

JACK WILER'S WORLD

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SUNDAY, JUNE 03, 2007

Ed Campbell

Third Grade you'll note was taught by a woman. A woman with a young son. First and Second as well were taught by women and Fifth and Sixth. Teaching was widely perceived as a woman's job in America in 1960. It was underpaid and the women who held the jobs were considered either to be in search of a husband or supplementing a man's income in the family. My world and Mick's and Terry's and Chris' was filled with women. We left for school without seeing our fathers. We returned from school to our mothers. Many of the men in town took the train to work in Philadelphia. We'd see them walking home just before dinner in their suits and hats. They were far away figures. We had yet to participate in organized sports. We had no coaches and few if any male teachers.

Wenonah Elementary had two exceptions, my Fourth Grade Teacher, Mr. McIntyre, and Ed Campbell. Ed Campbell was assigned the problem classes. The Second and Third graders that posed a difficulty. My classes were filled with good cooperative kids. Mr. Campbell's were filled with kids with learning problems, with discipline issues. It was thought that only a man could bring them in line.

Mr. Campbell was that man. He'd served in the Korean War. He was a father as well. But more than that he was a robust, energetic man who engaged his students in ways our teachers didn't. If a kid wasn't paying attention he'd toss an eraser at his head. Mike Smith, the younger brother of Michelle, was once hung out the window till he cooled down. He played football and soccer with us on our gravel schoolyard. Especially soccer. We played a robust game with few rules and lots of contact. The only referee was Mr. Campbell and unless you were a bully or a cheat you got away with everything within the rules. It was always a joy when we were allowed to join with his classes in soccer or football.

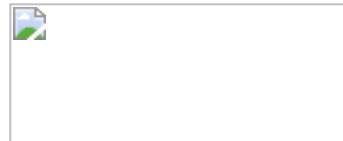
In summers he was a lifeguard at the Wenonah Lake. He'd plant himself on the raft in the middle of the lake and take on all challengers.

BARACK LOGO



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My house in Wenonah

BLOG ARCHIVE

- ▼ 2009 (22)
 - ▼ September (2)
 - [The Unseen World](#)
 - [Friendship and it's vagaries](#)
 - ▶ August (3)

We'd try to take the raft and he'd toss us off. He was a war hero and a man and everything we could want to be. He was fearless. Of course, he was dealing with boys and girls under the age of twelve so it's doubtful he was physically afraid of us.

You had the sense though that he expected better of you. That you could be a better man, a better person, a better scholar, by following in his footsteps. He was, most importantly, not our father. He didn't belittle you or make you feel stupid. He simply asked you to do the work you were assigned. He was never my teacher except in the way a male role model is for a young boy. Like my Uncle Al or my Uncle Ed he showed me the way to be a man.

It was a strange world not having men in it. Your father, my friends fathers, never involved themselves in our lives the way fathers do today. They came home, had a cocktail, ate dinner, asked you about your day, chatted with our mothers and went back to work. Their life was a mystery. But Ed Campbell was there with us daily. Striding the schoolyard like the cock of the walk. Loud, boisterous, argumentative, challenging.

In my town most of the men went to war. WWI, WWII, the Korean War, the Vietnam War were all a real part of the landscape. The county draft board was headed up by a man who lived in Wenonah. Nolan Cox. He lived in a large, dark Victorian home off the park. He seemed to take great pleasure in sending young men to battle.

Ed Campbell was one of the men of South Jersey who served and then came home to serve again in a largely woman's world. I have no idea how he might have felt working with the women in the school. He certainly never would speak of it. He seemed to say you should live your life as though every thing you do matters. As if it could all be gone in a second. We responded to that with an energy almost unchecked. Every boy, from the smartest, wimpiest among us to the most nasty, bullying thugs, loved him. And when he brought us together we played together. The private wars we had vanished in the joy of kicking a ball or tossing a football or stopping a run. My brother Mick had a good deal of trouble as a boy with scholastic endeavors but he worked hard for Ed Campbell. His friends and mine loved the man.

So.

I can imagine Ed Campbell feeling diminished each time he saw a man step off the train at 5:40 after a days work in Philadelphia while he spent his days with boys and girls. I can imagine him trying to learn what drew him to this vocation. More than that I can remember going to his house each Halloween and having him take the time to guess who each and every one of us was beneath our monstrous masks and grotesqueries. He was never wrong. No one ever took the raft.

