

From Prussia to upstate New York to the early suburbia days of Northern Virginia, the author takes us on a growing-up journey using his grandfather's handwritten documents, family interviews, and personal history.

Burbia Boy

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# BURBIA BOY

A memoir

By Paul Steucke Sr.

**BURBIA BOY: A memoir of growing up in Northern Virginia**

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE **RUNYON'S HARDWARE**

My parents were good friends with their neighbors, Bill and Orpha Runyon. Bill was a big, barrel-chested man, at least six feet two and all of 300 pounds. Orpha was not dainty either; they were well matched. A generous couple, they gave freely of themselves, their time, and their money to others. They had a swimming pool, which was unheard of where we lived, and their friends were always welcomed to use it. (In the years to come, all my four children would learn how to swim in that pool.)

I never saw Bill angry, even at times when I knew he had every reason to be. He was like Santa Claus without the beard or belly, and

like Santa he was always jolly, with a chuckle and twinkle in his eye when he spoke to you. His humor was a sometimes bit rough around the edges, but never mean.

Father and Bill got along well. Under Bill's tutelage, Father even learned to stand by the sink and drink a straight shot of whiskey followed by a Budweiser chaser. Mother and Orpha never shared a beer and a bump in the kitchen, but they were just as compatible as their spouses.

The B.P.O.E, Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks, was formed in 1867 as a social and community service order. Bill was a member, and with his sponsorship, Father joined the organization, and together they later started a new chapter in Fairfax, Virginia. Mother and Orpha joined the subsidiary group, the Does' Club.

Several days after our return from Montana, Bill came into our kitchen and casually said to me, "When are you going to work?" I just looked at him, and slowly said, "What do you mean?"

Bill walked over to the coffee pot, took a cup from the cupboard, filled it, looked at Mother with that twinkle in his eye and said, "I mean, *when* are you, coming to work? You gonna just sit around here all summer?"

"But I don't have a job," I said.

"Oh, yes you do. You have a job at Runyon's Building Supply and Hardware—starting tomorrow." He got a kick out of my reaction, because it took a few seconds for the good news to sink in.

"With you?" I blurted out, "Wow!"

And that's how I became an employee of the Runyon Building Supply and Hardware, a place so old and dilapidated that I never noticed it, even though I had driven past it dozens of times. The business was housed in a flat-roofed, single story wooden structure, painted a dull blue-gray. An attached cinder block building had two large sliding doors, about four feet above ground level, for loading or unloading the supplies directly to or from the bed of a truck. At the back of the store, a two-storied loft held select lumber and molding. Near the main building, in a gravel and weed-filled yard, the stock of heavy duty lumber rested on cinder blocks. A few beat-up delivery trucks stood nearby. I later discovered that the place had been allowed

to lapse into such a run down condition, because the Runyons were planning on leveling the place at the end of the summer.

The business faced a main highway that dipped down and passed below Lake Barcroft dam. The State of Virginia had issued a request for bids to put in four large culverts below the dam and backfill with rock and dirt, raising the level of the road by forty feet or more, so the turnpike would no longer drop down into the hollow, but run almost flat across it. Runyon Construction had been able to bid low and win the contract because all the fill dirt would come directly off the Runyon Hardware property. All they would have to do is push the dirt from their property over the embankment and onto the culverts. It was efficient and inexpensive and the Runyon Hardware would be no more. Profits from that job went to buy property in Annandale, where Bill's family later built a large shopping center. Bill offered Father an opportunity to invest in the shopping center, but Father did not have enough money to do so. Those who did invest reaped very generous returns on their money.

The Old Man of the family, B.H. Runyon, was known simply as BH. He went everywhere in denim coveralls and heavy boots, had wild gray hair, bifocal eye glasses, and always looked over them at me with an unsettling look, as if to say, "What's he doing here?" I never had any direct problems with him, because Bill always stood up for me, even when I had made some stupid mistakes.

My first few days at work were easy going. In fact, the entire summer was easy going. Regular customers came by, but business was slow. One morning a man came in and ordered six, two-by-twelve-inch boards, sixteen feet long. I searched the lumberyard, but could not find any sixteen foot boards. All they had were two by twelve's, eighteen feet long. I did not want to disappoint the customer, so I took a handsaw and slowly cut two feet off all six boards, making them sixteen feet long.

When BH found out about it, he could not believe what I had done. He complained to Bill, "Well, he literally cut the profit out of that sale in more ways than one. I'll never be able to sell anyone six boards, each two feet long." Bill thought it was funny.

A week later a customer ordered six bags of pre-mixed concrete. Bill told me to take the man's truck, drive it around to the loading dock and put the concrete bags in the back. I jumped in the new red pickup and drove it around the back and up so tight to the loading wall that I could reach out and touch it through the window. Then I realized that I could not open the door. So I backed up and pulled forward, then backward, then forward.

Each time I moved the truck, the big side view mirror on my side got closer and closer to the wall. Finally it hit the wall and broke the mirror. I was sick. I got out the passenger side, loaded the concrete into the back of the truck and went to tell Bill what I had done. I didn't dare move the truck again. The mirror was smashed and the body of the truck was only about six inches from the wall.

When I came inside, BH, Bill and the customer were standing in the store swapping stories. "I have something to say, and I am not proud of it," I said. BH looked at me over the top of his glasses, waiting. They all looked at me.

"When I moved the truck up to the loading dock, I got too close and broke the mirror." I waited, but no one said anything. "And...and...and," I stuttered, "I don't dare move the truck because I think the situation might get worse."

They all looked at me in silence. Then the customer said, "That's OK kid, done things like that myself." Then he looked at BH and said, "Don't worry about it. Let's go take a look." We all walked around the building and Bill checked the bags of concrete in the truck bed and then got into the truck from the passenger side.

