

Four Dollars & Sixty-Two Cents

A Wilkes-Barre Christmas Story
2nd Version



BRIAN W. KELLY

A young boy with a 26" bike has a burning desire to have a train set go around the family Christmas tree each year. This true story takes you on his homemade bicycle when he was five and ends when he is nine, Great read for all ages.

Four Dollars & Sixty-Two Cents: A Wilkes-Barre Christmas Story

By Brian W. Kelly

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Chapter 1: Nothing In The World Like a Kid And a 26" Bike

Thank you to unsplash for the below image



The setting for *Four Dollars & Sixty-Two Cents: A Wilkes-Barre Christmas Story*, is my hometown, Wilkes-Barre, PA. As I noted in the Preface of this book, my hometown may not be Bedford Falls but it was a great place to lead my wonderful life. It may not be Mayberry, but it was my hometown, which gave me all I needed as I grew up.

And, folks, Wilkes-Barre to those who have lived here at one time or another, is pronounced as Wilkes-Berry and that means that it rhymes with Mayberry. And that means we can sing their song without melody changes.

Just a little more about the “two-name” name *Wilkes-Barre*. Wilkes-Barre was named in honor of John Wilkes and Isaac Barre. Historians have written that these two prominent members of the British Parliament were “zealous advocates of the American cause.” There is a much longer story which I will save for another day.

Everybody has a soft spot for their own hometown, and hearing that wonderful song *Mayberry* sung on the ME TV’s Andy Griffith Show’s TV advertisements is enough to bring a yearning for your hometown and my hometown right to our hearts.

So, let us begin this story about a young Wilkes-Barre boy, who loved Christmas by singing Earle Hagen’s now famous “My Hometown.”

Clear out the pipes and let’s give it a go along with Keevy Hazelton, Aunt Bee Taylor and Clara Edwards. Why Not? Get ready. Here are the Words for the sing-along:

My hometown is the greatest place I know
Where the neighbors I find are gentle and kind
And the living easy and slow

My hometown is the only place to be
Here the worries are small & the kids grow
tall
And strong and healthy and free

It's my hometown, my hometown

Wilkesberry, Wilkesberry

OK, Hollywood would say Mayberry but around Northeastern PA, we would enjoy saying in our special twang, Wilkesberry.

Yes, kids and older folks, I was born back in the glory days of Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. I always remember my home and my hometown being quite special as I was growing up. I loved the City and I loved where I lived.

By the way, I lived right next door to a silk mill that operated twenty-four hours a day. My brothers and sisters and I wonder today why we do not hear as well as we should.

All night long, especially with windows wide open in the summer to get some cool air, we were treated to the same old song every night.

We never gave it a name but the song went like this: “*Whoosh Whoosh Eee Eee Whoosh Whoosh*” Each line of the song was the same It was the mill machines working overtime.

Long before the silk mills such as the one next door to our first home operated each shift, huge trucks delivered the raw silk Here is a little snoop at what that raw material looked like long before it hit the truck. The old silk mill has now morphed into a nice winery at 373 High Street. My address back then was 363 High Street, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania

Raw material for a Silk Mill from Pixabay



Our neighborhood was unique, I would say. Besides the huge mill, there were three stores on our little block and a tavern—my cousin Arlene’s place which was aptly named *Arlene’s*.

Right across the street from Arlene’s was the big mile-deep coal car elevator for the South Wilke-Barre Coal Colliery. Miners often enjoyed wetting their whistles at my cousin Arlene’s place both before and after their work shifts.

In fact, as I recall, there was a tavern on every block on the streets by our neighborhood. On some blocks, there were even two. The miners never had to travel far for a cool one.

It seems that as soon as I could walk, I could ride a bike. I mean a big 26" bike. I had learned to ride a two-wheeler on a 16-inch bike on Brown Street—just one block up from High Street where I was born and lived.

My cousin Rich Knaus, RIP, who I loved like a brother, had a 16-inch bike with training wheels before we were even five years old. Think of the girls' bike below and then subtract ten inches from the wheels and add training wheels.

We rode it on the sidewalk by his house on Brown Street. When his dad, Hank Fibick, took off the training wheels, both of us could ride Rich's bike. It was great! We grew up fast with two wheels.

Girls' Bike 26" from Pixabay



It was not much more than a year later that I was hoping to get a bike of my own. I was five or six years old at the time. I am not kidding.

My dad bought my first bike for me for one dollar. I knew my father had no dimes to spare so this was unexpected but much appreciated.

Karly Blaine, who lived across the street from our home, made my first bike from stuff he had gotten at George Solomon Sr.'s Junk Yard on Parrish Street. The junk yard was less than a block and a half from home.

My buddy George Elias who grew up with me on High Street said this about Karly Blaine:

“Karly Blaine manufactured so many bikes, he should have opened a factory.”

