

THE BRONX

by
Benjamin Weiss

I was born in The Bronx on January 26, 1937, and lived there until my family moved to a chicken farm in Toms River, New Jersey, in 1945, when I was nine years old. These are a few stories I recall as I was growing up.

CHARLIE KASS

When I was about five, Charlie Kass was my best friend. I knew he was my best friend because my mother always asked me, "Why is Charlie Kass your best friend". I'd answer, "Because he protects me". Being the smallest and skinniest kid on the block, I needed all the protection I could get.

My neighborhood consisted of two groups of people: the Jews and the Italians. It was years later that I was to discover that there were more kinds of people than those. The Jews lived mostly on Burke Avenue and the Italians lived on a small side street off Burke Avenue. The Jews had small shops on Burke Avenue, like the bakery, the candy store and the butcher shop, while the Italians has small stands in front of their houses where they sold fruits and vegetables. The major interaction we had with the Italians was related to the fights that broke out. These fights generally consisted not of fist fights but rather of long distance fights. The Jewish gang built secret forts in one of the vacant lots down the street which the Italians tore down. The Italian kids then built a secret fort of their own which we tore down. I guess the forts were not quite as secret as we thought.

Charlie Kass was a crazy kid. One day he got hold of a can of kerosine and pored it into his bathtub and lit it. We barely escaped with our lives as we climbed out of the bathroom window. Luckily he lived on the first floor.

We lived on the fifth floor of the six story apartment building. 155 Burke Avenue, as I remember it. It had a large courtyard leading into the building and a foyer which had steps on both sides and an elevator in the middle. We lived in Apartment 5F. Right across from us lived the Titlebaums. Another one of my friends, Sidney (or was it Norman?) Titlebaum, was kind of a sissy, like me I guess. Among other activities, we use to play tricks on his grandmother, who was almost blind. We hid from her and taunted her- not the high point in my life, as I think back on it. He was the rich kid in the apartment building. Periodically he threw pennies from his fifth floor window to the street below, where all the rest of us kids scrambled for them.

ENTERPRISING YOUTH

We kids in the Bronx spent much of our time playing marbles. In one of the games, we drew a circle in the dirt and each of us put some of our marbles inside the circle. Then we took turns shooting our marbles, trying to hit one of the other marbles out of the circle. Any marbles we hit out were ours.

It was during this period, when I probably was about seven years old, that I had my first business experience. One day one of my friends and I ventured into forbidden territory --across the trolley tracks on White Plains Road. We were strictly forbidden to cross this street since it was a large and heavily trafficked road. Anyway, on that day we crossed the tracks and found a store on the other side that sold large "puries". Now you have to understand that puries, which were clear, colored marbles, were a premium with us kids. And to find a source for LARGE puries was, well, you can only imagine. We immediately went home and gathered together all the pennies and nickels we could find and returned to the store across the tracks. We purchased as many of these large puries as our resources allowed and returned with our treasure. At the next marble game with our other friends, we revealed our amazing cache. Naturally, everyone wanted to know where we got them, but we had decided to keep this important information secret. Rather, we would sell the puries to them. We had bought the puries at three for a nickel and offered them for sale at two cents each, making a huge profit. We kept our business going by returning to the store across the tracks periodically and replenishing our supply of puries. Needless to say, one day one of our friends followed us across the tracks and found out where we were buying the marbles and what we were paying for them. When word got back to the other kids that we were selling the puries for more than we bought them for, they beat the crap out of us. Even considering the beating, until this very day that probably was my most rewarding business venture.

BOMBS AWAY

We didn't have that many games to play with in our apartment in the Bronx, but we improvised. One of the favorite games by brother Howie and I played was Bombs Away. When we were left alone for any length of time we would fill paper bags with water and drop them out of our fifth story window onto the ladies who always gathered on chairs on the sidewalk below to gossip. This was our little diversion from fighting with each other.

THE MOVIES

Every Saturday my mother would give me and Howie a quarter to go to the movies. The movies was a small theater called the Burke, which was across the street from White Plains Road. For a quarter we would get two tickets, 12 cents each, and have a penny left over for a fistful of candy corn which we got from the candy machine in the lobby of the theater. We would spend the whole afternoon in the Burke. First there were a bunch of cartoons, at least 7 or 8, then several serials, which were a series of episodes, such as The Shadow, which never seemed to end. They always began with the hero having a harrowing escape from the last episode and ending with the hero entering a harrowing plight from which he would escape the next week. This would be followed by two main features. I never was able to follow the main features so would always ask Howie or Lester, if he was there, what was going on. They used to get very annoyed with all my questions. I loved Saturday afternoons.

PS 21

All the public schools in New York had numbers and most were called by those numbers. We went to PS 21. It was about five or so short city blocks from our apartment on Burke Avenue to school, around the corner and up the street. We had to cross several streets, but none were large or particularly dangerous crossings. The sidewalks on the way to school consisted of irregular slate blocks. Invariably one of the older kids would write things in chalk on the blocks. I remember clearly the slate slabs on the way to PS 21 had "Kick me" and "Fuck me" scrawled on alternating blocks. Knowing the meaning of only one of the phrases, all of us little kids would be very careful to jump over the Kick Me blocks.

THE LAUNDRY BUSINESS

My father had a laundry business in the Bronx: Grand Concourse Laundry. He started with a horse and carriage. I remember this because the horse once stepped on his big toe. It caused the formation of a large blackened nail on this toe which remained for his whole life. (my mother used to love to tell the story of how I would chant that: "Daddy had a horsee and horsee stepped on daddy's fuselie"). He later got a closed van which was used for the business. We used to throw a blanket in the back of the van when we visited Uncle Jack and Aunt Anna (Tanta Chana) and our cousins, Dorothy, Charlotte and Leonore, in Brooklyn, or Uncle Paul and Aunt Ester and our cousins, Annette and Rita, in Toms River on their chicken farm. We would go to sleep in the back of the van and wake up when we arrived.

Sometimes my father would take me along with him when he went to work. He often had to walk up several flights of stairs to pick up the dirty laundry. I was always so impressed how he would wrap up the bundle of dirty clothes in a sheet, throw it over his shoulder, and carry it down all those steps. The clothes would be cleaned and pressed in his shop, folded neatly and packed in brown paper, tied with a string and then returned to the owners, again my father walking up all those steps with the heavy package. Sometimes in the heat of the summer the workers in the shop would faint while working over the steam presses. My parents were very distressed over this.

My father eventually got a couple of partners for the laundry business. When Laundromats became popular, the business started to fail. My father kept pouring money into the business but his partners didn't. This was the cause of a great deal of stress and began a problem in which my father no longer could swallow his food normally, and he would often "choke" during meals. This digestive problem lasted for his whole life.

The business eventually went broke and my parents bought a chicken farm in Toms River, where we moved in the spring of 1944.

I still love to do the wash, wrapping up the dirty clothes in a sheet, tossing it over my shoulder, and carrying it down to the basement to clean...because it reminds me of him.

THE EGG BUSINESS

I guess my father didn't make enough money in the laundry business, so my parents had to have a side business. My parents would buy several cases of eggs (a case holds 30 dozen eggs in three-dozen flats) each week directly from the chicken farms in New Jersey, probably from my Aunt Ester and Uncle Paul, who had a farm in Toms River. They would be delivered to an underground garage nearby where they had rented a small room deep in the bowels of the garage. The room was pitch dark. There my mother would sit for hours on end candling the eggs to see if they had blood spots. These were little specks of blood that you could see when you held the egg over a light box in the dark. Eggs with blood spots could not be sold as Grade A eggs. The good eggs would then be repackaged into one dozen egg boxes, much as you can buy in the supermarkets today. I used to like to go there with her because it was so eerie. However, working in this room for long hours must have been awful because of the cold, dampness and choking exhaust fumes. What a life!

My job was to deliver the eggs to some of the customers in the apartment. I'm not sure how many I sold and how many I dropped.

PAULINE TEACHING PARENTAL RESPECT

We were still living in the Bronx so I had to be 9 or less. We had all piled into the closed laundry van that my father used for his business and were going someplace. My father (Harry) stopped off somewhere, apparently to do some business while we waited in the van. I supposed more time elapsed than I liked and I said, "Where the heck is daddy?". Well, mom (Pauline) lit into me saying, "Don't you **ever** talk about your father like that!" I said, "I just said heck not the other word". My mother said, "Saying *Heck* is just like saying *the other word*, and either way, Don't you EVER talk about your father like that again!"

I didn't.

Eat Your Soup

When I was a little boy I was very skinny and couldn't sit still long enough to eat a meal. My mother would sometimes get so frustrated with my jumping up and down while eating that she would tie a towel around me and the chair until I finished my meal.

Another method she used to make me eat everything was to tell me that as I ate the soup, all the vitamins would run away from the spoon. They kept doing that until the vitamins were all huddled in the last drop and couldn't be gotten until I ate the final spoonful of soup.

Thanks to this training, now I can't leave anything on my plate, even without being tied down.

BLOSSOM HEATH

I never told you about Blossom Heath and Tel Aviv? They were bungalow colonies up somewhere in upstate New York. Each summer my mother would take the kids there: me Howie and Lester, I guess. Grandpa would drop us off and come stay with us over the weekends sometimes, or maybe just on Sundays. Blossom Heath was the lower end of the two places. I thought Uncle Abe and the Abromskys owned Blossom Heath and Uncle Max owned Tel Aviv, but I'm not sure. Blossom Heath had about 10 or so little one- or two-room wooden bungalows. No running water as I remember. There was a hand pump leading to a well outside for community use. We had to prime the pump before use. That was fun. I remember the toilet in the bungalows very well. It had a tank that held the water above the toilet. After you went, you had to pull the chain and the water would flush the toilet.

The reason I remember that so well is because I used to pee in bed sometimes. In our apartment in the Bronx to get to the toilet from the bedroom I had to go through the living room, through a hall and to the toilet. I was afraid to go through the dark living room by myself at night so I used to pee in bed instead. As a solution, my mother used to keep a pail by my bed to pee into when I woke up so I wouldn't have to go all the way to the toilet in the middle of the night. That system didn't always work. Once when back in the Bronx, I peed in bed and my mother found me standing by the bed with my hand flailing over my head. When asked what I was doing, I told my mom that I was looking for the chain to flush the toilet.

I LOVED to go to Blossom Heath. They are some of my most pleasant memories of childhood. Tanta Channa (Aunt Anna) and her kids, my cousins, Dorothy, Charlotte and Leonore, would go too. I guess Uncle Jack would drop them off like my father dropped us off. We'd play all day long, running around barefooted in the grass. It was wonderful. I still remember the sweet smell of freshly cut grass there. Sometimes, nowadays, when I cut the grass in our backyard, I get the same smell and all the lovely memories of Blossom Heath come back.

Tel Aviv was upscale. We got there by walking on a dirt road from Blossom Heath. The houses were bigger there and it had a swimming hole nearby where we used to go swimming. I remember being scared to death of the "dining needles" that used to fly over the pond. The story was that if they got to you they would get into your blood and kill you.

TOMS RIVER

by
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MY FAVORITE YEARS

My favorite years were those spent on the farm. My parents bought a chicken farm in Toms River, New Jersey, in 1945, when I was nine years old. Even after I was married for many years, I still considered the farm my home. It was the place where I would go to regain my sanity from the insane world in which everyone else lived. The outside world was full of money-grubbing, ambitious, and in some cases, deceitful people. The Farm was a throw-back to everything that seemed to me to be real, calm, simple and sensible. I guess that was a tribute to my parents, who were simple folk-- kind, gentle, unselfish, loving, supportive, and scrupulously honest. The air was clean, the skies clear and the manner pure. A visit to the farm replenished my spirit, restored my soul and renewed my faith. Those were my favorite years.

ONE-EYE

Henry Silkowitz was our crew chief on the vaccinating crew. In those days (1940's and 1950's) we made our way through school by vaccinating chickens. The crew consisted usually of six or seven of us. There were my brothers, Les and Howie, Karl Engleman, Billy Budin, Lenny Bear, and me. Henry was our boss. We were of high school or early college age, but he was older---a veteran of World War II. During the war he lost an eye which was replaced with a glass eye. We never seemed to appreciate his loss. Rather, we made fun of it. It was really creepy though when I think back on it. When we vaccinated the chickens, we got very dusty, what with all the feathers and chicken manure we had to wallow in. Henry's glasses got covered with so much dust that he could hardly see. So, naturally he would wipe them off periodically. Except that he would wipe off only one lens, the one from the good eye. The lens covering the glass eye was always completely covered with dust. Once in a while though he did clean his glass eye. He would take it out of its socket, shine it up with a dirty handkerchief and put it back. That was weird. Naturally, behind his back we always referred to him as "one-eye". To this day, 50 years later, everyone who was on the crew would know who we were talking about when we referred to one-eye.

