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Atlantic City Memories and Beyond

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Atlantic City Memories, and Beyond
By Larry Metzgar

Raised in his French grandmother’s house in wartime Atlantic City, the author suffers a 43 year estrangement from his father. Nostalgic boyhood beach memories are capped by memorable lifeguard days. Years later that training revives his drowning infant daughter. He graduates from Rutgers, raises his family in Darien, CT. Their 50th wedding anniversary, his 50th college reunion and an emotional reunion with his father follow. And now with his wife’s support he struggles with the scourge of his Parkinson’s determined to die with, not from, that debilitating disease. Selah

About the author...
In 2002 Larry and Eileen Metzgar retired to Mansfield, CT close to their grandchildren, and the University of Connecticut. An avid supporter of the UConn Huskies, Larry shows his true colors when Alma Mater Rutgers comes to town. He’ll be the old guy with his face painted half UConn Blue and half Rutgers Scarlet.
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I was brought up in Atlantic City, New Jersey, in my French
Grandmother’s large, comfortable home midway between the ocean
and the bay.

It was 1940 and I was five when my Mom moved my sister and me
back the first time under her mother’s roof and under her terms. Two
years later Mom, separating from my father for the second time,
returned for good to the sanctuary of her childhood home. She had
few options and little control of her destiny, much like a shipwrecked
Robinson Crusoe swept ashore and stranded by the receding tide.

Thus began a seemingly interminable period of isolation from my
father as my Grandmother’s ultimate condition for taking us in was to
cut off all contact with him and his family.

Almost as a bitter-sweet trade-off to fill that void, growing up on the
beach was an unforgettable magical time for my sister and me. Time
stood still as we enjoyed life to its fullest, each seemingly unending
perfect day running into the next.

Enter the ever present, ever vigilant Atlantic City Beach Patrol.
Throughout our summers on the beach, lifeguards were the one
constant, with their commanding presence—an authoritative force to
be respected, their piercing whistles intermingled and competing with
the sharp cries of the ever hovering seagulls.

Over the years, the Atlantic City Beach Patrol (ACBP) has been the
recipient of many accolades and awards for lifesaving rescues and
competitions. Then, as now, lifeguards were an elite vigilant presence,
always on the alert, ready to assist swimmers in distress from a myriad of ocean and beach calamities.

Our early summers were spent in the shadow of the lifeguard stands building Camelot-like sand castles and tidal moats. We would dig down halfway to China for the finest textured sand, chasing scurrying clawless sand crabs along the way.

As the afternoon tide swept in, we hurried to counter the threat to our castles by shoring up damp sandy walls in futile attempts to hold back the sea. At the end of the day King Neptune always triumphed, sweeping once sturdy, now slumping walls and sliding battlements out past the sandbars.

In later adolescent years we spent many pleasant hours swimming and riding in on the waves under the watchful eyes of lifeguards who’s long, shrill whistle blasts called us shoreward when we ventured out too far or when a strong undertow threatened.

We started each beach day stopping at the lifeguard stand for the official water temperature, followed later by periodically checking the time. We ended each day waiting for and then riding in the last perfectly formed wave. Drying off, we languidly sprawled on beach towels to catch the last rays of the late afternoon sun and then raced home as sidewalks cooled and dinner waited. We knew we were running late when the guards, facing outward, one on each end, lifted, and taking short little steps, started moving their heavy stand back above the high water mark as they ended their day.

Later, as I reached college age, I became one of those lifeguards granted the special privilege and sworn responsibility of protecting the lives of my bathers.

In my senior year in high school, I passed the Atlantic City Beach Patrol lifeguard test, which was a competitive exam combining rigorous swimming, rowing and lifesaving requirements. A prerequisite to qualify was a character endorsement from a politically connected sponsor through the office of the City’s Director of Public
Safety. This amounted to a built-in process of job dependency by which political boss State Senator Hap Farley managed to get re-elected in perpetuity.

As I recall now, some 50 years later, the swimming test involved racing freestyle a half mile out to sea and around the end of the Steel Pier beyond the cut between the spectator bleachers and the diving horse/water circus and into shore again. I believe qualifying points were awarded for placement of finish. I was no speed merchant, but I could have made it to England and back if I had to.

