother when I was a paperboy. We are both descended from Joseph Sieracki. Polish emigrants had big families, and you didn't have to travel far to find a cousin of some sort.

On the next block, the Kujak family moved into the house on the corner. When I came to collect, Ms. Kujak said her name was hard to pronounce. When I pronounced it with the "j" sounding like a "y," she was pleased to hear it. Two doors down from her, the Smokeys lived in the basement level of the house. Ms. Smokey always complained of the damp. I made the mistake of pronouncing the name as Smokey and was quickly corrected by Mr. Smokey: pronounced Smockey. On the other side of this block was Watkowski Funeral Home. Aside the building was a long elevated driveway that was fun to ride up for the quick ride down. No doubt I was the only person in town getting a thrill going by the funeral home. Joe Watkowski was the epitome of decorum in his suits favoring unusual colors. He served all of the deceased members of my family – grandfather, father, great uncle, uncle - until cancer claimed him.

The seventh and last block of the paper route was where my family moved to when I was in high school. 212 Mankato was our residence, 214 Mankato in the same building was the Cinderella Shoppe. My father had been selling sewing machines and renting space in Lilla's barbershop and kitchen appliance store. When the Watkowski family put the 212/214 building on sale, my father was happy to buy it because of the attractive store front it offered to feature his sewing machines. The Cinderella Shoppe was a fabric and women's dress shop – no better place to sell sewing machines. In the little house next door, lived Bill Koehler, a retired German farmer, and his wife. He lived to a very old age, fortified in retirement by trips to the Athletic Club bar. He told me that in Germany his father would wake up at dawn, take a big swallow of schnapps from a jug under the

bed, bite off a chaw of tobacco and head right to the barn to start milking the cows. This little house was where my Uncle Joe and Aunt Mary lived early in their marriage.

So around these seven square blocks I would go delivering my newspapers, not realizing at the time all of the connections I had with those very special houses.