

The Danville News  
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"Neglected"  
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It pains me say this, approaching Father's Day, but at seventy years and eleven months old I'm finally secure enough to admit my neglected childhood.

Picture the indignity of Dad making me share a bedroom with two brothers. At night, our warden did allow us to read or listen to the radio in our cell block till lights out. When younger, before prayers, Mom read to us. Did she read from Mad Magazine or comic books? Hardly. What did Mom read? Dickens.

Would Dad let us sleep in on Sunday? Sleep? Scrub up, brush teeth, dress up in coat and tie, off to Sunday school then worship. Church, not social media, not sports. Church, where pastor expected us to learn scripture and apply critical thinking. Brother Ricky suffered more because wearing husky size, his clothes itched like a Medieval hair shirt. Let's talk about those hand-me-downs. Me, third son. You think they could have bought me a new shirt? They could afford it. No. Those hand-me-down shirts never reached my wrists; to this day I never button my cuffs.

Worse, imagine what it was like suffering a father who invited neighbors to reprimand us when observed misbehaving. How rude: Dad expected us to know right from wrong. You mess up, you clean it up. Don't disappoint yourself.

Did Dad care enough to drive us to school so we miscreants wouldn't dawdle? No. Dad made us walk or ride our bicycles to Elementary School and Junior High, each a mile away, regardless the weather. What? Were we Post Office mailmen? Neither snow nor rain. Bus service was provided only those pupils who lived over one and a half miles away. High school was two miles away. Did Dad pity us and drive us? Never. The best I could do was catch a ride on the back of a Harley ridden by my brother's friend, otherwise it was the Bataan death march, with books.

Shall we talk about birthdays? After 6th grade it was: "Oh, yes, tomorrow's your birthday, do you have a favorite meal you'd like?" Presents? Not after 6th grade. Meanwhile, Mom busied herself serving as church elder and Dad as School Board President and bank trustee. Did they, busily being civic-minded and church-minded, ever help us complete our homework? Worse, when a teacher would send a note home from school about us, did our parents believe us? Guess again. They actually trusted the teacher's comments. And we thought they loved us.

Did Dad ever send me to soccer camp so I could become a superstar? Summer meant unloading trucks at the family factory.

Let's talk child labor laws. Making our beds. Mandatory family meals, black and white television off. Clearing the table. Handwritten thank you notes. Mowing the lawn. Trimming roses. pricked by thorns. Shoveling elderly neighbor's driveways, for free! Grandma probably deserves blame for such abuse. Grandma paid a paltry penny for each dandelion pried up by the roots from her lawn. Were we ever given a weekly allowance? Never!

Dad violated child labor laws with a vengeance. Cheap labor. Free labor. Three boys forced to grow up in a paint factory alongside Jersey's Raritan Valley railroad line, us dashing to place those dandelion pennies on the track for the commuter train to run over. Picture poor Oliver Twists perched on catwalks shoveling rosin into varnish vats. Picture rolling 50 gallon solvent drums off the truck bed onto a stack of tires, then roll them into the shed. Picture this pitiful adolescent Caliban trudging blocks to Stewarts Root Beer to order lunch for everyone, even the paid employees. And I was the boss's son! Talk about exploitation. Juvenile workers of the world unite!

Can you believe how Dad rarely knew where we were when we weren't forced to work at home or factory. Mom summoned us home by cow bell. We'd bike through two towns, cross Route 22, head towards Seeley's Pond in the Watchung Mountains. We'd fish all day bereft of parental concern for their precious darlings. After 10th grade, five of us canoed for two weeks through the Adirondacks. Dad only quizzed us about how we were going to get there and how would we pay for the canoes. Imagine five unchaperoned teens paddling and foraging through that wilderness. Hello, Lord of the Flies! What on earth was Dad thinking, expecting us to fend for ourselves, to be accountable, responsible, to learn how to act like decent men.

What a great way to grow up. Thanks.