

North Bay in the 1950s and 1960s

Stories by Michael Oldfield

LONG AGO AND FAR AWAY

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by

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Recently I received via the Internet one of those humorous quizzes about bygone days asking if I remembered such things as Studebakers, ice boxes, headlight dimmer switches which were mounted on the floor of the car and when milk was delivered in glass bottles. Yes, I can remember all of that quite well. In North Bay in the 1950's, you couldn't have pizza or Chinese food delivered to your door but milk and bread were, on a daily basis. In fact, North Bay Dairy still had a couple of horse-drawn milk wagons in use. The driver/milkman rarely touched the reins; he would make a sharp clucking noise and the horse would plod down the street and stop at the next house. But I can also remember the formal atmosphere of those times and how that was reflected in so many of the institutions. For instance, banks did not use catchy little names such as the T.D., The Royal or The Scotia. They had long imposing titles which were meant to instill confidence; The Imperial Bank Of Canada and The Canadian Bank Of Commerce were not interested in being coy or cute. Neither were they interested in encouraging their depositors to borrow money on a whim. Thriftiness and fiscal responsibility were their watchwords and in that era, there were no glossy ads urging bank customers to, "Come on in and get the loan you need for that dream house, new car or boat that you've always wanted!". Memories of the Great Depression and the life savings that had been lost during that upheaval were still fresh in many people's minds and the common wisdom of the day was... better to go without than to go into debt. Entering the Commerce Bank was like stepping into the Museum Of

Natural History. Their high vaulted ceilings and hushed ambience caused everyone, even small children, to speak in quiet whispers. The tellers, all middle-aged men in grey suits, sat in cubicles which were wire cages and conducted their financial affairs with a minimum of talk. There was no idle chit-chat, no laughter or joking and they did not urge you to “Have a nice day” when you left. This nonsense, all-business approach was common to many public venues in those days. Libraries, courtrooms, federal, provincial and municipal offices were all decorated in dark mahogany paneling and their cold austere environments and unsmiling staff conveyed the message that this was not a place for fun or frivolity. This formality and adherence to well-defined rules of behavior also permeated all levels of schooling. From the earliest grades through to high school, it was made quite clear that you were there to learn, not have a good time. For breaking the rules in public school, you received several blows from the strap across your hands; in high school, you were given detentions, extra work or could be expelled if you proved to be a trouble-maker. The teacher’s word was law and woe betide he or she who antagonized a teacher. All high schools enforced a dress code. Girls were not allowed to wear blue jeans or slacks to school and boys were forbidden to wear black leather jackets, the symbol of the motorcycle hoodlum. Caps were removed the moment you entered the school door and were not put on again until you walked outside. This all-pervasive atmosphere of obedience to rules and serious attention to studies was in place for one reason, as we were constantly reminded; we were being trained to be the young leaders of tomorrow. This approach to teaching obviously worked because those who graduated from Grade 12 or 13 in the 1950's had an education equal to the college B.A. of today. We had a good grounding in math and science, knew who Julius Caesar, Genghis Khan and Marco Polo were because we had studied them in History class, were familiar with the plots of “The Merchant Of Venice”, “A Tale Of Two Cities”, “Ivanhoe” and the

other classics we had read in English Lit., could write in proper sentences having been shown the way by our English Composition teacher and, thanks to Geography class, we could find Mindanao, Madagascar and the Ural Mountains on the map with no trouble.

In my small Northern Ontario hometown, population 25,000, we had two hospitals; St. Josephs for the Roman Catholics and the Civic Hospital for all others. In Eastern Canada, many institutions were divided along religious lines. There were separate public schools, high schools and even cemeteries for Catholics and Protestants. To us, a mixed marriage occurred when a Catholic girl wed a Protestant boy, or vice-versa, and everyone speculated as to which one would convert to the other's religion. Our two hospitals were eight storeys high but were not huge. They were never over-crowded and there was never a shortage of beds or staff. The reason for this was quite simple: their patients were either people who had been injured in accidents, women waiting to give birth or the terminally ill or elderly who had no hope of recovery. No one went into hospital to get parts replaced or to have their heart operated on; such surgery was unknown.

