



Home Sweet Home Canal Zone

Canal Gypsies: A Memory of Good Times

I rather imagine that my memories of living in many Canal quarters is not unique by any means. As I started recalling all of the places I lived, it seemed, in retrospect, that we were a bunch of gypsies - my Mom, Dad and I.

by C.W. "Chuck Hummer," BHS '55

Part of the reason for the moves may have been common to many others. Since quarters were assigned as a matter of eligibility. For the most part, seniority, combined with family size entitled an employee to better and better quarters. So many folks, my parents being two, used to check out the available quarters each week at the Housing Office. And if a better house was available, application was made to compete, or as they would say, "put in for" quarters. Once successful, the moving process began.

To make matters worse, my father worked the entire World War II at the Mechanical Division and was not able to serve in the military because of punctured ear drum. When the boys came home, some from as far away as service in Coco Solo, my Dad was RIFFED, we lost quarters eligibility and we moved to "no takers" or quarters my mother qualified for. All of this made for exposure to many different towns, types of quarters and, above all, schools,

When I was born in 1937, my father was a policeman and we lived in the old four-family houses in "The Flats". (Smiley Morris was my neighbor then, although I know that from photos only.) Then, Eureka, my father was successful in getting a "no taker" on Ancon Boulevard that was an old French-Era cottage. The War broke out, in 1941, my father transferred to the Mechanical Division as a crane operator and we moved to new set of "four families" in Gavilan Area. (Robin Harrison and Sandy Hinkle were neighbors at that time and we started in first grade together.) From Gavilan Area, we migrated to some really spiffy "up and down" quarters on Magoon Street in Diablo when my father worked for the Special Engineering Division (SED). The SED was in charge of the Third Locks Project. (Mary Lou and Bob Dailey were neighbors, along with Patt Foster, Lanny Gunn and Don Ponder.) I attended second and third grades at Diablo Elementary School from 1944 to 1946.

Two or three memories of that era are the huge dry season fires that swept the field below our wooden house and scared the wits out of us each dry season, the secret trek to the old dump behind the elementary school where we had to go through the mangrove swamp to elude the guard and pilfer the treasures from the discarded aircraft and military supplies. I also remember quite vividly hearing of the

death of FDR and the end of the war while living in Diablo. It was then that I remember the concrete bomb shelters and particularly the one under the Mundt's house near the school.

From there, we moved to Balboa Heights in one of the three old concrete two-family quarters that looked down on Heights Road. That was my fourth grade experience at Balboa Elementary School and my daily trek down and up the Administration Building steps. It was only about a year that we managed to stay in those quarters before once again getting lucky and securing some new "up and down" duplex quarters on Venado Street in Ancon. Burt Mead, Joe Wood, the Englekes and Askews were neighbors there, among so many others. It was at this time that I was fortunate to have had Sue Core as my sixth grade teacher, be the resident batboy at the Beer Softball League and play tops, marbles, baseball, depending on the season, and generally hang around with the Panamanian kids who lived down by the Tivoli Bar and the Olympic Stadium in Caledonia. I also remember the tanks stationed behind the Ancon Laundry ball field during one of the many times political unrest struck Panama City and I believe, Arnulfo Arias took up residence in the famed Tivoli Hotel.

From Ancon, we moved for a short time to the Curundu Skunk Hollow. My dad had been RIFFED six times in two years and it was a pretty unsettled time for us. As I look back on it now, I do not know how my father managed during those days. It must have been terribly discouraging for him. I do not remember it as being unpleasant for me, the moving was pretty exciting, it seemed and I got to drive, underage, on the Curundu-Ft. Clayton Road, a surplus Jeep my father had successfully bid on. After less than a year in Curundu, we moved on to Cocoli, where I spent my high school years. Cocoli was a great place to live. We could sneak over and swim in the Third Locks after posting an alligator look-out, or ride our bikes over to Rousseau where we could explore the jungles around the dredged fill area behind Rousseau. Cocoli and high school were great times. Riding a Cushman scooter across Miraflores Bridge was a daily terror for me. I was convinced I was going to lose control going over the open steel decking and cripple myself for life. There were always stories about someone who fell, but I never met any of them. Dave Hilliard, Bobby Presley, Ed Henry, Stu Bush were some who lived close by in those days.

So as I look back on it, we lived in The Flats, on Ancon Boulevard, Gavilan Area, Diablo Heights, Balboa Heights, Ancon, Curundu and Cocoli, all by the time I graduated from BHS in 1955. And during that time I attended school at Balboa Elementary, Diablo Elementary, Ancon Elementary, Balboa Jr. High and BHS.

Once of the constants in my life, as I recall, as we moved around was getting sewed up, injected, prodded and pilled by Doc Bob Berger and his nurse, Tillie (?) Ishoy. It seemed that they always managed to appear in whatever community dispensary where I lived and, being the klutz I was, managed to find my way with a head wound, nail in the foot, broken fingers, broken arms and so on. I remember those days that one badge of courage was to have the white collodian patch on the shaved part of ones dinged up and stitched head.

Were we gypsies or what?