

31st Street

These are my current recollections of part of North 31st street in Billings, Montana while I was growing up there. Our house was at 1119 N. 31st. Back then, in the 1930's and early 1940's, kids streamed outside of their houses after dinner each night in the summer and played games such as kick the can, tag, pump-pump pull away, double slips, etc. I can't remember how the last two were played. Television hadn't been invented, and radio was the only distraction we had. Jack Armstrong and his All American boys was big, along with a few cowboy shows. On Friday nights, the Sigourney brothers delivered the Sunday Denver Post, and my brother Neal and I would spread out on the floor looking at the funnies. Usually we or Mom would make taffy or fudge on weekends. But, when the weather was good, and we didn't have the funny papers or a radio show to here, we would be outside playing games with the other kids.

The kids then knew everybody in the block, and beyond. Also we were familiar with the alleys, because lots of time that's where we traveled. I can remember that people used to plant holly-hock and bachelor button flowers in their alleys. Alleys were very nice places, it seemed to me, and often the shortest way to get someplace.

12th Avenue and 31st Street was pretty much the edge of Billings, as I recall from my little kids eyes. When I was little, the area North of 12th was only starting to fill in with houses, and it was mostly vacant lots. I remember Neal building a cave on one of the vacant lots. Making a cave consisted of digging connecting trenches, covering the trenches with boards and then dirt. They were great places for kids to hang out, and eventually, it seemed, black widow spiders liked to hang out there too. While my mind is in that area, I remember Neal firing a rocket type fireworks in the vacant lots of the 12 hundred block of 31st, and the grass caught fire, It was so exciting to watch (as innocent bystanders) the Billings Fire Department battling a fire that your own brother started. I have another recollection of that area. I was out after dark with Pat McCallie, returning from seeing someone at St. Vincent Hospital, and walking along the North side of 12th street near the alley between 31st and 30th, when we saw a body on the sidewalk. We ran back to Pat's house, which was four up from mine, and the cops were called. We learned later that a man was visiting his wife at St. Vincent Hospital and when walking home, suffered a heart attack and died. It was real spooky,

and the sight of the dead guy stuck in my memory a long time. Pat, by the way, was a pretty good looking gal

Moving down below 12th Avenue, and starting on the West side of the eleven hundred block of 31st Street, the top house on the corner belonged to Dr. Frank Adams, a dentist. Frank Adam, Jr., called “Junior” was a year older than me, but still in the group of kids that played together. The outstanding feature about Junior Adams was that in his house, he always had a case of pop. I guess I don’t blame him, but only once that I can recall did he offer to share his pop with me. They were the little bottles of clear glass, and they had grape, orange and cream soda. I would dream about someday always having a case of pop so that, on a hot day—or a cold day, I could grab a bottle and guzzle it down, whenever I wanted. Junior owned a short mean dog called “Pug”. Pug bite my leg and I still have the scar.

Next below Junior’s house lived Gene Carroll. Jean was a whole lot older than me, maybe three or four years, He was very religious, thin, pale, and talked quietly. Gene was a nice guy.

Willey Johnston lived below Carroll’s house. Willey was my age, and while going to McKinley grade School, we use to hang out together. Willey’s older brother had an eye put out—allegedly by someone shooting a spit ball with a rubber band. Willey’s brother was always cited as an example why you shouldn’t shoot spit balls.

Next was the Dugan house. This was a great family. The Dad had red hair (what was left of it) short and built like a wrestler. There was a cartoon character called “Jiggs” and Mr. Dugan reminded me of Jiggs. My contemporary in the Dugan house was Jack Dugan, although he was one year older than me. I can remember helping Jack clean out the attic in their garage one summer, and I’ve never been so hot. We were dripping wet when we got done. Jack’s older brother, Fred became a lawyer and practiced for a time in Grampa Brown’s law office.

Below the Dugans were the Settergrens, of Settergren Funeral Home. Mr. Settergren was very thin, angular man, with a constant sober demeanor, i.e. just what I thought a funeral director should look like. I never got to know the Settergrens, and it may have been his occupation .

