

What I Remember

Memories of a Green Acres Boyhood



By Steven Paul Cahn

Forest Road School

I arrived at Forest Road School in Green Acres, Valley Stream (now known as Mill Brook) in September of 1958, ready to start the first grade. The only problem - I had behavioral "issues." I was a constant source of irritation for Miss Stein, but I couldn't for the life of me understand what I was doing wrong. I was never disrespectful, and being malicious was the furthest thing from my nature. So I was invariably surprised when she'd yell at me, or say in a very sing-song tone: "Steven... I'm still waiting!"

I was blessed, I suppose, with an overactive brain. I couldn't sit still or concentrate for long periods of time, and my report card reflected my fidgety nature. I can't help but wonder what kind of developmental testing I would have had to endure and what kind of drug regimen I would have been on had it been now, instead of 1958. I could have been spared a lot of report card lectures, if I'd had A.D.D. or some other alphabet soup diagnosis. Looking back, however, I'm glad that I had the opportunity to work through it, without thinking I had a serious problem for which pharmaceuticals were my only refuge. In our medical and psychiatric ignorance, the diagnosis was simply "boys will be boys" and I took my lumps for it in the classroom and around report card time. I'd like to think it built character... nah.

As the year progressed, Miss Stein's fuse became shorter and shorter. My self-centered recollection is that I had become the sole target of her torment, only to recently learn that she locked poor Linda in a supply closet for an hour, over some alleged classroom infraction. Linda, to this day, unwaveringly maintains

her innocence. Had this happened today instead of over 60 years ago, Linda would now be visiting Miss Stein in the women's correctional facility at Riker's Island for the wrongful detainment and unlawful imprisonment of a minor under her care. But in 1958, all Linda got to do was cry when she was freed from her makeshift prison among the shelves of construction paper, *My Weekly Reader*, and Elmer's Glue. And although she swore through her tears that she had done nothing at all, she dutifully promised never to do it again.

Every morning around ten, the milk monitors would roll their red wagons down the hallway to pick up milk and cookies for the mid-morning snack. When they returned to the classroom with their graham cracker haul, the milk and cookies would be placed on the counter next the window until snack-time. This was a double distraction for me. With one single glance I could take in the morning snack in all its glory, as well as the open expanse of the playground. The view of the milk and cookies provided a salivary response unequaled by Pavlov's best dog, and helped my mind find its way from the rigors of Dick and Jane back to the warmth of my imagination, where it was most comfortable.

Snack-time meant the morning was half over. And when the milk was finally distributed, the chill that makes it so refreshing had been lost to the time on the counter. Worse was when, in the dead of winter, the radiator under the counter was on full-blast. By the time we opened the orange and white wax-coated containers, the milk had achieved a consistency somewhere between kefir and small curd cottage cheese. But as unkind as the radiator had been to the milk, it was nothing short of magic for the cookies. They were warm and toasty when

we got them and tasted like they had just come out of the oven. Without knowing the actual term for it, milk and cookie time taught me the irony of the “double-edged sword.”

Row by row, my classmates were called to the window to take a container of milk and two cookies. The cookie variety was severely limited. Not at all what one might expect from a postwar-boom economy chock full of choices. Graham crackers and ginger cookies were alternated like clockwork, each with their own unique advantages. The grahams, when carefully snapped along the center perforation, yielded four cookies instead of two! Knowing full well that the volume and mass had not been altered, this was still somehow considered to be a big advantage for a kid who hadn't had a single morsel to eat for nearly two hours. Licking the cinnamon sugar off your fingers was yet another plus. Even when the cookies were gone, there were still a few more licks before schoolwork could resume.

The ginger cookies were shaped like characters from American history. Davey Crocket in a coonskin cap. George Washington with his trademark powdered wig. Abraham Lincoln with his prominent beard. When we got back to our seats, the boys would invariably bite the heads off, making Robespierre look like an amateur. The oral decapitation of our national heroes provided, cumulatively, hours of entertainment. I don't think there was any message of protest there- it was just fun to do.