Maybe you think about your job and what it means. Maybe you have sons and daughters and try to raise them up right. Maybe you fret about the men and women who teach them each day.

But in Wenonah in 1960 no one worried about this. You went to work and did the work you had to do to feed your family. You came home and ate your dinner with your cold milk and bread and potatoes. You

- ▶ July (3)
- ▶ June (3)
- ▶ May (3)
- ▶ March (4)
- ▶ January (4)

- ▶ 2008 (68)
- ▶ 2007 (128)
- ▶ 2006 (21)

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[Vanishing New York](#)
[Acme Exterminating](#)
[American Towns](#)
[Get Angry With Me](#)
[Maddox Corner](#)
[the long way around Carey's world](#)
[One Foot Out the Door](#)
[Town of Wenonah Official Site](#)
[Wenonah Woods](#)
[Longshot Productions](#)
[Zeitgeist Press](#)
[Gathering of the Tribes](#)
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ABOUT ME

JACK WILER

JERSEY CITY, NEW JERSEY, UNITED STATES

Too much to put in one space. That's why I wrote two books and innumerable unpublished poems

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smiled at your children and asked how they were doing and probably barely listened to their half hearted recitations of the days events. You trusted your children's lives to women and a few men with little or no knowledge of who they were or what they did.

It still amazes me I know almost nothing of their lives. I know Miss Quigley married a few years after I left Second Grade and became Mrs. Scott. I know Mrs. Kaufman lived at the end of my block for twenty odd years but I never had an adult conversation with her till I was in my thirties on the 4th of July. I knew Mrs. Fuller's son Greg but nothing of her or her husband. But Mr. Campbell strides through my life like a God. Strong and brave and fierce. A man like I wanted to be. He made books seem less like the world of ladies and more like the world. Not a bad thing for a guy in a little town in South Jersey.

POSTED BY JACK WILER AT [8:11 PM](#) 4 COMMENTS: 

TUESDAY, JUNE 05, 2007

Public Men and Women

I talked last of Ed Campbell. One of the few public role models we had as young boys and girls. You might ask who else we saw during the day in Wenonah in 1960. Not a great number of people but several, several. There was George Bowker and his wife Jane who ran the grocery in the middle of town. There was Tony Sacca who ran the butcher shop attached to Bowkers grocery. We had one police officer. His name escapes me but he lived at the end of Jefferson Street by the lake and his primary duty was helping us cross the street by the corner of Mantua and West Street each day coming and going from school. He was a pleasant enough man with little or no crime to combat. The firemen in our town were volunteers. They were our fathers and neighbors and so, for the most part invisible except when a fire swept through a house or yard or on the 4th of July when they had an open fire house with beer and hot dogs and gave rides on the firetruck for children at the park.

There was G. Wayne Post who ran the men's store in town. He had a small business cleaning men's shirts as well and delivered my father's crisp white shirts each week in a cardboard box. This served two purposes, one my father looked sharp and two I had ample supplies of cardboard for school projects.

There were various men running a Sinclair gas station in the center of town, though Chuck Forsman ran the more popular establishment just across the Wenonah Creek in Mantua. Chuck dressed as a clown each 4th of July and pattered up and down Mantua Avenue on a small motor bike for the amusement of the children and himself.

There was the local librarian, who beginning in 1962 or so was my mother, Louise Wiler. Later Dot Nugent assisted her in her duties.

There were, of course, the teachers and administration of the school, the post men and women, and a few other local businessmen. Among

them was an insurance man, Don Mawson. Don's shop was on Mantua Avenue just before the gas station in the center of town. Don's best friend was Milton Webb.

Each morning and each afternoon we passed Don on the way to school. He was, how to say it, a fag. At least, that's how we described him. Young boys and girls with no real sense of what we were saying. He was unmarried, dressed well, and lived by himself, though he had one close friend, Milton Webb. Both men seemed vaguely effeminate, though by the standards of later years hardly flaming queens.

I don't know if Don was a vet but Milton was, having served honorably in the Korean War. Milton spent several years as a prisoner of war. Both men were ridiculed by us as figures of public humiliation. Both men lived honorably and bravely in a small town with small minds. Milton Webb passed away several years ago, shortly before I returned to Wenonah, ill with AIDS. He died of natural causes and had many dear friends in the community. He was in many ways one of the town's historians and worked with a number of people in South Jersey to keep our mostly unremarkable history alive. My landlord in 2001, 2002, and 2003, Rachel Knisell admired him and his work on the town's history. He was active too in keeping the town green, helping to establish, along with Mr. Campbell, Mr. Eggert, the Middleton's, the Lentze's, and others a band of green woods around our town in the early 70's.

