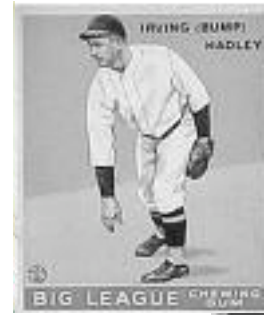




Chapter Four- *August Nights*



Equally as exciting and even more fun were the hot summer nights on the street.

We would go home exhausted after 5 hours of baseball, clean up, eat dinner, and we were ready to go out again.

We were permitted to stay up to all hours for there was no school and none of the evil, satanic, demonic homework. After we had eaten and done all the chores, the entire family would repair to the front stoop to escape the suffocating, heavy weight of the humid, sulphur-laden, August air. Out there we would catch a wisp of a breeze off the Allegheny River (one block away).

So many people did this it was sort of a community watch meeting. While the adults talked and joked, we were permitted the rare privilege of running the streets under their careful view (they thought).

We would play more baseball, pitch baseball cards, and play these ingenuous and self-designed games. Hide and seek was a favorite, or allee, allee oxen free. The boundaries were Seventh Street and Third Street. Or we played "buck, buck". One person from team A stood against a wall and the rest of the team hooked arms to him while hunched over. The other team would jump one at a time and try to break the chain. If they all got on and the chain was still intact, their captain would hold up a number of fingers. If the team could guess the number, the team changed places. I'm not sure how one won, if anyone did - perhaps just being able to walk the next day was victory enough. But all those Italians and Polish backs withstood such punishment.

Occasionally, we got carried away at these games as we strayed from the purview of parents, pseudo-parents - uncles, aunts, pseudo uncles and aunts. I remember one particular night when we hid on the roof of the garage on Second St. and Main, prompting the arrival of the police. I never was so scared and I doubt I ever ran so fast. I wasn't afraid of the Police. But I was terrified at the prospect of them taking me to my parents. They would have thrown me up the stairs just so they could throw me down the stairs. The public flogging would have made Nero's Coliseum seem demur!

It was thrilling when we could get Tony, my Father, and others to start telling stories of "how things used to be like". Stories of surviving the depression. growing up in the depression, tales of destroyer duty in the North Atlantic or making do in the jungles of Australia or Borneo. There were tales of the the Bulge, Normandy, Iwo

Jima. There were captivating stories of going to the movies for a penny, taking Moms to a dance for a dime. We would be wide-eyed. Even on my meager funds, eked out by various and mostly nefarious schemes, all of a sudden it would seem to be possible to take Janet, Doris, or Theresa to a show and have enough for a milk shake or coke for two. How romantic... if unlikely!

The men would tease their wives, who mockingly scolded in some foreign phrases playfully meant. This would continue until ten or eleven o'clock. Inevitably it would come time for the torture chamber, in which mothers scrubbed their little urchins AKA their favorite Pittsburgh Pirate. We were covered with soot from the playground, the streets and alleys, and the air. My mother could spot a speck of soot embedded in my face or neck that a X-ray machine would have missed. The brush would get it out, even if the skin came with it. No-one ever called out, "There goes Jim with some soot on his neck!"

Properly scrubbed and fed with a bowl of Wheaties, we were off to bed. We would go to sleep to the car lights through the Venetian blinds or by counting the cars on a train as it went by. After the first hundred clickety-clacks, you'd be sound asleep.

We had been exposed to a valuable lesson of life. These folks had survived a Depression - we didn't call it the Great - and found way to have fun. They had served in the War and told funny as well as serious stories of that as well.

My folks and their friends weren't much. But they could survive anything, make do in any situation, face down the evil Nazi, and still have a laugh. America of the 21st Century, are you paying attention? They were poor, had difficult and sometimes unrewarding jobs, scrubbed their kids, beat their kids, and enjoyed their little station in life.

