

Won't you be my Neighbor

I attest truth in Robert Fulgum's remark, "a good neighbor makes a huge difference in the quality of life." Good neighbors have blessed me so.

I do not recall my first home-- moving from it while an infant. However, neighbors of my five lived homes since then have blanketed my living with threads of love and woven in memories of endearing quality.



3338 Brookside Parkway, Indianapolis. 1943-1950

This was the first home of recollection. After a few years there, I thought it even providential for it was on the corner of Brookside and Adams Street... our name was set in the sidewalk in black and white-- Adams Street. Our living quarters were an upstairs apartment in one of those very stately homes --the ones with front and back stairways and big porches -- across the street from a park--Brookside park. The windows had blackout blinds--and were my only WWII memories until Dad was drafted in the late summer of 1944 . The apartment pleasingly possessed a back enclosed porch which served as a summer bedroom in those pre air-conditioned days. The view was a flowered trellis, some patches of flowers and an alley. The kitchen owned a linoleum floor covering. Once, my mother was emptying the tray from the icebox--truly that... when she spilled the some of the melted ice. The backwards crashing fall was accompanied by little boy panic-- and stiches.

The owners, a retired minister, Gary Cook, and his wife whose name has left me, resided downstairs. My memory is stingy about the good Reverend nor his wife. He suffered a debilitating stroke when I was around three years old and loss all verbal communication except for the word "spotsy" spoken in various knowingly inflections. The neighbors next to us had a littermate home to the Cook's. They needed every square foot of it. The Radcliffes, Ben and Lulu had nine children -- eight girls and a boy. The oldest girl, Margaret and the boy James had matured and seeking their own adventures. I do not recall James's vocation, but Margaret played a harp. Why that interested me I cannot fathom. I think it may have been

in the Indianapolis symphony. Where she may have played it did not interest me at four or five years old. I was more captured by the sandbox under the cherry tree joyfully gracing the Ratcliffs side yard.

Lulu was a happy laughing woman-- not too tall even in 5 year old's skyward view. She was grandmotherly warm and round and owned a joyous leanback laugh that warmed her presence. Ben, whom my Dad sometime affectionately referred to as a "pasty faced Englishman" worked at one of the several Allison plants on the city's west side. I do not know in a what capacity. What did interest me was he had a large shiny motorcycle. He sternly advised my sis, Perk and me on the safety concerns of riding a tricycle--then even more safety instruction after I matriculated to my used red Schwinn. Later when Ben was in his 80's he and his brother took their polished monster touring Harley's to Florida and back... made the Indianapolis News in the process. He practiced a scheduled periodic 3 in1 oiling of the many door latches of that spacious teen infested home. Lulu filled her day by keeping the home litter free while loading the propped clothesline with the families' wash. To this day, the smell Fells Naptha Soap, returns me to their basement seeing again the chore used...and well oiled --Maytag Wringer washer. After Dad was drafted into WWII, Lulu added grand mothering me and Perk to her daily schedule. She squeezed time to make daily custards for us and her youngest daughter, our playmate Patty. From our front row sandbox seats, we watched in anticipatory eagerness, the window sill where Lulu placed them to cool. Patty was a year or two older than me. All her older sisters were pretty and practiced the role of guiding lights for Perk and me as well. Each became a cheerleader at Tech High school as they passed through the halls of that cavernous school. Following our move in 1950, our two families remained in loving contact for the remaining years of Ben and Lulu's living. On a visit to that porch when they were into their late 80's, Lulu chuckled proudly that the neighborhood children--those replacing Perk and me were constantly knocking on the door asking if Ben could come out and play. The Ratcliffe's exemplified living with patience and loving neighborly care was tenderly planted and is ever growing my own life garden.