I don't know for certain if Milton Webb and Don Mawson were gay or homosexual, though, if Johanna were to have met them, I'm certain she would say yes. I'm sure she would say, "I can smell my people". Certainly, all the small, little bigots of my acquaintance, including myself, thought they were and worked tirelessly to make them feel unwanted and out of place.

When I came back home, sick with a disease that ravaged the gay world, I thought a great deal about Milton and Don and their world. There were a few more gay men and women in Wenonah by then. Some of them worked hard to help the sick and damaged beginning in the eighties. Their legacy was real and brave. But I can't help but think, that like Ed Campbell, Milton and Don were heroes too.

Milton was a war veteran just like Ed Campbell. He served honorably and then faced the Chinese in their camps. He braved far worse than a dozen or so idiot children ridiculing him behind his back. He involved himself in his world though his world often turned its back on him. Courage is a funny thing. Role models take lots of shapes. There were lots of people in Wenonah when I was growing up but only two men that I could say seemed to be gay. Only one black family. No Jews. Six Catholic families. A town where being different was a curse.

I'm off to Wenonah again this year for the 4th of July. With luck I'll return with many pleasant memories and some pictures. Here are two from my memory. Ed Campbell racing down a soccer field, laughing and screaming at a bunch of ten year olds. Don Mawson on his porch, graciously saying good morning to us as we walked each day to school. Tall, dressed impeccably, enjoying a crisp fall day in a small town in southern New Jersey.

SUNDAY, APRIL 27, 2008

Things we didn't know we'd learn; 1963

I know what you're thinking. I know I've waited many years for this post, two to be exact, and I've hesitated for two or three days thinking about what else to say about 6th grade and the fall of 1963 but really this is the thing that matters most. It's some time around the middle of the afternoon on a lovely late fall afternoon. It was warm. I remember that. We were in Mrs. Fuller's math class. God knows what we were learning. Some dim precursor to Algebra? It couldn't have mattered. Mr. Campbell walked in and pulled Mrs. Fuller out and they talked, like adults do about things that matter to adults, and Mrs. Fuller walked in to tell us the President had been shot. President Kennedy had been shot in Dallas, Texas in the afternoon of November, 22nd, 1963 and we were shocked. Huh.

That seems stupid saying that but we were. Shocked. Stunned. Only one other event in my life made me feel like this and that was in September of 2001 when I watched two airplanes hit the World Trade Center. But back then this was something you didn't even know how to acknowledge. What did it mean? Why was he shot? I mean, really? Why would anyone shoot the President of the United States. It wasn't a Russian. It wasn't like we had just ended a great Civil War. So we all sat in class like little fools and looked at each other and then we were sent home. After an hour or so our teachers sent us home. To be with our parents.

They were no better than us. Ed Campbell who had witnessed the slaughter of Korea and who rushed out like a hero to put out fires, Mrs. Myers who seemed stalwart and brave and strong, Mrs. Ferrera who laughed with us and told ribald jokes, they all looked like little puppets who had had their strings cut and they said things and did things but they didn't know why or what they were saying and we walked home. When I got home my mother was sobbing.

When I got home my mother was sobbing.

Her ironing board was in the living room and she was in the first living room and she was crying. I don't believe I am making this up. This is what I remember. It was embarrassing but she was in tears. The tv was on and there were people talking about the President and by now it was clear he was dead. He'd been shot in Texas by a man and he was dead.

It seems so stupid from this great remove to say we loved this man. We did. He was a joy. He and his family were funny and real and just like our own even if later we were to find out this was all a fiction. He was like my father. He played touch football. My father did. He had back problems. My father did. His wife was beautiful. She looked like my mother and my aunts and my beloved Irish cousins. Jesus. My mother had been watching a soap opera. She never watched

another to the end of her life.

The facts played out on television like nothing we had ever seen; though they would play out that way again and again over the next several years. We were exiled to play but everytime we ducked into the house the President was dead.

You could make up lots of dumb shit about this. We were, after all, only sixth graders. We knew absolutely nothing about politics. To us he was like God. We admired and loved him and his family. We had not had the tragedy of WWII or WWI or the Civil War or any other horror brush up against our stupid little lives. This was like getting smacked really hard with the hand of reality and no one tells you it is reality.

