

## A Haircut To Remember

04-27-2017 by Harry Zirkelbach

Stars and Sun date 34769

My memory of my father, was this. Dad was always bald. Hairless.

Dad thought some "accident" was the cause. For when in his early thirties, overnight, his hair fell out. Dad had the thought it was a Lightning strike connected with the use of earphones listening to the Pittsburgh Radio Station KDKA in radio's infancy. Yes he recalled that shock. Then that full head of thick black hair shown in earlier photos, completely gone, forever.

Instead of a comb and brush, a face cloth to his whole face and head made sense for dad. Hair did not grow on his head. But he did possess, in parts, something close to peach fuzz, most evident in the space behind both ears. This was simply a fact of life for Dad. He neither complained nor boasted of a head covered without the same hair found on all others of his family.

Still dad needed to shave daily. This growth was robust, turning from black to white with age. Little of his body supported growth of any other hair.

Dad made no effort to remove what fuzz grew on his head, though we had hand operated clippers and barber shears. He never asked Mom to trim his head.

Money was always a luxury in 1934. Dad and Mom took turns cutting my hair. Neither was a great barber. Both taught me the virtue of keeping my head firm when they set a position for trimming. Still after each snip, the scissors or clipper would be jerked away to remove loose hair from the newly cut surface. Because they had not released the shears or clippers, this usually pulled away still attached hairs, to my great discomfort.

On special occasions the 25 cents would be made available for my hair to be cut by the neighbor Barber. For me that event was special, infrequent.

Most customers at the neighbor barber shop were men. For while there were many more boys than fathers in my town, most parents cut their sons and daughters hair.



When at the barber shop the male conversation always interested me. Still this barber kept a dozen well work magazines. The subject masculine; sports, adventure, hunting, cars, the popular topics. These magazines were not read so much as thumbed through. I made this judgement by the pace at which the pages were turned. Reading beyond the photos and headlines was saved for national news of local importance featuring the Cleveland Indians and Pittsburgh Pirates baseball. We lived the same distance from both cities. In these 1930's both fielded non-contenders. Yet both Pirates and Indians were held in esteem by Frank's one chair barber shop, the front room of a Baldwin built house in which he lived, more often than not, a home exactly like each customer's home.

This day, Easter Sunday was chosen for the professional haircut. As usual, I arrived at nine Saturday morning. Four men were ahead of me. I guessed I'd be out before noon.  
Time to prep for Sunday Mass.

On arriving I looked over the magazines; picked an Outdoor Life, planning to follow with a Field and Stream and the maybe the latest WWI Flying Aces adventure book.

Once seated, I also found myself more listening to adventures of the men, than attentive to those tales in the large world outside

While an occasional customer, I knew the routine. The barber Mr Frank McCarthy, knew his regulars, their names, that they came because their hair was seven, or so, weeks long, but that they also enjoyed his friendship. Knew when to talk, that Frank preferred to listen. Still Mr. McCarthy controlled the conversation even when the customer led. In a few hours I would learn large bits of three or four histories, work, sports, romance, rage, family, hope. Making sense of any is another matter. I did know that if I were to return when any of these four predecessors of today returned, Mr McCarthy would build on what was said today. Biographies were built in this room of no secrets.

Mr McCarthy followed a ritual in his shop, perhaps a standard of his times.



The longer wall of the room had a fixed mirror. Before being allowed to stand the customer was handed a small mirror to inspect the back of his head. The expected approval was never denied.

Even as money and compliments were exchanged Mr McCarthy was wielding a broom to remove hair cuttings from the work space of the floor. Then ever the businessman, Mr McCarthy pointed to whoever was next and said clearly "Next".

I had the routine memorized.  
Well, today would be different.

When I entered this day, one in the chair, three waiting. One of those waiting looked much older. His clothing well-used, crusted, filthy. He wore a sizable beard, generous head of hair. This mass ran together, was matted, not pretty. I knew he would precede me. One, or two turns, before mine.

His hair cut even began differently. Without conversation, the back of the Barber Chair was lowered, the leg section raised. I had never seen a Barber chair horizontal before! A full size towel was heated to a scald. Mr McCarthy shifted his hands constantly to protect them for the hot water. The towel was wrapped around the whole head, exposing the tip of a nose, which seemed to glow. Now I could no longer pretend to look at the magazine in my hands. When a sink full of lather had been prepared, the towel was removed and the head and face was covered with the white lather. Vigorous rubbing turned the foam black. Then the customer, whose name I learned was Bob Crotty, had warm water poured over his head and face, that collecting in basin beneath the head, The head was then dried with a clean towel. Mr McCarthy gave Bob's head a second foam bath, then another rinse which was light brown. At a third application, the suds remained white. Bob's age shrunk.

Returning the chair upright, to the cutting posture Mr McCarthy first cut the hair, rather short I thought, then shaved the beard. Now Bob was the youngest on the room, excepting me. While Mr McCarthy knew Bob, there was not hint of Bob's work, life, family, in their chat. Just one gentleman



Once in a chair, a formed square 6 foot cotton sheet was twilled around the customer, the back of the neck secured with a pin, the remainder covering the customer and chair. Then a 3" by 30" strip of white paper was tucked between the neck and sheet. Again, pinned together.

Mr McCarthy's equipment was all hand operated. His motions economic, precise. Clipping was done with methodical speed; final touches with flair. He and his customers like this attention

When Mr McCarthy decided the head was properly shaped, the hair cut was not finished. The protective cotton cloth draped around the neck was unpinned, the bottom folded toward the customer's face. Taken a short distance from the barber chair it was allowed to unfold, raining stored hair onto the white linoleum floor. The small band of paper inside the customer's collar was removed, folded. The protective cloth was loosely returned to the shoulders at the neck. The band of paper was laid on one shoulder

Turning to the sink Mr McCarthy added hot water to soap in a mug. He also poured scalding water on the large barber's face cloth while beating the soap/water into foam. With shaving brush applied the warm lather to the area behind and in front of both ears. While hair softened, Mr McCarthy honed his razor on the strap at the side of the chair. All an effortless continuous motion.

With the straight razor he made an even cut on hair around one ear, then trimmed the sideburn. The foam and cutting was wiped on the palm of his hand not holding the razor. The chair was swung to the other ear. When the second trim was complete, that residue and the gathering on his left palm was cleared onto the saved band of paper of the customer's shoulder, then tossed. In the same motion Mr McCarthy grabbed a lotion bottle from the shelf, filled his palms with dashes of a great smelling ointment that he then generously rubbed onto ears, neck, parts of the face.

The spread cotton sheet was removed a final time, a large soft longhair brush was flourished to remove even the hint of a stray fragment from face, head, clothing of the about to depart customer.