Teenage kids did not hang out at shopping malls because there weren't any. Local restaurants such as The Chicago or the Arcadian Grill which dispensed hamburgers and milk shakes were the usual gathering spots for older teens while younger kids tended to congregate at some nearby grocery store. Most of these were old houses which had been converted into merchandising outlets selling everything from groceries to shoelaces and chewing tobacco and whatever else they could cram onto their shelves. These old houses-cum-grocery stores had wooden exteriors covered in large metal signs for Coca Cola or Pepsi which was quite fitting because the main attraction for most kids was the pop cooler that stood in one

corner of the store. This was the large refrigerated container, painted bright red for Coke or bright yellow for Pepsi, wherein assorted soft drink bottles stood in cold water. You handed the grocer your seven cents, lifted the lid of the pop cooler, fished out your bottle of Coke, Pepsi, Orange Crush, Root Beer or Cream Soda, shoved the top end into the bottle opener which was attached to the cooler, snapped off the cap, inserted two straws and slurped away to your heart's content. No one drank directly from the bottle. Another refrigeration device which held a great fascination for kids, especially in the summer months, was the freezer containing the Popsicles and Fudgesicles. Not only did we devour these frozen treats whenever we had a spare nickel to spend, we also collected their red polka dot paper containers because when you had amassed several hundred of these, you could send away for prizes. There was a great sameness to these corner grocery stores. They all had bells mounted above the front door which jangled when someone entered and they all catered to the tiny tots by offering a large selection of jawbreakers, licorice pipes, bubble gum, waxed lips, candy cigarettes, Cracker Jack "with a prize in every box", and penny candy of every description. For adults there was a magazine rack containing the latest issues of Life, Colliers, The Saturday Evening Post, Redbook, True, Argosy, Field & Stream, The Ladies Home Journal, Photoplay, Modern Screen and True Romance. On a lower shelf were the comic books and you could feel the intense glare of the storekeeper's eyes upon you if you looked as though you might be reading the latest adventures of Superman, Captain Marvel, Batman, Red Ryder, Mandrake the Magician, Tarzan or Flash Gordon without paying for them. Because North Bay was situated beside a large lake which attracted summertime tourists, nearly all grocery stores offered scenic postcards, many of which were the humorous kind created by trick photography. The most popular were black and white postcards showing fishermen hauling into their boats a trout or pickerel that was just slightly smaller than Moby Dick! I can

also recall that many of these stores sold comical signs that you could hang up in your garage or workshop; one in particular read, “If You’re So Durned Smart, Why Ain’t You Rich?”. I have hearkened back to this sign and its sentiment many times in the ensuing years and have come to the conclusion that it was probably the greatest piece of philosophy that I ever read.

Youngsters could also experience the thrill of bargain hunting at Dewey’s, our local Five and Ten Cent Store on Main St. East near the Arcadian Grill. This emporium sold household goods, small hardware items and toiletries but a large portion of the store was set aside for their junior customers. Here, kids with a few extra dimes and nickels in their pockets could wander up and down the aisles and cast their discerning eyes over counters laden with balloons, assorted rubber balls, colouring books, crayons, coloured pencils and coloured chalk, masks for Halloween and firecrackers for the 24th of May, water pistols, collections of brightly coloured marbles and their own special reading material which they called Big Little books. These thick miniature publications for pint-sized hands contained the latest gripping and spine-tingling adventures of Dick Tracy, Little Orphan Annie, Steve Canyon, King Of The Royal Mounted, Terry and The Pirates and Joe Palooka and a host of other characters who had begun their careers in the daily newspaper comic strips.

For comic book enthusiasts, Liggett’s Drug Store at Main and Ferguson and Stevenson’s Sport & Tobacco at the other end of Main Street West had the best selections. This led to another youthful activity which involved several youngsters gathering at a friend’s house with huge armloads of comic books which were then traded back and forth. For more serious readers, Fosdick’s Book Store offered a large array of books for all ages. My particular favourites were the wonderful

tales of such daring collies as Lad, Wolf and Grey Dawn as written by that master of dog stories, Albert Payson Terhune and the futuristic adventures of Tom Corbett, Space Cadet. In our later years, we would head down to Fosdick's in early September to buy all the required textbooks for high school.