I would imagine there are worse things than public tragedy. I know my mother's death affected me more than the death of the young man who was President. But I know that this event marked my childhood just as clearly as the two towers falling marked my adulthood. That's an odd thing. How public events become private events. How you can remember every smell and hesitation. The ironing board. The quiet streets. The shocked looks of adults. The newsreels, the tv news, the man with a gun the twisted body of Lee Harvey Oswald, the smoke drifting across Brooklyn, the candles burning in doorways all over Jersey City, the ironing board, the gun, the smoke.

POSTED BY JACK WILER AT [12:23 AM](#) 2 COMMENTS: 

SATURDAY, APRIL 19, 2008

Sixth Grade September 1963

It was always nice to go to school in Wenonah. The first days were warm with that beautiful September warmth and you had the idea that you'd do great this year, really great. Sixth grade marked a change for us. In order to get us used to moving around like robots in our new high school we would move around in Wenonah school. From teacher to teacher, subject to subject, classroom to classroom. In theory this would have us up and running on day one at the new HS. In fact it was sort of stupid. We knew everybody. We'd had all these teachers. My math teacher was Mrs. Fuller from last year for God's sake! I think we had Ed Campbell for History but jeez loulise this was no stretch for any of us. I mean, what, walk upstairs to a classroom or down the hall twenty feet to another and all with the exact same people? We would not, repeat not, be ready for Seventh Grade.

But we felt all cool and shit and that meant a lot. For the first time in our little lives we felt like we were in control. It was a lie but it felt like it.

After school we'd ride our bikes to my house and sit on the curb and talk about the Beatles. There was some weird rule that you had to pick your favorite Beatle. As if I gave a fuck. So I picked George who really didn't do anything. One thing about the Beatles, and the Beach Boys, and some other bands was they had long hair. Okay, not really long, but long enough.

This got me thinking about growing my hair and wearing cooler clothes. Bad thoughts all. My hair was a disaster. Three cowlicks, no hope. Cool clothes? We shopped at JC Penney's for Christ's sake. I couldn't even get Converse sneaks...I had to get the cheap Penney's knock offs. We did go to a mens wear store in Pitman though to pick out our fall clothes. I actually had some vague say in what I wore. I have no idea what I picked only that in all my pictures I still look like a geek. And our new classes? We were learning about New Jersey history. Apparently over the summer the state decided we should know something about this pisshole so they taught us about the Lenni Lenape and Governor Morris and we had to know all the counties and stuff. As if in Gloucester County we had the vaguest conception of Jersey City or Hoboken or Newark. There were only two negroes in our school!!!

But we were cool, we were cool. We passed through the hall like little gods, lording it over the 5th and 4th graders. When we got home we'd make fun of Chuckie Holstein and his little friends. We'd break their club house and laugh and laugh. We ruled.

POSTED BY JACK WILER AT [6:47 PM](#) 1 COMMENT: 

THURSDAY, MARCH 27, 2008

Names in the Photo

Hi all, I know I promised I wouldn't be posting but this was relatively simple and required no thought:) Thanks to Barb Conway for id'ing Nancy Garrison and "Linda" Smith, not Susan Smith who was equally hot but much younger. A few other comments on the photo. First, check out my cowlick. Jesus I look like Alfalfa. Second, go back over the past years and look at Terry's expression in every photo. He always has the same odd look. Is it the holly poking him in the back? Who knows?

Barb reminded me as has Bob that one of the cool things about being in Ed Campbell's class was that he would leave to go to fires and come back smelling of smoke. That's devotion.

POSTED BY JACK WILER AT [8:16 PM](#) 1 COMMENT: 

SUNDAY, JANUARY 27, 2008

Volunteer Firemen

Bob Thomas suggested I write a bit about the Wenonah Volunteer Fire Dept. since I had just covered the Police Dept. When I was in fifth grade the firehouse was a two story building on South West Ave. It was a white building and the one fire truck was kept on the first floor with the second floor functioning as a social hall for the volunteer firemen and other community functions. On Election Day the first floor was where the voting took place. On top of the firehouse was a loud whistle