The Lyon’s lived in the house below. They were a great family. There was the older sister, who was neat, then Jim, and Bob. Bob was my age. Mr. and Mrs Lyons were nice too. They were all athletic. Jim was a gymnast at a time when there weren’t many gymnasts around. Bob and I palled around together. In about 1937, as I recall, we had a tremendous flood that inundated a good share of Billings. The water got up to past McKinley School. I remember Neal and I building a raft out of some lumber and

rafting around the school. Bob Lyons and I were ramming around the flood area after the water subsided, and went past St. Patrick's Church. The door was open to the basement under the church, and we went in. There, all covered with mud were some candles. Bob and I took (stole) some of them and then stored them in a crawl space under his house. Periodically, in later years I have had recurring thoughts of how God might be planning to punish Bob and me—actually it was only me I was worried about—for pillaging His house.

It was in front of the Lyon's house, that Neal pulled off one of his major feats. I was an eye-witness. Neal found a live rifle cartridge, probably a 30-30, and he wanted to know what would happen in he hit it with a hammer. I hid behind a large elm tree in the boulevard in front of the Lyon's house while he placed the cartridge on the curb and hit it with a hammer. The thing went off with a large bang, and then Neal yelled and said he was hit. The bullet went through the fleshy part of his upper arm. I can remember some stuff oozing out of his arm that looked like fish eggs. Neal went on to other, bigger and better antics afterwards.

The Hoiness's house was below the Lyons; though there was another family there before Hoiness that I can't recall. Mr. Hoiness was a lawyer, and he spawned Peter and Sonja.

Next was the Stong house. Judge Stong was a State District Judge and had a unique family. Mrs. Stong always seemed to me to be harried, and in distress. Maybe it was because of her kids. The oldest boy was Bob, and I wasn't around Bob much, until I had grown up. John was a few years older than me. I heard that John went on to be a scientist or something, but when I knew him he was sort of odd. He would often talk to himself. I remember walking to McKinley one morning and hearing sounds behind me. Looking back I saw it was only one person, and so I hid behind a tree (come to think about it, I seemed to hide behind trees a lot) and let John pass while carrying on this conversation with himself. There was another boy in the family, Bill, who was a year or so younger than me, and Bill was a regular guy. Before leaving John, I remember that he ventured across the street to our house one time, and must have done something to tick Neal off. Neal hit John on the head with a croquet mallet and chased him off our premises. I don't recall that there was any improvement with John for the experience, but he rarely came over to our side of the street again.

Below the Stongs lived the Taggarts. This was a large Mormon family, and Charlie Taggart was my age, and pal. Charlie had contracted polio and wore heavy steel braces on both legs. The Taggarts moved on and there were a succession of families that lived in the house thereafter,

including Bud and Doris Obrien. Doris OBrien was an attractive lady who was also was an artist, and taught painting. This was during my Dad's artistic phase of his life (around 1955-- he died in 1956) and Dad took painting classes from Doris, across the street. The classes were in the evening, and when Dad brought his art home from class, the pictures were primarily of a reclining nude. I think the model was a ceramic piece, but Mom apparently thought otherwise, and the painting lessons ceased.

The Louis Dousman house was next below the Taggarts. I have heard that the house was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. They had a daughter, Judy who was a friend of my sister, Barbara.

On the Northwest corner of 31st and 11th Avenue was the M. J. Lamb house. Carl Lamb was one year older than me, but often was in the group of kids that I was with. I remember a car that Carl owned while in Junior High. It was just a car frame, with motor, seats, and no body. We rode out in the open. Gas then was 10 cents a gallon and if our gang collectively raised 25 cents, we could travel all over. Carl's Dad was a lawyer who died before I started practicing. My recollection of him is that he was always working. Mrs. Lamb was a great lady. Dick Lamb, Carl's older brother was noteworthy in my mind for having his feet run over by a City bus while sitting on the curb at the corner in front of his house. While in Junior High, Carl was instrumental for my friend Jim Tingle's aversion to wine. Jim, Carl and I went to Red Lodge with plans on the next day to hike to a lake on top of the Beartooth Mountains, and fish. I think Jim and I were 15 at the time. Carl was old enough looking that he could buy booze, so he got a bunch of beer, some rot-gut whiskey and the cheapest red wine that he could find. I remember the wine had sediment in the bottom of the bottle about a third of the way up. We drank all of this poison, and Jim and I, with our immature stomachs, were deathly sick that night and the next day. As we were hiking on the trail to the lake, at 10,000 feet, Jim and I would throw up and writhe on the ground, I don't remember fishing, but I suppose I did, When it came time for lunch Carl pulled out some cold pork sandwiches which he handed us, and the nausea started all over again. From that experience, Jim never touched wine again, so he told me. I think I bounced back after only a month or two.