Training for the boat test consisted of dragging forward the heavy wooden boat with one of the veteran instructors, Capt. Solitare or Capt. Stetser. Once knee-deep in surf, the candidate would leap into the bow seat, locking in his legs, flipping the oars off his knees high into the air, landing them in the oarlocks, then starting to row short heavy back-wrenching strokes to build momentum, and glancing over his shoulder to knife the boat through the breaking waves. In the meantime, the instructor would vault on board and into the stern seat to observe the candidate’s performance.

Capt. Solitare yelled to stop grimacing fiercely as I rowed because, “If the victim didn’t drown, I would scare him to death.” By this time we had passed the first line of surf and were into the second line of cresting combers. Plowing through, the heavy boat would rise-arching upward, stern down, bow out of water, then flopping down like a blowing whale, hurtle over the waves.

In drilling us in practice, the instructors would spot the victim, and after pulling the boat in front, between the swimmer and the breakers, we would reverse direction and helped by the waves, back in toward the victim, then check the shoreward momentum by digging in again with deep back strokes. Closing in, we would complete the rescue by dragging the victim over the stern “any way we could,” in Captain Solitare’s words.

Once the victim was on board we would turn and ride a wave into shore, beach the boat and start artificial respiration the old fashioned
way. We flipped the victim onto his stomach, with his head turned on his elbow and tongue cleared—then straddling his legs, leaned up and forward, press and back, pushing on his ribs until he coughed up water.

Our rescue-savvy instructors preached never to give up prematurely on an unconscious victim, demonstrating how a tiring guard should pass on the rhythmic, lifesaving repetition to the next guard by taking over his partner’s straddle position one leg at a time as to not miss a beat.

We drilled and drilled this lifesaving technique so that we could have executed it in our sleep.

In these times of espousing “nothing new under the sun,” and “what comes around, goes around,” I was interested to learn recently that this old technique of artificial respiration is returning into favor in some quarters, superseding the current in-vogue mouth-to-mouth method practiced at most beaches.

I shall be always grateful to my old instructors Solitare and Stetser for their diligence in grounding this lifesaving routine deep into my subconscious that after a 17 year hiatus came back in a flash as I responded instinctively in the biggest rescue of my life, working on and reviving my four year old daughter in a near-drowning pool incident.

Anyway, I passed the test and qualified for a lifeguard’s spot the following summer. The lifeguards worked a seven day week from 10:00 to 6:00 from June until after Labor Day, and of course we had our share of benefits including attention from all the visiting bathing beauties.

Looking back, my cumulative teenage and adolescent character shaping years growing up in Atlantic City were like a sandy mosaic peppered liberally with formative life experiences, which extended from the 1940 war years until I left home for college in the mid 1950s.
A young author salutes the future—1938

I’ll have another popsicle please—1937
I’d like you to meet Dina, my kid sister-1943

Are you sure the water isn’t too rough?-1944
Chapter Two

ONCE UPON A TIME

Camelot Revisited

The year was 1942 and the country was at war.

The little boy swung around on the street sign pole on the corner, waiting in vain for the bus to bring his absent father home. His was not an uncommon story as the country was filled with children waiting for absent fathers to return to their families. Theirs would eventually return. Mine would not—not for 42 years.

When it comes right down to it, those of us born in the years 1930-1945 were a forgotten generation bracketed between Tom Brokaw’s Greatest Generation—rooted in the Depression and the Second World War—and the high profile Baby Boomers and Beatnik Woodstock’s post-World War II generation.

Ours was a sometime spectator generation growing up running home from Saturday afternoon’s Gung Ho movies bayoneting imaginary Nazis and Japanese—playing war in the early 1940s instead of fighting one. Some of us were later caught up in the Korean Police Action, a forgotten war fought by a forgotten generation, the last to grow up dancing to music whose words were actually understandable—just before the onset of Rock and Roll.

As the last of the dwindling members of the Greatest Generation leave us with their history-impacting experiences, like the final few grains of sand trickling through an hour glass, I thought Times’-a-Wasting’ to celebrate some of my forgotten generation’s unique stories—before our parade too passes by.

This, then, is the story of one, a boy from that generation brought up in Atlantic City.
A product of a broken family, he was seven when together with his mother and sister he was taken in for the second time by an autocratic, French grandmother, whose only condition for raising them in a comfortable upper middle class lifestyle was to permanently sever all contact with the boy’s father.

