

Jersey Avenue School 1957

Tales From The Brickyard

Sixty years ago this summer, ground was broken for the construction of Jersey Avenue Elementary School. At the time, our family lived on nearby Sunglow Street. All through the spring and summer months I watched the school being constructed and on a clear and crisp September morning in 1957, it opened its doors for the very first time. I was there.

On that first day of the new school year, dad was at work. My mother had left my younger siblings in the temporary care of our grandmother while she accompanied my younger brother John and I to our assigned classroom locations. She held our hands as we looked both ways before entering the freshly-painted crosswalk on Alburdis Avenue. Once we crossed the street and entered through the schoolyard gate, we joined the throngs of other parents with *their* children headed for *their* first day of class. I particularly recall Mom exhorting John and I to stamp our feet on the freshly asphalted black top in order to shake the white, powdery playground dirt from our shoes and stiff new blue jeans. The school and its surroundings presented a panorama of various odors to us new students. It smelled of curing concrete, of fresh oil-based paint and of hard sterile linoleum flooring. John was starting Kindergarten and I was starting First grade. My room number, as I recall, was 402 and my teacher's name was Mrs. Marcoux. The doors were propped open with taped signs identifying who the teacher was in that room. After checking me in at Mrs. Marcoux's desk, I was shown to my seat. Mom left me with my new classmates as she now headed off in the direction of the Kindergarten center with a very reluctant John in tow.

A year earlier I had been attending Kindergarten at Lakeview School across town. Every morning, we would wait for the school bus at the corner of Sunglow Street and Alburdis Avenue. It would hiss to a stop and then, once its door slapped open, we'd clamber aboard. It was one of those Crown Coach busses that I remember from my early school days. I always thought that they were magnificent-looking machines with their long, rounded riveted body and their trademark twin windows in the rear that reminded me of those on our Uncle Ricky's 1939 Ford sedan. Along the side of its long yellow body were the words: LITTLE LAKE CITY

SCHOOL DISTRICT. Our bus was Number 4 and when boarding at Lake View School to go home for the day, we were instructed to board this one and no other. This ensured that a wayward kindergardener didn't get mistakenly taken for a ride to Norwalk or something.

The Crown Coach was impressive-looking vehicle with a front end that has always reminded me of a Boeing B-50 intercontinental bomber. After picking up the other students at the corner, the bus would continue to wind and wend its way through the neighborhood and then roar south along Orr & Day Road to Lakeview Elementary School, bouncing over the cross-gutters at the intersection of Telegraph Road. It always amazed me how the driver, Mrs. Moore, was able to skillfully maneuver her bus through the narrow residential streets and all of the passenger car traffic in the relatively cramped Lakeview School parking lot. However, all of this changed the following spring as we watched Jersey Avenue School gradually take shape.

It was a different world back then. The Cold War was in full progress. Our parents, uncles, neighbors, the grocery store clerks, truck drivers, TV repairmen and yes, school teachers along with so much of adult society were veterans of World War II. They had flown into the deadly aerial maelstroms over places like Schweinfurt and Ploesti. They manned the ships and guns at places like Midway, The Solomon Islands, and Samar. They had slogged across the beaches at Normandy, Tarawa and Anzio and ultimately liberated the Nazi death camps. Both men and women labored day and night in the factories that built the P-51 Mustang fighter planes at places like *North American Aviation* in Inglewood, or perhaps P-38 Lightnings at the *Lockheed* plant in Burbank. And before that, they had suffered hunger, deprivation and uncertainty during the Great Depression. These were the adults who were our social and moral lighthouses and I always considered the stirring theme from the TV show "*Victory At Sea*" to be their anthem.

Santa Fe Springs was still a year away from incorporation when the earthmovers began rolling across the property at 9400 Jersey Avenue. The town was dominated by forests of oil derricks to the east as well as oil refineries and ancillary facilities nearby. Virtually all of the surrounding area was open land filled with tumbleweeds and wildflowers. In other sections were the rows of dead and abandoned orange trees bordered by narrow two-lane roads. In the railroad switch yard off Smith Street one could hear the groaning of the diesel locomotives and the

oil jack pumps in the fields as they continued their ceaseless reciprocating up and down movement. It was either the first or last Friday of every month, starting at 10:00 AM, that the county would test the local Civil Defense air raid sirens. As the town filled with their chilling wails, I would sometimes squint into the morning haze and imagine silver swept-wing planes with little red stars painted on them streaking across the sky. This was the world I remember as a five year-old when construction started on Jersey Avenue School.

