

Introduction to A Collection of Essays, 1945-1957

Here I am decades later walking down Chatham Street where I grew up, where a lot of memories were created. Technology has changed so much over the years that I am not physically in my neighborhood. Mostly, I'm in my mind trying to remember some of the good—and not so good—times. I'm also taking a virtual tour using an internet connection and Google Earth-Street View to navigate the streets and see the yards and houses as they were recorded on the day when a Google Maps street-level-camera-car drove by. Wouldn't it be cool if it could somehow capture images from the past; the time before the vehicle drove down the street? You know. There I am like a hologram playing in the front yard when I was 5 years old. *Spooky cool.* There is a movie called *Déjà Vu* that does something like that; an experimental computer displays actual events as they transpired a *few days* in the past.

The neighborhood was pretty much my day-to-day world for my first five years. Although, there was a brief period in Mount Tabor, NJ; visits to my maternal grandparents in East Orange, NJ and paternal grandfather in Boonton, NJ; plus day trips to other relatives and family friends around town, in nearby cities, and out in the rural countryside. One of the earliest memories I have was before I was 5 years old. I was with Mom, Dad, and my sister, visiting an uncle and his first wife in their New York City apartment. He was working for Standard Oil at the time. I remember watching 8mm film home movies of their honeymoon in Florida. This was a big deal because I had never seen a home movie or knew anything about a place called Florida; much less alligators, which appeared on the screen. I didn't care a bit that the moving pictures were in black and white, without sound. I sat on the floor my eyes glued to the small pull-up screen while the scenes rolled by as the projector reels whirred next to me. Nothing else made an impression on me that day, not even seeing the tallest buildings and busiest streets with the most cars and people up to that point in my life.

Trees on my street are bigger now or cut down. Shrubs have been removed, and some replaced. Houses are painted a different color, many with additions, including our family home; the one-story three-season porch is now a two-story, fully enclosed part of the main house. A couple of houses have been

Introduction to A Collection of Essays, 1945-1957

torn down to make way for newer, larger houses; maybe not true McMansions, but pretty close. In fact, the Hadley house next door has been demolished and a new, larger house built, which sold for \$1.7 million in 2019. There is a mixture of old and new fences or no fences where there were fences. Different families with different names. The vehicles in the driveways are pricier; not to mention the home prices. Dad and Mom bought our 1,645 square foot house from an elderly couple, the Merkles, who were moving to a retirement community at the Jersey Shore. The house was built in 1926. We purchased it for \$12,000 in 1945 and sold it for over \$100,000 in 1982. Its 2020 market value is \$801 thousand. Location. Location. Location. Chatham is known as a bedroom community; a town where many of the people commute by train to work in New York City or other more urban areas near the City.

The houses are still all in a row and the streets and avenues haven't changed directions. For the most part streets go east to west and avenues go north to south. I don't know about the lanes, courts, boulevards, or other road designations. *Dead Ends* are now known as *No Outlets*, supposedly to comfort the living. The general lay of the land is as I remembered it. Fairmount Avenue still climbs up the hill from Main Street through Watchung Avenue to Southern Boulevard and beyond. At one point on the left side of the hill is the Fair Mount Cemetery, and just beyond there is a wooded area heavy with thick, old growth trees on a steep hillside. Back in the 50s and 60s, there was a path, used mainly by kids, leading through the woods from Fairmount Avenue down to Hillside Avenue. It may still be there. More about the path later.

If I *really* look at it all a little closer with the eyes of someone who has traveled many thousands of miles farther than New York City, it doesn't appear quite the same. It almost reminds me of that town where the actor, Jim Carey, lived in the movie, *The Truman Show*. The shine is too bright, the colors too calculated, the air too scented, the sounds too contrived, the motions too choreographed. It just doesn't seem ... well, natural. Not unnatural, like a Stephen King Salem-kind-of-town or even a Mayberry RFD. More like scenery from a play or a movie or a musical that gets moved around

Introduction to A Collection of Essays, 1945-1957

as the acts and the actors change. It seems to have become too manicured and precise and planned. And *very* expensive. I don't know how to explain it any better. Or maybe I shouldn't try and just settle for something more mundane, such as it looks like a picture postcard. Perhaps there is a lot of curb appeal to maintain the community's image of itself as a well-to-do place to live in the long shadow cast by New York City.

The title of this collection of essays is from one of my stories where I describe how my dad wouldn't allow me to use training wheels on my first two-wheel bicycle—he wouldn't even let me use a tricycle. It was a hard lesson to learn, but I finally figured out how to balance myself and was the first one in my small group of friends to ride a two-wheeler without training wheels. In life, there are times when we need to learn to do things without the aid of “training wheels.” We have to figure out things for ourselves. When we do, the feeling of accomplishment is often greater and the lesson lasts a lifetime.

I hope you enjoy what I have written and find some of it enlightening. These—sometimes quirky times when things went sideways—stories give you snapshots of times while I was growing up becoming me. You will see some of my virtues and flaws. Fortunately, the grownup me has a lot more common sense, which comes with time. I have taken creative license to fill in the gaps with what I think did or might have happened. All of the stories here are mostly true.