We follow the boy growing up in this extraordinary city by the sea, living through life’s formative experiences—of times with myopic overtones reflecting the lonely isolation of being brought up in a frozen-in-time, fatherless household—until he breaks away like the prodigal son for the lure of unbridled freedom of college life, leaving behind his mother and sister and Mimi, his French grandmother.

I am that little boy and this is my story.

**CAMELOT REVISITED**

**Aberdeen Place, the Family Homestead**

Not too long ago my sister Dina and I drove by our old house on Aberdeen Place where we grew up. Many thoughts ran through our minds as we stopped and took a few snapshots of the old brown-shingled home on the double lot with its line of majestic beeches and the still miniature Chinese maple.

Given the opportunity to reminisce and reflect upon the events that had transpired in the town and within the walls of this house over the past 100 years, I thought recounting them might be of some interest to my family. My family, and especially my playwriting daughter Bonnie, encouraged me to put this down on paper.

So, off we go.

This is the story and adventures of the generations of our family who lived in that house, which became interwoven into their day-to-day lives, sometimes nurturing and accepting and sometimes sheltering their moments of despair.
The house was located midway between the narrow thoroughfare and the ocean, with a jog in the street keeping the ocean and the bay from meeting and overflowing the curb, sheltering the basement from fall hurricanes and winter northeasters.

The House. I knew every inch and nook and cranny of that house. In future years I would fall to sleep recounting the sagging, canvassed, wrap-around front porch, the faded awnings I grew up putting up and taking down and storing in the detached garage that stood at the end of the dual cement stripped driveway. The garage was distinguished by the memory of a long ago motorist with hat and goggles leaving behind large ceramic batteries still mounted on the wall, poised to charge-up one last time.

The unheated sun parlor was sheltered from the biting winter ocean winds by removable storm windows stored in the off-season and replaced by large, neatly patched screens with frames fastened together to let in gentle summer breezes. On the inside wall of the sun parlor hung two coach lamps with smoked glass guarding the huge paneled oak door that led into the beamed ceiling living room, with the servants’ foot call button summoning long departed butlers and house maids. The festooned chandelier was Orangeburg smoked glass, electrified sometime over the past, converted from its gas fired beginnings.

Although richly appointed in my mind, the house was essentially a long, front to back, two storied, post-Victorian summer house. The fire-placed living room led up and beyond a baby grand Steinway over a three-step landing down into the dining room and past a coat closet where I experienced one of life’s most bitter disappointments—my long-awaited official Captain Midnight Atomic Bomb Ring that, received in exchange for ten Ovaltine chocolate drink labels, promised to shoot off atomic rays in a darkened closet, which mine failed to perform. My mom was even more disappointed—she had to get rid of all that terrible-tasting Ovaltine she was forced to buy.

Further back in the house beyond the dining room, two swinging doors led into the pantry and kitchen. The pantry harbored a large sink
with flanking high curved copper faucets, slightly pitted and tinged green with age. The pantry, later converted into a downstairs half bath, flowed into a simple, scarcely utilitarian kitchen. The many times painted wooden cabinets were offset by a plain sink and ancient gas stove.

The prize appliance was an ageless 1937 GE white enameled refrigerator, which sat by the back door with its now empty ice-box shed leading the way down a steep set of stairs into the back yard and garden, replete with a grape arbor, Adirondack wooden settees, and a lush lawn.

The house itself was situated to the side of a large treed yard, so although surrounded by other properties, it afforded the feel of spaciousness with room for sea breezes to wash through the generously-sized windows. Deep blue-hued hydrangeas lined the side yard reflecting the pH of the sandy soil, while a closely trimmed hedge partially shielded front walk passersby.

Back upstairs, through the rear door in the pantry, led a corner staircase spiraling down into the basement, which had been the maid’s quarters in its distant past. The rear of the basement had been converted to a laundry with twin stone wash tubs, draining an original Hotpoint wringer washing machine. Moving forward was the furnace, later converted to oil, with a coal bin that was fed by a long chute through a basement window from coal trucks out front in the street. My job was to dampen the furnace, shovel in that day’s supply of coal and once a week haul the anvil-heavy ash cans out to the curb for pick-up by the city.

