

## Peace on Earth

December 17, 2007

G. Gibson Carey IV

It is not clear to me how I fell into the habit of writing, for these happy occasions, papers that have little or nothing to do with the holiday season. I am no Christmasphobe. I yield to no man in the pleasure I take from our Lord's birthdate. But given a golden opportunity to write something sentimental about the season, I keep reverting to tales of bizarre incidents that have befallen me along the way. Last year it was a parachuting boa constrictor. And so it shall be for one more Holiday Observance. I would point out, however, that the happenings I will share with you tonight did at least occur in high holiday season, with snow on the ground, and Christmas greenery everywhere to be seen.

Come with me now back to Christmastime 1960 - an era when our day-today lives were shaped by needs and customs long since forgotten. And one of these was that out-of-date anomaly, the carpool.

Ah yes... the car pool. Who among us can remember the car pool... that vestige of bygone times, when no one - NONE OF US - owned two automobiles? And husbands banded together to take turns driving each other to work so our wives could have the family car to shop, or run errands, or take the children to school and the doctors.

Most successful car pools functioned on a precarious understanding of unwritten rules. Only cars with four doors were allowed. There was a meticulously prescribed rotation of drivers. There was an agreed order in which members were to be picked up and dropped off. It was clearly understood that there must be no baby seats, no dirty diapers, no other infantile flotsam or jetsam left in the car by one's wife. The preferred routes to be taken to and from work were invariably to be followed, together with alternate routes in case of traffic jams on Columbia Parkway. There must be always a sufficiency of gas in the tank before picking up the riders. Prompt payment of shared parking expenses was absolutely essential.

For many carpools there were further territorial "understandings" on such weighty matters as who claimed which seat in the car. And - above all else - there were clearly stated rules on punctuality, and these were absolute. To manage all of these important issues, there was generally a senior member who assumed leadership responsibilities, handled the finances, and called the shots as the enforcer.

In the early 1960's I was pleased to be in a car pool operating out of lower Indian Hill with four other junior P&G associates. The five of us - a full complement for a car pool - lived in rented farmhouses (which could still be found in those days). Dick Shepherd was the senior member and enforcer of the group, a role for which he was particularly well suited: he was a man who liked things done the right way - his way - with never an exception. Another member of our little group, King Herbert, was a wonderfully likable man who was laid-back, perpetually disorganized and - worst of all - invariably late. It was only a matter of time until these two had a

head-on collision, and all of us knew it.

Morning after morning we would pull up in front of King's house on the Stanley Rowe estate on Muchmore Road, toot the horn... and then wait. Morning after morning King's wife Jane would appear on the porch in her wrapper, waving at us and assuring us, "He'll be right out." Then there would be a further wait until, at long last, King would appear on a dead run, like Dagwood Bumstead, with his necktie, briefcase and raincoat in one hand and frequently the remains of a partially eaten breakfast - usually half of a fried egg on a piece of toast - in the other. He would leap into the car in the cheeriest way as though everything was all right, while Dick Shepherd fumed in silence.

Looking back on it, it should have been clear to us all that this volatile arrangement could not last: that we were dancing on the brink of a volcano and that an eruption was bound to occur. And so it developed...

One December morning - in the high Christmas season - we pulled up in front of King's house with the four other riders already aboard, and tooted the horn. Sure enough, out came Jane in her wrapper to waggle her fingers at us and call, "He'll be right out..." in what she took to be a cheery greeting and reassuring sign that everything was on track and King was about to make his appearance. And then, after a longer than usual wait, out ran King still munching on a piece of French toast, liberally covered with powdered sugar. As he slid into the back seat (the last man aboard always had to sit in the middle of the back seat), French toast in hand, he sprinkled powdered sugar on all of us in the process. Dick Shepherd, sitting in the right hand side of the front seat, got a liberal dose: it looked like artificial Christmas snow - or dandruff - on the shoulder of his blue suit.

One of the cardinal rules was that briefcases were piled on the front seat between the driver and passenger. King flipped his briefcase onto the pile in the middle of the front seat and we took off for downtown, heading down Miami Road hill into Mariemont. As we went around the first curve, King's briefcase toppled over into Dick Shepherd's lap. That was all it took. With never an oath or word of warning, Shepherd picked it up and with all his strength gave it a mighty backhand swing into the rear seat. King never saw it coming: he was happily munching his breakfast, and the briefcase took him square in the French toast: blood spurted from his nose.

Shepherd never turned around to survey the chaos he had created but sat rigidly looking forward out the windshield as though nothing untoward had happened. Pouring gore from his nose, King picked up the briefcase while I watched aghast. Holding it by one end, he took careful aim at the back of Shepherd's head. With all his strength he drove it forward, smashing Shepherd's head into the dashboard (breaking his nose, it later developed). Blood streamed in all directions.

And so began the great briefcase fight.

While Dick Schacht, the driver, struggled to keep the car on the snowy road, briefcases started flying front to back, back to front. On Shepherd's next swing into the back seat King ducked, and the briefcase took me square in the face, shattering my glasses and giving me a bloody nose. As

a wounded noncombatant, I watched in horror, trying to stanch the flow as the briefcases flew back and forth. No intelligible word was spoken, but the struggle was punctuated with the awful grunts and ughs of grown men locked in mortal combat. Skip Nalen, the fifth passenger, ducked and dodged, contributing to the confusion of combat.

And then it was over, as suddenly as it had started. By this time we were at the bottom of Miami Road hill and well into Mariemont. Dick Schacht pulled up in front of the movie theater and, without a word, the walking wounded got out of the car. There was a pay phone on the corner, and one by one we called for our wives to come and get us. We were a remarkable trio, three grievously wounded men covered with gore, standing on the curb amongst the Christmas decorations, tending our wounds as we waited for our wives. No one spoke a word to anyone else. There was nothing to **say**.

Passing cars all but stopped while onlookers stared in wonder as they drove past. We were standing between two snow-covered Christmas trees in front of the Mariemont movie theater, a pathetic trio clad in seasonal scarlet and white, incarnadine from the nose down in our blood-soaked button-down shirts. It must have been quite a sight. A forlorn tribute to the season of goodwill toward men.

And that was the end of the car pool. There was no meeting... no discussion... no accusations or apologies... no armistice declared. We all knew it was over and could never be put together again. I went out that very evening and for \$125 (a considerable sum in those days) I bought a nine year old Chevrolet with the floor in the back seat completely rusted out, and began driving myself to work: so did everyone else.

It was the end of an era - the car pool era - and a remarkable way for grown men to celebrate the Christmas season, and peace on earth.