Two great junk yards were little more than a block away

A good baseball pitcher could reach both junkyards from my back yard but you'd never find the ball again with all the junk. Alexander's Junkyard was on Gould Lane right off Blackman Street. Solomon's Junk Yard was on Parrish Street.

Alexander himself was the dad of a great guy whom the young ladies in our new neighborhood, Jeannie Elin & Carol Stett call “Lar Lar.” Some say their boyfriends, John and Joe never got jealous. Alexander's junk yard on Gould Lane, was just ½ block from Parrish Street.

The backs of Solomon's and Alexander's touched. Alexander's was almost as close to my house as Solomon's junk yard but Solomon's place was much bigger or so it seemed to me when I was just nine years old and even younger.

The Silk Mill parking lot, which was behind my house on High Street also touched part of Alexander's and part of Solomon's. But, the fences were high enough to keep us out. They had barbed wire at the top and the bottom was up a little. We could lift the bottom of the fence to go under it to get into the Mill Yard to play ball.

We were also able to sneak in the front drive-way of Solomon's Junkyard whenever we needed used bike parts.

More importantly to me, Solomon's took in a lot of bikes, bike frames, fenders, chain guards, forks, and other bike parts.

They were mixed in with metal appliances, car frames, car rims, and other metal objects. The great bike parts were not always easy to spot.

You can get an idea of what a pile of scrap looked like at Solomon's by typing in *junk yard metal crash pile* in your browser. I could not find Solomon's or Alexander's in any archives because both "yards" went out of business more than fifty years ago.

The junkyard workers were concerned when we climbed the huge piles of metal junk at Solomon's looking for bike treasures.

The men who worked at the junkyard just threw the bikes up on what had to be a fifteen- foot-high junk pile. We had no problem climbing the pile after the junk settled.

The bikes did not last long. Along with small cars and car parts, they were crushed into two-foot by two-foot metal bricks, sometimes larger. After that, the junk yard shipped these huge metal bricks someplace to recycle the metal.

My friends and I climbed those piles like they were a mountain of free toys and we often found some great bike parts and other great stuff. We knew that we had to get there quickly for new treasures before the stuff was crushed.

It was not easy to find bike gear though. It was also a little scary when they were running the metal crusher (called a baler) that was fed by a huge scrap magnet. Sometimes we would see a whole car being put into the baler (crushing machine) where it was quickly made into huge metal bricks.

The magnet was somewhat quiet when in use. Its noise mixed in with the overall eerie junkyard sound. I recall no junkyard dogs protecting the place and if there were, this story never could have been told. I can't recall a bark.

But when they turned the baler on to crush the metal—scary! That was a frightful sound.

I could not find a good picture of an old scrap metal baler but here is a picture of a huge magnet, this one without a claw, getting ready to pick up scrap such as below. Sometimes these huge magnets would have a car or another large object in their grasp.

This image from Pixabay gives the right idea



The machine magnet would pick up the scrap and when it was moved to the baler, it would turn off the magnet and drop the car or other scrap into the baler and the big bales were then made as the car was swallowed and eventually disappeared. Witnessing this as a kid, I thought it was pretty spooky.

Some places stored their huge scrap bales like bricks, neat as a pin. Others, such as Solomon's, put them wherever they could find room in the yard. When stacked, the metal bales looked pretty scary—like this picture at Solomon's Junkyard on Parrish St. in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania:

Bales of metal junk in big cubes—from Pixabay



Chapter 2: Built from Junkyard Parts

When we were not walking out with things from the junkyard, we brought other things in to receive payment. We never brought anything to the junk yard that we had taken from the junkyard. We brought metal, paper, and rags to both of the local junkyards to get paid. We got paid but it was never really much, but it was always enough.

Where else, but in Wilkes-Barre PA would there be entrepreneurial opportunities for all regardless of age. Too young was actually okay and I loved that it was.

When I was five years old, I had a junk route in which every Saturday, I would knock on neighbor's doors as far as four to six blocks away. They would save me papers and rags.

Typically, I would get $\frac{1}{2}$ cent per pound for old newspapers and magazines and 2 cents per pound for rags as long as the rags were clean. On a typical Saturday, I would make between 30 cents and 50 cents for the day. I thought that was great.

At one time, I had a radio flyer wagon that was the top of the line. But, to be honest, mine was redder and rustier than it was red and white. Because it was rusty, it was hard to pull. especially when filled with junk for the junk yard.

I put two cardboard boxes into it and when I collected them from “my clients,” I put the old newspapers that they gave to me in the boxes. The wagon with two boxes did not hold much but until I found a better way, it served to give me my junking income.

There was a well-endowed Salvation Army on the other end of my street-- High Street. It was right by Hazle St., about five blocks away from our home. They sold big baby carriages there for 10 cents apiece. I later learned the bigger carriages could hold twin babies.

