

On the Sidewalks of New York

6. A Summer To Remember

After the birth of my sister Erna in 1934, my mother's tuberculosis became more serious. The five flight walk up became more of a burden to her. Her physical condition finally forced us to move from 1543 First Avenue. She had lived all thirty four years of her life there. In 1935 we moved to a second floor apartment between 82nd and 83rd Street on First Avenue.

The move to a more congenial setting did not change our mother's constant worry over our health. She was always afraid that she would pass her tuberculosis on to us. Since she had an active case, she could never show physical affection to either Erna or me. It was one of the crosses she bore. She was continually concerned over Erna's low weight. She would buy a can of Borden's "Hemo" at the 86th Street Woolworth's and mix it with milk for Erna. Then she would add light cream and a blood builder which Erna detested.

Part of her stratagem to keep us healthy was to get us out of the city. She was always working on plans to get us out of the city. In her younger years Erna was sent to stay for short periods with her Godmother, Emma West, in Garden City, Long Island. When I was eleven she had saved up enough money to send me to Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania. The Masek family, who lived in our tenement, knew the McCreery's who lived on a small farm in Cherry Valley outside of Stroudsburg. The Maseks interceded on my behalf and asked the McCreery's if they would be willing to take me in their home for two weeks of the summer vacation. The McCreery's agreed and I was on my way to Stroudsburg during the hot days of August in New York.

The trip to Stroudsburg was the longest journey I had made in my eleven years. The McCreery's met me at the train station. I was easy to spot, since I was the

only eleven year old to get off the train. They appeared as eager to see me as I was to know someone was waiting for me.

The McCreery's had three unmarried adult children, two sons and a daughter, Grace. They all lived on their small farm. Their home was several miles outside of Stroudsburg set in the midst rolling farm land. Cherry Valley was composed of small family farms. The roads were dirt and gravel, asphalt had not come to this part of eastern Pennsylvania. Some houses along the road were better kept than others. The McCreery's home showed much love and care. For a city boy, this summer experience was to be an eye opener.

There were several boys my age in farm houses near by. The one who stood out that summer was Billie Lutjen. He was one of at least five Lutjen children. I never did see them all at one time so there may have been more. The Lutjen family lived across the road from the McCreery's in a ramshackle house. The only building in worse shape than the house was the barn. It was the closest I would come to seeing poverty country style. It was a slice of Tobacco Road come north.

Nothing seemed to bother the Lutjens. They had a reputation in the community of claiming other people's property as their own. This was only one of their weaknesses. One of the big events during my two week stay at the McCreery's was a visit from a state police officer searching for property which had been reported missing. Someone had suggested beginning the search on the Lutjen farm.

I even got into the show. Since I had been over at the Lutjens with Billie the state trooper asked me if I had seen any property that looked like it didn't belong to the Lutjens. Since everything was pretty run down on the farm, he expected that I might have seen something which stood out as looking too new. I told the officer that you couldn't tell anything by me, I was just a visitor in the neighborhood.

The McCreery's, who were generous spirited people, were not ones to put down their neighbors. But Mrs. McCreery by way of inference suggested that I not spend too much time with Billie Lutjen. This was difficult since he was

immediately across the road. The only other time I saw kids in the neighborhood was when they gathered at the swimming hole - the main means of recreation during the summer.

Billie was a mature twelve year old. It proved to me that kids raised on a farm were more precocious about sex, and life in general, than any city kids I knew. Farm kids learned a great deal about life from the farm animals. Billie was into promoting sex with a sixteen year old girl who was visiting another farm family down the road. I believe she slugged him for his brazenness.

Billie couldn't believe I came from New York City. Nor could he believe my politics. I don't think he had ever met a Democrat. He asked Mrs. McCreery how I could be a Democrat and be for Roosevelt. This was 1936 and election fever was high, particularly in farm country. Alf Landon, the Republican candidate, was out of Kansas farm country and had strong support from the farm community.

Mrs. McCreery had a hard time explaining my politics to him. Most of the folks in Cherry Valley were Republicans. They thought that Democrats were from places like Philadelphia. She finally said city folks just live and think differently. She told him that city folks lived in crowded tenements with little space and bad air to breathe. I believed I was hearing a version of how Mrs. Masek had sold the McCreery's on taking me on for two weeks in the summer. She finally told him that that's where I came from and then added maybe " that's why Richard's a Democrat. "

The McCreery's were faithful Methodists. They said grace at their meals. This was new for me. They also regularly read their Bible. This was also new for me. They asked me if I knew the books of the Bible all the way through. This was not one of the pieces of knowledge that I had learned from Good Will Sunday School. But I did know Bible Stories - especially Old Testament stories. I told them that one of the fun things we did at Good Will was to act out the stories we read in the Bible. That was some consolation to the McCreery's.