When we finished the day's work vaccinating chickens, we would often ride through Lakewood where all the fancy, rich Jews were walking. Riding through the area, filthy and smelling from chicken manure, Henry would yell out the windows, "Shmeck us ein, Yidlach" (Smell us up, Jews). That was always one of the high points of our day.

Karl wore about a size 12 shoe. The reason I remember this is because whenever a chicken would try to escape while we were vaccinating them, he would throw out his foot with his giant shoe and crush it, often crippling the chicken. Naturally, Karl became a physician.

I suppose the most memorable thing I recall about Karl, however, was the time he saved my life. We used to ride in the back of an old pick-up truck when we went to our vaccinating jobs. The truck was an old Model T Ford which was converted into a truck by adding a platform with a low railing to the back of the cab. It was started with a crank in the front of the radiator and had something called a Magnito. Being kids, we fooled around a lot during these trips. One time I stood up in the back of the truck just as Henry, who was driving, swerved the truck in order to get me to sit down. I fell out and would probably have died had Karl not grabbed me. I remember my hair brushing against the asphalt as the truck sped down the road, an exciting experience I probably could forgo.

Karl's sister Marian was my old high school flame. Marian tortured me mercilessly. Thank God for Joyce.

Billy Budin became an accountant, I think, and now lives in California. He was a few years older than I and would take me to New York periodically to listen to orchestral concerts. He opened my eyes up to fine music. I am forever indebted to him for that.

Lenny became a pilot, testing experimental jet airplanes for the Air Force. One day, flying over an area in the Southwestern part of the United States his test plane crashed, killing him instantly. I remember the funeral well. About all the chicken farmers in Toms River showed up. There was a color guard flown in from the Air Force. They blew taps. His parents and my brother Howie were devastated. I don't believe that Howie, who was his best friend, ever quite got over that loss.

JACK CHERRY AND HIS CREW

Another crew chief I had was Jack Cherry. Jack was a short pudgy guy with a very deep raspy voice. I took Jack's daughter, Phyllis, out a few times. It was she who suggested that I take out Joyce one of the times when she refused a date. That date was the beginning of the romance between me and Joyce. I am forever indebted to her for that.

Jack's crew was considerably younger than One-Eye's. It was me, Morty Lipitz, Ronnie Tucker, Richie Sudalter, Abe Goldfarb, Shelly Singer and Jack.

Tucker was crazy. He was the one who, on one mischief night set fire to a three story abandoned house in Toms River. He also used to play tricks on Jack, who had no discipline with the crew whatsoever. While Jack was driving us to work, particularly when we were approaching a sharp curve in the road, Ronnie would throw his jacket over Jack's head. What a riot! All of us would laugh like crazy. As you can see, we were not only younger but also kind of stupid. Gang stupidity, I guess.

Tucker, along with Stanley Kraushauer, would beat me up periodically. One day, in particular, I remember them sitting on me while hitting my head on the bathroom floor in school. The last I heard, Tucker joined the army or was in jail; I don't remember which.

Tucker's cousin was Elaine Tucker. She was my first flame when we moved to Toms River in 1945. I was in fourth grade. She was very pretty and was voted Miss Tomco in a beauty contest when in high school. Joyce was voted miss Tomco the following year, beating out Marion, which delighted Joyce to no end.

Stanley became a pharmacist, then quit pharmacy because he married Saran Glenn, the daughter of Lester Glenn, who owned a Buick franchise. They were very rich. Unfortunately, Saran used to run around with other men a lot. One of the guys she was having an affair with was Robert Marshall, who had his wife murdered on the Garden State Parkway one night at Saran's instigation. Saran got Marshall the money from her father in order to pay off the killers. He is still in jail. Saran got off. Saran and Stanley are still married.

Richie was one of my favorites on the crew. He was a big cuddly guy with a terrific sense of humor. He kept us in stitches. One story that I remember (that loses something in the telling) is that whenever we went to the bathroom, he would rush over to the urinal, unzip his fly and yell "O.K. peepee, do your stuff." I always wondered what happened to him.

Abe's nickname was "Gimpy". He got it when one day he came limping to work after he hurt his foot. That was his name from that time. My best friends at that time were Gimpy and Arnie Olshaker. The three of us used to do everything together. The girls were crazy about Abe. I never knew why. Abe married Phyllis and became a lawyer.

Arnie never worked on a vaccinating crew. His father was rich. He made his money from a liquor store business he had in New York. He bought a chicken farm to retire, lost most of his money from the farm, then sold his farm and bought another liquor store in Beechwood. Arnie was my best friend. The last time I heard from him Joyce and I had just moved to Rockville, Maryland, where I was to start a postdoctoral fellowship at the NIH. Arnie called and told me his Ph.D. Thesis had just been rejected during the final defense of his Doctoral Dissertation at M.I.T. He was absolutely devastated. He said he was going to fly to California in his light plane that he had just purchased. We, nor anyone else from his family, ever heard from him again.

Morty lived down the street from us on Silverton Road. Like us, his father had a chicken farm. He talked with a nasal twang, had droopy eyes and a shit-eating smile. I think his father committed suicide when the chicken farm business went bad back in the 1950's. Farmers would burn down their chicken coops to collect the insurance money. I think Bill Buden's father did that. Or worse, they would hang themselves from the rafters in their chicken coop.

It was during that time that we lost our farm. It must have been devastating for my father, who had been in business for himself for so many years. Before he bought the farm in Toms River, he owned the Grand Concourse Laundry on White Plains Road in The Bronx. That business started to go down when all of the Laundromats started to open. He expanded the chicken farm that we bought from the Troy's and did very well for many years-- well enough to put his three sons through college. But even though he managed the chicken farm better than most of the farmers, the economic situation on the farms was impossible. This was largely due to the government support of grain prices-- grain to feed the chickens being the greatest expense we had-- while not supporting the price of eggs, the only major source of income. As large conglomerates of chicken farms opened in the South and Midwest, the price of eggs plummeted while the price of grain was kept artificially high. Essentially every farm in South Jersey went bankrupt. After he realized that we were losing more money with each passing day, he finally gave up the farm. My father went from job to job, doing anything that would bring in some money--janitor, cutting grass, anything. One day he came home and told us he was turned down for a job pumping gas. I can only imagine how bad he must have felt because he never complained. He just looked so sad. Those were terrible times.

ALBIE

When I used to vaccinate chickens we had this guy working with us, Albie Fleischman, who was Mr. Disgusting. He had terrible teeth and always seemed to have chicken feathers sticking out around his mouth. I think they stuck to his skin because it was so dirty. Anyway, he used to like to take off his shoes and socks and walk barefooted in the chicken manure. He said he liked the feel of the manure squishing between his toes. Makes me hungry just thinking about it.

THE VACCINATING CREWS

There seems to be some interest in vaccinating chickens so I'll tell you some more about that. During this period in the 1940s and 1950s, the chickens were usually vaccinated for three common diseases: Fowl Pox, New Castle, and Laryngotrachitis (Laryngo). The fowl pox vaccine was administered by brush to open pores in the legs of chickens, formed by stripping the feathers from the leg. New Castle was given with a double needle which had eyes like a knitting needle. The needle was dipped into the bottle of vaccine, wiped gently on the side of the bottle and stuck through the web of the chicken's wing. The laryngo was given by brush to the membrane of the chicken's cloaca.

The vaccinating crews usually consisted of between 6 to 8 people, depending on the job. Two were in the shelters catching the birds by the legs and handing them out to the others who were just outside the door. (A shelter was a building, maybe about 10 feet square, maybe 5 feet high at its peak, with slanted "A" shaped roofs that were covered with tar paper and reached down to about a foot from the ground at its lowest point. The front, back and sides of the shelter were enclosed with chicken wire. The shelters rested on the grass of the chicken range, but the floors had raised sections made up of turkey wire covered with wooden 2x2s on which the chickens roosted. Each shelter housed about 200-300 chickens). The caught birds were handed to a person standing just outside the door. Holding the group of three or four birds upside down by one leg, he stripped the feathers from the drumstick, one bird at a time. His partner held a small bottle of vaccine and a brush about three inches long with short bristles, which he used to rub the vaccine into the open holes left by the stripped feathers on the leg. He then handed the group of chickens

to the next pair of vaccinators. One held the wing open so the web could be stuck by his partner with the needle. He then passed the birds, one at a time, to the final person who was sitting on a small chair or stool. Holding the chicken upside down between his legs, he opened the cloaca which he rubbed with a brush containing the laryngo vaccine. If he had a partner, the partner would rub the vaccine onto the chicken. If he did it alone, the vaccine bottle would be kept on a small board by his side so he had a free hand. The chickens were then let loose in the range. Giving Laryngo was the easiest of the several parts of the vaccinating jobs, so long as you didn't mind getting crapped on periodically. Those in the shelter had the hardest job by far so we rotated, changing each job with each new shelter. (Sometime we sang as we worked: Tote that Barge, Lift that Bale, Get a Little Drunk, and You Land in the Shelter).

DAY JOBS

Ordinarily when we worked vaccinating chickens we started at daybreak and worked until early afternoon. The head of the vaccinating crew would drive around picking up his crew at about 5 or 6 in the morning and drive us to the farm that he had set up to do that day. The farmer's job was to go out in the field the night before, after dark when the birds had gone to roost in the shelters, and lock the doors. We arrived, the boss talked briefly with the farmer and we started our job. After working for several hours we would often get a break and have something to eat. All of us brought sandwiches, which we ate in the field, but sometimes the farmers brought something out for us: coffee and donuts or if we were lucky, bagels with cream cheese. Many of the farmers treated us like family and prepared something for us to eat when we finished working. This treat we ate out in the field with the chickens or more often in his kitchen: rolls and pastry and eggs, of course. To reward his hospitality, we always were careful to scrape the chicken manure from our shoes before we went in. What we ate varied and depended in large measure on the generosity of the farmers. Fanny Brafman, the sister-in-law of our Uncle Paul, stood out as preparing the best feast. We looked forward to working there. I wonder now if it was partly because she had a daughter Martha, whom my older brother Lester later married.

NIGHT JOBS

Although most of the vaccinating jobs were during the day, sometimes we had night jobs. Here we started at dusk, after the chickens had gone to roost. Often the night jobs were short, maybe 3 or 4 hours, but on big jobs we worked through the night. These were kind of a nightmare as it seemed the night would never end. I don't remember ever being more tired. Vaccinating was hard to begin with, but working through the entire night was very difficult. We would try to amuse ourselves by singing or telling jokes (dirty jokes, naturally). I remember feeling a little delirious at times. We longed for the first rays of light. When finally it started getting light it was wonderful and we felt like we had slept the whole night. There is something special about seeing the sun rise.

GOOD PAY

As difficult as the work was, vaccinating chickens paid very well. In the beginning (I probably was about 13 or 14 years old when I first started) we got a dollar and a quarter an hour. Later the pay increased to \$1.50 an hour for day jobs to as much as \$1.75 or \$2.00 an hour for night jobs. I remember some farmers complaining when they saw me, being so small and skinny, why they were asked to pay me the same as the older and bigger boys on the crew. Henry, my first boss, insisted the I get the same as the others. He would tell them, "Just see how he works." I always appreciated that. With this money, combined with what my parents gave me for tuition, I was able to save enough to go to college.

BEN THE BUSBOY

Sometimes the vaccinating business waned as farmers started going out of business in the late 1940s and early 1950s . So I had to look for a more steady means of employment over the summer months. Lakewood was a kind of fashionable resort about 6 miles from our chicken farm, so I applied for a job as a busboy. Now you probably know, the busboy was the guy who took off the dirty dishes after the people finished with them. This is not to be confused with the waiter. They were more senior people with more experience, who served the food. They got more money, of course. We both worked almost exclusively on tips. As I recall, the standard tip was \$2 for a waiter for each person he served over the weekend. The busboys got \$1 per person per weekend. In Lakewood, most of the people came for weekend vacations from New York. They were old crotches who couldn't afford to go to Florida. I remember that many of them would ask for prume (sic) juice. The juice never seemed to be in the right kind of cup...some of the lips of the cups were too thin, some too thick..."It dribbles down my chin". Nothing but complaints, I got.