At the Southwest corner of 31st and 11th was Judge Derry's house. I practiced before Judge Derry when I returned from the Air Force, I remember he called someone, a lawyer, and I think it was his son-in-law, a piss ant from the bench.

Just below the Derry's was Judge Harwood. My recollections of him were from when I was practicing law. I can remember being in his chambers

on many occasions, when he would spit in the spittoon next to his desk. He would carefully hold his tie to his chest while he was bent over so he wouldn't spit on his tie. Judge Harwood had a court reporter who had been with him for decades. Guy Marvin didn't take crap from lawyers, or anybody. He recorded testimony by hand, on a stenographer's notebook. He used the Pittman method of short hand, which looked like chicken scratches. If a lawyer or witness started talking too fast for him to record, he would loudly bring the trial to a halt, with an admonishment to slow down. In those days, the late fifties and early sixties, the official court reporter (who was an employee of the State) was required by law, and without charge, to furnish a transcript of the trial if the case was appealed to the Supreme Court. In practice, however, lawyers always paid the court reporter for preparing the trial transcript. One lawyer whose name escapes me was mad at Marvin and insisted that he furnish the transcript free, as the statute allowed. Guy Marvin won the war by typing the entire record of trial on rolls of toilet paper. The statute didn't specify what kind of paper the reporter had to use.

Moving down the street, the next house belonged to Paul O. Neilson. Mr. Neilson ran a combination service station and convenience store from a store about the size of two closets, located at a V shaped corner at Grand Ave. and 32nd. The reason I'm mentioning his place of business is that it was very easy for 15 year olds, including me, to buy beer there. Paul Jr. was near my age, and a pal.

Next was the Rowan house. Liz Rowan, about a year older than me, was a different sort of gal, and seemingly pampered. I remember she was interested in singing opera at a young age, which put even more distance between us. But after I grew up I found she was a regular, nice person. She married Jimmy Binkert, a jazz clarinetist, and that might have influenced my thinking, because I like jazz.

Jumping across 31st Street, on the East side of the ten hundred block, lived Dr. Bell, Sr., who was our family dentist, and whose practice later was passed on to his son, Dr. Norman Bell. Dr. Bell, Sr. was a pioneer aviator, and one of the first to fly an airplane at Billings. There is a painting at the airport depicting him flying from a dirt field in an area near North Park.

Several houses up the street from Dr. Bell's house was where the Seigel brothers lived. They were older than me, and my recollection is that they were tough. I remember their family had an Austen car, which was small, and one night some kids picked up the car and put it on the Seigel's front porch.

Back up the street, on the North-East corner of eleventh and 31st was where the Davis girl lived (I think her name was Pat).

Then, one up from the corner was a large house, occupied by a family that I can't recall, and thereafter the Bohlingers, and then Dr. Hulit, an OB-Gyn doctor who delivered Nancy and Becky into the world. I believe Mr. Bohlinger died early and his wife, Eileen, kept on the their woman's clothing business called "Eileens". John Bohlinger went into the family business after he got back from the Marines, and, as of this writing is Lieutenant Governor of Montana. The Bohlingers were a great family, as were the Hulits.

Next up were the McMahons. Mrs. McMahon would make cookies and hand them out to the neighborhood kids. My sister Barbara was friends with a McMahon girl called "Honey".

Above the McMahon's and just below our house, was a house occupied by the Nibbe's, and later Dr. Norman and Julia Bell. The Bell's were some of the nicest people I knew and were good neighbors.