While on line to get my soon-to-be-beheaded ginger cookie friends, I noticed a helicopter in the sky, over the upper grade wing of the school. The horizontal rotor was moving at just the right speed to present the optical illusion that it was standing still. I understood these kinds of things from watching prime time westerns on TV with my dad. He was a western gourmand, and in the late 1950s there was plenty of television to satiate his appetite. *Gunsmoke* was the standard to which all adult westerns were held, and its success brought an endless supply of good triumphing over evil in twenty-two minutes of black and white programming. *Maverick*, *Tombstone Territory*, *Have Gun Will Travel*, *Wanted Dead or Alive*, *Tales of Wells Fargo*, *The Adventures of Jim Bowie*, *Cheyenne*, *Sugarfoot*, *Wyatt Earp* (“Brave, Courageous, and Bold!”) *The Texan*, and *The Rifleman*. I know that there were many more, but these names just rolled off my tongue. The venerable *Bonanza*, like *Gunsmoke*, was a full hour long, and was the original “Must See TV.” During the chase scenes, the wagon wheels always seemed to give the illusion of going forward in slow motion, and then changing direction going slowly backwards. I didn't know the science behind it, but I knew it when I saw it. And the same was

happening that day on the milk and cookie line, over the playground's sky.

“LOOK!” I shouted, “It's a helicopter!” Everyone on line craned his neck to get the right angle and the others rushed up to the window to take in the sight. Miss Stein came running too, because helicopter sightings so close to the airport's landing patterns were fairly rare. The Grumman and Sikorsky plants were only miles away, but chopper flights so close to Idlewild Airport were far too dangerous. After a few seconds, when the classroom noise subsided, she said slowly, in a carefully-calculated-to-embarrass tone: “It's not called a helicopter, it's called a hé-li-o-copter.” She laughed out loud at my pronunciation, and caused the rest of the class to laugh out loud, too. I knew then how Linda felt when she was paroled from the supply closet. But this time it was me who was the target of the teacher's verbal slings and arrows.

I had been thoroughly embarrassed. And, for the moment, I was a laughing stock. I could feel my cheeks turn red as the blood rushed to my face. It was Mark Twain who said, “Man is the only animal that blushes. Or needs to.” And though he said it decades before there were helicopters, I knew that he was absolutely right.

To the rest of the class it was only a brief moment of laughter at someone else's expense. Everyone sat down and began to open their milk containers. They had forgotten about the helicopter and began their daily snack-time rituals. But for me there was only the uneasy discomfiture of public humiliation. That day there would be no biting off Davey Crockett's head; no licking the cinnamon sugar off my fingers. I wondered to myself why a teacher would deliberately be so mean. But I was just a child, and this was a concern for greater minds to ponder.

I never really found an answer as to the helicopter pronunciation, at least none that satisfied me. I've heard that it is an old form of the word; much like aero plane had once been the preferred usage. Others have told me that it was a British pronunciation that predominated during the 40s and 50s. But what is an even more unsettling thought is that my children and the children of my entire generation, in these post 9/11 days, are once again looking to the skies to identify the aircraft that flies overhead.

Idlewild Airport

Forest Road Elementary School was approximately three miles from Idlewild Airport (which became JFK in 1963). Airplanes were always overhead, entangled in a latticework of landing patterns and paths of ascent. It

was a favorite game in the playground to pick a landing pattern and watch for planes to appear over the horizon. One after another they descended upon the Idlewild runways. They flew directly overhead, eventually circling around Jamaica Bay before touching down on the tarmac, which only a few years before had been saltwater swampland. One after another they appeared – silent at first, and then deafeningly loud as they passed only a few hundred feet above the playground. We all knew the tail designs of every airline that flew into Idlewild. We all knew that only Pan Am was allowed to display the American Flag. And we all knew that ninety seconds after this plane passed, another would appear in the exact same spot on the horizon.

