

Never Open An Outhouse Door Without Knocking

I suppose that every hometown of every child holds certain favorite hiding places, or short cuts, or little-known doors or cubbyholes or secret passageways or whatever, and Auburn was no exception.

One of my favorite such places was the train tunnel that ran under Palm Avenue and the Auburn reservoir, and came out just this side of Gasoline Alley, a wide spot on Highway 49 about a mile north of where I lived. Tales of being caught in the tunnel when the train came were standard Auburn lore; one of my older cousins' cousin swore that he got caught one day with the train coming, and had to lie flat on his stomach between the tracks while the train passed over him. I believed him until I was about ten or so, when I started to notice that each time he told the story some of the details were different, such as whether it was night or day, with friends or alone; that sort of thing.

Being somewhat timid by nature, I never would have taken the dare to run through the tunnel if I was alone, but crowd psychology is different than individual psychology, and the herd instinct won out. It was a winter day after school, and several of us 8th graders were out of basketball practice because of teacher conferences. Since we didn't have to practice, we naturally looked around for something else to do, and Ken, our point guard, made the dumbest suggestion of all: "Let's run out to Gasoline Alley & back through the train tunnel."

So off we went, lickety-split down Palm Avenue, past my house, past the yellow bus shed where bus #9 picked us all up every school morning, and up the hill across from Dr. Dunevitz' house, where we dropped down to the tracks and began our run through the train tunnel. The train came twice a day, once early morning and once about 10 PM. It was only about 4 PM then, so we knew there was no danger of a train coming.

What we didn't know was that a group of transients, guys who road the rails from one town to another; we called them "hobos"; had taken residence in the tunnel. They apparently were sitting or lying against one wall of the tunnel, perhaps 50 feet or so from the end of the tunnel we were entering, so they had enough light to function and yet no one looking into the dark tunnel from the bright daylight outside could see them.

We entered the tunnel on the run, making jokes about outrunning the train, and what would happen if the train schedule changed. As we ran past the hobos in the darkness, our eyes fixed upon the small dot of light at the other end of the tunnel, one of the men shouted something that sounded like "Run to hell, boys!" None of us ever knew exactly what he said, but the shock of that shout and the ensuing laughter coming from the darkness was enough to send us into overdrive. We looked back to see the outline of a man in the end of the tunnel where we had entered seconds before. We screamed in unison and absolutely sprinted to the other end of the tunnel some quarter of a mile away. If we had been clocked, I'm sure some of us would have set a new world record. Needless to say, we did not return the way we came, nor did we ever enter that tunnel again.

Another shortcut my cousin Harvey & I used to take was through the wild blackberry vines across Nevada Street from my Uncle's nursery, Easley's Nursery, on the corner of Nevada Street and Palm Avenue. Well, it wasn't really a short cut; it was more like a long cut. But we liked to take it anyway, and imagined ourselves to be Tarzan finding hidden trails through the jungle of tangled vines and swamp-like foliage. Somewhere, in the acre or so of blackberries, was a small little home housing a Japanese family. We didn't know them, and in 1944 or so, we weren't even sure we wanted to know them. Maybe they were still the enemy. Maybe they would capture us and hold us as prisoners of war. Maybe they even had weapons over there in their little reddish-colored house. Maybe they were Kamikazes! Wouldn't that be exciting? Our excitement grew as we wove our way through the vines, making up stories of how Tarzan defeated the entire Japanese army by swinging through the trees and ambushing them from the hollow of a blackberry bush.

Just then we crawled out of a bog of pussy willows and into a very small clearing with a tiny little house in it, hardly big enough to house a single person, let alone an entire family. Could it be a munitions depot? A secret storage area? Would the US army want to know about it? Could it be connected with spies? Overcome with curiosity, fantasy, and patriotism, it was our duty, Harvey and I, to investigate it. Stealthily we snuck around it, signaling each other to be quiet, until we locate a door. Harvey gingerly opened it, as his wide-eyed little cousin peered in.

Just as my eyes focused on the Japanese woman seated in the outhouse, her shriek of terror told us we had made a terrible mistake. We hastily retreated in great fear and consternation, fearing both reprisal and political consequences.

None ever came, thank goodness. But unlike General MacArthur, we did not return.

Note: As we grew older, we realized that they were not only NOT the enemy, but they were loyal Americans who later became good friends.

Source: <http://www.articlecircle.com>

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