Our house at 1119 was built, I believe, in the late teens or early nineteen twenties. It wasn't a very well built house, with only half of the basement excavated. When I was real young, the back of the house was a screened in porch. Though I don't remember much about it, I think Keith had to sleep out there throughout the year, and it must have taken a lot of blankets in below zero weather. In the 30's sometime, the folks remodeled the back end of the house and enclosed the screen porch area. My sister Barbara left the nest by the late 30's and then my brother Keith went to war. Neal and I occupied the middle bedroom. Neal had a constant supply of comic books, that were contraband, since Dad Thought we should be reading a good book instead of that trash. We would hid the comics under our mattress, and when the folks went to bed, we'd bring out the comic books and read them under the covers with a flashlight. Sometimes we would giggle enough to rouse Dad, and we would hear that dreaded sound of him clopping down the hall with his noisy slippers, awaiting stern judgment. I don't think the comic books were responsible for any of the bad stuff I did later on. Dad smoked both cigarettes (Old Golds) and a pipe (Walnut tobacco). He would light up his pipe first thing in the morning, and you could hear the slurping sound of the pipe as he dragged on it to get it lit. Dad walked to his office downtown and in season put a yellow rose in his lapel. This was from a wild rose bush next to the Bells, that is probably still there. Mom was always baking something. Her kitchen, before it was remodeled in about 1940, had a green and white gas stove, and in the back porch area, unheated, was an icebox, and later an electric refrigerator with the external coils on top. When we had the icebox, it was fun to steal chips of ice from the ice delivery truck. Mom had a mangle to iron the clothes. You don't see

mangles anymore—I wonder why? Mom took awfully good care of me—maybe spoiled me, although I didn't realize that until I was older. Pat McCallie, whom I will talk about later, told me at our 60th High School reunion that my Mom was over-protective of me. If so, I think I outgrew that when I started working at hard jobs during Junior High.

Another of Neal's pinnacle moments occurred while I was still in grade school at McKinley. After Christmas, Neal and I would gather up the thrown out Christmas trees from and alleys and bring them home. The only practical place to store them (for what purpose I didn't know at the time) was in a small garage along the alley and next to the alley. The garage was made of corrugated metal siding and roof, with windows that were of heavy, thick glass, with metal wire inside. We had amassed quite a pile of trees in the garage by New Years day, when the folks left to visit their friends, as was their custom. Neal lit the trees on fire, and it was a blazing inferno---which I think was the effect Neal was after. The fire got so hot that the sides and roof of the tin garage turned cherry red, and the thick glass windows melted. The neighborhood turned out to witness this spectacle, and then Dad and Mom returned. I can still see Dad trying to put out the fire with a hastily rigged garden hose. The Bell's had a wooden garage nearby that was scorched, but survived. Things were pretty tense around the house for some time.

The house next to us, to the North, was the Sackett's. Mr. and Mrs. Ed Sackett were nice people, who always seemed "old" to me, even when they were probably considered young by others. The youngest daughter, Rudy, played the flute in High School, and practiced the infernal instrument each morning before 7:00 a.m. at a spot in their house that was 20 feet from my bedroom. I have kidded Rudy (then Rudy Johnson) about this in later years and she doesn't seem to have any remorse.

Next up was the Patterson house. Mr. and Mrs. Patterson were kindly, nice people and treated the neighborhood kids with cookies and treats.

Above the Patterson's was the Mills house. Ellen Mills was my age, and a good looking blonde. They had a swimming pool in their back yard, which was unique in those days. It wasn't very big, however. I'd guess that it wasn't over 15' long and 10' wide---about the size of a living room rug, but it was an oasis in the heat of the summer.

The McCallie's lived above the Mills house. They had two daughters, and the family was self-described by them as Pinky, Pat, Poly and Mac (in reverse chronological order). Their whole life centered around horses, which I thought was neat. Mac owned some pasture West of town, in an area toward town from the present West Park Plaza. That whole area was

undeveloped agricultural land at the time. The Partington Hereford Ranch was exactly where the West Park Plaza is located and in the fact the Partingtons were in on the Plaza development. I had a horse that I kept South of town, and would ride it in the Western Days parade. The McCallie's were originally from California, and were into the Mexican cabellero style horse gear, with the fancy saddles, dangling tapaderos and silver embellishments on all the leather. The Western parade was a high point of their year, and they were spectacular to see.

Above McCallie house was the Clavadetschers. Mr. Clavadetscher was from Switzerland and had a pure white, flowing mustache. I think he was in charge of music in the School District, and he conducted the McKinley grade school orchestra. I played a violin at the time. I remember one of my friends played a trombone in the orchestra, and because his arms weren't long enough to push the slide to its full out position, he taped a stick to the slide for that purpose. The result of this collection of grade school musicians was cacophony. I have often thought about the patience that Mr. Clavadetscher had leading the McKinley orchestra. One of his sons later became Mayor of Billings.

On the SE corner of 31st and 12th lived Henry Coleman, one of the founding partners of the law firm of Coleman, Jameson and Lamey (which became the Crowley firm) .