Being a busboy meant that you were low man on the totem pole...and I was not the greatest busboy. As I said, we had to remove the dirty dishes. Piling them up and down our arms was quite of feat, one which I still watch with amazement when I see busboys (and girls) do that now. We also had to serve the tea after the meals. That was the scary part. I inevitably would pour some of the hot tea on the patrons. They got to know me and when I approached the table, I would see them duck and hear them whisper in their scratchy voices, "Watch out, here he comes".

Anyway, when I applied for the job, they asked if I had a workers card. Now, I never had a workers card as I always just did vaccinating on a crew who didn't worry about things like that. The farmers couldn't care less. But here were fancy hotels with real employees and they had to obey the rules...I needed a workers card. To get a workers card you had to have a social security card. To get a social security card, you had to be 18 years old but I had never gotten one. What to do? My brother Howie had just turned 18 and had a draft card. I decided to use his draft card as evidence that I was 18. And so it came to pass that I was registered on my Social Security card as Benjamin Howard Weiss, a name I just made up and seemed would work. I got the job. When friends would come visit me, they would ask for Ben the Busboy. The owners said there was a Howard, but no Ben. Oh, they would remember, yes, Howie Benjy.

Years later, when at 65 I applied for my Social Security benefits, I still had the same card as I had gotten as a teenager. The woman on the phone said she didn't have anybody named Benjamin Weiss with that number. The number on the card said Benjamin Howard Weiss or Howard Benjamin Weiss... I don't remember). When I began to explain the story of what had happened some 40 years ago, she very nicely interrupted me and said, "Oh that's all right, these things happen all the time. I'll just change you records to read Benjamin Weiss, using your same Social Security number." That was the end of that.

The Night Zayde Died

We were still living in The Bronx when Zayde got hit by a car and broke his leg. He was in a cast from his ankles to his hip. He was moved from the hospital to our apartment in the Bronx so my mother could take care of him. He was difficult to deal with before, but now he was impossible: imperious, demanding, complaining. My mother waited on his every need, doing all the work herself, lifting the heavy cast to move him in bed, bathing him, cleaning the bedpan, etc. When we moved to Toms River, he came with us. I shared a small bedroom with him downstairs. He slept in a double bed, I in a small single bed, almost like a junior bed. The only other piece of furniture in the room was a small old table that was like a night table but was at the foot of his bed against the wall. He had two great big feather pillows that he slept on, on his back. He had a long white beard and very short hair that he combed every day with a very fine-toothed comb. He took very good care of himself. He wore a yarmulka at all times when he was awake. The only time he took it off was when he combed his head and just before he went to sleep. He might have even worn it to bed; I don't remember.

My parents stayed in another bedroom, also downstairs. Howie and Lester shared the bedroom upstairs in the converted attic. To turn on the light in the attic, we had a string that was rigged to be pulled at the bottom of the stairs. If you pulled it, sometimes the light would go on at the top of the stairs. If not, we had to grope our way in the dark up the stairs to the attic. It was kind of scary as there was no railing to separate the attic from the stairwell. I always thought I would fall into the hole as I walked around in the attic. At the top of the stairs was a door leading to the bedroom that was insulated somewhat from the attic. When Lester went to college, I moved upstairs with Howie.

One morning, when I came downstairs to have breakfast, I noticed everything was very quiet. Something terrible had happened. My mother was in the kitchen sobbing and my father was over her trying to console her. I walked by the kitchen, down the hallway to the bathroom and passed by my old bedroom. Inside, lying on his back, as if asleep, lay my Zayde. He had died in his sleep overnight. There was a candle burning on the small table, as was the custom when someone had died. I went back into the kitchen and my mother told me that Zayde had died and I shouldn't go in the room. Around that time there was a small commotion. The candle had burned down and caught fire to the table in the bedroom. My father quickly extinguished it, but not without great anguish, as you can imagine.

The thing that went through my head at the time was that my mother was so upset. Zayde had given her nothing but grief. Always yelling and demanding that she do more and more for him. It was never enough. I thought she would be happy that he was finally dead. But she was not.

THE QUITTER

When I was in seventh grade I tried out for the Junior High School baseball team. The baseball coach was a Mr. Olson who taught seventh grade Science as I remember it. The practices were held after school so I had to get a ride home after practice; the school buses left promptly after school let out, of course. Sometimes my father would come to pick me up, but most of the time I would hitchhike home. After a couple of weeks of practice my parents told me that they needed me to help out on the farm after school so I would have to quit the team. I remember vividly the scene when I went to see Mr. Olson. I told him that I wouldn't be able to make baseball practice anymore. I don't remember if I told him that the reason was because I was needed to help out on the farm, but I do remember what he told me. "You are a quitter" he shouted, "and quitters never amount to anything". Well, you can imagine how awful I felt after that and how much it must have hurt me since I still remember the incident even after almost 50 years have gone by. What a terrible person he was!

But on the other hand, his prophecy did come true.

NO NOSE

Shelly Singer was another guy from the vaccinating crew. He had about the biggest nose I ever saw, so naturally we gave him the nickname "No Nose". He was always asleep when we came to pick him up and I, being the youngest, would have to go into his house, which was always unlocked, and wake him up. It would take about 2 minutes for him to get out of bed, and into the car. He usually was just in his underwear--he dressed in the car.

The thing I remember the most about him though was his father. He, like so many of us, had a chicken farm, and like most of the farmers, had a dog. Well, this female dog attracted all the male dogs from the neighborhood. Shelly's father was tired of his dog always being pregnant so he would catch the male dogs when they came a courting and tar their penis. Though crude, this was one of the early, and quite effective, forms of birth control.

Shelly had an older sister, Mona. As big noses ran in the family, Shelly's father didn't have to worry about tarring any of the neighborhood boys.

THE SCHOOL BUS

Bill Farrington was our bus driver. He was drunk most of the time, largely to enable him to cope with a busload of screaming kids every day. One of the stops on our route along Bay Avenue was at the end of a long side road, Dugans Lane. We would stop there to pick up the kids that lived on this little side road. Well, this stop was one of our treasured attractions. For it was the site of the daily Rat Race. Ethyl and Judy Kurtz lived on Dugans Lane. For some reason, even though the bus came to pick them up at the same time each day, they never were ready. They would be seen running down Dugans Lane toward our bus, arms and flab flying. While waiting for them, all the kids on the bus would jeer and bet on which would get to the bus first. Kids sure can be cruel.

Jimmy Hoffa

During the war years, the chicken/egg business was pretty good. The egg prices were relatively high and the price of grain, which was the major expense on the farm, was reasonable. The chickens ate something called MASH, which was mixture of ground-up corn, wheat and oats. Sometimes we would feed them pure corn to fatten them up. At other times, when they seemed skinny, my father would prepare a mixture of oats with cod liver oil. I remember him digging his strong, bare arms into five-gallon buckets filled with oats, into which he had poured the oil, and mixing it until the composite was uniform.

Well, as I said, the years during World War II, the chicken farm business was good. Unfortunately, my parents bought the farm in 1945, after the war had ended. Times were OK for a while. But in the late 1940s and into the 1950s, the government started subsidizing the grain farmers out in the mid-west. They didn't subsidize the egg price, however. So the price of grain was kept artificially high, but the egg prices were not. The price my parents got for the eggs, the main income on the farm, was determined by supply and demand, the price set in New York every day at auction. People like the wholesalers, who bought the eggs and sold them to the retail stores, would come to the market in New York and bid on the eggs. The price of gotten at these auctions was published daily in the local paper. My parents would look up the price every day, as that would determine how well they would do. New Jersey eggs usually went at a premium price compared to that from the mid-West or South. I think it was because we were closer to the major population centers of the country, and the eggs, not having to travel that far, were fresher. Anyhow, things started to get pretty bad in the late 40s and still worse into the 50s. Sometime during the late 1950s who should arrive in town but the savior of Labor, Jimmy Hoffa.

As you may know, farmers are notoriously independent. They don't want anyone telling them how to run their business. I suppose most business people feel that way...and everybody else as well, now that I think of it. So riding into town came Jimmy Hoffa, the head of the Teamsters Union. His idea was to unionize the chicken farmers in South Jersey. Band together in order to raise the price of eggs. We should withhold the eggs until we got our demands met...that is, have the price of eggs also subsidized or at least raise the price at the auction markets. The problem, of course, was that eggs were perishable. We could not hold back selling our eggs for long. They would spoil. I remember my father going to the big meeting between Hoffa and all the chicken farmers in the area. The upshot of it was that they would have no part of him. No one was going to tell them what to do and certainly not someone who hadn't the slightest idea about farming. So the farmers flatly rejected his proposals...and soon thereafter the chicken farmers in the whole area around Toms River and all of South Jersey went bankrupt.

The take-home lesson I got from all that was government should not micro manage businesses. By choosing to subsidize the grain industry but not the egg industry, it ultimately resulted in the collapse of the entire small-chicken-farming business in New Jersey. Eggs would now be controlled by the huge conglomerates in the South and mid-West. Of course, the other side of the coin is that now that eggs and chickens are

produced in huge, efficient farms, the price of chickens and eggs are still relatively inexpensive. What we currently pay for chickens and eggs, unlike practically everything else, is still about what we paid for them in the 1940s. But is that because the grain prices are kept artificially high or because large industries can more readily produce products at lower costs? In any case, the end result was that the cost of the chickens and eggs to the consumer was kept low but the cost to the farmers like my parents was incalculable.

MOSES

On nice days I would talk our school bus driver into letting me off a few miles before we got to my house so I could walk down Beaver Dam Road. This was a beautiful road, filled with scrub oak trees and wild blueberry bushes, and completely uninhabited, except for Moses. Moses was a hermit who lived in a little one-room shack, about 8 foot square that he built from scrap wood and corrugated aluminum. In the shack was an old wooden desk, a broken chair and a torn, smelly mattress on the dirt floor. The shack was next to a small swamp from which he got his drinking water. There was no gas or electricity and, except for the stream feeding the swamp, no running water. Most of the kids were afraid of Moses since he seemed so strange. But I used to love to go visit him there in the middle of the woods on my way home from school. Moses apparently used to own much of the land on Beaver Dam Road. His relatives wanted the property so they declared him insane and took it. I used to love to talk to Moses because he was actually very bright. He loved to talk about math and science. He taught me that you don't need much to live.

GEORGE

George was one of the many workers we had on the farm over the years, whom my dad hired to help with the chores.

The Workers (as they were known) were a very varied bunch: ex-convicts, alcoholics, vagrants, mental incompetents, runaways, fugitives, illegal aliens, juvenile offenders, and just out-of-luck persons of all stripes-- black, white, Hispanic, old, young, you name it. Some came as couples, men arriving with wives or girlfriends, but most were single. Many, but not all of them, were alcoholics. Where they came from, I'm not sure. They were usually sent by the AGENCY-- whatever that was. They stayed in our "bungalow", a one room, cinder block, stucco-covered house, about 12 feet square, which we built near the chicken coops. The bungalow had a bed, an old dresser, a stove, sink and small refrigerator and a little walled-off area for a toilet. Most of the workers ate with us in our kitchen, my mother treating them like one of her own children. Several of them I befriended. One of my favorites was George.

George was a middle-aged, stocky, rather good-looking, man with a ruddy complexion. He was competent, reliable, and hard-working. And he was a wonderful gardener. Each Spring he would dig up a large patch of ground in the middle of the chicken field, where the chickens had been spreading their droppings for years. The soil was rich and fertile. The ground was soft, dark and sweet smelling as he turned it over with his shovel. His garden in full productivity was a delight to behold. I would love to go out there with him, to watch and help if he would let me. George was so proud of his garden. The rows were straight and long; the soil, free of weeds and remarkably productive. In addition to doing his regular chores--feeding the chickens, collecting the eggs, and doing general repairs around the farm, George supplied us with an abundance of all types of fresh vegetables for the whole season.

Like all the others, one day George picked himself up and disappeared from my life forever, but not without leaving me with one of my fondest memories and a priceless gift--a love for gardening.

OL' MAN TILTON

The Tiltens lived on Silverton Road up the street not far from us. They owned several acres of land on the corner of Silverton and White Oak Bottom Road. They lived in a large, old two-story frame house, the wood darkened with age. Across the house was a barn made of the same material. They were one of the few farmers who didn't have chickens. In that area of Toms River, almost all the chicken farmers were Jews; the Christians had other businesses-- plumbers, carpenters, electricians, vegetable farmers, selling feed for the chickens, wholesaling eggs.

