

HOG HEAVEN

So much to do, so little time.

For those who wanted to hang out, it was paradise. For those who were inclined to engage in mischief, it provided opportunity aplenty. For those of the athletic persuasion, it was nirvana raised to the umpteenth power. All of which is to say that the block bounded by St. Clair Avenue, Huron Avenue, and Third Street was hog heaven for those of us who lived there in the 1950s and early '60s.

Within or immediately adjacent to our block, there was a baseball field, a gymnasium, a bowling alley, a 60-by-20-foot indoor swimming pool, two tennis courts, a restaurant, a candy stand, a Coke machine, a river, and a railroad station.

The baseball field, home of Renovo's Little League, was our main venue in the summertime--both for pickup games and, until age 13, for sanctioned league games (complete with fans, coaches, uniforms, and--the delight of all delights--new baseballs). Four teams--the Elks, Moose, Eagles, and Sons of Italy--vied for town bragging rights over an 18-game schedule each year.

Friendships were often placed in jeopardy by the luck of the Little League draw because, with four teams participating in the lottery, there was a 75 percent chance that best buddies would end up on opposite sides of the field. But Maurice Manili, my childhood playmate, and I managed to set aside our fierce on-field rivalry--he played for the Moose and I played for the Elks--for the sake of our longstanding palship.

(Footnote: With the stars aligned in our favor a few years later, Maurice and I were placed on the same team in Jr. League, where we formed the "world-famous" double-play combination of the Lancer Pools Tigers.)

The tennis courts (which, by the way, served as an outdoor ice-skating rink in the winter) provided us with an afternoon diversion from baseball--but, come to think of it, we frequently played baseball there, too, taking down the nets, drawing bases and a home plate with chalk, and using a sawed-off broom handle and a tennis ball as bat and baseball. When we did play tennis, because we had no formal instruction we played in a style that one might charitably call unorthodox. (And we weren't much for tennis etiquette, either. Regardless of whether or not play was in progress on the next court, we regularly bolted onto it to retrieve errant tennis balls.)

In the fall, our passion for all things spherical took us to the YMCA gym for basketball, a topic which has already been exhausted in "Follow the Bouncing Ball."

The YMCA, the hotel portion of which was the preferred way station for out-of-town train crews on the Pennsylvania Railroad's Washington-Harrisburg-Buffalo route, also housed the aforementioned bowling alley, swimming pool, restaurant, candy stand, and Coke machine. In other words, the YMCA was tailor-made for kids.

There were regular open swims in the YMCA pool, where the principal pastime was dodge ball. And for kid keglers with money, there was open bowling at the lanes in the early evening Monday through Friday and all evening long on Saturday.

The YMCA was somewhat schizophrenic when it came to edibles, offering up wholesome meals at the restaurant (the meat loaf, mashed potatoes, homemade Italian bread, with a side of green beans springs to mind) and candy bars and penny candy at the front desk just 10 feet away.

My preferred YMCA snack was a Coke and a Baby Ruth (although jumbo gumdrops sans beverage was not far behind). And what better place to consume my appetite-destroying cavity-promoting treats than the railroaders' off-limits, smoke-filled lounge, where one could watch the Pennsylvania Railroad engineers, firemen, conductors, flagmen, and brakemen shoot pool. Many a candy bar and soda were also relished in front of the communal TV in the YMCA lobby while watching the World Series, which, more often than not, pitted my beloved New York Yankees against the National League's Sacrificial Lamb of the Year.

When I think of my boyhood buddies and the mischief we got into, I'm tempted to call them not buddies but unindicted co-conspirators. No place was too laden with adults and adult sensibilities to keep us from getting into trouble (which, because we were kids, was our job). Thank God the sports we played left us very little time for devilry because there was no shortage of ready-made sites for it.

Take the Pennsylvania Railroad station. It had mail handwagons to ride on (never mind that the resident PRR cop thought that the wagons should be used solely for transporting mail), a waiting room (complete with patrons to serve as audience for our impromptu one-act plays), and an outside faucet and enough nooks and crannies to make it an ideal place for a rollicking game of water balloons. Invariably, someone who was not part of the game (read: an adult) would get some water splashed on his or her person, and the game would come to an abrupt and ugly end. (Sheesh. You'd think that grownups would have had enough experience with the ballistic trajectories of airborne water balloons to avoid getting hit.) But the most memorable water-balloon incident was the one where some brain-dead kid (who shall remain nameless) held a water balloon in an open mailbox to impress his friends: "Look, guys. What a riot! Hahahaha--oops!" [Sploosh, drip drip drip.] "Oh boy, I am in trouble with a capital T."

The railroad station also had an ice house that bore a big "KEEP OUT" sign (or, in kidspeak, "COME ON IN AND GET SOME ICE"). We often took a break from playing baseball or tennis to refresh ourselves at the ice house. (Yes, we could have gotten ice at home. But ice you got from the fridge didn't taste nearly as good as ice you got from a place where you were not supposed to get it. Besides, those homemade ice cubes were so small.)

On the other side of our block--i.e., the side opposite the railroad station--was the Susquehanna River. Like all rivers, it had a riverbank--over which (need it be said?) it was strictly forbidden to go. I would love to tell you about the day that I found a perfect stone and skipped it on the surface of the water nine times (!) before it plooped to a watery grave about 40 yards away. But because I was an obedient son, I did not go over the riverbank and I had no part in the skippingest stone-skip in the history of mankind (wink, wink).

After sundown in the summertime, our block was alive with kids playing Ghost, Drip Drop, Kick the Can, Mother May I, Red Rover, Stoop Tag, Red Light/Green Light, Throw the Wicket, Three-Step Mickey Across the Road, or any of the other myriad games that are passed from generation to generation wherever kids play. (We boys also spent an inordinate amount of time giving each other noogies, wedgies, purple nurples, and Indian rope-burns, but that, of course, didn't have anything to do with the block we lived on.)

Oh, and in the unlikely event that we were somehow still bored or hungry, relief--in the form of Morgan Pompili's pool room, the Rialto Theater, Gianoplos' restaurant (specialty of the house: baked hamburgers with stewed onions), Hevner's newsstand (whose racks always sported the latest edition of MAD magazine), and Bratz's dairy store (home of the locally celebrated peanut butter-fudge sundae)--was just two short blocks away.

Not to put too fine a point on it, but living on our block was hog heaven.