

Memories of Papa Joe's Yard

I was just sitting here thinking about a few things from my growing up years. One of the things that flew through my mind was Papa Joe's yard. I drove by my grandparents' house not too long ago, and I was amazed at how small the yard seems now... as a boy in my growing up years, that yard seemed huge -- and it was always a place for fun and adventure!

We only lived a couple of miles from my grandparents, and we would go to their house quite often -- especially on the weekends. I had several cousins that were near my age, and we all spent a lot of time in my grandparents' yard -- and in the next-door-neighbors' yards -- playing all kinds of games! We had some classic games of "Hide 'n Go Seek" that seemed to last for hours into the darkness of the evening. We played Tag, and Freeze Tag, and T.V. Freeze Tag, and a bunch of other crazy games. We yelled and hooted and hollered -- it is a wonder we weren't arrested!

There were some classic sports moments as well! Two-hand touch football games were my favorite -- and there were some epic battles -- some of the best ones involving the neighborhood kids! One of the neighbor houses a couple of doors down had a basketball court behind it -- and we "borrowed" their court from time to time for a few games of hoops. And of course Whiffle-ball! We had some fantastic battles right out there in the yard!

Papa Joe always tried to have a garden in his back yard -- even up to his later years. He would get someone to plow up his garden at some point, and it wouldn't be long before he'd be out there with a hoe and some seeds and tomato plants and some corn... and he would have a garden! I used to worry about him out there trying to do that in the hot sun, but I think he loved it.

Sometimes on Sunday afternoons when things were kind of slow at Papa Joe and Granny Um's, me and some of the cousins would round up some of Granny Um's potatoes, wrap them in aluminum foil, and build a small fire in the back yard. We would put the taters into the middle of the fire and let them cook, and we would sit around the fire and talk and laugh and do all kinds of crazy things while our taters were cooking. We thought we were so big! Finally, when we could take it no longer, we would remove the taters, unwrap them, and proceed to eat! Sometimes, as I recall, the taters were amazingly good, and other times -- quite often, it seems -- they tasted terrible, or were undercooked. But even if the taters were terrible, we still had a good time.

Behind Papa Joe's house was a Weeping Willow tree. We loved to climb around on that tree -- but we especially loved to take the whips off the tree and try to use them like a bull-whip... usually on each other. They also had some plum trees -- maybe a couple of varieties of plums -- and a snowball bush. In the front yard, he had a few bushes along the road, a few trees, and some kind of big evergreen bushes near the house that grew out of control every now and then.

I remember when I was a teenager, I mowed Papa Joe's yard a few times with a push-mower -- hoping to get a little money. Well, that is just what I got -- a little money! That yard had lots of bushes and shrubs and roots and holes -- and as I recall -- it was pretty hard to mow. I pushed

and pulled and sweated in the Summer sun, and finally when I was done -- Papa Joe rewarded me with \$2. Well, I guess it was a labor of love!

I remember on a few occasions, me and the cousins took gallon and quart glass pickle jars and caught bunches of bumble-bees as they would land on various flowers in the yard. I don't remember exactly why we did this -- except to get a closeup view of a bunch of bumble-bees... well, a bunch of very angry bumble-bees! It is a wonder we survived this!

On Friday or Saturday afternoons, a lot of my Aunts and Uncles and their families would come over and sit around and talk and eat hamburgers or whatever. As the adults sat around and "chewed the fat," the kids would run around and play in the yard. On one occasion, the adults began to notice as kid after kid ran through the den and into the kitchen carrying an empty Coke bottle. They would fill the bottle with water at the sink, and run back outside. In another few seconds here they would come again and repeat the process... Finally, one curious adult said, "What are y'all doing with those bottles of water?" The kid replied, "Well, the back yard is on fire!" Adults jumped up and scattered in all directions! (I don't remember what caused this fire, but I don't think it was related to cooking taters.)

I remember taking Granny Um's magnifying glass outside and burning all manner of things. I thought it was amazing that you could burn newspaper with focused sunlight from a magnifying glass! You could also burn leaves, and ants... and even skin. And I'm pretty sure, if you hold the glass just right, you can light a match -- and perhaps even light a firecracker -- if you are careful... not that I would ever do that.

I remember when I was pretty young -- and it was almost dark -- the uncles and older cousins were a few doors down in the back yard playing basketball on the neighbor's lighted court. I was going to run back there and join them -- so I blasted out the front door of the house, turned right, and just as I rounded the corner I could see the lighted court in the distance! At this point, I really turned on the speed -- but I forgot that Papa Joe had strung up an antenna guy wire to his TV antenna... and I was reminded of it in a big way! That thing hooked me on the neck as I rounded the corner at top speed... I don't remember if I pulled the antenna down, but I know that wire pulled me down! I never made it back to the basketball game that night...

Well, there are many more stories we could all tell about that yard. But that is enough for now... I'm suddenly hungry for taters, for some reason.

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