My most vivid recollection of Ol' Man Tilton, who seemed to me to be at least 100 years old, was of him riding by our house in his old wooden wagon pulled by an even older horse. Every day at dawn he would go by, being pulled by this horse down Silverton Road. It went so slowly that if you would be walking along side the horse and wagon, you'd probably pass it. Ol' Man Tilton's head would be slumped over, nodding in rhythm with the clump, clump, clump of the horse's hoofs. The horse itself, which also seemed to be fast asleep, had no trouble finding the way-- no great feat since the duo had been making this same journey for so many years.

I always wondered where they were going. Every day I would watch as they would go down the hill passed our house in the morning and then go by again up the hill and pull back into their barn in the evening. One day I decided to follow them.

As I didn't want to be seen, I stayed some distance behind the wagon, not that either would have noticed me even if I had been sitting on the old man's lap or on top of the horse, for that matter. But nevertheless I was cautious not to be seen. They went passed the Kelsey's, passed the Hopkinson's, passed the Lipitz's toward the big bend in Silverton Road which led to Beaver Dam Road. Then, just as they reached the big bend, they veered left onto an old sandy, rutted fire road that went directly into the woods. The horse made the turn into this dirt road without any prompting from Ol' Man Tilton, who of course, was still fast asleep. I had never ventured deep onto this road by myself before because it was far from my house and completely deserted. But I had gone this far and I had to know their destination. The horse was traveling even slower now as it pulled the wagon and its old master through the sand.

Finally they arrived at a clearing in the woods that I had never seen. The trees had been cut down to make way for a large plot of ground that could be farmed. Every day the two would come to this secluded spot in the woods and farm the cleared land. The horse would pull a plow to till and cultivate the soil, the old man working his horse like the master he was. At the end of each long, hard day they would trudge back home. What peace! What paradise! I always wished that some day I would be able to be just like Ol' Man Tilton, every day walking slowly to my secluded piece of fertile ground and farm the land. Now I can and do. It's wonderful.

MRS. TILTON

Mrs. Tilton was Ol' Man Tilton's daughter. She was a sweet, proper, matronly, white-haired woman, who used to take children into her home and give them room and board. These kids, who ranged in age from about 10 to 14, as I remember, became my most common playmates on the farm, for there were very few kids my age living anywhere near us. The children were both black and white, mostly, if not all boys, and seemed to be orphans or kids from broken homes or reform school. They stayed with her for varying periods of time, then would be gone. I think she got support to keep them in her home from either public or religious, charitable organizations. She seemed very kind to them but also very strict.

One of my most vivid recollections of life with Mrs. Tilton took place one day when I was over at their farm playing with one of her charges. She called him in from playing outside in order to do his daily religious education exercise. I went with him into his room. It was a very small, dark, windowless room, sparsely and simply furnished. His lesson that afternoon was from a comic book-type bible with gaily colored figures and scenes on every page. The particular story that he was to read that day told of how the Jews killed Christ. That episode made a great impression on me. As I saw it, the main theme of the story boiled down to this: Jesus was the most wonderful and most important person ever to exist, and the Jews killed him. My friend would be made to read this story almost every day that I was there. I always felt that that sort of religious indoctrination contributed greatly to the anti-Semitism that was so prevalent in our community and probably throughout the world. It gave me an insight into how anti-Semitic feelings could be perpetuated from one generation to the next. For, wittingly or not, I don't know how children cannot come away from this training with anything other than a dislike, or even hatred for Jews. I hope this sort of "teaching" is no longer prevalent, but somehow I wouldn't be surprised if it still exists in some communities.

CHARLIE KELSEY

The Kelsey's lived down the road from us, just before the first bend on Silverton Road. They lived in a wooden farmhouse, similar to that of the Tilton's, except smaller. There was Mr. and Mrs. Kelsey, three children, a daughter, son Charlie and I think a younger son, and the kids' grandfather. The grandfather was an incredible woodworker. He once made us a wheelbarrow entirely of hand tools. I wish I still had that wheelbarrow. What a treasure that would be!

Charlie was about Lester's age. I don't know what he did for a living but once he showed up with a horse and wagon and took me for a ride. That was great.

My major recollection of Charlie, however, had to do with our cat problem. We had on the farm more than 20 cats. We kept them to keep the mouse population down. Besides the rodents that they would catch, their diet consisted largely of stale bread, which we got from the baker for 25 cents a bag. My mother soaked the bread in a little milk and water and added the eggs that had broken during the day. She put the mixture in a big flat metal bowl. All the cats and dogs would eat out of the same bowl.

Unlike the dogs, which were part of the family, we never had much of an attachment for the cats. As a matter of fact, we used to make fun of some of the newer farmers that actually NAMED their cats. What a riot. Could you believe it, giving cats names?

Well anyway, as you can imagine, with more that 20 cats on the farm, we were inundated with kittens. For each cat would have a few litters each year, with each litter consisting of up to 10 kittens. Without doing something, we would soon have more cats than chickens. So periodically we had to call in Charlie Kelsey for assistance. My father didn't have the heart to kill the kittens, and there were certainly no takers for them, as all the farmers had their own problem with too many cats. Charlie had devised a simple solution to the problem---somewhat cruel-sounding in this day, but simple. It was the two-pail system. He would fill two pails with water and take the kittens and the pails out into the woods. He would put all the kittens into one of the pails of water and put the second pail into the first pail. After several minutes, when all the kittens had drowned, he would dump everything out in the woods. My kids hate this story.

THE BANACHS

The Banachs came to Toms River a few years after we had. They bought a small piece of property diagonally across from us, adjacent to the Schuslers and across the street from the Kelseys. They were refugees from Nazi Germany. They built a modest sized chicken coop, but as they could not afford a house, they lived in the chicken coop. They occupied the first room of the coop. The room was about 12 foot square, with a very low ceiling. I didn't visit them often but I remember going into their room once. It was smelly and dusty and very depressing. That one room served as the kitchen, living quarters and bedroom. I don't remember a bathroom so they must have had an outhouse. I don't know where they washed. They had hung an old curtain to separate the beds from the rest of the room. The furniture was second hand and in tatters. Their clothes were also worn and tattered. They lived there for several years, working from dawn to dusk and hardly spending a penny until they had saved enough money to buy the Kantor's place, which was just up the road from us, adjacent to our property.

The Banachs had a young, red-haired daughter. She was the sole surviving child of what had been a family of seven children. All the others had been murdered by the Nazis. She had escaped because the Banachs had been able to find a convent into which they could put her until the war ended. The nuns were able to get away with the deception because the little girl had red hair and therefore could more readily pass as non-Jewish. The Banachs themselves managed to survive somehow, and after the war, with the help of agencies set up for that purpose, were able to find her and be reunited with their little girl. It was the first time I experienced first hand and personally what the Jews had gone through in Europe during the war.

THE SCHUSLERS

The Schuslers lived directly across from us on Silverton Road, in a large lovely, two-story home standing stately toward the top of a elegant sloping lawn. The grass was kept immaculately cut by Mr. Schusler, using an old push rotary lawn mower that he maintained razor sharp. Before each cutting, Mr. Schusler honed the blades of his mower with a hand file in the workshop situated discreetly behind the house. Each week like clockwork he would walk slowly and effortlessly back and forth across this large lawn, the mower making a pleasant clickety click sound as it sheered the grass, keeping it perfectly coifed. The lawn was bordered by a long semicircular driveway that wound its way up the sloping hill and across the front of the noble home. Grass, as neat as the lawn itself, protruded between the rutted gravel driveway. There were two large, neatly trimmed maples trees situated perfectly, one on each side of the lawn toward the top of the hill. Near the bottom of the driveway, stood large, lovely evergreens, one copse on each side guarding the entranceway.

We didn't know much about the Schuslers. They were an older couple, apparently retired. Reclusive and somewhat aloof. The best I could determine, he used to be in some sort of banking business in the City before he retired. His most distinguishing feature was his hand. Three of his fingers of one hand had been cut off almost at the knuckles. It seems they were lost during some woodworking accident, or at one point he hinted that he lost them during the war. It was never clear. My parents, though separated from the Schuslers by just the width of Silverton Road never set foot in their house. Mr and Mrs Schusler came to our house just once soon after we moved in, and never again. The greetings were always polite but formal: "Good morning, Mr. Schusler", to be answered by "Good morning". I don't remember ever hearing him mention my father by name, as if he couldn't decide what to call him or, as I sometimes felt, that he didn't want to give him that honor. As far as I could remember, the women never spoke to each other.

Unlike the farmers in the area, who mostly had pick-up trucks as transportation, the Schuslers drove a big car, kept spotless as you might imagine. He washed it every week, whether it needed it or not. They drove it infrequently, apparently only when they went shopping or to church. I assumed the latter trip as it was always on Sunday and they were more dressed up than usual.

I used to visit the Schuslers fairly often. I loved to walk up their driveway and take in the exquisite grounds. As beautiful as the lawn was, what I loved most was their backyard. Hidden away behind and to the side of the house was a garden. It was a sight to behold; the first time I saw it I must have gasped. The rows were as straight as could be with alternating patterns of flowers and vegetables. Everything was done by hand, the digging with a shovel and the cultivating with a hoe and rake. Both Mr and Mrs Schusler worked in the garden, she paying more attention to the flowers. I always thought it was such a shame that no one but them would see it for I don't ever remember their having visitors.

My rare, one and only actually, visit to the inside of the house was memorable. The rooms were dark, the windows being covered with heavy drapes, and musty smelling. I always thought that the two of them lived alone in that big house until I was invited inside. As I stood in the living room, dimly I saw hobble into the room a small figure. Somewhat startled, I was introduced to an old lady, Mrs. Schusler's mother, I believe. Frail and pale, she was dressed all in black. She walked very slowly, bent over as old people do. She weakly answered the frightened little boy's quiet Hello. I couldn't wait to get out of there.

I saddens me to think about them sometimes as we were geographically so close but culturally so distant.

BLACKS NOT WELCOME

Seaside Heights was a favorite swimming place for us. It had beautiful sandy beaches on the Atlantic Ocean. Although they had strict rules, such as no one could walk on the boardwalk without a shirt, everyone enjoyed themselves there --- well, almost everyone. One day while we were swimming, a voice come over the loud speaker. This speaker was routinely used to announce things like, "Anyone, looking for a little boy, about 4 years old, wearing green shorts, report to the lifeguard on Pennsylvania Avenue and the Boardwalk."

However, this announcement was different. It demanded that the group who came on a bus from Philadelphia should return to their bus immediately. There was a small commotion down the beach so I went over to see what was going on. What I saw was a few lifeguards herding a group of people out of the water off the beach. These people had one distinguishing characteristic. They were all black (colored in those days). I had never thought about it before but I now realized that this public beach in New Jersey in the 1950s practiced blatant, racial discrimination---and not I nor anyone else on the beach objected. I knew that this area of the state was bigoted---there was a very large billboard leading to Seaside proclaiming "A RESTRICTED FAMILY COMMUNITY", which everyone knew translated as, "No Jews or Blacks allowed", but I had never before seen first hand what that meant to the everyday lives of real people.

ACROSS THE TRACKS

Toms River was bordered on the south by an old set of railroad tracks with grass growing between the rails as they hadn't been used for years. I don't remember ever being explicitly told not to go there, but it was the general understanding that 'You don't cross the tracks' to South Toms River. One day a few of my friends and I decided to see what was on the other side of the tracks. We were probably about 13 years old or so. What we saw was certainly different from what we expected. There, scattered along a lonely dirt road were small, dilapidated one-room houses, not so different from the brooder houses in which we kept the baby chicks until they were old enough to go out on the range. Clothes lines were strung outside the shacks with old, torn clothes hanging haphazardly along them. This is where the blacks in the Toms River area lived. Moving a little further into the community we realized that these shacks housed the more well-off black population. Across the way from these hovels was the Toms River garbage dump, a vast area stretching as far as our eyes could see with a stench that made us hold our noses. Strewn among the garbage were cardboard boxes and little lean-to's with corrugated sheets of old pieces of aluminum that acted as roofs. Peeking inside we saw that there were people living in them. Torn mattresses, some with people sitting or lying on them, covered the dirt floor. Several people, many of them barefooted children, were wandering along the dump picking up anything they could use: wood for burning, metal for building, some old uneaten food. Many emaciated, straggly stray dogs wandered about, competing with the humans looking for something to eat.