Next, onto hardwood floors, past a basement bathroom with its dusty four-legged tub and narrow-width dark-stained tongue & groove wooden walls, was a musty bedroom stacked high with mostly family heirloom furniture. As if left on display from yesterday was an unknown musician’s old violin and my grandfather’s rakish blocked tall silk hat together with a display board pinned with his Rotary International medals.
Hanging on a peg in a sturdy bag was a collection of my grandfather’s hand carved Swiss alpine climbing sticks, some with curved handles, several of which I have adopted and use today to smooth my uneven Parkinson gait. Not a day goes by when I reach for one of his canes that I don’t think of the grandfather whom I never met.

Tucked away in deep overhead storage cabinets were a half a dozen dark brown unopened bottles of Guinness Stout, together with several corked square bottomed darkened bottles of Dewey Stomach Bitters.

Across the hall against an outside wall leaned a vintage wooden surf board which swept me ashore many times on the Big Wave of my imagination. Beyond, sheltered under the house was Uncle Robert’s Old Towne Canoe, complete with outrigger and hidden deep under a camouflage of scrap wood, ready for its next Polynesian sail.

Inside, up from the three stair living room landing, framed by an electrified imported Italian sculptured statue, led mahogany painted steps to the four bedroom, front to back second floor.

Over the years and generations of residence, the order of room occupants remained consistent. Initially Marie and Joseph occupied the front master bedroom and adjacent bath. The lavatory featured an oversized four-legged bathtub custom installed by the oversized German original owner, a customer of the Vienna. Later, a solitary Mimi, the Matriarch, lived in this room for the last forty years of her life.

As a boy growing up I have fond memories of sitting at the foot of Mimi’s big bed, listening with her to John Gambling’s morning radio programs broadcasted from WOR in New York, and where we chuckled together as Uncle Don read the funnies every Sunday morning.

I enjoyed a good, albeit not a close, intimate relationship with my grandmother. Mimi provided me virtually all of my material wants, from toothpaste to trombones, with a wee little bit of demonstrative love thrown in along the way.
Again in her bedroom I dimly remember sitting there listening to Uncle Don reading Ham Fisher’s Joe Palooka that infamous Sunday in December of 1941 when a newsman broke into the program with first reports of the Japanese sneak attack upon the little known naval base of Pearl Harbor in the Hawaiian Islands.

Fast-forwarding two more decades to that same bedside where I said my final goodbyes to Mimi as I raced through the night in an unsuccessful attempt to reach her while still alive. I kissed her still warm cheek and bade farewell to the most powerful influence of my formative years.

Next in line to the master bedroom was daughter Dina’s bedroom (succeeded in time by granddaughter Dina) with the access passageway from the front bedroom, through the second room to reach the stairway down. The original hallway up front was closed off and converted to a walk-in clothes closet, for some long ago forgotten reason closed off from the rest of the house like a sealed Egyptian tomb.

Moving past the stairs was my mother May’s bedroom. Later it became that same returning daughter’s room once more, providing a less than private retreat in which to savor an evening cigarette. Much later it offered a garrison to return to each night to lessen vulnerability as the lone occupant of the otherwise empty house.

At the end of the hall like a caboose was the bathroom, with its four-legged tub and rubber hose hand shower where we soaked and gazed up through open pebbled and frosted windows at the clouds passing by. In the summer we were treated to an occasional circling biplane trailing its Coppertone sign, ready for a run down the beach.

It was here in this ancient bathroom that the house surrendered its birth secret, as while stripping the original Sanitas wall covering, I discovered the proud signature of a long ago artisan plasterer—John Hall, Philadelphia, Pa.-1910.
Finally, sharing the very rear of the house was the son’s (and later on, a grandson’s) bedroom boasting small cross ventilating windows drawing cool breezes directly from the sea.

During the quiet of the evening I was that latest grandson to drift asleep lulled by the distant booming of the surf pounding against the sand.

The Old Homestead
Raised in his French grandmother's house in wartime Atlantic City, the author suffers a 42-year estrangement from his father. Nostalgic boyhood beach memories are capped by memorable lifeguard days. Years later that training revives his drowning infant daughter. He graduates from Rutgers, and raises his family in Darien, Connecticut. Their 50h wedding anniversary, his 50th college reunion, and an emotional reunion with his father follow. Amid all, his 13-year struggle resisting Parkinson's debilitation continues.

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