Airplanes were a big part of our growing up. We knew a Boeing 707 from a Douglas DC-8 just the same as we knew a Chevy from an Oldsmobile. And we also knew exactly when to stop talking and let the plane go by, so that our conversation wouldn't be lost to the roar of engines. I always loved talking to a friend when a plane passed overhead. When the volume was at its apex, I'd stop talking, but continue moving my lips so as to pretend words were coming out. And then, as the noise faded away, I would end my sentence with some demonstrative non sequitur conclusion like "... and that's why I'll never do *that* again!" No one else actually found it funny, but it cracked me up.

My first grade classroom had windows with a western exposure that was perfect for growing lima beans in Dixie Cups and daydreaming in the middle of class. It was also perfect for seeing the planes as they descended. In the front of the room was a blackboard. They were still black in 1958 and the stark white chalk made a bold contrast. Miss Stein always had a student wash the board before going home, so it would be fresh and clean in the morning. But erasures grayed the board, and the contrast dimmed as the day progressed. Occasionally, she dipped into her private reserve of red chalk for emphasis, and there was a nifty multi-pronged chalk-holder enabling her to make three lines with a single stroke. This was very high tech for 1958, and with similar devices still in use today, it shows that analog continues to have its place in a digital society.

The blackboard was framed on either side by the painted cinder block walls of the classroom. The bottom half of the walls were green, and the cinder blocks on top were off-white. A full sized American flag hung proudly from a pole bracketed into the cinder block. The flag was the focus of our attention every day as the pledge was part of our daily morning ritual. In the first grade, words like "indivisible" might have been confused or mispronounced, but it didn't detract from the feeling of patriotism.

Taped to the wall below the flag was a chart. Not of the alphabet or colors or shapes as might be expected. It was a chart showing the various commercial and military planes of the day. There was no chart of Russian aircraft in our class. My guess is that if we didn't recognize the plane as one of ours... it was one of theirs.

The Lockheed Constellation was my favorite plane. It had four propellers and three tails, and Miss Stein told us at every opportunity that Ike used a "Connie" for Air Force One. I didn't really know who Ike was, but the fact that she was on a first name basis with him was impressive enough for me. Lockheed also made the C-130 Hercules, which I liked because of its name. Boeing produced the B-17 Fortress, the B-25 Mitchell, and the B-52 Stratofortress, a huge jet plane which is still in use today. On the commercial side, besides the Connie, were the Boeing 707 and its competitor, the Douglas DC-8. Each was a beautiful sight as it roared overhead, and in the days before noise pollution abatement, they forced everyone to place their fingers in their ears to protect their eardrums from perforating.

The plane chart was never part of our lesson plan. It was never even a topic of conversation. But it was taped to the cinder blocks in its prominent position, under the flag, all year. During recess, or milk-and-cookie time, we were never discouraged from looking out the window to see if we could identify a plane.

One might expect us to be immune from gawking as a plane flew overhead, but it simply wasn't so. As jets replaced airplanes, their flights became more remarkable. The Doppler Effect became greater, the distance between the location of the jet and the time we could hear its roar became greater, and the sheer size of the jets were simply out of this world. Years later, I remember participating in a track meet during my senior year in South High School. It was April or May in 1970 and the starter's pistol had just gone off to start the 880 yard dash. It was just a two-lap race, but at a half mile in length, it was a very long sprint. The first lap came off without a hitch and the coaches were yelling out the "split" times to the runners as they finished the lap. But as soon as the runners made it past the next turn, someone noticed a brand new Boeing 747, a jumbo jet, as it entered its landing pattern. It was enormous. It seemed completely implausible that wings of aluminum could hold a ship of that size aloft without some kind of strings attached. It glided – no, floated noiselessly across the sky and captured the attention of everyone. "It's a Pan Am!" someone shouted when he saw the blue and white logo on the machine's tail. We began to hear the thunder of the four jet engines in the distance, and we were captivated as the landing gear came down. The fuselage

was so big that its weight had to be distributed across eighteen wheels on five separate landing gear units.