which was sounded to summon the volunteers should there be a fire. You could hear it everywhere in town. The number of whistles indicated (at least this is what us chowderheaded kids thought) the severity of the fire. It also was sounded at 8:00pm each evening to tell all the children to go home. It was called the Eight O'Clock Whistle. On the 4th of July it was sounded to let everyone know the parade was about to begin. It was also supposed to be sounded as an air raid siren. There would be tests of the air raid function when we were young and if we were in school we either a) got under our desks and put our hands over our heads or b) went into the hall to do "duck and cover". I guess this made people feel safe. I know that in fifth grade we were fairly certain that if there were a real nuclear war we would be toast by the time the dopey whistle went off. We lived about ten or so miles from Philadelphia and the US Navy Yard as well as some of the largest oil refineries and chemical plants on the east coast. There was a Nike missile base in Pitman and it seemed like the Russians would probably know to hit Philly. We read John Hersey's "Hiroshima" and that was just a little bomb. An H Bomb would cook us all. But still we did as we were told.

I wasn't the child of a volunteer fireman so my experiences with the fire department were limited to rides on the truck on the 4th and watching the volunteers speeding to the firehouse when there was a siren. My brother Ted joined the department as a young man and it was then that I found out that one big feature of being a volunteer fireman was that you hung around and drank beer. That probably explains much of the appeal in a town like Wenonah, with no bars and lots of young married men with children. Plus every once in awhile you got to put out a brush fire or a fire in a kitchen. Bob reminds me that Ed Campbell would leave school for fires and return covered in soot and smelling of smoke.

I don't recall anyone ever dying in a fire in Wenonah. I actually don't recall any really big fires. But still there were fires and danger and men willing to help for no pay at all. They still do. In a bigger firehouse with two trucks (at least) and serious training and probably the same amount of beer.

I go to the firehouse each 4th of July to drink beer and meet old friends and remember the good old days. We watch the parade and try to egg the firemen into pulling their sirens. They're not supposed to but they do anyway.

It's kind of strange that a town as small as Wenonah was divided up in little ways. I don't know much about the holiday displays and the care and work that went into them because my father wasn't in the Lion's Club (until much later) and whatever danger the men who volunteered to fight fires faced is something I know nothing about because my father wasn't a fireman. But divided up or not divided still men got together for business or pleasure or to help their town and did it all for free. For free.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 03, 2007

Fifth Grade

Fifth grade was different. I was entering new worlds. I was done with Mr. McIntire. My eyes were better. I was better read. I was happier. I was discovering girls and feeling like a different person. Fifth Grade begins not in the fall but in the summer. We belonged to the Wenonah Swim Club now. The swim club had its heroes and heroines. Great swimmers that competed year round. My friend Terry's brothers and kids from Woodbury were stars in the world of swimming. They walked like gods across the grass of the club. Their parents played cards and perhaps sipped cocktails and we ran like maniacs about the pool. As usual my summer began with two weeks in Ocean City and then I returned to Wenonah. Hot and humid now. Deep greens and thick air. We'd ride our bikes to the pool and drink cokes and eat cheesesteaks and watch the teenagers, cool and serene.

We played our swim games, swim tag and we took diving lessons and we were still kids but we were changing. Learning. We showered in the shower before we went in the pool. We wore speedoes and we admired the kids that won meets. I wasn't a kid anymore. I wasn't a teenager either. I was a skinny kid watching how to be.

Then we rode our bikes to the school at the end of the summer to see where we'd be in the fall. Mrs. Fuller's class. Now we were all together. The kids who were smart. The kids who weren't in Ed Campbell's classes. Now we were treated differently. There were still classes well above us. All the way to 8th grade but that would change. In two years we would go to a new junior senior high school.

Suddenly what we had on our backs made a difference. All of a sudden we noticed girls and girls noticed us and we were all dancing an odd dance with no practice and no experience.

We started playing games in the summer nights with girls. We watched them intensely. We watched how some boys were smoother with girls. I always felt awkward. I guess in retrospect all of us did but it was intense for me. But still for two years my ability to know things seemed to make a difference with girls. They seemed to like me. And I like that. Class was easier than Mr. McIntire. After him everything was cake. I knew the drill. I seemed almost magically to know how to write paragraphs and reports and make them the way teachers wanted. In fact, the thing that most amazes me is that I started to understand I knew what teachers liked.

Our games began to change. Our play began to become more focussed. We were being sucked into the world.

But not in a bad way. We were acknowledged for knowing what we knew. We were encouraged. We read our Weekly Reader and talked about it as though it mattered. We talked about elections. We talked about the world.