I always wondered where the few blacks who attended school with us in Toms River Grade School and High School lived. Now I knew. What was more surprising was how many children we saw in South Toms River. In our high school of about 500 students, I remember only two black kids, the Harvey brothers. Midge was two years ahead of me in school and was the star running back on our football team. Butch Harvey was one year ahead of me. He was the quarterback. Where, or even if, the other black children went to school is still a mystery.

It should be kept in mind, this scene took place, not in some small town in the deep south in the 1800s or early 1900s, but in the early 1950s in Toms River, New Jersey, a fairly prosperous community, with clean, tree-lined broad boulevards with large well-kept homes running through the center of town, in central-eastern New Jersey, the county seat of Ocean County. Surrounding the town at the time were the chicken farms, one of which I lived on. It was an all white community. No blacks lived either in town or on the farms. Blacks were hired to clean the homes of the town folks; black farmhands were often hired to help on the chicken farms, shoveling manure and doing other manual tasks. They were the lucky ones who had employment. In the evening they would return to their own homes in South Toms River.

EVERYBODY OUT

Many days after school a bunch of the guys would gather on Harvey Braun's front lawn to play football. His father was a lawyer and the richest one of the gang, hence they had the biggest lawn. Most of the time we played one-hand or two-hand touch but sometimes we decided to play tackle football. Those latter games usually didn't last long as someone was always being carried off the lawn with one injury or another. The designated quarterback, usually the most aggressive of us, would call the play. It always was the same: "OK, I get the ball and everybody go out for a pass". We always huddled but never changed the play. This story came to mind while watching the Eagles play football nowadays. They seem to have the same play. Michael Vick: "OK, I get the ball and everybody out for a pass."

OPEN UP THE NESTS

The chickens laid the eggs in 'nests'. The nest units were made of metal, with the total unit divided into 15 sections or holes (nests), five individual nests across and three high. Each individual nest was about 15 inches deep and had openings that were about 8-10 inches square and each was covered on the bottom with a soft absorbent material, made of dried grass or something like it, we called 'stage dry' (I think it really was a proprietary produce called 'Stays Dry'). The chickens somehow knew to go into the nests to lay their eggs; the stage dry was there to absorb the chicken droppings so the eggs were cleaner than they otherwise would have been if the chickens had so sit and lay their eggs in the droppings. Each day, or twice a day, we had to go to each nest and collect the eggs. My father would do this in the morning and either he or I would do it late in the afternoon. The eggs would be put into wire baskets and place on our 'track', which ran the length of the chicken coops.

At dusk the chickens would go to roost to go to sleep. They naturally looked for a high place to roost. For this we built roosting areas for them to go to. This was a raised wooden platform placed in the back of the coop. Each platform was maybe about 6 feet deep and 20 feet long and was built about three feet above the floor of the chicken coop (which was also covered with stage dry). Above and attached to the solid wooden platform was another section made up of long, wooden two-by-twos, attached to turkey wire (as you may know, turkey wire is made up of wire with hexagonal holes. Turkey wire is thicker and has smaller holes (about one and a half-inch holes) than chicken wire (about 3 inch holes). There was a space of about 6 inches or so between the solid platform and the turkey wire platform. The idea was that the chickens would roost on the two-by-twos, and their droppings would fall through the turkey wire onto the wooden platform below. Once a year, using a hoe-like scraper, we would scrap the chicken droppings from the platforms into containers and put them onto our pickup truck and dump the droppings onto a giant manure pile on Beaver Dam Road. (We used this manure pile as a backdrop for our practice shooting with our .22 gauge rifle, the targets being anything we could find, like tin cans or glass bulbs.) (Later we had to stop using this dump as they started building fancy houses on Beaver Dam Road). This clearly was one of the more disgusting jobs on the farm, as the droppings were pure chicken manure, unadulterated with any stage dry. It made a great fertilizer though.

So back to the story. The nest units had attached to them platforms made up of two wooden one-by-threes that the chickens could land on when they flew onto the nests to lay eggs. These platforms were on hinges that could be opened and closed. We closed them at dusk so the chickens would go to sleep on the roosts we made for them rather than have them sleep in the nests. We didn't want them to crap in the nests. Each night, when it was dark and all the chickens had roosted, someone had to go into the chicken coops to open up the nests so the chickens, when they awoke, would have a place to lay their eggs. The chickens were awakened about 3 in the morning by lights, which were set to go on automatically by a clock-like arrangement. The idea was that chickens laid more eggs when there was a short dark period and a long light period. (We thought then that this was because by getting up early they would eat more and be able to lay more eggs, but now

I think it has to do something with the pineal gland which governs ovarian activity). (By the way, in case you were wondering, chickens were inbred to lay lots of eggs, a good chicken laying an egg almost every day). So someone had to go in and open up the nests, i.e. put down the platform that was preventing the chickens from entering the nests. That became my job. I hated it. I had to go into each chicken coop, one by one, and walking in pitch darkness on slimy, slippery chicken stays dry, open up all the nests. (We had 7 large rooms of chickens, each housing about 1000 chickens and each having maybe 8 of these nest units). I would work faster and faster as I was afraid of the dark and sometimes would fall onto the filthy manure covered floor. This was not one of my most pleasant memories on the farm but, as I think back on it: 'no big deal'.

THE LICENSE PLATE

Almost every farmer I knew had a license plate outside the door to their house. It was embedded in the cement sidewalk just outside the door most often used to enter the house. The plate was stuck in the cement on the long side of the plate, standing up so about two inches were exposed. It was used to scrap off the chicken manure and other dirt from the shoes before entering the house. The more advanced versions had one of the ends bent over to remove the hard-to-get-at chicken shit that always seemed to get lodged in the crack between the heel and sole of the shoes.

SCIENCE AND GARDENING

Science was good to me and I honor it as much as anything. It was stimulating, exciting, and intellectually challenging and provided for me a wonderful, interesting and full and satisfying life--one that I would not have given up for anything. Yet it doesn't hold a candle to the feeling I get from plunging my hand into soft, dark, fertile soil.

THE CREEK

The creek played a major role in my days on the farm. The creek had a soft, sandy bottom and the color and smell of pine, properties it picked up as it meandered lazily through the pine forests of Toms River. We reached it by heading our pick-up truck into the woods on one of the sand-covered rutted roads that criss-crossed through the forest. We drove through this winding road until we reached the small clearing where we could park and make our way through the trees to the creek, hoping all along our truck didn't get stuck in the sand.

I didn't know until much later that our creek actually was part of the Toms River, having its origin at Pine Lake upstream, passing through the town of Toms River, then widening out as it passed by Beachwood, Island Heights and Ocean Gate and eventually emptying into Barnegat Bay. For us the creek was only about 15 feet across and seemed to begin and end in the middle of the woods, beginning just above the deep part of the water where we dove in and ending just around the bend, disappearing beneath the overhanging trees where the water was swift and shallow. It was there where we used to go swimming in the summer to wash ourselves off after vaccinating chickens, jumping into the frigid water bare-assed. And it was there where in my teens I used to take Joyce, parked among those wonderful sweet-smelling trees, happily spending the evening with the love of my life.

THE PIT

With more than 10,000 chickens on the farm, naturally we had a lot of dead chickens to dispose of. Several techniques were tried. One involved piling up all of the dead chickens, dousing them with kerosine and setting them afire. We children were made to stay way back as this produced a raging inferno, thick black smoke and a terrible stench. Sometimes the surrounding grass would catch fire and my father would have to put out these small brush fires with the back of a flat shovel. This solution to the problem was not only dangerous, it was also unpleasant and very time consuming. A new system had to be found. And so, THE PIT.

The pit was a large hole in the ground, about 8 feet in diameter and 10 feet deep, which my father had dug in back of number 7, the last room in our long line of chicken coops. There was a concrete slab covering the pit, with a hole in the middle of the slab. In this hole was placed something like a short stove pipe about a foot in diameter, and on top of this pipe was a small, old, rusty garbage can cover. My job was to take the dead chickens and walk through the tall grass to the end of the chicken coop, climb up on the slab, open the cover and throw the dead chickens into pit. As time went on the chickens would decay and the smell became horrible. I used to dread this task. Just being around so many putrid, foul-smelling corpses was bad enough but I was always afraid that the cover would collapse and I would fall into the mass of decaying chicken flesh. I wasn't even able to hold my nose because with one hand I had to take off the garbage can cover and with the other hand quickly throw the chickens into the hole, all the time trying to keep my nose as far from the hole as possible. I couldn't just take off the cover and put it down because the stench was too great to keep the hole uncovered for that long. Once in a while I would gather my courage and looked down into that dark, smelly hole and see all those decaying, maggot-infested chickens. This filled me with dread. Periodically my father would throw some lime down into hole. I think this was to keep the smell from getting too unbearable, but if that is what it was supposed to do, it sure didn't work. All I know is that I used to have nightmares that I would be falling, headlong into this maggot-infested, putrid, stench-filled mass of rotting flesh.

THE HALF-A-DICTIONARY

My parents had a sacred cabinet. It was a mahogany-stained, two-shelf bookcase, about two and a half feet tall and two feet wide, with two glass doors. The doors were invariably kept locked, though the key was always left in the lock. I never quite figured out the logic of the key-in-the-lock, but I got the impression that the locked doors signified that something special was in there, and the key in the lock meant that if you wanted to see what was in there, you could readily do so. The cabinet was placed in the hall leading to the living room so I passed it by every day, but though I could see what was inside through the glass doors, I rarely ventured inside the cabinet.

One day I decided to examine this locked treasure. I turned the key and opened up the cabinet. Inside was a gigantic, water-stained, faded, gray-green book. It must have been more than 14 inches tall, ten inches wide and five inches thick. I could hardly lift it. It was the second half of an old Webster's Dictionary—section M through Z. I never found out what happened to the first half of the dictionary. My parents might have gotten it at a garage sale or, more likely, since I never remember them EVER buying a book, it was left over from some books that my uncle Irving had no longer any use for and had given to them. Carefully I opened the book and read the definitions of words beginning with R. Then I gingerly skipped to some of the W's. I was very impressed with how much information was in this book and how one word could have so many meanings. But the thing that impressed me most of all was that my parents, who rarely, if ever, read anything other than the Readers Digest, old copies of which were kept in the bathroom magazine rack, or free papers which were sometimes placed in their mailbox, honored books so highly that when they had one with a hard cover and small print they kept it as a treasure.

THE HEIST

My brother, Howie, had a drug store in Brooklyn. He had a partner, Frank, who liked to get involved in shady dealings, particularly if they made him a lot of money. Howie hated this but told Frank, "So long as you don't involve me or the store you could do what you want". The tale I'm about to relate was told to Howie from another employee in the store, Joe, who was asked by Frank to help him.

One day Frank got a phone call from someone named Tony, with whom he had such dealings before. In hushed tones, Tony told him, "I've got a truckload of one thousand brand new Sony color television sets that I can give you for a hundred dollars a piece. Retail they are worth at least six hundred each. You could certainly be able to sell them for two hundred each, giving you an easy profit of one hundred thousand dollars. The TV's are in a big tractor trailer down by the waterfront where I stole them from a cargo ship that had just come in." Frank's eyes lit up. He thought, "Wow for a few hours work, I could net at least a hundred thousand. This is too good to be true." So he asked the guy, "What's the deal?" The man said, "If you would drive your car and meet me tonight down by the waterfront with one hundred thousand big ones IN CASH, I will turn over to you the tractor trailer with the thousand TV's. You could then unload them wherever you wanted and bring back the truck". "O.K., said Frank, you got a deal", and they made up the time and place to meet. It would be that night at one o'clock in the morning on eleventh avenue and fifty seventh street, down by the docks.

Frank spent the rest of the day frantically digging up the hundred thousand. Having been in many shady deals in the past, he had lots of cash on hand, but not that much. He borrowed the rest from the bank, using his large savings and checking account and mortgage as collateral. He asked Joe, who was the biggest and strongest employee in the store, to help. His plan was to get the tractor trailer, unload the TV's in a warehouse that he had rented, and return the truck before dawn.

