

OLDEN TIMES
COINCIDENCE and CHANCE

Recollections of Walter Heffron, March 2015
Edited by Ellen Heffron

Childhood Memories

In 1931, the heart of the Great Depression, I was eight years old. My mother, two brothers, a sister and I were living for a few years with my maternal grandparents, two aunts and an uncle in their two-story frame home on the south side of Chicago. To accommodate our family Grandpa had put an addition on the back of the house. We were a huge intrusion in their lives, but they accepted us in their warm, gentle way with love and kindness.

Recollections of my childhood at Grandpa and Grandma's house remain particularly clear and distinct. Our presence brought to ten the number of persons using the tiny, old-fashioned bathroom with its ancient claw-foot tub. We children bathed only once a week, extending the limited supply of hot water by taking turns in the same tub of water – bladder control was imperative.

I can remember coming down the backstairs to the kitchen early in the morning and seeing Grandpa (who was born in Sweden) sitting on a chair with the coffee grinder between his knees, crushing coffee beans to make "Swedish gasoline," which was brewed on the stove in a tall, blue-enameled pot and drunk throughout the day. Occasionally, as a delightful treat, Grandpa gave us youngsters sugar cubes that had been dipped in his coffee.

My grandparents had a chicken coop in their backyard. For a special Sunday dinner Grandma roasted a chicken that Grandpa had dispatched with a hatchet and my aunts had plucked using a pail of boiling water. For desert Grandma made a delicious pudding using the juice she had squeezed from Concord grapes and stored in a basement crock.

At Christmastime, Grandma baked cookies and let us children participate. We made an array of holiday shapes with cookie cutters, licked the batter bowl, and then got to eat the cookies that had been broken during baking. We never forgot the fun of "helping" Grandma with the Christmas cookies.

The Christmas tree had a prominent place in the front parlor, which was reserved for special occasions. I took great pride one year in being given the task of keeping the lights lit on the tree. In those days the lights were wired in series, so that when one of the short-lived bulbs burned out, the entire string went dark. Getting it to work again required checking each bulb and replacing the bad one. Two bulbs burning out at the same time created a major problem because of the difficulty in locating both bad ones. Each of us children chose a favorite spot under the tree and vowed to stay awake for Santa's visit, but didn't succeed. Reflecting the straightened times of the depression, our gifts were modest, though we thought they were wonderful.

It is hard to believe these boyhood experiences occurred more than eighty years ago, when horse-drawn wagons still plied the alley behind my grandparents' house. I look back fondly on those days.

Walter
December 2014

Memories of Youth

My 2014 Christmas letter portrayed our warm family life with my maternal grandparents at the beginning of the nineteen thirties. That period must be balanced with later events in considering how we fared overall during the Great Depression.

Around 1935 my father found a job managing a car repair shop that, although not paying very much, was sufficient to bring our family together (from my grandparents' home) and rent a small bungalow in Fernwood, a somewhat depressed community rather far south in Chicago. Our house was in a section scheduled for development that was halted by the stock market crash in 1929. There were curbs and gutters, a sidewalk, and a gas streetlight in front of the house but no paved street. Many undeveloped lots that we called "prairie" surrounded our area and provided a place to play and find garter snakes, little green grass snakes, toads, and turtles – a kids' paradise. We would trample down a bit of vegetation, light a tiny fire of twigs and pretend to be camping. The empty lot next to our house was good for football; baseball (old bedspring backstop); digging a large, deep hole in the ground (make-believe cave); and in winter flooding a small patch with the garden hose to freeze and slide on. Empty quart cans in the trash behind a local gas station yielded a few drops of oil to lubricate bearings on our wagon, roller skates and handmade scooter. We walked about a block through vacant lots to reach grammar school. My seventh-grade teacher once tried to inject some light-hearted humor into the short span of free time at the end of the school day. She invited students to tell funny stories, jokes, or ask riddles. My naive contribution was: "Why does the ocean roar? You would, too, if you had crabs on your bottom." At that the teacher erupted in anger. "Walter, you should be ashamed of yourself for such naughty talk!" That ended her noble attempt to offer our class a bit of fun at school. Anyhow, around the corner from the school was a very small store that sold penny candy, where we would spend endless minutes pondering what to buy with the rare cent that came our way.

