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WTHPC Essay Contest

“Charlie, come here. The Port Reading Comets just won eleven in a row,” declared my mother all those years ago. Back in the 1930s in Woodbridge Township, baseball dominated the lives of youths. It became the heart and center of our recreational activities. Quite frankly, not a single soul would dare miss the different teams compete against each other. Because of this, it wasn’t a shock when the July 2, 1936 edition of the “*Woodbridge Independent*” stated...“Two Carteret clubs supported the Port Reading Comets with their 10th and 11th victories this week. The Rangers put up an argument before bowing by 8-5, but the rout of the Bears was practically pathetic since the final figures were 27-5...” My family absolutely adored the Port Reading Comets and were the number one fans in town. However, there were other pastimes available for children in the age without modern technology. Even to this day, I still cannot fathom why the “fancy” computers and smartphones are even half as entertaining as playing outside and enjoying one’s self.

What exactly did I do outside then? Well, when I was about four years old, my parents used to take my older sister and I to the Knights of Columbus carnival. We first found out about it in the August 17, 1928 edition of “*The Woodbridge Leader*”. The article read...“More than

eight hundred people attended the opening of the Knights of Columbus carnival last evening at the corner of Main Street and Amboy Avenue. Several scores received prizes at the various booths, the bingo booth and the blanket booth giving out the most awards...” Oh how I loved the carnival! The delicious food, the novelty hat booths, and the prizes all gave celebration to shout for joy. In the 1930s, whenever the carnival came to town, one could sense it miles away. The festivities and celebrations brought joy to the hardships of the Great Depression, and it was the one event us children longed for every year. I may have forgotten a long time ago what I learned in seventh grade biology or in tenth grade social studies, but I still remember the smells and sounds of the carnival very clearly.

“My name is Charles, how about you?” One of the most popular trends in the early 1900s was swing dancing. Granted, I was only a young teenager at the time when swing dancing reached its zenith, but I was certainly not one for standing on the sidelines during swing dances. There was also another reason why I swing danced. By dancing at different events, I was showing off in front of pretty girls. So, after I saw in the November 23, 1938 publication of the “*Leader Journal*”...“Old-fashioned and modern swing dances will be the features of the Annual Thanksgiving Eve dance to be held tonight at St. James auditorium...,” I implored my father to take me. Upon arrival, I met this fourteen year old named Charlene, and we had a nice long conversation. It turned out that we enjoyed doing many of the same activities.

At the dance, we exchanged phone numbers, and I promised to take her somewhere special one day. The one day came sooner than I thought, for I read the December 2, 1938

version of the "*Woodbridge Independent*", and something struck my eye. "The Barron Free Public Library of Woodbridge will be the beneficiary of a concert by the Rutgers University Glee Club to be held in Woodbridge High School Friday night, December 9 at 8:30 under the sponsorship of the Young Women's Club of Woodbridge." How appropriate and fitting!

Charlene absolutely adored music, especially the pieces that were to be played, including "Echo Song" and "Now Tis Time to Go." Additionally, the newspaper article continued... "Dancing will follow the Glee Club program, with music by the Queensmen, a Rutgers undergraduate orchestra." Dancing was how we first met, so this was great! During the 30s, 40s, and even the 50s, music was the Romeo and Juliet of love. If one could play jazz music on his trumpet, he would find love in a matter of weeks. Unfortunately, I was not that great of a musician, and I only married when I was forty years old.

Reflecting upon the many chances for leisure during my wonder years, I still regret to this day that I could not have taken hold of opportunities only available in the first half of the twentieth century. I always had hoped to one day tell of my wondrous childhood and be an inspiration for others. Indeed, amidst all of the sadness and dismay of Great Depression, people in Woodbridge had hope of a better life. No such greater was there an example of a better life than that of Harding William Peterson. I only just remembered about him when I read the "*Historic Tour of Woodbridge, (Volume V) Fords, Hopelawn, Keasbey: Three Towns -- One Story*" brochure. Skimming through the brochure, I saw noted about him... "Born in 1929, Fords native Harding Peterson graduated Woodbridge High School and went on to earn a varsity letter and All-American honors playing baseball at Rutgers University... Drafted as a catcher by the

Pittsburgh Pirates in 1950, Peterson spent time in the minors and in the U.S. Army before making the big leagues in 1955.” God Bless him! He showed the entire world who we, the Township of Woodbridge, really were. He brought to our town the game of baseball and played it like there was no tomorrow. He truly defined not just Woodbridge, but America and all that is great about her. As I conclude this account or memoir of my early life, I hope and pray that one day, future generations can be the Harding Peterson and bring joy to others in times when it is most needed.