

I should have done that when I had the chance.

by Harry Zirkelbach December 27 2017

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It was an ordinary Wednesday morning. Winter, cold, some snow on the ground. The phone rang, was answered. Within a few comments, the caller was invited to the house. He knew the area, and Windsor Gardens, having made a offer on a small unit years past, rejected, and had been happy with his home since.

He was the same age as our oldest. He had been given our phone number by John Gibbons, third generation Denverites, our neighbor two homes earlier.

In the ensuing conversation it was apparent we knew him, just didn't recall him from those days when our oldest was reaching maturity. Knew every room and nook of the house, especially under the garage roof where that son had built a small house of two rooms to entertain young neighbors. When I had to destroy it, leaned, too late, this was considered a place to avoid by respectable neighbors.

Our guest settles into a chair at the breakfast table, rejects nourishment. We learn, he was asking for a written comment to take to a funeral he was attending in central Arizona.

Rick Nesbitt had died. The indestructible Rick, handsome beyond belief, strong man, adventurer, best friend of our oldest child, Paul. Divorced, was living alone near his two daughters in central Arizona. Rick had a brother in Denver, invalid from a heart attack, could not speak, also alone. The visitor, Frank Chmora was flying his brother to the wake and had been calling some who knew Rick, to tell the next generation what this man had been like as a teen ager. We quickly composed that limited biography, Rick, Nesbitt, circa 1970.

Rick Nesbitt and Paul Zirkelbach had somehow graduated from East High School in Denver that spring.

Then late May, the two left Denver, hitch-hiked to Hannibal Missouri. Made residence in that countryside, found enough logs to build a comfortable raft. And in the middle of the night shoved off, intending to ride the Mississippi, Hannibal past St Louis, onto New Orleans.

We never learned how many rafts were confiscated. Authorities no longer allowed "Huck and Tom" to meander south on these waters.

Usually this meant an authority in a powered boat came along side, suggested they be pulled ashore, raft confiscated. These encounters pleasant. Most times they were not arrested. But they always managed another raft, continuing. Until just short of New Orleans the lawman there had enough, jailed them a night. His parting comment, sure-fire enough; they finished on the freight train.

Paul had the name of Barbara's classmate from Denver, now in a Navy related employment, husband and two sons. She gave them a prodigal son welcoming. That food, a meal to remember. They left two days later, not hungry.

The next weeks they meandered east, then northeast along the Eastern Coast to New Jersey. Hungry. dirty again, no reference, they approached a farmer, became day laborers with machetes harvesting various root vegetables alongside the other migrants.

With the summer fun on their face, muscles rejuvenated, a surprising number of pennies in their clean jeans, they bussed home, stopping a few days to visit Paul's nine cousins in the Erie Pennsylvania neighborhood.

To Rick and Paul, a nice summer. To youngsters everywhere, that impossible dream.

Years later on an airplane trip seated with a successful businessman, whose name you would recognize, I recount their story. Silent a while. Gazing our the window into the distance, he merely says,

I should have done that when I had the chance.