My mother was very frugal and stretched the food dollar with a lot of homemade macaroni and cheese, soups, navy beans baked in a pot set on a ledge in the coal-fired furnace during winter, and so forth. I suspect my parents sometimes may have taken smaller portions so we children had enough. When the cupboard was bare a few times, our Aunt Elizabeth and Uncle Harrison Barnard kindly sent us enough food for a week by delivery truck from the grocery store they patronized.

In our kind of bare-bones existence, we boys got along tolerably with old, hand-me-down clothes, but there was no money to buy decent clothing for my sister or to provide a suitable environment for her as she grew up. Out of desperation, and by generous agreement with Aunt Ruth and Uncle Leonard Canty,

Corinne was sent to live for a few years with them and their daughter Cousin Carolyn (Corinne's age) in Cleveland Heights, Ohio. At the train station we were all heartbroken. My mother wept, and was angry that our income was too little to keep our family together. It must have been a wrenching experience for my little sister to be forced to leave her family and ride the train all by herself to an unknown future with persons she didn't really know.

My father finally found a job with a better salary in Minneapolis and Corinne rejoined us there. One warm afternoon I happened to be getting a haircut in a barbershop with its door open to the sidewalk along the south side of Lake Street. A lad of about nine or ten came skylarking by, singing aloud to himself, in a world of his own. The barber said, "How about that kid!" As an introverted, sensitive adolescent, I was too embarrassed to say he was my brother Norman, and I replied weakly, "I know him – he lives near me."

On another warm weather occasion, a violent storm struck Minneapolis, setting boats adrift on nearby Lake Calhoun. Two youngsters about eight and ten, unaware they were following the unwritten law of the sea that taking possession of abandoned or derelict boats or ships constitutes ownership, got into a rowboat at water's edge ("Look at this rowboat. I didn't know it was ours."), and paddled it out on the lake. The Coast Guard or police picked up Norman and Corinne, scolded them, and took them home, where they were disciplined further.

There were no funds in our Minneapolis budget to buy bicycles for us children. My twelve- or thirteen-year-old brother Daniel wanted a bike badly and, undaunted, set out to earn the money for one despite the scarcity of jobs for youngsters his age. The only job he could find was shoveling out stalls in the local livery stable. This work infused him and his clothing with a distinctly unpleasant odor. When he came home from the stable, Mother made him go directly into the basement through a lower side door and put his clothes in the washing machine. He then had to run upstairs and bathe before joining the family. With the money he earned Dan bought a very sturdy, used Schwinn bike – the first bike in our family. Years later on a trip to Ireland my brother Norman was told that our name, Heffron, meant stable hand, so maybe Dan had been returning to his roots unknowingly.

At this juncture my father was transferred to Glen Ellyn, a western suburb of Chicago. We enjoyed living in this lovely town for a year. That winter we ice-skated on beautiful Lake Ellyn, often playing "Rover, Red Rover, Come Over, Come Over."

Then the sky fell in once more: my father lost his job. Mother and we four children went back again to live in Chicago with Grandma Tidholm, Grandpa having died in 1936. Grandma was still living with Aunts Irene and

Helen at 7040 Perry Avenue in the Englewood neighborhood. I went to the nearby public high school, Parker, having some of the same teachers who had taught my mother, aunts, and uncle. This was the fourth different high school I attended in four years.

A short time later my father found employment and our family moved to a second-floor apartment at 7349 S. Union Avenue, not far from Grandma's house. I believe Norman used his Laverne Noyes scholarship to attend the Lab School (High School) at the University of Chicago, where I was a college student on the same grant. I joined the Navy, as did Norman later, and the rest of our family moved to Denver. My brother Daniel was drafted into the Army.

In retrospect, despite our family having been separated a few times by necessity, I think my parents did very well under the circumstances. My mother was a high school graduate and my father had to leave school after the sixth grade to earn a bit that went toward helping his widowed mother care for him, his brother, and his sister. Dad possessed an innate intelligence by which he rose to become sales manager of a Denver truck-shovel company in his final job. He had a difficult life and was not always an easy or pleasant person to be around. Mother was the linchpin of the family – she kept things afloat with her kindness and paramount concern for our well-being.

Here is something about our family history that is not generally known. Alzheimer's disease entered the family through my maternal grandmother, who had a genetic proclivity for it that was passed, only on the female side, to two of her six daughters and both of her two granddaughters.

