



## The View from Right Field

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**A Parable...Perhaps**

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**T**he chilly, damp days of early November remind me of an incident that occurred in my ninth fall, just as I was becoming old enough to walk, unescorted by parents, from the family homestead at 472 Oakwood Avenue to the Boys Club (later to become the Boys and Girls Club) on Paine Street. As a condition of this independence, my mother instructed me to stick to the sidewalks, not to dawdle, go east on Oakwood, cross at Park Place and Paine Street, looking both ways several times, then turn left on Paine to the club. I'm sure she had to stifle the urge to embarrass me by calling the club to see if I made it there without mishap.

On one of those first forays off our block, I was at the club, messing around on the pool table in late, lamented Clement Hall, when an older guy came up to me. In dress and coiffure he resembled the Fonz with leather jacket and greased back DA, but in demeanor, he was more like Marlon Brando in "The Wild One." He shucked his jacket, revealing biceps like Christmas hams and a pack of Marlboros in his pocket. "I'll play ya kid," he sneered, "for your life." I can't remember if I screamed, but I didn't stick to the sidewalks as I sprinted home in a panic. I bolted out the club's front door and across Paine, cut through the Presbyterian parking lot, bushwhacked through the jungle of brush by the collision shop behind what is now West-Herr, tried to be stealthy as I sped around the nun's convent at Immaculate Conception (we would catch hell if they spotted any kids, Catholic or otherwise, on their property), crossed Park Place, probably not looking both ways, went up the alley to the Roycroft Inn, scaled the rusty fence at Hudson's, ran through Mrs. Thomason's forbidden backyard to the sanctuary of home. (Note: The pool table showdown would not be indicative of the rest of my Boys Club experiences, most of which were wonderful.)

I came to find out that the pool shark, to whom I'll assign the alias Vinnie (although readers of a certain vintage will remember his real name), was affiliated, to some extent, with a motorcycle club called the Road Vultures, who were wannabe Hells

Angels of national fame, but who were really playing intramurals where the Angels were playing varsity.

I would have occasion to hear of Vinnie's Road Vultures several years later in an incident whose details may have clouded over five-plus intervening decades, but whose essence resonates in 2018.

It happened on a warm, fall evening somewhere in the early to mid-'60s, although exactly when I can't be sure. There was a teen night scheduled at the club, not unusual for a Friday night, especially since the Blue Devils played their football games at Hamlin Park on Saturday afternoons. These nights were always good fun with music, food, games and an opportunity to be around girls without teachers close at hand, but this evening had a certain tension to it from the get-go. Rumors had been buzzing throughout the day about something big being up. The word "rumble" was being thrown around, a word that in 1960s America meant a free-for-all fistfight. Of course, I had never participated in a rumble, so my ingenuous curiosity can be forgiven.

The best I could cobble together from snippets of second-, third- and sixteenth-hand information making the rounds was that a guy from EA, a big kid like a senior, or maybe even a PG (a second-year senior finishing up some credits) had infuriated a member of the Road Vultures and was in trouble. In those days, that might have meant daring to smile at his girlfriend, holding the door for her at a restaurant, or even having the audacity to say hello to her. Serious stuff like that, you can understand, warranted a rumble. And the teen night at East Aurora's Boys Club had been decided upon as the time and place for retribution. Apparently it hadn't occurred to the would-be rumblers that the club, situated next to the police station, might be an unfortunate setting for a rumble. Anyway, the die was cast.

My dad—indeed, several dads—had gathered outside the club and were nervously pacing the sidewalk, smoking their unfiltered cigarettes, talking not as cheerful chaperones at their kids' event, but more as members of an ad hoc defense team securing a border. Many of them were WWII vets, not yet 20 years removed the horrors of war, so the possibility of combat might have hit closer to home than we teens could have imagined. The thought of my father—any of those fathers in their coats and ties—in a fistfight with a Road Vulture still visits my dreams from time to time. As reinforcements, police cars that night seemed to hover in the area, making tighter and tighter circles around the club. You could cut the tension, as the cliché goes, with a knife.

As the clock advanced, questionable rumors solidified into unchallenged facts, and by 9:30 we were convinced that a fleet of Harley Hogs was headed south from the city to right this egregious wrong by laying waste to our fair village. The kid at the center of this hubbub—I'll call him Pete—seemed to eat it all up. He was ready. "Bring it," he seemed to be saying to his fellow rumblers. His sangfroid (RIP Snake) was right out of James Dean.

Ten o'clock came and went, then 10:30 and finally, it was time to go home. No Road Vultures. No rumble. Cue the sound of air hissing from a tire going flat. I'll admit to being disappointed, although the dads breathed a collective sigh of relief. The kid, Pete, strutted about like a rooster, ready to claim that he had scared off the fire-breathing dragons.

I thought the incident was over and done with until I discovered that Pete the Invincible had been asked to come into the office at the Boys Club. Through a window, we could see, but not hear, a panel, consisting of my dad and several other dads, the club director and a police officer, speaking sternly to Pete.

On the way home, my dad spilled the story. Apparently, the whole thing had been a ruse, a canard (RIP Snake). There had never been a real threat from the Road Vultures. Like they would waste their time with small potatoes like Pete in Nowheresville East Aurora. He had done it to impress his peers and certain members of the feminine persuasion. "Basically," Dad said, "he set a fire so he could take credit for putting it out. Yeah, you guys thought it was cool, but it was a cruel thing to do to the club, the police, the village, everybody. Self-serving, dangerous. There will be some repercussions." Of course, I knew the old man was right; he was always right.

If any of this conjures analogies to the rumored Oct. 24 "Steve Bannon at the Roycroft" canard and subsequent cancellation "in the public interest" employed by political operatives in a certain State Assembly campaign, I can't help that. After all, I haven't lived here all my life, not yet, anyway.