The mirror made several ugly noises as Bill pulled the truck forward and away from the wall and drove it around to the front. I went to the back of the wood loft and pretended to sort wood. No one said another word to me about it.

One morning Bill told me a customer had ordered 200 cinder blocks, and that I was to hand load them onto the flat bed truck, drive to the job site and unload them.

It took me a good while to hand load the 200 blocks onto the flat bed in the tight criss-cross formation that would keep them from falling off the back of the truck in route. Cinder blocks are about eighteen

inches long, ten inches high and ten inches wide, weigh about four pounds each and have a hollow core.

If they are stacked more than five blocks high without overlapping the rows, they will lean, until eventually the entire row falls over, creating a pile of broken blocks.

Moving the blocks by hand was a back breaking job. I had to wear heavy gloves, because the cinderblock surface is very rough and abrasive. I was sweating heavily by the time I finally got the load on the truck, but I was pleased with the job I had done. Bill gave me the address and directions and sent me on my way.

At the job site I found a beautiful big house still under construction in a wooded area in Great Falls, with lots of people, vehicles, pickup trucks, and equipment everywhere. The narrow driveway was still crude, with deep ruts in some places. I parked on the street and walked into the site looking for anyone with the authority or the incentive to tell me what to do with the delivery. Neither the foreman nor the owner was around.

After about twenty minutes, I got tired of waiting and backed the truck down the driveway, as close to the house foundation as possible, and began to off load the blocks on one side, two at a time. The blocks were stacked six feet high. I got in the truck bed and tossed the top layer to the ground, then jumped down and arranged them into a row. I had several rows of blocks lined up by the truck bed, when I noticed that the soil along side the driveway was a bit damp and soft, but by then I was committed to the location.

I changed tactics then, and began to grab one block in each hand, to balance the weight, and carry them off the truck. Eventually the pile on the ground grew larger and the pile on the truck grew smaller. I was just finishing the last row of blocks when the owner showed up. I was standing on the truck bed when he angrily shouted up at me, "Why the hell did you unload them here?"

I told him as nicely as I could that I had unloaded them here because there was no one who would tell me where to stack them. He said, "Well this is sure the dumbest, most stupid place I ever saw to put them! Look how far they are from the foundation!"

I replied, “Well I waited over twenty minutes for someone to show up and tell me where to put them, but no one ever did, and now they are unloaded.”

And I placed the last two blocks on top of the pile, and in one smooth motion, grabbed the truck bed pole on the driver’s side, swiveled down onto the running board and landed in the driver’s seat behind the wheel.

At that moment I looked in the side mirror and saw that the entire first row of blocks was starting to lean like the Tower of Pisa toward the truck. I decided that the sooner I moved the truck the better. As I pulled out of the driveway, I looked back. The pile was still standing, but I knew it would not be that way for very long.

It felt good to be moving along the road with an empty truck. I don’t know if the customer ever complained or not, but if he did, I am sure Bill didn’t care very much; the business was well on its way to history anyway.

Bill must have been as kind to others as he was to me, because he had one employee who was more than a little strange. Jake weighed at least 300 pounds, had lost most of his hair, and had a wandering eye that made it difficult to talk to him, because I never knew if he was watching me, or something else.

He could never have worked retail, so I think Bill used him on the construction crew that had started work on the road job. Jake always wore the same outfit, denim overalls and a white T-shirt. He was friendly and likeable, if a little goofy, and he always did his best to do a job right.

One day Bill told me to help Jake move the beat-up construction trailer that had been parked out back for many years. Another employee had already removed the power and phone lines, and the blocks under the wheels, and had cleared the area in front of the hitch, so all Jake had to do was back the antique truck cab he was using for the job under the large fifth wheel trailer hitch. The finished assembly was the standard eighteen-wheel truck arrangement, except that all of the elements were ancient. I had no idea where we were going, but Bill told me to ride with Jake in the truck cab.

We started out traveling carefully and slowly down Columbia Pike, backing traffic up behind us for quite a distance. Jake began to get nervous as the old truck strained to haul the creaky trailer, and decided to take a shortcut to relieve the congestion behind us.



He turned into a subdivision of attractive homes and we wound our way through the tree and sidewalk lined houses. Everything was going fine, until I heard a car behind us beeping its horn non-stop. I looked out the window to see the driver of the car behind us waving his arms and blinking his headlights, all the while leaning on the horn.

Jake stopped to see what the driver wanted, whereupon the driver pulled up beside us, jumped out of the car without turning off the engine, and shouted, "You idiots! You damn fool idiots!" Considering our appearance I thought he was being unnecessarily personal. He finished his outrage by telling us that we had torn down every telephone line that crossed the road for blocks.

We got out of the cab and looked back to where the guy was pointing. To our great horror we discovered that one of the power pole pipes had been left sticking up three feet above the trailer and was now replete with many festoons of black telephone line stringing out to the pavement behind the truck like some wedding party trick.

While Jake told the irate gentleman who we worked for, I climbed up on the trailer and removed the wires from the pipe. Jake put the truck in gear and we slowly went on our way. He never spoke or cracked a smile and neither did I, although I did have to look out the window on my side a few times to maintain my composure.

There is one other distinct memory of my time working for Bill. My late night 3:00 AM goodbyes to Annette made going to work the next morning difficult. I was never late, but I was usually pretty tired and in need of a nap, so I sometimes crawled up in the loft and slept fitfully on the wood, waking up every so often to get up and rattle the boards around like I was working. Bill must have known what was going on, but he never said a word. The man was a saint, for sure, but I think the fact that they were going to tear the place down helped.



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