Everyone's eyes were glued to the spectacle above, as the race ended, completely unnoticed, below. To the official's embarrassment, no one had seen who won the race, not to mention recorded the official time. My recollection is that the race had to be run a second time. Exhausted from running two races, the runners crossed the finish line. Their times, as reported in the local paper the next day, were very slow, reflecting their double duty. There was no asterisk to explain the circumstances.

Duck and Cover

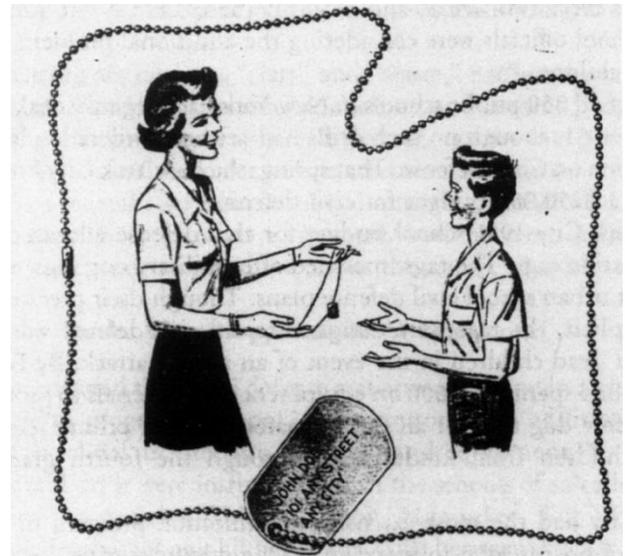
New signs had been placed throughout the building during the summer between kindergarten and first grade. They were on the inside, on the outside, near the doors, and in the halls. Each rectangular sign was black on yellow for maximum contrast. Inside the large black circles were three yellow equilateral triangles, their inside points converging at the center of the circle. The signs resembled a pizza with alternate slices eaten. These bomb shelter signs were mandatory in all public buildings and were part of the civil defense initiatives that left an indelible mark on the America of the late 50s and 60s. The buildings designated as bomb shelters were supposed to protect the general public from the blast and aftershock of a nuclear explosion. We all took note of the pizza signs and learned which buildings were to be our refuge, just in case the unspeakable happened. We were grateful that the government was doing something to protect us from the barbarians. But the buildings weren't the safe havens we were led to believe. They hadn't been built with special reinforced concrete or emergency ventilation ducts. They hadn't been built to be shelters at all. They were just schools and subway stations and warehouses. The only difference now was the yellow and black pizza signs. In time it became evident that the only ones to benefit from the signs were the sign manufacturers.



VA-0010 - Not Shown on Actual Sign

Although the last of these signs were affixed in 1967, they are occasionally still visible outside older brick buildings. Many have been lost to the wrecking ball and others to exterior paint jobs. Still others are barely noticeable because the colors have been bleached out by over 50 years of sunlight. But every once in a while, on a building with a well-protected northern exposure, you can see a perfect specimen of this post-McCarthy era relic.

In Miss Stein's first grade classroom, next to the blackboard, were four brass hooks. On the hooks were thirty-two chains, one for each student in the class. These were not the kind of chains with interlocking links, like you'd use to lock up your bicycle. These were the ones with the little interconnected silver balls, like they use for pull-chains on exposed bulb fixtures in an attic closet or a musty basement. At the end of each chain was a credit card sized colored paper encased in hard plastic. Not merely laminated, it was actually encased. The paper had all the vital statistics about a student in the class. Name, address, phone number, parents' names... maybe even a social security number. It was more than an identity necklace; it was a kind of dog tag for first graders. The tags were color-coded with each color corresponding to a quadrant of our neighborhood. All the red tags were on one hook, the blue on another, and the yellow and green had their own hooks, as well.