It was the oddest transformation and it accelerated exponentially over

the next few years. But at least for a few years in Wenonah Public School it was sheltered. We all knew each other. Me and Tommy Jenkins and Kenny Fell and Ralph Leeds had a shared history that kept us kind to each other. We, jeez this sounds dumb, liked each other.

POSTED BY JACK WILER AT [10:28 PM](#) 2 COMMENTS: 

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 30, 2007

What We Wore



Children in the early sixties resembled children in the early fifties who resembled children in the early forties. Look at our photo. With the exception of Tommy Jenkins we may have been in a photo from the dust bowl by Walker Evans. When we were out of school we wore dungarees and t shirts. Or sweatshirts. When we were in school dungarees were forbidden. Note I do not say "jeans". Thats because no one would have known what the fuck I was talking about. They were dungarees. These could be made seasonal by purchasing lined dungarees for winter.

We also wore flannel shirts in the winter. My Aunt Gert used to use our old flannel shirts to make flannel board presentations for her bible classes so at least there was another life for them. Flannel board presentations. Just thinking about that shit freaks me out. There are times when I feel like Henry Adams in the 1910. Besides all his other peculiarities Henry Adams lived from 1838-1918. This meant he went from sailing ships and horse drawn carts to airplanes, telephones, cars, and tanks all in one lifetime. He had some other shit going on as well and you should read his autobiography, called "The Education of Henry Adams".

Okay, so we're in flannel and denim and cotton. And for school we wear our "school clothes" which as I recall consist primarily of khaki pants and some sort of patterned shirt. Girls were fucked. They had to wear dresses and apparently the dresses had to be ugly. I don't possess the appropriate vocabulary to describe their dresses except to say they were uniformly ugly. Not one girl was cool. Not even Sandy Fay or Dolores Lorenz. Then they would join Brownies or Girl Scouts and get uglier more. That is a poor construction that accurately describes the terrible descent into fashion hell that takes place when you put on a Girl Scout or Brownie uniform. These uniforms are not even vaguely Hitler Youth. Whoever had the bright idea to put young girls in uniforms should be sentenced to a year as Naomi Campbell's personal assistant.

Tiny white collars, puffy skirts, plaids, little shoes, white socks. It must have been a curse to be a girl. At least our clothes were functional if dull. Sure we could have been midget accountants or garage mechanics but we could run and play and have fun pretty much the same as if we were wearing our "play" clothes.

Then there were our "church" clothes. This consisted of my only suit which was bought for me at Robert Hall. Here's my picture. Snappy is not the word for how cool I looked. Trapped, forlorn, and stupid might be adjectives that leap to mind.

The tie is a clip on. I learned to tie a tie when I was twenty eight. Before then it was clip on all the way. Much like the food we ate. If it was easy that's what you picked. Shoes. Shoes were from Ernie's Shoe Post in Mantua. Usually Buster Brown. "Does your shoe have a boy inside, what a funny place for a boy to hide. Does your shoe have a dog there too? A boy and a dog and a foot in a shoe. Well, the boy is Buster Brown and the dog is Tige his pet and they're really just a picture but it's fun to play pretend." This is an actual jingle played on TV and radio intended to trick us into buying these shoes. As though we had a choice. As though I could somehow cajole my mother into picking Buster Browns if there was something cheaper. Not going to happen. It might work with Frosted Flakes but not with shoes. Shoes were clothes and clothes were her game. We had no say in what went on our backs and feet. We trudged behind her each August and each April and she pulled stuff off racks and held it up and sent us into tiny rooms where we tried it on and then that's what we wore.

Not that I cared all that much. We had occasional flirtations with motorcycle jackets or Chuck Taylor All Stars but the bottom line was the only pieces of clothing I ever wanted were long johns and hip boots. Beyond that I could give a fuck. They all wore out and tore and got small and then my poor brother Ted had to wear them. Ha ha. Too bad for him.

This would all change in Seventh Grade. Let me close the door then gently on Mr. McIntire and Fourth Grade. It's time for Jack to begin his time as a teenager or near teenager. One door closes and the other opens. It's Fifth Grade and our teacher is Mrs. Fuller. We're seated in our class wearing our new fall school clothes.

