

A Child's View

By Jim McCusker

Morning came early but I never really thought about it. At about 5:00 AM, Mom and I would start walking in the dark, going from our home on Fifteenth Street, down North Main Street, to Love School. The time was World War II. My Dad had been moved by his feeling of patriotic duty to enlist in the U.S. Navy and was at that time somewhere in the Phillipines. I don't recall any details of locations or combat engagements, but I do recall the distress and despair of my family when my Dad came home and said he had enlisted. It seemed as if a part of life had been taken away, but I soon realized that life went on. As a child, I was protected from many of life's harsh realities.

Like most other families and households of the time, ours was engaged in the war effort. My mother was a production worker at Marlin-Rockwell Corporation. Like other families at that time, we had no car, and most likely would not have had gasoline or tires even if we had had a car. Those items were scarce and rationed.

We would walk down North Main Street, arriving at Love School at about 5:45; in the winter. It was very dark. Mom would walk me to the auditorium and then continue on to work. So began my day at a World War II day care center.

I soon learned which of the many cots in the auditorium was mine. Even though I was, by now, wide awake, I would go to my assigned cot. Like the other children, I was expected to lay my head on the pillow and remain quiet. Occasionally, I would fall asleep. Other times, I would silently observe the comings and goings of the people who cared for us children. In retrospect, I hesitate to guess how many children were there, for fear of distorting actual numbers. I do recall a large number of cots in the auditorium, though.

This center served the northern half of the city, so I didn't know all of the other children. I distinctly remember Bill Avery and Violet Koresko, but this may have been because they were in classes with me.

Some time after our early arrival, the children were awakened to have breakfast. Every day, all of us had breakfast together, and it was always the same; a fruit cup and hot cereal.

Following breakfast, we all went to classes. I guess our classroom was like any other at the time. After morning classed, we'd eat our "brown bag" lunch and continue with afternoon classes. I remember buying U.S. Saving Stamps during the school day, and I'm pretty sure that Milton J. Fletcher was the principal at the time. Following classes, we would return to the auditorium "day care center."

Having spent some time recalling many of these events, I've come to the conclusion that the day care center was really pretty good. A lady we knew as "Gussy" (Mrs. Gustafson) left no doubt as to who was fully in charge. There were several others involved in the operation of the center but everyone took instructions from Gussy.

School was over at 3:30, and my mother would pick me up at 5:00 PM. During that period, we were always kept busy with planned and directed activities. After my mother picked me up, we walked home, often in the dark. It's strange now to realize how many of my daytime hours during the war were spent inside Love School!

In the evening, we often spent time at Roseland Park. We would ice skate in the winter; in the summer, we often watched softball games. Softball was a very popular sport at the time. The park was quite nice, and even had clay tennis courts.

For a real treat, we spent Saturday afternoon in Brooklyn Square, at the Roosevelt Theater. The Roosevelt was a favorite of mine because all they ever featured was cowboy movies. The house would be full of wartime children, and even the ushers were quite young. At times, it would get so noisy in the theater that the movie would be stopped and house lights raised until everyone sat down and got quiet. I wonder if children have really changed?

For myself, these recollections have been very satisfying. It's often said that you can't go forward by looking backward. I'm not sure that this is an absolute truth. I have gone back, and I have reflected on these memories. I know that I was denied some of the quantity in my family life, but I can recognize the tremendous quality of this life during World War II. Those who didn't experience these events may have difficulty understanding my feelings, but I knew of many caring people. My Dad cared for me in his absence by defending our county so that I could stay free. Words can never adequately describe the love of a mother for her child. Others who cared were family, friends, teachers and certainly Gussy – whoever she was.

Jim McCusker attended Jamestown schools. After graduating from the University of Pittsburgh, he was drafted to play offensive tackle with a professional football team known in 1958 as the Chicago Cardinals. The following year, he went to the champion Philadelphia Eagles, where he played four seasons. He played for the Cleveland Browns in 1963, and the New York Jets in 1964. In 1965, following his retirement from the "pros," Jim opened his successful restaurant. "The Pub" is located on Main Street between Second and Third.

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