There were, of course, no self-serve gas stations in that era and many of the oil companies such as White Rose, Supertest and B.A. are now gone. The attendants who came running when your car passed over the rubber hose which dinged the bell in the office did not wear the plastic bow-ties or have big toothy smiles like the men in the Texaco magazine ads, but they did fill up your tank, check your oil and wash your windshield. Naturally, you paid them in cash; credit cards had yet to make an appearance. Best of all, just about every gas station had a garage attached to it should you need a new fan belt, headlamp or any other emergency repair. Road maps were also available...free of charge.

One endeavor which has changed little over the years is the business of riding a bus, except for one thing. Back then, the uniformed drivers of the the blue and white Deluxe Bus Lines which carried passengers around North Bay and out to West Ferris and Callander, carried a change-dispensing device on their belts and could hand you quarters, dimes and nickels in order to supply you with the correct fare.

As darkness fell on North Bay, three-blocks of Main Street were transformed into a mini version of Broadway as, one by one, all the neon signs came to life. Every restaurant, store, hotel and car dealership had signs which pulsated in red, green, blue or yellow. The Capitol, Bay and Melrose (later the Odeon) theatres had dozens of white running lights around their marquees and everywhere you looked

there were flashing red arrows directing you to a doorway, colourful spirals which wound and unwound, letters which climbed upward and downward as they spelled out the name of the business; a non-stop moving kaleidoscope of coloured images which never failed to amaze my young and impressionable mind.

Apart from the disappearance of moving neon signs, another old tradition which has fallen by the wayside is the family business. The stores along North Bay's Main Street were nearly all run by brothers, husbands and wives or fathers and sons. It was an accepted fact that the oldest son would take over the business when Dad decided he was ready to retire. Family-operated stores and indeed, main streets themselves were killed off in the 1960's by the emergence of the mega shopping malls with their huge parking lots and Cineplex cinemas. Interspersed between the malls, came long stretches of road where gas stations were crammed in between fast-food drive-in and take-out establishments. Slowly but surely, downtown was overtaken by the new shopping complexes which arose in the surrounding districts.

I well remember what Christmas was like in those far-off times. When December arrived it was always very cold with lots of snow on the ground and kids like myself would be lured to the windows of Cochrane Dunlop Hardware and Richardson's Hardware on Main Street West to stare enviously at the toyland window displays. A veritable feast for our young eyes was laid out on layers of cotton wool made to look like fresh snow. Lionel and American Flyer electric trains chugged and tooted in their non-stop journeys around a large circular track. They were, of course, pulled by steam locomotives; no self-respecting kid would have asked Santa for a diesel! For the sporty types, there were Toronto Maple Leaf and Montreal Canadiens sweaters, hockey sticks, pucks, skates, toboggans and

sleighs. For the imaginative types, there were wind-up cars, trucks, fire engines and tanks which could climb over obstacles with their rubber treads. Roy Rogers and Gene Autry holster sets containing pearl handled silver revolvers which fired caps sent many of us mentally climbing into the saddle on Trigger or Champion. A great assortment of board games such as Parchesi, Rummoli, Chinese Checkers and the ever-popular Monopoly were wedged in between Mechano sets, Tinker Toys, log building sets, model airplane kits made of balsa wood and Junior Chemistry Labs. For girls, stores offered dolls galore including the crème-de-la-crème, the one modelled after figure skater Barbara Ann Scott. There were nurses outfits, tea sets and doll houses with all the miniature furnishing that went inside. For the budding engineer, there were several German-built steam driven toys. These consisted of a shiny brass boiler with a small firebox underneath. You filled the little boiler with water, put a heating cube in the firebox and when it developed a full head of steam, it would cause a flywheel to rotate and there was a tiny steam whistle you could blow. Frankly, these particular toys always struck me as being more trouble than they were worth and never even made it on to the bottom of my Christmas list!