Whenever I went there, the Salvation Army had about five or ten of these carriages lined up for sale. They were all in great shape for expectant moms, available for a dime each. I stopped using wagons as the carriages were much easier to push and I needed no boxes. These carriages, some built for twin babies, were my favorite as two stacks of papers fit perfectly.

A key point in my approval was that the baby carriages were much easier to push than the Radio Flier wagons. As each large carriage such as that below fitted two columns of newspapers, stacked neatly side by side, it was actually perfect. It was like the carriages were made for the small-hauling scrap newspaper business.

Baby Carriage – from Pixabay



Even though the price I received for junk at the two junkyards was supposed to be the same, Alexander's always gave us a better price than Solomon's for a bunch of rags, if they were clean. But, Alexander did not like to receive small amounts of newspapers so I would take them to Solomon's, who accepted them gladly.

Mr. Sam Alexander was a great guy, as was Mr. George Solomon Sr. and Mike Solomon, his son. I admit I was afraid of them all—especially when they yelled at me to get off the big junk piles when I was hunting for bike parts. When we found stuff, they never let us pay for anything we took.

The Solomon Junk Yard workers did not care what kids like Karly Blaine and I took from the yard, or so it seemed.

What they could not tolerate, however, was kids on the top of the dangerous junk piles looking for great stuff. We did not think we were thieves no matter what it cost us. Most of the time it cost us nothing.

We took the risk because the reward was so great. We were all unbreakable little men then; but the Solomon people did not know it.

So, they would give us the chase when they saw us on top of the big piles looking for bicycle part treasures.

If we had a good day finding stuff, and we were leaving with some bounty, such as a rim or a shock absorbing bike fork, a sprocket, or a glistening handlebar, the men at Solomon's would pretend they did not see us.

Perhaps they just hoped we would leave quickly.

They turned their eyes to enable our escape with our loot, but they did not like to see us ten or fifteen feet up high on those junk piles—no matter how much they seemed to like kids like us.

One day, Karly Blaine completed the biggest deed of anybody ever in my young life. He was several years older than me.

He must have had a successful mission at Solomon's where he amassed all the parts he needed to make a "new" homemade 26" bike for somebody.

I never saw him up there on the piles when I was there, but I knew he did not get the parts out of thin air.

The bike that Karly built had a beat-up frame that had been painted with cheap 5c & 10c store paint several times. It might have even been house paint.

Looking at an inexact replica below, may I suggest that if we took off the back and front fenders of this rust-encrusted bike and the chain guard and if we added a fat seat, gave it a good washing, and added some old blue house paint, the bike below could quickly look a lot like the bike Karly Blaine made for me. Except Karly's bike had big fat tires and they were inflated and they held air:

Old bike picture – from unsplash



That's how tough looking the bike remnants of the 1950's looked when they were captured. The Karly bike

that my dad bought for me for on dollar had a not-so-shiny, partly rusty, handle bar, with no fenders, and no chain guard.

The Karly bike not only had rims; it had two tube tires filled with air. They were almost bald but the tubes held air and did not leak.

The foot brakes even worked. They were called “New Departure” style brakes. When you peddled backwards, the wheel stopped and the bike skidded. The best thing of all was that the completely assembled Karly bike itself was in working order and it was ready to be ridden. Karly did it. He made it from old junkyard parts.

In putting this book together, I looked for old pictures of me and my trusty bike but I came up empty. I did find some pictures of the kind of bikes available from junkyards back then.

But no picture that I examined captured the full rag-tag look of the 26" bike Karly Blaine had made for me. My bike was built with a very old Roadmaster frame with fat tires. You can use your browser to find a much nicer narrow-tire version of the bike I once called my own:

For example, the one on the next page looks pretty good:

Nice looking bike from Pixabay



As I got older, I got good at recognizing the good old bikes from the bad old bikes.

Often those bikes that were painted many, many, times had their emblems painted over and it was tough to tell the good styles and models from the bad. But I could usually tell.

When I found a frame for a Roadmaster or a Schwinn, at the junkyard, it was always a grand day. In other words, it was a real treat.

By typing in 1952 Roadmaster image in your browser, you can see photos that show these types of bikes looking new in 1952. You will notice the fat tires. They are impressive.

Let me repeat: If you take all the bells and whistles and fancy parts off the beautiful bike pictures available

on-line, my big 26 “bike was a lot more like a fat-tire Roadmaster than a new skinny tire Schwinn.

I was just looking at a Schwinn bike from their 1955 catalog. Schwinn is still a big name in bikes. Feel free to look it up on the Internet with your browser. The tires on the Schwinn always seemed too narrow compared to my 26” beauty. The frame of my thick-tire bike of course was painted by the same type of paint as one would use to paint a house. Few people who I know could have afforded real bike paint.

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