Alzheimer's Deaths: Maternal Grandmother Mary Tidholm, Aunt Elizabeth Tidholm Barnard,
Mother Cora Tidholm Heffron, Sister Corinne Heffron McChesney, and
Cousin Carolyn Canty Butler

Walter
January 2015

Strange Coincidences

There have been many unusual, inexplicable coincidences in my life, enough for a believer in the paranormal to have a field day accounting for them. My father was a salesman and traveled fairly often, returning usually with little gifts for us children, like kites or other such toys. When we were living in Minneapolis he came back from a trip with two pennants to hang in our bedroom: one pennant of the University of Chicago and one of the Colorado School of Mines. I was fourteen or fifteen at the time and wound up later by good fortune with a degree from each school.

In Minneapolis my siblings and I enjoyed listening on the radio Saturday afternoons to “Hawaii Calling.” The program was broadcast from the grounds of the Royal Hawaiian Hotel in Honolulu, replete with Hawaiian music and descriptions of hula dancing, palm trees, clear blue skies, Waikiki Beach, and Diamond Head promontory in the background. About six years later I was in the Navy, visiting that very place on the way to catch my ship at Eniwetok atoll in the Marshall Islands. Curiously, Eniwetok was subsequently blown out of existence in a nuclear bomb test – it may be just a rumor that my earlier stop there tainted the atoll beyond saving. My brother Norman had joined the Navy after me and was billeted for a time in the vicinity of the Royal Hawaiian Hotel, which was then a rest and relaxation retreat for sailors who had been on active duty in the Pacific theater for a long time but could not be spared for liberty in the states. I have a photo of Norm standing next to a surfboard on Waikiki Beach.

I was born in 1923 at the Lying-In Hospital of the University of Chicago. Nineteen years later I was a student at the U. of C. through an odd circumstance. Our family was poor and had been taken in for a while on two different occasions by my grandparents. My going to college was never given a thought and was not even a remote possibility. Upon graduation from high school, I worked for a year handling paint samples in the lacquer lab at Sherwin Williams Paint Company near Pullman (where the Pullman railroad cars were made) on the far south side of Chicago. It took me forever to get there and back on the streetcar each day.

Then, Eureka! My parents accidentally learned of the Laverne Noyes scholarship (actually a grant – I was no scholar) that paid the U. of C. tuition for children of parents who were in military service during World War I. My father had been a Second Lieutenant in a field artillery battalion. I managed somehow to pass the U. of C. entrance examination, and began commuting to class on the streetcar carrying my books and lunch. I felt out of place among the many students from wealthy families. In 1942, shortly after the December 7, 1941, Japanese attack, I enlisted in the Navy and was assigned at random to the V12 officer training program, but didn't get called to active duty until June 1, 1943, as an Apprentice Seaman. The V12 program took me to Dartmouth College (general academic courses); Asbury Park, New Jersey (pre-midshipman school); Columbia University [midshipman school and Ensign Commission (90-day wonder – ha!)]; and Harvard University (communications school). I became a Communications Officer aboard an escort aircraft carrier in a task unit on antisubmarine

patrol in the Pacific. The ship carried a squadron of F4F Wildcat fighter planes. My duties included encoding and decoding classified radio messages and acting as Registered Publications Custodian of secret documents for setting up the coding machines. When my ship went in briefly for repairs to the San Diego naval base, my brother Norman just happened to be stationed there at that time and we were able to get together for a night on the town. After the war my ship was part of the “Magic Carpet” operation and made a trip carrying troops back to the U.S. from the seaport of Manila in the Philippines.

I resigned from the Navy in June 1946, after three years of service. Upon returning to the University of Chicago that fall I was extremely fortunate to meet Patricia, purely by chance I believe, when she was crossing the campus with two friends I knew. She was a student in residence there, having transferred from the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Luckily, I was on the GI Bill then that paid for my continuing education in addition to future living allowances for Patricia and me in married student housing at the Colorado School of Mines, where our first child, Stephen, was born in 1949.

Another extraordinary experience took place not long ago. A former business associate and I have been exchanging our choice of a good bottle of booze at Christmas. We each pick one that promises to be exceptional. By coincidence last Christmas we exchanged what turned out to be the same great single malt scotch whisky, Ardbeg Uigeadail!

Oh, the mysteries of life

Walter
February 2015



Walter's Escort Carrier, U.S.S. Kasaan Bay (CVE 69)