The school was built upon what used to be an abandoned petroleum facility. Apparently, it had been used for the dumping of waste soil from the surrounding oil fields. I recall one sunny afternoon standing on the corner by our bus stop watching the earth-moving equipment drive back and forth over the site leveling the ground. I clearly remember that one of them was a huge yellow Caterpillar scraper with a long, overhanging cab. As it clambered and thundered over a mound of freshly deposited dirt it reminded me of some enormous prehistoric monster, all the while belching black smoke from its exhaust stack. And so it went all day long during that spring. By summer, construction of the school buildings themselves had commenced. An army of masons could be seen across the school yard as they methodically and diligently went about their brick-laying all day long. I clearly recall seeing them clambering upon the scaffolding and we could even hear the clinking of their trowels as they slathered mortar upon the bricks before tapping them into place. On the east side of the school yard along Alburdis Avenue were pallets and pallets of red brick. Also nearby were huge mounds of sand and gravel for mixing concrete and mortar. As the days grew longer (especially after daylight-savings time went into effect around April) we'd have lots of daylight left after dinnertime. Naturally, one of our favorite places to play was in the sand piles there. We'd play hide-and-seek, or play army there till almost dark, then head home. No one ever bothered us.

But soon the school was completed and just in time for its scheduled opening in early September. I remember our first principal was a Mr. McMahon. I recall him as being a slim, 30-ish man with close cropped hair but he wasn't around for long as he was soon re-assigned to the district office. He, in turn, was replaced by one Mr. Needham. Mr. Needham was a huge man with a round red face, silver glasses and thinning white hair. He was unsmiling, stern and was known for making unannounced visits to classrooms just to observe class behavior and instruction.

He'd only remain for a minute or so then silently drift on to the next room. Since the classrooms did not have air-conditioning, the doors would be propped open on warm days. My sister told me of the time that Mr. Needham dropped in on her classroom one day. He lounged in the open doorway for a minute or so and she told me that his enormous frame literally blocked out the sun. Other times he'd quietly stroll along the rows of desks, hands thrust in his pockets. You behaved yourself in those days as you did *not* want to get sent to the principal's office.....at least not this one!

Now, within the office of every trucking company, meat packing plant, aerospace contractor or tire factory across the fruited plain is the secretary/receptionist/office manager whose skill and knowledge keeps that company operating on schedule and within budget. American industry would grind to a halt without these women running things. In this respect, Jersey Avenue School was well served by our own office manager, Mrs. Ott. Sporting those bat-wing style glasses typical of the time and her red hair in a bun, she quietly and efficiently directed all administrative and operational functions of our newly opened school while presiding from her post behind her crinkle-finish Smith-Corona typewriter. In any such organization, it is very comforting to know that such people are in control. Mrs. Ott took care of everything.

Just as indispensable as Mrs. Ott was Mr. Southerland, Jersey Avenue's janitor, custodian and all-around maintenance man. Like Mr. Needham, he also was a big man with thinning white hair and glasses who dressed in a gray utility shirt and pants complete with black shoes and even a black bow tie. With his ever-present nickel-plated key-back reel clipped to his belt, Mr. Southerland *looked* utilitarian and appeared to be the sole custodian at the school. He always seemed to be everywhere whether it was collecting trash, changing a fluorescent lamp that unexpectedly burned out in a classroom, folding and unfolding the benches and tables in the cafeteria before and after lunch or collecting play equipment after recess. From my desk in Room 402 I envied him because he was a man who was *not* chained to a desk. I envied him because he enjoyed a great deal of autonomy. Throughout the day, Mr. Southerland moved at his own pace and no one told him what to do because he *knew* what had to be done. This was the kind of job I would aspire to in later years.

South of the 700 wing was supposed to have been the athletic field. I say, "supposed to" because the school and district groundskeepers never were able to grow grass out there with any degree of success. That soil was so heavily tainted with oil that on a warm breezy day you could smell it across the school yard. And the soil didn't feel like soil at all. It felt, well.....oily! If you crawled around on the ground (as young schoolboys are wont to do while playing marbles) this pungent dirt would get on our hands and clothing. Mom would grouse and mutter as she placed our jeans in our Kelvinator wringer washing machine followed by a cupful of White King D detergent and some 20 Mule Team Borax water softener. They simply reeked. Over the years the school groundskeepers, to their credit, tried with might and main to grow something.....anything! I remember seeing a tractor dragging a length of chain-link fence across the dirt trying to level and prep the soil surface. They'd spread seed and wait to see what happened. A lot times they'd get a ting of green here and there but for the most part, nothing would ever grow. For the six-some years I attended Jersey Avenue we were told, to our great annoyance, that the field was off limits. As a result, we had to settle for the grass field north of the main blacktop for games and related activities. All of that smelly loose dirt had other consequences as well and one afternoon during lunchtime recess an enormous dust devil arose and, of course, we kids went running *into* it despite the frantic whistle-blowing of the playground supervisors. It wasn't until after I left in 1963 that they were able to grow any kind of respectable-looking field of grass.

