

California Days

In the summer of 1963, I got a summer job as an electrician in the shipyard in Seattle. I became a member of the Electrical Workers Union, through my father's membership in the Seattle local. My dad was working in the same shipyard that summer, but he, a journeyman, was laid off because of a reduction in force. I kept working for another three weeks on a crew pulling cable from one compartment to another. It was hot, steamy and boiling work....and boring work. I got laid off as well and my father suggested he was going to drive to California, to visit his ailing mother - my grandmother, and I rode along and got a room at the very downmarket Santa Monica Hotel for fourteen dollars a week!!

I was curious to find that each of the four bed posts were anchored in tuna fish can moats. When I opened the drawer of my dresser, I discovered the newspaper in the drawer was totally obscured by a mass of scurrying cockroaches! I was not completely deterred and rented the room for another week.

I moved out to Inglewood to a rented room as I had taken a job as a jig-builder at North American Aviation at the international airport in Los Angeles. It was an easy job as a fitter, cutting steel to be welded into jigs for stanchions for building the Minute Man Missiles in Huntsville, Alabama.

I was taking a calculus course at UCLA when I was offered a delightful job with a three wheeled scooter-truck, fetching materials for the jig building. I knew the materials and could read the blueprints and knew what substitute materials would do and was given a workroom with a locking door on the inside, where I could study my calculus undisturbed - like when I worked at Boeing in Seattle, where I had an "unlimited" badge that let me go all over the plant. I was trusted with "top secret" blueprints and weekly paychecks from the main plant on the other side of the divided highway. Being curious about everything, I looked at the "top secret" plans that I carried, in a washroom cubicle. Good thing I wasn't a spy.

Instead of riding my motorcycle up the dangerous freeway to my class and home again in the dark, one of my classmates offered to let me ride with him and we became friends. He said that he had a sailboat - a Rhodes, nineteen foot sailboat and he needed a hoisting cable, which I easily acquired for him with the largesse of my courier job. I had lots of friends all over the plant.

My classmate asked if I would crew for him in a race at Balboa on New Year's Day. We came in second out of six boats in the race.....not bad for my first time as a sailor.

By this time, I was ensconced in a quaint little apartment with a Murphy bed and a kitchen in Hermosa Beach. Al, a mobster from New Jersey, who was taking a hiatus from his mobster work, lived in the same place and had a car and so I was ferried to work. He was an interesting, somewhat handsome guy, who was a real charmer with the ladies who we would meet cruising the bars in our offtime. I was not very good with the ladies, but learned a lot watching Al operate. We would suntan on the beach in front of Pete's Poopdeck, a famous bar on the strand at Hermosa Beach.

Al would sometimes awaken me by pounding on the door and one morning, I was running the hot water, defrosting a frozen orange juice can. I had already incurred the wrath of the landlady by not sorting my garbage properly and I was warned about eviction, if I didn't comply, and the eviction came that day after work when I arrived home to discover that I had run all the hot water out of the apartment house.

I found another place to live in Redondo Beach and stayed there until a letter from my draft board in Washington state, sent me back for a pre-induction physical.

Years later, I took my wife for a nostalgic look at my much lauded former hangout, to discover it was still there, but very seedy and downmarket and populated by skinny, grizzled, alcoholic Vietnam vets who chatted up my wife in a friendly way as she ordered a wine at the bar.