At one o'clock exactly, Frank and Joe drove to their rendezvous to meet with Tony. The spot that Tony had chosen was nearly pitch dark. Sure enough there he was wearing his worn, brown leather jacket half pulled over his face. "Ya got the dough?," Tony asked in his raspy voice. "Yes, but where is the truck?," said Frank nervously. Tony, with great annoyance answered, "I didn't want to drive the truck here where I got the money, you idiot. Suppose someone saw us. They would get suspicious. The truck is parked on the next block, around the corner. You give me the money and the keys to your car so I could drive away, and I will give you the keys to the tractor trailer." Frank was a little uncomfortable with this plan but what could he do at this point? So Frank gave Tony the money and his keys, and Tony gave Frank the keys to the truck. In a flash Tony got into Frank's car and disappeared. Frank and Joe went around the corner to get the truck and make their getaway. But, as you might have guessed by now, there was no truck to be seen. Frank had been had. He was out one hundred thousand AND his car. Obviously he couldn't call the police. What would he tell them---that he was trying to buy stolen merchandise and had gotten robbed instead?

When Joe told Howie this story the next day, Howie couldn't have been more pleased with the outcome.

BABY CHICKS

The day the baby chicks arrived, early each January, was a big event. It signaled the advent of a new season, one filled with promise that they would grow up to be healthy and be productive egg layers. They were one day old when we got them. At this stage they were about two inches tall and covered with a fine coat of yellow fuzz. Otherwise they were self-sufficient and could eat the ground corn my father fed them. Since all they had was a coat of fuzz and since it was winter, besides giving them food and water, they had to be kept warm. So the day they arrived we put them in the brooder houses. The brooder houses were small buildings, about 10 feet square and eight feet tall with a shallow pitched roof. To supply warmth, in the center of each brooder house was a gas stove. The stove was shaped something like a round pyramid and had small feet, a few inches from the floor of the brooder house, to allow the chicks to stay under the stove. Each stove had a gas burner at the top. Fuel was supplied by propane gas, the propane tanks placed outside each brooder house. My father put a cardboard ring, about a foot tall, on the floor of each brooder house. It was placed around the stove about two or three feet from its perimeter in order to keep the chicks very close to it so they wouldn't freeze in those cold winter months.

We had ten brooder houses on the farm, each of which held a few hundred chicks. They were located in a line about 50 to 100 yards from our house. The chicks stayed in the brooder houses until the weather warmed up somewhat and they developed a nice coat of feathers. Everything was timed so they could be let outside when they were a few weeks old and the weather was a little warmer. When they were a few months old and had developed a small comb and full coat of feathers, they were put out on the range in shelters in late spring or early summer where they could eat the grass.

Shelters were open rectangular structures, about ten by twelve feet, with low, steeply-pitched A-roofs. The roofs were made of tar paper, reinforced with chicken wire, and the sides were made from open chicken wire. The chickens were kept on the range until they were of egg laying age, about 20-25 weeks old, at which time they were transferred to the chicken coops, where they stayed until they decreased their egg production to the point of unprofitability, usually a year or two. At that time they were sold for food.

There were many problems associated with raising the chicks to adulthood. My father always had to worry that something would happen to the stove or the gas supply. If something happened to the heat supply, the chicks would quickly freeze. If they didn't freeze outright, the chicks would huddle together so closely in their attempt to stay warm that many would suffocate. This could be disastrous because, besides the loss of all the work involved in raising the chicks and all the money my parents paid for them, replacement chicks were not readily available other than in January.

Another major problem was disease. The most common disease that baby chicks got, as I recall, was coccidiosis. I'm still not exactly sure what this was, but if the chicks got the disease, it quickly spread and could wipe out the whole flock. The chicks were vaccinated

against coccidiosis when they were one day old by placing a drop of vaccine in an eye of each chick. As an extra precaution, my father would always dip his shoes into some sort of disinfectant before he went from one brooder house to the next so he wouldn't spread the disease, just in case one of the brooder houses contracted the disease. No other farmer EVER was allowed to enter another farmer's brooder house for fear of spreading disease.

The thing I remember most about those times, however, was when it got so cold that the water supply froze. The pipes delivering water to the brooder house area had to be shut off in the winter so they wouldn't freeze. As a consequence, my father had to hand carry pails of water from our house to each brooder house and put the water in special fountains that the chicks could drink out of. These fountains were small, round, galvanized metal tanks with a narrow trough around the bottom. The water would fill the trough from the reservoir. Generally, the heat from the stoves was sufficient to keep the water in the fountains from freezing. However, major problems would arise at the times when it got so cold that the water would freeze in the fountains. I remember my father trudging through three foot snow drifts, carrying in each hand a five gallon pail, filled with boiling hot water from the cellar out to the brooder houses. He would pour some of the hot water into the troughs in order to thaw the frozen water in the fountains. Sometimes he would have to do this even in the dead of night because if the chicks didn't have a source of water for even a short time they would die.

What a difficult life!

CHUMATZ

Every year before Passover, my grandfather (Zayde) performed the ritual “search for chumatz”. Chumatz, of course, is any food product that is not Kosher for Passover, meaning any product that was not certified by the Board of Rabbis as being Kosher for Passover. In order to make sure the house was properly prepared for Passover one must get rid of all the chumatz that was in the house.

Keeping kosher in a rural area was not always so simple. One day I remember going to get a bottle of milk at the Ceders, a country general store not far from our farm in Toms River. My Uncle Jack, who regularly visited us with his family during Passover, accompanied me to the store. The owner put a bottle of milk on the counter, but when Uncle Jack, who was very religious, inspected it he saw there was no ‘Kosher for Passover’ label on it. So he asked for milk that was Kosher for Passover. “Oh, why didn’t you say you wanted Passover milk”, the owner said, and promptly reached into a drawer where he had a bunch of Kosher for Passover stickers and stuck one on the bottle.

My mother had two complete sets of dishes---one for regular use and another fancier one used just for the eight days of Passover. Actually, there were four sets of dishes, for the regular and Passover dishes each had their corresponding meat and milk sets. Also there were four sets of eating utensils, four sets of pots, etc. In the case of eating utensils, if one didn’t have enough that were used just for Passover, one could make them Kosher by burying them in soil for a few days (I suspect each family had their own ‘correct’ number of days.) I remember my mother sticking a knife that was to be made Kosher by sticking it into the ground outside the house. One could re-Kosher a meat knife that was inadvertently used for dairy using the same method. For all glass dishes and drinking glasses, one had only to wash them thoroughly in very hot water or soak them in the bathtub to make them Kosher.

My mother’s job was to assure the house was properly and completely made Kosher for Passover. My mother and father worked for days, cleaning and scrubbing the house to make sure everything was spotless and all the chumatz was gone. This difficult chore was made even more arduous because my Zayde, the tyrant, lived with us. He ‘davened’ (prayed) three times a day and was very strict (but that’s another story). In order to be sure that all the chumatz was removed from the house, Zayde went around with a feather, sweeping areas around the house, searching for any remnants of chumatz that might have been overlooked. In order to be sure he did a good job, the practice was to leave a few crumbs of bread in a conspicuous spot for Zayde to find. I suspect my mother made sure he knew where this pile of crumbs was. So he would go around the house with his feather until suddenly he would find the crumbs and exclaim in Yiddish “Ah ha! I found some chumutz!”. My mother, properly reprimanded, promptly removed the offending chumatz, and Zayde was smugly satisfied that NOW all was Kosher for Passover.

WAGES FOR CHICKENS

Once in a while we'd find some strangers in our chicken coop picking up our eggs. They were usually from the city and happened to be driving by and decided to get some fresh eggs right off the farm. When we'd ask them why they were stealing our eggs, they would get indignant and say "What are you complaining about. You don't pay the chickens to lay eggs, do you?"

MRS. ZWICKEL

The Zwickels lived on Old Freehold Road. They had a chicken farm, of course. There was Mr. and Mrs. Zwickel and a son Herbie, who wasn't bad looking, and a daughter Roz, who unfortunately took after her mother. Mrs. Zwickel was a short, stocky woman, and no beauty. She was easy to identify because she dressed in layers. The outermost layer was the shortest and each succeeding inner one was a little longer than the previous, so one could see a little bit of all the clothes she was wearing, which were plentiful, even in the summer. All of the layers were very colorful, likely because they were made out of the colorful, burlap feed bags that contained the mash, a ground up mixture of grains that we fed the chickens. The joke in the family was that for some reason my mother thought that my father had a thing for Mrs Zwickel. She would say: "Oh Harry, why do you always want to visit the Zwickels". My dad always smiled when she said that. I wonder why?

THE VERSNELS

The Versnels lived on Old Freehold Road, right next to the Zwickels. They were one of the oldest farmers in Toms River and owned a large piece of land. Unlike most of the farmers in Toms River, they were not Jewish. I don't remember their having many chickens, if any, but they did own a tractor and did lots of vegetable farming, as I recall. Mr. Versnel was a huge man, maybe 6 foot 4 inches and about 250 pounds. Mrs. Versnel was smaller, but not by much. They had three children: the eldest was a boy who was about the size of his father. The next in age was Bertha, who, while quite pretty, looked like she could break you in two if so disposed, which she wasn't. She was about my brother Howie's age. The youngest was Herman, who was in my class. Herman wasn't that tall, but very stocky and very strong. One of the distinguishing features was his hair. It was shock yellow and looked like it was cut by his parents by putting a pot on his head and cutting whatever hair stuck out, which I believe was the case. Herman used to display his prowess by banging his head against brick walls. His head seemed to get the better out of the encounter.

The Versnels were fairly rich, by chicken farmers' standards, and used to loan money to the farmers. My parents got a loan from them when they bought their farm on Silverton Road, at the recommendation of Uncle Paul and Aunt Esther (the Brafmans). I suppose the Versnels gave my parents a better rate than the banks did.

The big scandal in the Jewish farmers' community was when Bertha married Herbie Zwickel. Herbie was my brother Lester's age and his parents wanted him to be a rabbi. So he goes off and marries a Gentile girl. I guess the Zwickels got over it because Bertha and Herbie moved into the Zwickel's house. I remember this vividly because of this one particular experience. Herbie was one of the members of the vaccinating crew that Lester ran. I, being the youngest on the crew, had the job of going into the houses to wake up all the crew members as we went around to pick them up. One morning, when I went to wake up Herbie I came across Herbie and Bertha lying in bed stark naked. It was a sight a fourteen-year-old does not easily forget.

CLOPPED UP OR WHOLE YOLK

My parents had their own vocabulary, which nowadays would probably be called Yinglish. If you got a cut, you put on some disaffectsia; if you had a stomach ache, you took some pepto bismo or maybe ate some prumes; if you had to fix something, you could use either a screwel or some easy tape. And eggs were prepared either clopped up or whole yolk.

Grrrrrrrrr.....Fight

Our perennial rivals in football at Toms River High School was Lakewood. It didn't matter how we did over the football season, so long as we beat Lakewood at the annual Thanksgiving Day game. The night before we played them we would have an assembly where the whole school would gather in the Assembly Room for a stirring exercise in school patriotism, complete with speeches and cheerleaders. The highlight of the occasion and the closing act was when the principal of our High School, Mr. Detwiller, would lead us in a rousing cheer. Mr. Detwiller came onto the stage resplendent in a suit and slicked-back, black hair. He would go to the middle of the stage and direct the student audience in something that no one but he could do as well. He clenched his fist and with his arm almost touching the floor, swept it across his body until it was high over his head, the whole time chanting 'Grrrrrrr...Fight!'. At the end of each chant his foot would come smashing down to the wooden floor. The first one began rather mildly, 'Grrrrrrr...Fight!'; it continued to increase in crescendo, 'Grrrrrrrr...Fight!', and concluded with him and whole student body shouting with a frenzy that bordered on the hysterical: '**Grrrrrrrrrrr...Fight!..... Fight!, Fight!, Fight!!**'. This was followed by a deafening roar from the crowd. At that point the student gathering was ecstatic and completely beyond control, and the team was ready for The Big Game.

Detwiller was an idiot.

RAPE OF THE LAND

In the early 1950s the chicken farm business got real bad. Large egg-producing farms in the South and Midwest were being built by huge conglomerates, depressing egg prices, the sole source of our income. The price of feed for the chickens, the main expense on the farm, was kept artificially high, however, by the government policy of supporting grain prices. One by one, farmers were forced out of business. Some burned down their farm to collect the fire insurance. Others committed suicide, hanging themselves from rafters in the chicken coop.

