

The Old Stomping Ground

By Richard Kesterman

Until I was eight, going to church on Sunday morning involved driving from my home in Price Hill to Concordia Church on Race Street in Over-the-Rhine. Although I have many recollections of the old church, one that remains particularly vivid to me occurred after the services had ended. My dad was born at 1623 Pleasant Street, only a couple blocks away, and since Concordia didn't have a parking lot, we often parked near his old home.

I recall going past the old tenement. Although I didn't realize it at the time, I was about the same age as he had been when he lived there. In one way, I saw the neighborhood in a similar light that he did: the eyes of youth. This was his old stomping ground, where the investigation of the world around him began. In another way, I was a visitor from the suburbs. What I was experiencing was different from the world he came into. There were no longer the horse-drawn vehicles, the traveling vendors, or much else that he experienced in the 1920s. While walking to the car, Dad would tell me stories about the different places and the people who once lived there. Fortunately, this wasn't the only opportunity I had to hear these tales. Over the years, Dad would retell the stories that I had heard, and I began to appreciate how these simple tales gave me an understanding of him and the era he grew up in.

When Dad was ten or eleven, his family moved to Mulberry Street on the border of Over-the-Rhine and Mt. Auburn. Dad took me past the old house, and again I had a reference point to his stories. But while this gave insight into his neighborhood, I didn't have an opportunity to explore the inside of either building until some years after he passed away, when my daughter, Carolyn, and I went to Mulberry Street on a September Sunday in 2005 to visit local artist David Day in a tenement that had been refurbished. David's family had once lived in this building, and I was invited to see how the old structure had been modernized and put to new use.

As Carolyn and I drove there that afternoon, I told her about my dad's family and how they, too, had once lived on the street. But as we neared the old house, I began to worry about what we might see. The last time I had driven by the house was over twenty years before, and at that time, the front door was adorned with some rather strong language. Much to my surprise, as we got closer, I saw that the building was freshly painted, and more importantly, there was an "open house" sign by the curb.

Here was an opportunity I could hardly pass up. To be able to go inside the house and see where the family had once lived seemed too good to be true, and yet, my first impression on entering was one of disappointment. The rooms had been refurbished to the point of being unrecognizable to anyone who had previously lived there. The building itself might date from around 1870, but the interior spoke more of 2005. New base boards, replacement windows, modernized kitchen, and an inside bathroom – none of these features served to remind me of my dad and his family in the 1930s and 40s.

But once the initial disappointment wore off, I began to see what the old house had to offer. The cabinets and appliances might be different, but this was the kitchen in which the family gathered on cold evenings to do their schoolwork if they were younger, or have a beer and relax if they were older. Dad had spoken of how on Saturdays, his mom would mop the kitchen floor, and after it was dry, she would spread old newspapers down, possibly to keep it clean at least one day. My dad and his one brother and sister would pass part of the afternoon lying on the floor, reading the cartoons or anything else that caught their fancy. Grandma's kitchen safe and blue and white canister set would have been against the one wall, and an ice box would likely have been against the wall near the back door.

Dad never spoke highly about the old ice boxes. I can recall one time in particular when someone was showing him an ice box that had been converted into a mini bar and liquor cabinet. Dad's remark was rather curt, and when asked if he didn't think it was cute, replied that as a young boy, he had to help lug a block of ice up two flights of steps to the third floor of a tenement, and as such, found the person's treasure one of utility and hard work, and not of beauty. While this story related to Pleasant Street, I doubt that his opinion changed much on Mulberry.

The kitchen was the last room on the first floor, and on the far wall was a door which in my dad's time, opened out onto a flight of steps leading into the backyard. This door now served as access to a nice-size deck. While the exterior of the house might be nondescript, the view from the deck was spectacular. Facing slightly southwest, I gazed out over the rooftops of Over-the-Rhine, with the Union Terminal in the distance. This view made up for any disappointment I might have had with the modernized interior. This was the view my dad saw any time he looked out the door, and since the family moved here in the early 1930s, it is possible that Dad saw the Terminal in its earliest days, possibly even during its construction.

While Dad never cared much for anything mechanical, his love of rail travel was one subject on which he could wax poetic. He would speak of the rails as they branched out to places unknown, how they lead you away from where you have been. The railroad was a means of escape, a chance to move on with your life. Was this view from his backdoor the impetus for these ideas? Certainly he wouldn't have had any such view from Pleasant Street. The family had to move up the hill before dad would see how he could, and did, move forward with his life.

In addition to the view, there was another feature seen from the deck which the real estate agents had drawn my attention to. It was a very large and beautiful rose bush. I would estimate that it was at least five feet tall, and was covered with blossoms of crimson. Certainly great care had gone into this plant, and to anyone else, its grandeur would have stood alone. Unfortunately, I had brought along a few old photos of the house to show David Day, and in looking at one of the backyard, I saw the secret of the roses' success: there in the photo where the bush now stood, was the family outhouse. Those years of pre-fertilization had done wonders for the plant, and so, in some small way, my family was responsible for some of the roses' magnificent blooms.

Going back inside the house, we went up to the second floor. It, too, had been renovated, and since I knew nothing of which room might have been Dad's, we moved on through a door that led into an unfinished storage space. Even though this area was dusty and unkept, it was my favorite spot inside the house. Not because it had any visually-redeeming qualities, but because it was the one space that most certainly looked like it did when my dad lived there.

Returning to the front room of the house, I related some information regarding Dad's family to the two realtors sitting there. One of these stories dealt with telephone calls. For at least the early years that my dad's family lived on Mulberry, they, along with some of their neighbors, lacked any telephone service. A short distance away was the Jacob Mansion, which was originally a residence of local brewer Christian Moerlein. The Jacob Family which now lived there had a phone and would allow neighbors to not only make calls, but also to receive them. Dad recalled how when a call came in, one of the Jacob Family would come out on the steps and yell out the name of the call's recipient.

On the day of our visit, the front room of the house had a table set up with refreshments for perspective buyers. This seemed appropriate since this would have been the room that Dad's family entertained guests in and gathered for holiday celebrations. Dad related many memories of Christmastime to me through the years – such as his mother setting up a nativity in one corner of the room with lumps of coal to serve as rocks for the figures – but the story he told most occurred on Pleasant Street.

One Christmas when Dad was young, the family couldn't afford a tree. Dad wanted to help, and he went to a tree stand near Findlay Market and threw himself on the mercy of the merchant. Possibly Dad looked pitiful enough, but in any event, Dad got a tree free of charge. Dragging the tree for over two blocks, Dad finally got the tree home, and with pride, showed it to the family. Now the only problem with this windfall was that Dad's route took him down the center of Pleasant Street, the same part of the street in which numerous horse-drawn vehicles had made their way previously. When Dad would tell me this story, he was always touched by the way his family pitched in, cleaned up the tree the best they could, and celebrated the holidays around the salvaged tree.

With these memories and other pleasant thoughts, our visit to 37 Mulberry was drawing to a close. A few more remarks with the realtors, a final glance around, and Carolyn and I stepped out of the doorway onto the sidewalk. It was fortunate that we had come there during the short window of time that we could go inside. In many ways, it was nice the rooms were empty, since they provided a blank canvas for our imagination. Even though our visit was short, it was enough time for the old house to touch two more lives with its history.