TUESDAY, MAY 01, 2007

Second Grade and the Lake

I can't remember anything I learned in Second Grade. I remember Miss Quigley being beautiful. I remember learning to write and read. I can't remember a thing of arithmetic. I've asked my friends what they recall and the answer is the same. It's a strange thing to say but I passed through Second Grade as an innocent. It was the last year I believed in Santa Claus. It was the last year my parents were my whole world. It was also one of the last years I spent at the Wenonah Lake. After school ended there wasn't much to do but play. Wenonah is a hot humid town near Philadelphia. When I was getting better and living in the Knisell's home Rachel told me that homes used to have outside kitchens to deal with the heat of summer. What we did do was go to the lake. There were several bodies of water in Wenonah. The Wenonah Lake was a community association that dated back to the 1880's when Wenonah was a resort town. There was the recently formed Wenonah Swim Club. A clean chlorinated pool with a snack bar and a kiddie pool and tennis and basketball courts. There was the Mantua Creek and the swamps. There was Parkers lake and Sinnott's Pond and another lake by one of the mansions in town. Only the Wenonah Lake and the Swim Club were open for recreation. It's a long standing fact of life in Wenonah that young families begin their lives at the lake and migrate to the pool. Young children have no sense of cool so the lake was fine. Once you were older the brown water and lack of facilities made it less than cool.

My friend Bob has many memories of play at the lake. Ed Campbell, one of the teachers in our school, was a lifeguard and regularly roughoused with kids on the raft of wood and 55 gallon drums in the middle. Kid's sold snow cones and families barbequed and there were rudimentary swimming lessons. The swim club had a world class swim team. Kid's from the Wenonah Swim Club competed in Philly and all across South Jersey. Their swimming records were all over the walls of the club. When you swam in the lake you emerged in a brown tan from the cedar water. It was neither clean nor cool. No one raced. Instead you ran willy nilly and cannon balled off the pier.

When I went back to Wenonah to recover from my illness (AIDS) I went each day to the lake. I sat there the only adult male in the place and watched mothers and young children having fun.

On the 4th of July there were competitive races at the lake. The 4th of July was the greatest day in Wenonah and remains so to this day. My friends come back year after year to sit on corners they sat on when they were children to watch the same silly little parade. It's beautiful. The Pitman Hobo Band and the Bonsal Blues Band square off mid town in a burst of John Phillips Sousa. Raggedy fake hobos and military nincompoops all playing their hearts out and everyone cheers

and salutes. Politicians pay homage and walk the streets. You can say hey to the local representatives, laugh at the presumptions of small businesses and guess as to this years theme. I'll have a lot more to say about the 4th in years to come.

But always, on a hot day, when you were in 2nd grade you went to the lake. You caroomed off the pier. You laughed and scared your parents. You begged for a dime for a snow cone.

I'm going to break protocol here and put in a poem I wrote when I was stuck in Wenonah in 2002-2003. Please read it for it's great joy and nostalgia.

We're All Going to the Lake

We're going to the lake!

All of us.

We're loading up the minivans.

We're slapping up the kickstands.

We're running around the house,
screaming about how we can't
find our badges or our high band
or our favorite suit.

Which was right here and
we're getting up slow from lunch
and walking out to the car.

We're going to the lake!

Eight housewives, twenty five kids,
three lifeguards, one kid in the refreshment stand to dish up the water
ice,

me and once in a while a dad and maybe some teenagers,
who are loud and look scary but
swim like shit once they hit the water
and smack!

What a lake to dive into!

A long brown ribbon of cedar water.

Trees brushing it's sides, bright blue skies
fill it with clouds

and turtles strung out on a log.

They're so tired from this hot, hot sun they forget to eat.

So the crappies and minnows
are all over the shallows.

Gotta get while the getting's good.

Far, far out on the lake a big bass leaps up, flops down
and nobody sees the water ripple out.

They're riding their bikes
down Jefferson or Monroe.

Towels over their shoulders
snapping in the rush.

A whine of spokes and muscle that's been going on for fifty years.

Fifty years of kids hauling their
bodies trawling streams of brown water,

small muscles stretched,
yelling, running, tight little balls that
cannon into the water!
O Joy! O headlong rush to water!
O the whirl of spokes!
The shrieks!
The gossip!
The affairs.
Bodies lying in beds, dreaming of other
bodies last night, last week.
Husbands, lovers.
Heat raising tiny beads of sweat,
the bathing suit tossed heedless on the chair.
The brush of finger to breast.
The wives dreaming of sweat;
muscled backs, thick bellies.
The drop falling from his chin,
running down her breast.
But then the kids are yelling!
We gotta go swimming!
Insistent!
Water calling water.
Awkward crawl
head out of water
crazy seven year old treading water.
mad dog paddle.
Mom watching, feet in water,
not really there,
but cool and wet on a hot, hot day.
O Wenonah Lake!
Canoes, boats, rafts,
big fat guy, belly up,
floating.
The only husband here today.
Me, watching housewives,
watching kids,
splashing dad,
slap of hand on water.
Ripples that go all the way to shore.
We're all at the lake!
We've brought everything we need.
Life jackets, blankets, sunscreen, towels, badges, bands,
balls, rubber killer whales, sunhats, sun glasses, coolers,
cocktails cleverly disguised as lemonade, water,
watches, buckets to carry water and
desire.
All for the lake!
On a hot, hot day.
We go to the lake for the water.