Their Family Bible, which had a prominent place in their living room, was a large book with a thick leather cover. In the front the McCreery's had the history of

their family going back several generations. I was impressed that they knew their family back in the early 1800s. The Bible was filled with colorful pictures of the major events in the Old Testament and the New Testament. I could identify some of the pictures, since I had played parts in some of the stories. One rainy afternoon I spent hours paging through the pictures in the Family Bible, refreshing my memory about the stories I had heard or acted in.

On Sunday, we went to the Methodist Church in the Valley. It was a white one room building which seated about 100 people. Cherry Valley normally had a few visitors during the summer vacation. During the service the minister asked for the visitor who had come the furthest distance. I thought nobody could beat out New York City. The McCreery's had me stand up and announce where I was from, as if the congregation couldn't tell from the accent. Everybody turned around to look at this wonder. Then somebody in the front got up and announced they were from Denver, Colorado, or some such place and everybody applauded. The minister welcomed all the visitors, and with tongue in cheek, even those from places as far away as New York City.

Cherry Valley had a swimming hole. It was about a half mile down the dusty gravel road which ran past the McCreery house, and then off on a spur. The swimming hole had all the makings of a Norman Rockwell print. It was the gathering place of the kids from the farms. It was a special treat for summer visitors. The swimming hole was the size of an overlarge pond. There was a large tree at the edge of the pond with a long limb hanging out over the pond. The kids climbed out on the limb and either dropped or jumped into the water. The pond was no more than five or six feet at its deepest. On a hot summer's day, with the air motionless and the dust from the gravel road still clinging to us, it was an experience to remember.

The closest thing Eastsiders had to a swimming hole was the East River. On a summer's day, some of us would trek down to the end of 84th Street to Carl Schurz Park. It was the closest patch of green we had on the East Side. Eighty-fourth street dead-ended at the East River. A railing protected cars from driving off into the river. We would lean against the railing at the East River's edge and

watch as some of the more adventurous dove off the rocks which jutted out into the East River.

Swimming in the East River never appealed to me. I knew that at 87th Street, a drainage pipe was emptying the garbage of Yorkville into the river. Even though the River moved at a constant pace, the water had a brownish hue. You could never tell what was in the river. There was an abundance of stories which sent shivers through anyone who had thoughts about swimming in the East River. One story which chilled any except the more bold was of the boy who dove off the rocks into the river at East 84th Street and never came back up. When they dragged the river for his body, they found him with his head wedged into a large milk can which had been thrown into the River.

The summer of '36 was my first encounter with a snake. I had gone out on the front lawn after supper to play with the family dog. The McCreery home had a full front porch which overlooked the lawn and the road. On the right side of the lawn was a field of high weeds. The evening air was heavy with the heat of the day. I heard a sound at the edge of the weeds, a sound like a rattle. I went over to see what had made the noise. Bill, the oldest McCreery son, was standing on the porch. He had heard the sound as well. He came down the steps with a bound, ran to the side of the house picked up a shovel, and made for the edge of the weeds. "A rattler," Bill said with little emotion. He began thrashing in the weeds, bringing down the shovel with well aimed strikes. He stopped and poked the snake with the shovel. It was motionless. He picked up the rattlesnake by its tail. It looked like a mighty healthy snake to me. He pulled the rattle off the tail and handed it to me for a souvenir. It made a great story when I got back to 83rd Street.

About three days after the snake episode, I was again on the lawn after supper. This time I was looking for four leaf clovers. As I was bending over I suddenly had a sharp pain in my right side. It doubled me up. Mrs. McCreery who was on the porch reacted immediately: "Is there something wrong, Richard?" "I just had an awful pain in my side - it really hurts." Mrs. McCreery went into the house and called the family doctor. She told him the symptoms. I couldn't hear the conversation, I was on the grass doubled up in pain. Without any further

questions, Grace, the McCreery daughter, got me into the car and rushed off to the Stroudsburg Community Hospital.

The doctor was waiting at the hospital when we got there. He asked me how I felt and tested the place where I had the sharp pain. He called out to several nurses to prepare me for an emergency operation. The next thing I remember was a mask coming down over my face and the smell of ether dragging me down into a deep sleep. When I woke up, the room was bright from the morning Sun, and my mother was standing by my bed. My first thoughts were about the long trip she had to make from New York to be with me. Then I thought about the expense. Where would she get the money to pay for the operation? Just when she thought she was getting ahead, I had to come down with appendicitis.

Before I left the hospital the doctor came to see me. He was a good natured man who said that he was proud of me and that I was lucky. He told me that the appendix was on the verge of bursting. If it had, peritonitis would have set it and I would have been a goner. He also told me that I was the first appendicitis patient that he had incised horizontally. I was an experiment. I always wondered whether he took that off the bill. I never asked my mother. The horizontal incision mended nicely and I was on my way back to the sidewalks of New York with a summer full of stories to tell.