Our own farm was not immune from this terrible plight. My parents were good managers and were able to hang on for longer than most, but only at a terrible financial and emotional price. One of my most vivid recollections of that time involved a decision my father made to try to keep the business afloat. He decided to sell the topsoil of a few acres of our property in order to get a few extra dollars. The people told him that they would take just a couple inches of soil from the top and convinced him that in a few short years the soil would return and everything would be back to normal. I remember the day that they showed up with their plows and large trucks. I watched as they scraped the topsoil from the land. Down and down they went until there was nothing left but gravel. For years later I remember going back to that area, walking slowly, sadly kicking at the barren gravel, waiting for the soil to return. It never did.

THE LAST GOOD-BYE

The last time I saw my father he was lying in bed in a deep stupor, probably from the cancer and the large doses of morphine he was taking. I gave his cold and limp cheek a kiss, said "good bye papa," and went into the living room, where I started crying my heart out. I guess I realized somehow that that would be the last time I would see him. My mother came in and, seeing me crying, came over, gave me a hug and said. "Oh, you DO love your father." I thought at the time that was a strange thing to say, as if she now was sure I loved him. I suppose that parents, like children, sometimes need reassurances of their mutual love.

CHATSHA AND GUSTA

One day, Joyce and I attended a family affair. We had just been married and I wanted her to meet the rest of the family. After some time Joyce came to me, asking me, "What kind of family do you have?". "What's the problem, says I?". And so she related this story: "I am walking around the hall when a somewhat chubby oldish man comes up to me and we introduce ourselves. I tell him I'm Benjy's wife and he tells me he is Morris or Abe. Doesn't he know who he is?" So I explain.

My father had two sisters, Chatsha and Gusta. They were considerably older than he was as they were from my grandfather's (named Lester, after whom my brother Lester was named) first wife, whereas my father (Harry) was born to my grandfather's second wife (Helen). Chatsha and Gusta married two brothers which caused quite a problem with their children's names. As it is a Jewish custom to name the children after a deceased relative, and because Chatsha and Gusta each had about 6 or so children, several of the children had the same names. Thus there were two children named Morris, two named Pauline, etc. To reduce the confusion, they would be called Chatsha's Morris and Gusta's Morris. Morris, however, did not particularly like this system so he decided to give himself another name, in this case, Abe. And so he introduced himself as, "I am Morris or Abe".

THE PARTY LINE

The telephone on our chicken farm in Toms River was a party line, lines in which there were multiple families on the same line. Our telephone number, as I remember it, was 0325 M2. On the same line was an M1 and an M3. When the phone rang it rang either one at a time (*ring....ring....ring....*), two at a time (*ring, ring* in rapid succession), or three at a time, to indicate which party on the line the call was for. Neighbors, other chicken farmers whom we knew well, were the other parties on our line, and we all heard the rings so we would know whom the call was for. Periodically, when we were talking to someone, we'd hear breathing on the line. Then we knew that one of the neighbors was listening in. We'd say something like "Ethyl, get off the line!" We'd then usually hear a click, indicating that they hung up. Sometimes, if we had nothing else to do, we would pick up the phone when it was for M1 or M3, or sometimes when we picked up the receiver to make a call, there would be someone else on the line. The polite thing to do was to hang up, but sometimes we'd listen in for a while. They would say the same thing: "Benjy, get off the line!" I always wondered how they knew it was me. Usually I'd hang up, but sometimes the temptation was too great so I'd put my hand over the receiver and listen as long as the conversation was interesting. I stopped doing that when my mother noticed I was listening in and told me that was not nice and not to do that any more.

THE MANURE PILE

Every year we had to empty out the manure from the chicken coops. We would shovel the manure onto the back of our pickup truck and drive it to a clearing on Beaver Dam Road where we would dump the chicken manure. This manure pile came to be about ten feet tall. We used this pile of chicken shit as a background for our practice shooting.

My brother Howie and I purchased a 0.22 caliber rifle to shoot the rats that were on our farm. Although my father hated guns and never shot the gun himself, he didn't prevent us from buying one, though he made sure we kept it safely in the closet.

To practice shooting, Howie and I would line up bottles against our manure pile in the woods on Beaver Dam Road and shoot at them until all the bottles were gone.

At some point I decided to try my luck on the farm shooting at birds. I generally missed. Then one day I hit one. I remember walking over to the bird on the lawn. It was a robin, dead, covered with blood. I put the rifle back in the closet and didn't shoot it again.

THE TELEPHONE

Our telephone was kept in the dining room on a small wooden table. When the phone rang my mother was always the one to answer it; for some reason my father rarely did. Since she didn't hear well, my father would say: "Mom (he always called her "Mom"), the telephone." She would then run from the living room, where they were watching television, to the phone to answer it, with her familiar lilting "Hello".

When I was in college or after I married, whenever I called them, my mother, as I said, would always be the one to answer the phone, eagerly anticipating a call from one of her children. After we'd talk a while I'd ask how was Dad. Her answer was always the same: "He's fine. He is just sitting here listening". Sometimes I would ask to speak to him. Even though he seemed not to like talking on the phone, whenever I asked to speak to him, he seemed to appreciate that I asked to speak to him. His first question was always the same: "What's the good word". As I reflect back on that I realized that that question is such an optimistic one. He could have asked the negative, "Is everything all right?" or the neutral, "How is everything?". But it was always the positive, "What's the good word?" His response to my question, "How you doing, Pop?" was likewise always the same: "I'm doing just fine!". He would say this even in his last months when he was dying from cancer, but it just didn't have the same conviction....until finally the response became, "Well, not so good".

DOGS ON THE FARM

We inherited PUPPY when we bought the farm from Sid Troy in 1945. I guess he was Sid's dog. He just left the dog there so he was ours.

Puppy was a stocky, medium sized dog, with brown short fur. He looked like part bull dog and part everything else...very ugly as I recall. He must have been quite old already when we got him as he walked VERY slowly, following my father wherever he went. I never got very attached to Puppy but my father did. I remember the day Puppy died. He was in the garage and he started walking down our driveway, laid down on the gravel driveway and never got up. Puppy was the only dog we had that lived to old age.

The next dog we owned we got as a puppy from one of the farmers. He seemed to be part collie, black and white, so we called him SPOTTY. Spotty grew up to be fairly large, with long nice fur and very fast. It wasn't much use on the farm because he didn't do much except run around and catch sticks and balls when we threw them. He was like a pet, I guess. He did bark when animals would come around though.

We needed a dog that did something useful, so shortly after we got Spotty, we got another dog, also from one of the nearby farmers. Dogs and cats just bred like crazy on the farm so there were always lots to choose from. The farmers were only too happy to give them away...especially cats. But unlike dogs, cats were not in demand at all.

Our new dog was a kind of smallish...brown and white with short fur, something like a terrier but with lots of other breeds mixed in. We named him BUTCH. Butch was very smart and played with Spotty, trying desperately to teach him something. Butch was a ratter. He would catch mice and rats all day long. There were more rats than mice for Butch to catch as the many, many cats on the farm would catch the mice. My most vivid recollection of Butch was when he was still young and he saw a big rat. Butch started chasing it around one of the large chicken shelters. They both disappeared around the shelter. Then the next moment Butch came running back with the rat chasing him. It was a very big rat. Spotty just watched.

None of our dogs were allowed in the house, of course. My mother would not allow that. They stayed outside in the dog house we built for them. The dogs could come into the cellar though whenever we were there cleaning the eggs. The cellar was nice and cool and we spent many hours there cleaning, grading and packing the eggs. The dogs would lick the eggs from the cellar floor when we accidentally dropped them.

We had Spotty and Butch for many years, but at some point both were run over by cars, the fate of most of the dogs on the farm. I never knew what my father did with them. We really missed them.

The only other dog I remember was one our Uncle Irving got us. It was a cocker spaniel, a pure bred no less...brown and white and just beautiful. Uncle Irving bought it from someone in Brooklyn and brought it to us on the farm. The little dog got sick while still fairly young and died. That was so sad my parents never got another dog.

A kid **MUST** have a dog. I can't imagine growing up without one. They are great.

FLUSHING

When we lived in Toms River we never flushed the toilet when we only *pished*. I told Joyce about that and she said they did the same thing. It was to save water. How times have changed! Now, of course, we never flush at all.

REMEDIES FROM THE OLD COUNTRY FROM MOM AND DAD

When you get a cut and put iodine on it, it is **supposed** to sting. This shows that the medicine is killing the germs. If it doesn't sting it isn't working. Apparently the germs make it hurt when they die.

Also if you get a cut be sure to put disaffectsia on it.

If you are out in the woods and get a cut, urinate on it. This kills the germs.

THE BOOK WORM

The only books I remember reading in Toms River were comics. We had hundreds of them. The last non-comic book I read until I got to college, as I remember, was called "Uncle Wiggley Comes Home"; there was also another one we had, having to do with some fairy like things called the Kelpies. For serious reading I used to read the classic comics in high school and turn them in for book reports. I remember one time I was supposed to read a non-fiction book for one of my two reports for that year (11th grade). I found a book in the attic where we used to store books in a big cardboard box that my Uncle Irving gave us when he finished reading them (he was the **READER** in the family; my parents read the Readers Digest...sometimes..they were kept in the bathroom). Anyway, I found this hard-covered book in the attic, skimmed through it, and gave it as a book report to the English teacher. He said that the book was not a non-fiction. I argued that since it had large words in it he should give me credit for a non-fiction. What words? Well, instead of **FIRE**, they wrote **CONFLAGRATION**. I don't remember what his response was but I graduated.

DOUBLE BUBBLE

The best bubble gum we had growing up in Toms River was *Double Bubble* Bubble Gum. It was in the shape of a cube, about one-quarter inch by three quarters of an inch by one inch. It had a nice sugary taste that lasted for several minutes. But the best part of it was that it was wrapped in a small comic strip which always seemed to be different. It cost about a penny or maybe two for a penny.

I always chewed bubble gum, adding to it periodically. I say added to it because I rarely threw it away. At night, just before going to sleep, I would take it out of my mouth and stick it onto the headboard of my bed. It was the first thing that went into my mouth when I woke up the next morning. Over the week the wad would grow until we could blow really big bubbles. Sometimes, when it got too big to stick on the headboard, I would put it in a glass of water to keep it fresh.

I even chewed the gum in school where it was forbidden. If the teacher caught anyone chewing gum he would be sent to the cloak closet. It was worth it.

JEWISH WORDS

Growing up in my house with my grandfather, who only spoke Yiddish, I always thought certain words were Jewish. Like, TUMULT... that was Jewish. The problem was I didn't know the English equivalent for it. VOMIT was definitely Jewish, as the English equivalent was THROW UP. Joyce, though being raised in a different household, also thought certain words were Jewish. "RADIATOR was definitely Jewish. REFRIGERATOR, I'm not so sure about."

THE SHUL

The Shul was an old stone and clapboard building, situated on Old Freehold Road in the midst of the chicken farms and about five miles north of the town of Toms River. It was a multipurpose building, serving as the meeting place for the Community of Jewish Farmers and their Shul (Synagogue). It was not far from the Jewish Cemetery on Whitty Road where my parents are buried, forever resting, still journeying together in death as they did in life, side by side.

The Shul had one story with a basement where parties and other such events were held. It was in the basement of the Shul where I had my Bar Mitzvah. Ascend the few stone steps and one would reach the main floor which housed the single, large room that served as its place of worship and meeting room. During services the wooden folding chairs, maybe a couple of hundred or so of them, were neatly arranged in rows facing the center of the room. At the front center, behind a lectern and a few larger chairs reserved for the Rabbi and other officials, were housed the ornate Torahs, kept behind curtains, to be ceremoniously removed for viewing only during special times during the services. To one side of the room was a stage on which was held secular events, such as piano recitals for the children, plays, talent shows and beauty contests. It was at one such beauty contest where my lovely bride-to-be beat out her arch rival, Marion Engleman, for the coveted crown of Miss Tomco. But I get ahead of myself.

During what Jews call the High Holy Days (Rosh Hashanah , the Jewish New Year, through Yom Kipper, the Day of Atonement), it was customary go to Shul, even if one hadn't gone for the rest of the year. My parents went sometimes when we first moved to the farm, then less and less frequently as the years went by. This was in part because it was not permitted to drive during this period, and the Shul was about five miles from the farm, quite a walk, particularly as they got older. Though I sensed my father would have liked to go to Shul, it never appeared to be a driving force for either of them. We kids, on the other hand, were young and strong and looked forward to the holidays. Not only did we not have to go to school, it was our chance to get dressed up, take a nice long walk in the cool air of early autumn along the farm-lined country road leading to the Shul, and most of all, to see the pretty girls who would also show up dressed in their finery.