During the magic month of December, Richardson's Hardware was an absolute magnet for all youngsters. Inside they had a large mailbox decorated to look like a brick chimney; this was where you dropped your letter to Santa and, if you were really lucky, The Great Man himself would read your letter over the air on his daily 5 p.m. broadcast from CFCH Radio.

So, having wallowed in all this nostalgia for bygone days, can I honestly say that life was better then? Well, yes and no. You certainly felt more secure from the

criminal element. Kids could walk to school in safety and few people locked the doors of their house or their car because break-ins were unheard of and auto theft was rare. People were far more civilized in their dealings with each other. Men did not swear in public and women did not swear at all. Children could be taken by their parents to any movie playing at the local theatre because none of them were R-rated. Ordinary working families could afford to buy a house and it was not necessary for both parents to hold down a job to support a family because half their yearly income was not gobbled up by taxes, as is the usual case today. But, on the down side, if you were poor in the 1950's...you were really poor and there were few government programmes to help you out. Should you be afflicted with a serious medical problem, there were no miracle drugs or delicate surgical procedures to cure you. No one retired before age 65 and then there was little to do but spend your remaining years in a rocking chair on the front porch. Most people received only one or two week's holidays and that was usually spent travelling in the family car to visit distant relatives. Air travel was available but there were no cheap fares and propeller-driven aircraft took a very long time to go from Point A to Point B. Hawaiian or Caribbean holidays were indulged in only by the very wealthy. Almost everyone smoked in those days and at every social gathering, out would come the packets of Craven A, Sweet Caporals, DuMaurier, Sportsman, Export A, Players, Buckingham or Black Cat cigarettes and all would be offered a smoke. It was a rare person who declined. Large tins of cigarettes called a "Flat Fifty" were a very popular gift at Christmastime. If you wanted to go out for a drink, some of the better quality hotels had a lounge where you could buy a cocktail, especially if they had a dance floor or provided live musical entertainment. Liquor laws varied from province to province; in some places, you could only get a drink if you ordered a sandwich or a plate of cheese and crackers. For many, a night out usually meant a visit to the local beer parlour. These were

usually located in the basements of hotels such as the St. Regis, The Empire, The Belmont, the Continental or the Parkview and were divided into rooms for men only or ladies and escorts. The interior décor of the Men's Only beer parlours could only be described as grim and drab. The air was filled with blue cigarette smoke and the din of loud voices. You sat on metal chairs at a round table which was covered with a piece of old terry-cloth to soak up the spilled beer. The moment you and your group had seated themselves, a stocky man wearing a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up, an apron with a bulging change pocket and toting a large tray, would plop a glass of draft beer in front of everyone at the table and take your money. Before these had been consumed, he would be back to ask, "Another round here, fellas?" and drop more glasses of beer onto the table. The message was clear: you were not there to enjoy yourselves or to have a nice evening out; you were there to drink as much beer as you could possibly hold. Drunkenness was not looked upon as a major sin in those days and certainly not an illness. The staggering, red-nosed drunk with his slurred speech was a popular figure in the humour of those days and most radio and early TV comics had a drunk act as part of their repertoire. Teenage drunkenness, however, was virtually unknown. At age 21, you could legally apply for your liquor license and a trip to the government liquor store on McIntyre St. West involved filling out a form with numerous details which was then handed over to a clerk along with your money and your license. He would then go into the storeroom and come out with your bottle of rye, scotch, rum or gin. Food was probably better then because little of it was pre-packaged, frozen or pumped full of strange chemicals to make it last longer on the shelf. Fast food and junk food were not available and obesity was not a huge problem.

Conclusion? Yes, I have some fond memories of those times because that's when I was a carefree kid with no responsibilities and no bills to pay. I still love to look through old catalogues from that era and see the products that were once so familiar to me. But the realistic side of me says that I would not want to give up all my modern comforts and conveniences and return to those simple times. It's fun to look back at the way we were but as far as living conditions are concerned, I think I'll choose to stay where I am.

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