

My Memoirs - Chapter 1.2 - The Old Neighborhood

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February 23, 2022



Here's a pic of me with my dad at a picnic area in Elysian Park.

I grew up in Echo Park, a mostly Mexican neighborhood with a healthy sprinkling of liberals, artists and Jews. We lived on a steep hilltop with the huge, semi-wild Elysian Park across the street. On the back side of the small house, from a big kitchen window, we had a view of the Hollywood Hills across a residential valley or two. When you see a movie with a cut-away shot of the "Hollywood" sign, you're sharing a vista I gazed at every morning at breakfast and every evening at dinner.

Our dog, Beauty, roamed freely in the park, which is 600 acres today but even larger back then, before they built Dodger Stadium in Chavez Ravine. It was a great place for a kid to grow up. After I learned to ride a bike there were some fabulous hills to coast down and a wonderful empty lot with a perfect little jumping hill. Beauty and I walked the park's trails, and the Eucalyptus trees were perfect for climbing. I especially loved rolling down the park's steep slopes, except for the year I discovered that one of them was covered with poison ivy. I got the dreaded rash almost every Spring, but that year I had itches on my itches and oozes on my oozes, some of them in unmentionable places. When the Coasters crooned "she'll really do you in, if you let her get under your skin," I knew whereof they sang.

Down the hill lived my cousins Mark and Julie, who were roughly my age, together with a bunch of other kids. Melinda, she of the famous Christmas presents, was one hill over. On school days I walked down the hill to Elysian Heights Elementary. My sister, Susie, also attended there. She was four years older, so we didn't play much together but she became my mentor in other ways: music, politics and the mysteries of her teenage social culture.

At Elysian Heights, my first grade teacher was Mrs. Simson, a curly-haired battle-ax of a woman who wouldn't last a week in today's schools. I'm sure was just a patriotic Christian lady but she was also a disciplinarian who didn't suffer dissent gladly, if at all. One day she taught us a lesson in Americanism from the Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge. She told us how important it was to believe in God, if we wanted to be good, patriotic Americans. She also thought it was incumbent on her to inform us that if we did NOT believe in God we would go to Hell after we died. To top it off, she asked everyone raise their hand if they believed. I promptly decided this would be a good time to drop my pencil so I could disappear under my desk. Rather than putting the fear of God in me though, Mrs. Simson's fear-mongering only served to confirm me as public non-believer.

Years later I got the last laugh when the journal I edited received the George Washington award from the Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge.