

## Childhood Gathering Places

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Our neighborhood was, from the view of the street anyway, a typical East side Syracuse urban area, lined with mainly post WWI two family houses and a scattering of single family bungalows. But past those back yards was an oasis of wilderness, at least to us kids. It stretched the whole length of the block, rising into a small woods of mainly hawthorn trees. Everyone just called it “the back lot.” The field just behind our house, separated from us by the garage and a line of cedar trees, had, in fact, been used for victory gardens during the war and there were a few plots remaining, still laid out and planted every summer. My grandfather had a burn barrel back there for paper trash. (One time he set the field ablaze by mistake. Fire trucks came from the back to douse the grass fire, but I wasn’t allowed to go back there and watch. It was probably the most excitement the neighborhood had had in years and it was very disappointing that I was not allowed to watch.)

The back lot was bordered, behind on the opposite side, by Westmorland Hill, a steeply rising street paved with brick, presumably to provide a footing for horses. There were only a couple of two family houses across that street, set part way up that steep slope, but, presumably, the steepness of the grade had discouraged builders from putting more houses back there, for which all of us kids were eternally grateful.

The hawthorn woods made a wonderful private playground for us. Several of us created a “town” under the low growing branches. We each carved out our own personal residence. Being a budding scientist, I also created a laboratory. There was really almost nothing in these spaces, but we filled them with our imagination. We named the town ‘Gorgerville’ because my next door neighbor, Mitch Greenwald and I were the founders, so that was a combination of our last names. Mine was Gorman at the time.

Now beyond the back lot and across the street at the bottom of the hill, was a triangular plot of land that someone, I have no idea who, kept fairly mowed. That

was too far away and too public for it to be a play area for us. However, on a summer day, a tall elderly man with a wide, wicker basket on his back, would walk the neighborhood gathering us kids up as he went by like a modern day pied piper. Sticking out of his basket were wooden bows and arrows, all created in his basement. We would all trape along behind him around the corner to that reasonably level mowed triangular field where he would have already set up a target for us. We all learned to shoot, probably with fairly minimal proficiency, but we did learn the finer points of rotating your arm so the string didn't hit your elbow, proper stance, and how to aim. His appearance was always the high point of a hot summer day.

I'm sad to say I can't remember his name, but he did live over on Allen Street, the next street over from Fellows Ave where we all lived. One day, he invited me over. As I recall, I walked over there on the wooden stilts that my grandfather had made for me by the whirligig craftsman with the workshop down the hall from his office. What awaited me was my very own bow and arrows. What a wonderful surprise. Maybe I was his prize pupil because no one else got their own equipment.

I cherished that bow for years. Even after the old wood cracked and broke apart, it took me many seasons before I could bear to throw it away. By that time it had been many years since we had seen him. I expect that he passed away and no one told us, if the adults even knew.

For urban kids, we were really fortunate to have easy access to all that undeveloped space. It was the last area to be invaded by houses. That did not happen until we were all in our teens and we resented every inch those bulldozers took. It was, after all, ours, wasn't it? How lucky for us to have had it available when we did.