Once at the Shul the youth divided themselves into two groups: the boys and the girls. Each stayed on the front lawn outside, standing in small circular clumps, rarely entering the Shul or otherwise engaging in the services being held just a few feet from us inside. And we ogled each other, the boys doing their silly boy things and the girls standing apart, infinitely more mature and trying demurely not to notice us, but stealing furtive glances in our direction, or at least that is what we hoped.

As little use as I have now for organized religion in general, I am forever indebted to these occasions for it was here, on one fine fall day at the Shul, when I was about 15 years old, that I saw for the first time the love of my life, my companion, my lover and my best and

dearest friend, Joyce. Seeing her as I did then is one of the fondest memories of my youth, so I will relate it here.

I was in our pack of guys and she among her gang of girls when I chanced, as casually as possible, to glance over at them, standing several feet from us. As if by magic, suitable for the religious venue, what I saw was not a group of girls, but a blur, the only thing in focus being a lovely, young sweet face, wearing a pretty dress, staring at nothing in particular, as in reverie. Everything else was blotted out. Time stopped. From that moment on, my fate was sealed. Who was this angelic being, I asked my friends? Oh, that is Joyce Zelnick. She is a freshman.

Sorry I didn't do this story the justice it deserves, but no words could capture the emotion of the moment nor the love and magic I still feel.

CONTESTS

To amuse ourselves on the farm, we conducted contests. I can only remember three of them that had any great importance. One contest was to see who could hold the most chickens in one hand. With one hand we caught the chickens by their legs and transferred and held them in our other hand with the chickens' heads hanging down. We had to hold them for at least one minute; any that slipped out during that time would not count. As I remember, the record was about 20 or so chickens.

Another contest was to see how many eggs we could hold in both hands. The eggs had to be graded either large or extra large. We had to hold the eggs so that the palms of our hands were down, so gravity did not aid in any way. If any of the eggs broke, you were disqualified. The record for the number of eggs held in both hands was about 14 eggs total.

The last contest was to see how many flies you could catch in one hand. The feed house where we kept the mash and grains that we fed to the chickens was always loaded with large houseflies. They usually alighted on top of the burlap feed bags, almost covering them. We were allowed three tries, swiping our cupped hand over the bags and catching as many flies as we could. The highest of the three tries counted as our score, not the total of the three swipes. After catching the flies, the trick was to release them one at a time so we could count them accurately. We weren't allowed to squish them, so dead flies did not count. A witness had to agree with the count of the catcher. We were able to catch 40 or more with our best swipe.

Only boys competed in these contests. We practiced a lot as, naturally, these contests determined one's status in our community.

CHICKEN HOSPITAL

When chickens stopped laying eggs they were promptly disposed of. The ones that were healthy were sold to soup companies, like Campbells. The ones that were sick were killed and burned or thrown in the pit. That is, on most farms that was what happened. On our farm, my father, who referred to himself as a 'softie' could not bare to kill them. So he set up an area on the farm where he kept the sick chickens, feeding them and providing water by hand. This area, probably about 20 or so foot square, had a shelter, a feed trough and water fountain.

Most of these chickens were pitiful: swollen and runny eyes, filthy feathers, wings dirty and dragging on the ground. I remember most of all those that we called 'waterbellies'. These were chickens that had some kind of disease (probably some form of ascites) that caused their abdomen to be bloated and drag on the ground. They walked like a duck, waddling back and forth, dragging their swollen stomachs along. Others had various other diseases, some of which were likely communicable. So my dad had a special pair of boots outside this fenced-in area so he could change and not spread the disease to all his healthy chickens. With all he had to do on the farm, my father made time to care for these disease-ridden chickens until they died. What a guy!

GAMBLING POP

Which reminds me of a story about my father and gambling.

Harry loved to gamble. I never knew that because in my whole lifetime with him, I never saw him gamble...except once. Joyce and I had taken them on a vacation to one of the islands in the Caribbean, one of only two vacations they went on in some 40 years. There was a casino there. So one afternoon we all wandered in. I was playing the slots and who should be by my side putting nickels into the slot machine, but my father. I said, "I didn't know you liked to gamble". He said, "Don't tell Mom". Unfortunately my 4 foot 11 inch Mom was standing by unnoticed. All she said was, HARRY! My father said something like a few nickels fell out of his pocket and accidentally landed in the slot machine. And so ended his gambling days.

MY BROTHER, LES

I remember one day, while still in high school, I was upstairs in the attic in a room my parents had converted into a bedroom. I was rummaging around in the unfinished portion of the attic and stumbled onto a manuscript of some sort that my brother Les (Lester) had written. Les, being seven years older than I, must have been in medical school at that time. I think he had worked at St. Christopher's Hospital either at off hours during the school year or in the summer, engaging in research in one of the laboratories there. The manuscript fascinated me. Among other things, it had pictures of chromosomes that had been pasted into the 'book', images that had obviously been cut out after having been photographed through a microscope. As I think back on it now, here was evidence of his early interest in genetics, an interest that led to his pioneering work in medical cytogenetics. I am sure it also must have kindled in me an interest in scientific exploration.

LIFE ON FARWOOD ROAD

TRENCH WARFARE

Our neighbors, Herb Miller and his family, didn't get along with us ever since one of our branches dropped on their property. He decided to retaliate by cutting down the bushes on our property that displeased him. The battle raged on and off until the decisive engagement.

We had a sloping property with a set of steps leading down to the back portion of our yard, a situation that prevented me from mowing the back yard with my riding mower. So I discussed the problem with Herb when we were on better terms, and he agreed that I would be allowed to mow the back portion of our property by going through the Miller's back yard. His yard didn't have steps but rather slanted down and was an easy access to our back yard. I just crossed over to his side with my riding mower through a small break in the bushes separating our properties, went down his slope for about ten yards and crossed over back onto my side where I would be beyond my steps. I then cut the grass and returned the same way. But after the declaration of war, I was no longer permitted to go through his property. Fortunately he was gone often enough for me to sneak over through his property with my small tractor to mow the grass... until one fateful day.

It was a beautiful summer day and the Millers were no where to be seen. This was my opportune moment. I crossed over onto the Miller's side as usual, went down his slope, crossed back onto my back yard and was blissfully mowing the grass, oblivious to what was in store for me. When I finished, I crossed over onto the Miller's property in order to go up the slope and back over to my side. But he must have been waiting in ambush. For after I had crossed onto his side to get to my lower area and while I was mowing the grass back there, he and his son emerged from their hiding place and quickly dug a deep trench between the small break in the bushes along the property line where I would have to go to get back to my side. I was trapped!

Without a moment's hesitation, I disembarked from my tractor, leaped over the trench, and ran into the house yelling to my steadfast family, "Help! I am trapped behind enemy lines!" Everyone quickly sprang into action. Some of the children carried shovels to try to fill in the trench, but that was too slow. His artillery pieces were getting into position. The only solution was to build a bridge. We gathered twigs and planks of wood and laid them over the trench. I got back onto my tractor just as he engaged his heavy guns and the shells began to fall. Over the rickety bridge I went. Just in time. Thanks to my loyal and ingenious family, I lived to mow another day.

COURAGEOUS PAULINE

The most courageous and positive person I have ever known was my mother. One particular incident stands out in my mind. After her husband Harry died, she was living in a nursing home in Philadelphia. She knew no one and wasn't a particularly outgoing person so had few friends. Despite this, every day when I called her she was always cheerful and upbeat. Except once. On this particular day, and completely out of character for her, she sounded very depressed. I chatted with her for a while and at the end of the conversation she said: "Thank you for giving me courage to go on". I don't remember what I said, but was surprised by her comment. Ever since then I realize that even someone as courageous as grandma needs some encouragement now and then.

THE CLEANERS

So at long last we decide to take some of our clothes to the cleaners. Joyce suggests the one near the bagel store, but I remind her that is the one I had a fight with. I suggest the one in the Manoa shopping center, but Joyce says that was the one she had a fight with. So we consider the one in the City Line Shopping Center. We recall that is the one we both fought with. But that was a long time ago so they might have forgotten us by now. That's the one we go to.

DOG TRICKS

Mom is trying to teach Allison's dog Radcliffe new tricks. Like yesterday she said to Radcliffe, "O.K., I'll say some words and you fill in the rest. 'Grand Central ..what?'". I'm not sure, but it seems like the dog hasn't the foggiest idea what she is talking about. I think both of them are in way over their heads.

CHAUCER'S TRICK?

Joyce taught our dog Chaucer this great trick that both of them are really proud of. Joyce puts a tiny piece of chicken in her mouth and Chaucer very carefully eats the chicken, little by little, right out of Joyce's mouth until it's all gone. Jeffrey insists that Chaucer actually taught Joyce to eat the chicken out of the dog's mouth first and that Joyce is trying to take credit for it. Either way, as difficult and entertaining as it is, this trick probably should not be performed in front of strangers.

Grade School Baseball

We divided up into two teams, the best two players by default were the two captains. They took turns picking the players they wanted for the team. My biggest fear was to be picked last. Fortunately there were some players picked after me, but not many. The best player played shortstop, the worse one right field, the tallest one first base. If there was a girl on the team, she pitched. If no girl, then anyone who could get the ball over the plate. If more than one girl, she caught. If not, then the fattest guy was the catcher. The batting order was best to worse; you got it right when you guessed I was closer to last than first.

PHILADELPHIA COLLEGE OF PHARMACY AND SCIENCE

Ray Ecock

Ray Ecock was a classmate at PCP&S. He belonged to Kappa Psi, a fraternity that was filled with a bunch of anti-Semites. He was the worst of the lot. Recently I was at a birthday party to celebrate the 70th birthday of one of my friends, Jerry Lubber, another classmate at PCP. His brother Norman, who also attended PCP, was there and while we were reminiscing about the good old days, Ray Ecock's name came up. Norman told me of how he saw Ecock put out a lighted cigarette on the face of one of the little Jewish kids in class. He also told me that Ray Ecock had died recently. Good riddance!

MY FIRST TALK

It must have been in 1963 when I gave my first official scientific talk. I was in my fifth year of graduate school, and was finishing up my doctoral dissertation at the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy and Science. The talk was to be on the metabolism of catecholamines, the topic of my PhD thesis. I practiced diligently, giving the talk to anyone who would listen and provide suggestions on how to make it better. More than a month before the meeting at which the presentation was to be given, I was ready...completely panicked, but nevertheless prepared as I could be.

The talk was scheduled to be held in Atlantic City at the Meeting of the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB). The FASEB meetings are the largest scientific meetings in the world, attracting some 50 thousand scientists from around the world. It used to be held in April of each year at the Convention Center and the many hotels in Atlantic City. There were so many scientists giving talks at that meeting that many of the presentations were scheduled simultaneously...maybe 50 or so at the same time, scattered throughout the various meeting rooms in the several hotels. Mine was to be like

most of them, a ten-minute slide presentation followed by a five-minute discussion period. A relatively few talks were given by more established members of the scientific community and lasted about one hour. These latter talks were by invitation.

The FASEB meetings lasted for one week, Monday through Friday, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., with sessions in the morning from 8 a.m. to 12 noon and sessions in the afternoon from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. At the early part of the week the talks were well attended, but as so many of the 15-minute talks were given at the same time, there were usually only about 40 or so people attending each one. Toward the end of the week, however, the attendance dwindled considerably, so that by Friday there was only a fraction of the attendees left in Atlantic City. As luck would have it, my talk was scheduled as the last talk on Friday afternoon, the 4:45 to 5 p.m. slot.

I attended this Friday meeting from the start of the afternoon session. There were maybe 30 or so people in the room, most of them the speakers scheduled for that session and a few of their friends. I watched nervously as each person gave his/her talk. Much to my dismay, as each finished their presentation, they picked up their slides from the projectionist and left the meeting room. I now was not only nervous but also filled with fear that hardly anybody would still be in the room when I gave my talk. Finally, the next-to-last person finished. As with the others, he picked up his slides and left the room. It was my turn. I would have to give my very first formal scientific talk to the projectionist and a friend, who came with me to give me moral support. And would you know it, like a bad joke, as I walked up to the front of the room, the projectionist asked whether my friend would be so kind as to show the slides for him so he could leave a few minutes early. An so it came to pass that my initiation into the world of scientific presentations was to give the talk that I had prepared months in advance and had practiced so conscientiously in a room in which the only occupants was myself and a stand-in projectionist.