Come in!
Come in!
Come in!

That's my lake. That's my town. Soon it will be summer and the snapping turtles will be on their logs, the bass will be leaping from the middle of a small brown lake and children will be screaming at their friends. Oh God. This is a beauty that can never be recovered.

POSTED BY JACK WILER AT [9:12 PM](#) NO COMMENTS: 

SUNDAY, MARCH 04, 2007

Summer 1959

First Grade came winding down. I received my first Holy Communion. My parent's bought me my first suit of clothes, from Robert Hall, and I trudged with a couple dozen boys and girls to the altar to taste the Body and Blood of Christ. Then it was summer. And just like school changed the world into weekdays and weekends, so school gave us summer vacation. Three long months that had a rhythm and structure all their own.

My family took a two week vacation at the end of June each year. We would rent an apartment in Ocean City, NJ and spend two weeks at the shore. The day consisted of waking up, going for a long walk on the beach, to the point perhaps, and then going home to get our towels and toys and going back to the beach. We spent the day on the beach except for lunch. Lunch was a rushed sandwich, tuna or cold cuts or PB & J, and then back to the beach.

We'd body surf and try to float. We'd make great sandcastles. Most of the time we stayed near 59th Street in Ocean City. Until 1962 it had a long fishing pier that stretched well out into the ocean. It also had a row of great Granite blocks dumped along the shore to hold the beach in place. We'd play inside the spaces between the blocks. We found sand sharks in gullies and learned how to find shells in the morning.

Sometimes my father would play box ball with us or handball. It was my father who taught us how to body surf. How to catch a wave just right. In the evening we'd eat seafood from Campbell's and then if we were lucky go to the boardwalk and ride the rides.

My father had been going to Ocean City his whole life. Ocean City had long ties to the Philly Irish community. The Kelly's of Philadelphia had a big house that my father never failed to point out to us. Our Uncle John had a home on 42nd Street right on the beach and we'd walk up and visit Uncle John and Aunt Ellie and my fathers cousins, including Aunt Alice who I thought was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen.

On the boardwalk our father taught us how to grab the brass ring on the merry go round and took us up high on the ferris wheel. We'd watch the great summer moon sink into the sea and then get up and do it all again.

By the time we returned to Wenonah it too was different. Wenonah in summer was hot and humid beyond belief. Nothing moved except the children. That first year we joined the Wenonah Lake and went there to take rudimentary swimming lessons. We played in the kiddie part of the lake and cooked hot dogs and ate snow cones.

We began to expand our world that summer. Mick had gone to Kindergarten that year and now had friends of his own. Some of my classmates were members of the Lake as well as his so we all joined together in games. Hierarchies had not yet been established and we knew nothing of cool. We were just having fun.

In the evenings we could play outside till 8pm when it was time for bed. There was really nothing of consequence on television so we began our long games of Kick the Can. Our friends played it for hours after we'd gone to bed and we could hear the can rattling along the sidewalk from our beds.

Thunderstorms would come rolling through and I'd lie at the end of my bed with my cat Surprise and watch the terrible skies light up. Great trees would fall and crush a house or lie across the road.

Each summer the town would put new macadam down on several of the streets. The smell of hot tar would fill the afternoon and the stones were new and fresh. We had yet to really explore the woods but that was soon to come.

Finally the summer wound down in a long, long slide that took us inexorably back to school. A few days before the first day of school we could walk up to the school and they would have our class listings posted.

Second grade for me would put me in a class with Third graders. Miss Quigley was our teacher. She was blond and pretty and looked a bit like Donna Reed. I was as glad for summer to end as I'd been for it to begin. I was bored with play and wanted something new. Something new I would get. Each September.

POSTED BY JACK WILER AT [10:50 AM](#) 1 COMMENT: 

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