Once the school year got underway, the matter of noon time lunch came up. Since a number of students rode the bus, they brought sack lunches which they ate in the classroom and, if they wanted to, they could buy a small carton of Quaker Maid milk for five cents. Of course, some kids toted their noontime victuals in themed metal lunchboxes emblazoned with popular TV personalities of the day such as The Lone Ranger or Woody Woodpecker. One kid's dome top lunchbox, whose graphics that I clearly recall, resembled a traditional red country barn. The thermos bottle that came with it was its "silo".

Jersey Avenue was an open campus. Because we lived so close to the school, a number of my classmates and I were dismissed from class to walk home for lunch every day around noon. As our other classmates retrieved their lunchboxes and lined up outside to march to the cafeteria, we would be walking across the school grounds to our houses. This was a luxury that my siblings and I enjoyed as long as

we were attending there. Lunch at home, though brief, was a very welcome respite from the daily regimentation and drudgery of the classroom. I recall walking in the front door one cool, overcast day to be greeted by the aroma of soup that my mother had prepared for my brother John and I while the soft strains of Les Baxter's *"April in Portugal"* drifted from our table-top Philco radio. If we didn't eat in the kitchen we'd have our lunch at the dining room table to watch TV and try to catch up on the latest episode of *"The Space Explorers"* on the "Sheriff John Lunch Brigade" show. As an occasional treat, like Thanksgiving, our mother would give us each thirty cents to buy lunch at the cafeteria instead of coming home. On the Wednesday before the holiday, the menu was always Turkey dinner complete with mashed potatoes, gravy and cranberry sauce. In the chilly morning hours of class the strong and intoxicating aroma of freshly cooked turkey and cornbread would waft down the corridors.

At the north side of the school along Charlesworth there was, for a time, a horticulture plot. I don't know which class did this or who oversaw the whole undertaking but the rows of cornstalks and vegetables looked tranquil and serene. I personally wished that I could have been part of that. Nearby was the tall brick trash incinerator and I can still see Mr. Southerland, the school custodian enthusiastically tearing apart cardboard boxes and feeding them into the flames. And next to the incinerator was a chain-link enclosure containing the gas meter. Now, despite the fact that the school grounds were completely fenced in, a stray dog would still occasionally manage to wander in and disrupt things and it would then fall upon Mr. Southerland to wrangle and capture said dog (If you've ever filled out a job application that specified *"other duties as assigned"* well, dog-wrangling was one of those "other duties"). Once captured, said canine was temporarily placed in the chain link enclosure until the county dog-catcher arrived to pick him up and transport him to the local animal shelter. Of course, one could not help but feel some empathy for the poor critter since we knew that that's where stray dogs got taken to. "Gee," I wondered aloud once, *"What do they do with them at the dog pound?"* A classmate set me straight: *"What d'ya think they do with 'em? My dad says that they gas 'em!"* I considered this to be a thoroughly unfair and horrible fate just for being a stray animal. And then one afternoon after school, I was riding with my dad in our old Chevrolet on our daily milk run to the local drive-through dairy on Charlesworth. As we drove past the school I got a close look at the aforementioned chain-link enclosure inside of which were gray pipes, valves and a large metal box-like enclosure. I pointed to and asked my dad what it was and he told me: *"That's the gas meter for the school"*. The gas meter? THE GAS METER???? Suddenly in

my seven-year-old mind it all came together.....The stray dog being impounded, the chain-link enclosure, the gas pipes. I immediately wondered if *this* is where they gassed the poor mutt? Though I later learned otherwise, the whole matter, from then on, made me regard Mr. Southerland in a somewhat different, though unfair, light.

