



The whistler

Fathers and Sons

There's something special about taking to the street on foot at 4:00 am on a cold January morning.



My target was the municipal post office where I was to meet my father a mile or so away. I was eighteen and about to embark on the adventure of a lifetime, to join my country's Army and help save the world.

My father met me in the busy parking lot behind the post office where trucks were unloading their collections and reloading for distributions. I don't remember much of what was said that morning. My father was not much given to sentiment or endearments. And after all, it was 1958, and men of that time were not expected to show their emotions. He asked me if I had any money, and told him I had a few dollars in the pocket of my jeans. He handed me three five dollar bills, and after a brief manly hug I was gone.

I was young, and my head so full of dreams that the momentousness of the occasion was lost on me at the time. I gave not a thought as to what my father must have been feeling or thinking. Now as a father with two sons and grandsons of my own, I can only begin to see what I might have missed. The images stayed filed away in my brain all these years and are still available for replay a half century

later. What a shame that it has taken me this long to take stock my relationship with my father, something I should have done long ago. In celebration of his pending 105th birthday and my 77th, I want to revisit my time with him and what he gave to me, father to son and how that has shaped my life.

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He was born December 18, 1911, and is long since gone from this life. He was one of ten children born of German and Irish immigrant stock. He was intelligent and lived a productive life, but he was born in a window of time that would greatly limit his opportunities. He graduated high school in 1928 just before the economy fell apart with the stock market crash of 1929. The experience of the Great Depression left him cautious and conservative, but also self-reliant. His expectations were not

high, so he made the best of what life offered him, and his loyalty to post office for a life-time of secure employment was typical of the way he approached life.

If I had to describe his identity, I would say mailman, family man, radio amateur, and boy scout. I put mailman first because from my earliest memories my father came home at the end of the day wearing his post office uniform including that special belt buckle and unique mailman's hat with the numbered badge over the visor. I saw him like that for eighteen years and it's hard for me to visualize him without that uniform. To my infantile mind his uniform was a source of family pride. I was the mailman's son.

Beyond that he was a carpenter, mechanic, home remodeler, and general Mr. Fixit. He would tackle anything and succeed at most. His extended family would call on him with all kinds fixit projects and he would always respond. I didn't inherit much of his skill, but I was his constant assistant in most of his projects.

He loved camping and collected stamps. There was always a room in our house dedicated to his radio amateur hobby and I spent hours watching him communicate, building new equipment and erecting new elaborate antennas on our roof. He taught me Morse Code and tried to develop the hobby interest in me but it didn't take.

My dad went to work very early and came home from work about the same time I got home from school. If he had errands to run or people he wanted to see, he would always drag me along. Looking back, I can see in this the bonding that was so critical to my development and socialization.

My dad was strong-willed, decisive, the head of his household in the best (and worst) terms of the 20th Century tradition. He didn't often lose his temper, but he did raise his voice to assert his authority. True to his breed, he worked hard, provided for the family, saved money and helped friends and family when they were in need. I would describe his demeanor as pleasant, not given to smiling, serious but generally cheerful. To many, my father was serious and reserved. Those closest to him, who heard him whistle or sing, or saw him act up in skits or shows, saw his willingness to cast aside shyness and participate in the silly side of life.

He whistled at work, and he whistled at home. He had an amazing music repertoire with which he entertained himself while working including everyone along his mail routes. He was reliable, loyal, thoughtful and considerate. He could also be gruff and demanding in the father-knows-best tradition of the age. He beat me with a belt one time, when I was a teenager, for something I didn't do. When I convinced him he was wrong, he said, "Well, that was for all the things you did and didn't get caught". I had to smile and agree with his logic.

I joined the Cub Scouts, my mother became a Den Mother and my father became the Cub Master. When I graduated into Boy Scouts, dad followed as troop committee member. He was a strong supporter of our troop and our Scoutmaster and frequently went camping with us. He was always involved in transporting us to our adventures. My scoutmaster, Bob Smith, gave my dad the nickname *Oogie*, as a play on his given name of Eugene, and it stuck with a narrow circle of friends, mostly within scouting, but with a few family as well. It says much of my father that he accepted the moniker as a term of endearment from a friend and did so with good humor.

My dad was not overly affectionate, but showed caring in a thousand ways by actively participating in my life. He was my Cub Master, my scout committee chair, my cheerleader during my archery competition years, my driving instructor, my protector when I got into trouble. He bought me my first car when I was sixteen years old.

My mom and dad did many supportive things for me in the years after I returned from the Army, but that's a story for another time. It was these early years that speak to the bond we shared and how they helped shape the person I was to become. They say the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. I can only hope my life respects the investment he made in me.

My wife, Lynn, says I grew up on Swan Lake with loving and supportive parents. It's only now that I can look back and see how strongly that environment shaped the adult I would become.

Memento: The Whistling Mailman

http://articles.mcall.com/2000-02-19/news/3293810_1_allentown-area-troop-wife

Gene Ziegler, Chandler Arizona, December 2016