



The View from Right Field

by Rick Ohler

a bi-weekly column in the

East Aurora Advertiser

“The Road Goes On Forever

Column 346/September 20, 2018/East Aurora, NY

By the time you read this column in the world’s best hometown newspaper, summer 2018 will have officially ended in the 14052, and presumably, elsewhere as well. For me, at age 68, this autumnal equinox will draw the curtain on my 69th summer, a number that once seemed impossible. Sixty years ago, as a kid of eight, I couldn’t have imagined it would ever come to this. Thirty-something, my mom’s and dad’s ages, seemed ancient when I was eight; 60-ish, my grandmothers’ age, seemed impossible. Sixty-eight, that was more of an abstract concept, like infinity or death, even, than a concrete number. Anyway, we were way too self-absorbed to be worrying about old people.

Summer for us kids on Oakwood Avenue was a buried treasure that had taken us nine months to find even with a simple calendar as a map. During those last agonizing, sweltering days of school where we pushed our harried teacher to the breaking point and raised fidgeting and seat wiggling to performance art, we dreamed about all the cool stuff that awaited us once the shackles were removed and we opened that treasure box. When the last, blessed school bell clanged, we were like shipwrecked sailors at a giant smorgasbord after months adrift who couldn’t decide what to eat first. Wiffle ball? Baseball, football, bikes? Kick the can, tag? Army men? Swimming? Exploring forbidden territory of the then dilapidated Roycroft? “Use it or lose it,” we might have cried if that expression had been invented in 1958. We were, I would learn later in high school poetry class, the original *Carpe Diem* Kids, descending like a rugby scrum on our little corner of the world.

Still a bit too young for regular chores at home, we ruled the block from dawn to dusk, cruising the neighborhood unescorted, without benefit of cellphones, helmets, safety glasses or radio frequency chips implanted into our bodies. Our mothers, the unsung heroes of the Greatest Generation, cared for us best by parking their helicopters on the home pad, leaving us to our own devices and trusting us to come home in time for dinner. Regardless of the rough and tumble nature of our play, the

moms knew that whatever injuries we encountered could be cured with wholesome, if not gourmet, food (eaten without complaint lest we be made to sit there “until the cows came home”), a warm bath (administered against our protests) and a bedtime story or two. If summer harbored one cruelty, it was the tragedy of having to go to bed before dark while listening to the joyous laughter of the big kids, still outside playing.

Too soon, inevitably, despite our most concerted efforts to slow time down, summer would wind toward a close. And Teddy Nichols and I and the rest of the Oakwood Avenue/Grove Street/Park Place/Main Street/ convocation of chronological and kindred spirits: Aungsts, Diebolts, Millers, Spitzels, Grundners, Smallbacks, Websters, Maxwells, Hudsons would begin to act like bees at the end of the season, frantically zipping around in a haphazard, desperate attempt to get all the nectar they could before a frost. We’d play harder and squeeze in more games, more shenanigans; we were sponges, soaking up all the summer we could. As the number of days until school dwindled into single digits, we tried to will the clock, the calendar, Oakwood Avenue to halt its advance into fall.

Fast forward six decades to this, my 69th summer, the first summer since 1967 that I haven’t had the demands of full-time employment. Oh, I’m still working, as I mentioned here a few weeks ago, but not at jobs with time clocks to punch or where attendance is taken. This summer, then, would be the one to explore the mysterious art of relaxation.

Except it didn’t happen that way.

Suddenly, I had that eight-year-old’s urgency in a 68-year-old body. I felt consumed by the need to do anything but sit still, to keep in shape, to stay healthy, to slow life’s clock.

I became reacquainted with my bicycle (with Dan Park’s help) and began riding the village streets everywhere I went, unless I had ladders to carry. (I’m still working on a ladder rack system that I tow behind the bike.) On several Mondays I joined Slow Roll Buffalo, where a thousand bicyclists became a mile-long, single-celled organism sliding through neighborhoods—Lovejoy, Bailey/Fillmore, Old First Ward, Larkinville, West Side, South Buffalo on side streets most of us had never heard of.

With my tribe of fellow senescents (RIP Snake), we hit the water. We ran the rapids on Cattaraugus Creek near Zoar Valley in kayaks, we paddled to Canalside on a perfect Buffalo evening for the Dark Star Orchestra, we kayaked up the shipping channel on the Buffalo River. When our schedules got sticky, we’d settle for a ride on the murky, but close by Caz Creek from the Legion to the first impenetrable logjam, perhaps followed by a frosty beverage on the post’s creekside deck. We fished together several nights, imagining ourselves with roles in “A River Through Runs Through It,” while more likely movies might be “Blazing Saddles,” or “Grumpy Old Men.”

When invitations to parties located on creeks—Crookstock on Hunters Creek and Turtle Soup on Caz Creek's West Branch—arrived, I put on water shoes, gathered some friends and creek walked. Gerry Simpkins, Erik and Jesse Maeder, John Hitchings, Rob Schultz and I had a lovely tromp from Goodleburg Cemetery to Crookstock two miles downstream. A few weeks later, the indomitable Lily Aungst (almost six), her Aunt Molly, Bill Shanahan and I ambled downstream from J.P. Nicely Park to the Fish and Game Club for soup. A creek bed is a world unto itself, a gift from retreating glaciers a few thousand years ago. And on Labor Day, I rode the rapids of the upper Hudson River with my raft guide daughter at the helm of our rubber vessel.

None of these exploits were particularly heroic, or perhaps even noteworthy, except for the urgency with which I attacked them. There is a difference, of course, between my ninth summer and my 69th. This year, unlike 1958, I didn't have to go back to school or anywhere, for as long as I wanted. As the famous Robert Earl Keen song suggests, "The road goes on forever, and the party never ends." It's a tantalizing sentiment for those of us carrying Medicare cards, absent one important detail. The road does indeed go on forever, and the party, indeed, never ends, but, at some point, it will go on without me.

When I was eight, the road seemed to be endless and was mine forever to travel. Now that I'm 68, the realization that there is an eventual end to things becomes more apparent. So I keep moving, and pretend that I'm eight again, *carpe*-ing as many *diems* as I can. After all, fall is coming, and there'll be lots to do.