The 1960 Presidential election had everyone on the playground talking and it was pretty much a foregone conclusion, even amongst us politically naïve kids, as to who was going to win. In those post-city incorporation days, even private homes were pressed into service as polling places and our neighbors on the corner, the Milanos, opened their garage as an authorized voting station. I still recall seeing long lines of cars parked along Alburdis Avenue in the early evening dark as husbands and dads stopped to vote on their way home from work, then hurry home to dinner to follow the election returns on the Huntley-Brinkley News Hour. My father, who was not impressed with either candidate, walked into the polls sporting a small "*Huckleberry Hound For President*" button on his lapel. This was an act for which he was mildly chastised by our next-door neighbor Lou, who was a poll worker that night. The next day our 4th grade teacher, Mrs. Thorpe, impressed upon us the historical significance of the election results. In the days leading up to the inauguration, one of the class apple-polishers volunteered to bring in a portable TV set to observe the event (and perhaps accrue some extra credit points for herself in the process). This was no small logistical undertaking for her mother as said TV set had to be lugged and loaded into the family's Country Squire Ranch Wagon then driven to school where it would fall upon Mr. Southerland to unload it and transport it to our Room 604. Remember that this was 1961 and a so-called "portable" television set simply meant that it had a handle screwed onto the top of its cabinet. We anticipated the inauguration with mixed feelings. To be honest, *anything* that took us away from class room instruction was welcomed but as I remember it the picture reception was atrocious. Despite the fact that Santa Fe Springs is in the shadow of the TV transmitters atop Mount Wilson, repeated fiddling with the rabbit ear antenna accomplished little. I recall seeing a very snowy Mr. Kennedy doffing his top hat before mounting the dais to take the presidential oath of office. I might have even recalled hearing him deliver his famous "Ask not what your country can do for you" line. And so began the new president's administration which, in time, would become known as "*The New Frontier*".

In the weeks following President Kennedy's inauguration, Mrs. Thorpe encouraged and expected us to keep abreast of national and international news and

we would receive credit if we brought in a relevant newspaper story to report on. This was known as "Current Events" and was part of our classroom instruction. One area of interest, to me personally anyway, was the US space program which, by now, was gaining more attention on the national news. When Mercury Astronaut Alan Shepard made his suborbital flight that May 5th, I was determined to watch the launch. Since dad left the house for work every morning at 5:30 I asked him to wake me. It was still dark outside when I turned on our RCA black & white TV in the front room of our house. For an hour I watched and listened to the pre-launch activities taking place at Cape Canaveral Florida, all of which were being presided over by CBS newscaster Walter Cronkite. Periodically, the live coverage was interrupted by an important announcement by "Shorty Powers" who was the official voice of Mercury Control. However, I really didn't have that long to wait. At 6:30 AM, Astronaut Shepard's long skinny Redstone rocket roared off the launch pad on a wispy tail of smoke and rose into the sky. His suborbital flight didn't take long at all and was actually over in twenty minutes. There would be plenty of time for me to have a bowl of Kellogg's Corn Flakes and get dressed for school. When it was time for "Show-'n'-Tell" in Mrs. Thorpe's class later that morning, I could stand up and say that I had watched America's first manned space flight.

Throughout the rest of 4th Grade class in that spring of 1961 we continued to study California history. This included an extensive curriculum on the Spanish explorers, their voyages, galleons, Father Serra and the missions. This all eventually culminated in a field trip to Mission San Gabriel and the Pio Pico mansion in nearby Pico Rivera. Another diversion in Mrs. Thorpe's class that we looked forward to was listening to the weekly radio program: "*Music, Passport to The World*". This was broadcast on radio station KFI (yes, *that* KFI) every Tuesday morning at 9:30 and was sponsored by The Standard Oil Company of California. Basically it was an educational travel log show emphasizing the music and culture of a different country each week (interesting program actually). We had an old vacuum tube table radio in our classroom just for listening to this broadcast and it was hosted by the world-famous orchestra conductor, Carmen Dragon. Unfortunately our radio died one week and it became apparent that it would be unavailable for Tuesday morning's broadcast. (One classmate helpfully chimed in: "*Hey Mrs, Thorpe! My dad says that it probably just needs a new tube.*"). However, at the last moment, Mrs. Thorpe was able to borrow a pocket transistor radio from a fellow staff member and, at the appointed time, it was placed upon the aluminum tray at the bottom of the chalk

board. Its volume was turned up for all it was worth and for the next thirty minutes we strained to hear Peruvian pan pipes along with Mr. Dragon's commentary.

By autumn of 1962 I started my final grade at Jersey. My 6th Grade teacher was Mr. Cox and by the following summer I would be leaving Jersey Avenue School for Lake Center Junior High (or what is now known as "middle" school.) Of Lake Center I have no particularly memorable recollections since, in general, I found the place to be populated by pugnacious, foul-mouthed, hormone-saturated knuckle-draggers. In looking back, I think I would have preferred a second tour of duty in Vietnam.

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