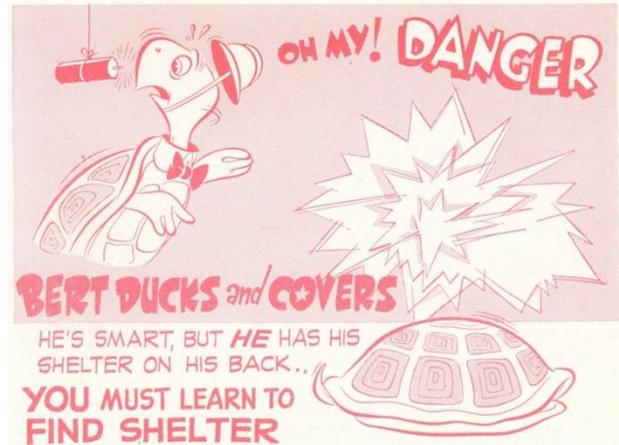


The theory behind the color-coded dog tags was simple. At the sound of the air raid sirens, every child would don his special chain. Teachers would be assigned to a particular color, and would walk the group of students through that sector of the development, until each child was home safely with his parents. The logic was straightforward, but it was badly flawed. What teacher in her right mind would spend her last hours on

this earth walking students to their homes? Even as seven-year-olds we knew, like the pizza signs, this scheme was more sizzle than steak. Regardless, we had a number of air raid drills. The school bell would ring in one long sustained sound, and each color group would meet, tags securely around necks, in a designated spot on the playground. Once everyone was in place, the teacher in charge would walk us to the edge of the schoolyard. The drill ended there. And apparently, so did the dog tag program. It never made it to the second grade.

John Foster Dulles, Dean Rusk and all the other Eisenhower Washingtonians responsible for our safety thankfully rethought the efficacy of this program, and deferred to the old, reliable “duck and cover” strategy. In the second grade, Miss Kranberg had no aircraft charts next to the blackboard and no dog tags to dispense. She merely ushered us into the hallway, where we were instructed to sit with our backs touching the wall. We’d bring our knees to our chins and cover our heads with our arms. It wasn’t as grandiose as the color-coded dog tags, but it was just as ineffective.

The brass hooks and necklace chains were replaced with “Duck & Cover” posters featuring a carefree cartoon turtle wearing a Civil Defense helmet. The posters were everywhere, and in a brilliant campaign of cross marketing, these posters were bolstered by a short animated Public Service Announcement. It aired on television during *Romper Room*, *Sandy Becker*, *Ray Heatherton’s Merry Mailman*, *Johnny Jellybean*, and other locally hosted programs which featured cartoons and other kids fare. The animated turtle would walk down the middle of a tree-lined suburban street, smiling broadly and singing the Duck & Cover theme song from underneath his helmet. Whenever he encountered danger he would simply drop to the ground and retreat into his shell. Danger, for the turtle, was usually avoiding the ambush of a mean-spirited boy with a slingshot, up a nearby tree. I don’t recall that the turtle was ever hit, but the shot from the sling created large explosions around his solid protective shell. When the dust settled, the turtle simply brushed himself off and continued down the street singing Duck & Cover—as if nothing had happened.



The power of broadcasting, entertainment, advertising, printed posters, and catchy theme songs, were all harnessed by an omnipotent government to bring the illusion of safety and security to the American people. An integral part of this campaign was the Duck & Cover message, specially crafted for America’s youth. Here we were, over a full year away from hearing President Eisenhower’s farewell address, warning us about the potential abuses of what he (for the first time) dubbed the “Military/Industrial Complex,” and as elementary schoolchildren, we had already seen it at work.

I wasn’t traumatized by the threat of impending nuclear disaster, but at eight years old, I was genuinely concerned for the safety of that turtle. He seemed to have this sling shot thing under control, but insisted upon walking in the middle of the street, which every second grader knows is statistically more likely to result in injury than sling shots – or nuclear explosions, for that matter.

For a number of years now, I’ve had my sights set on the “liberation” of a fallout shelter sign from the late 50s— an iconic, mid-century artifact. Better yet, maybe I can find one on e-Bay.

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