

Memories from the Watershed

by

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I want to thank my wife

Sam

for her patience in listening to my oral renditions  
and for encouraging me to put them into written form.

\* \* \*

I also want to thank my son

Jason Scott

for reading the text and giving me suggestions and advice,  
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## **Introduction**

Who am I?

Basically, I'm nobody. But I had a great childhood, and these are my memories.

I grew up in the village of Middleport, New York. Middleport has a population of about 2000 people. It's been that way forever. Middleport straddles the Erie Barge Canal on the eastern edge of Niagara County, approximately thirty miles from Niagara Falls. Sigma Motors and the FMC Corporation, which bought out Niagara Chemical, which used to be the Niagara Sprayer, are two of the better known employers in the village.

My father was born outside of Woden, Texas. My mother was from Medina, N.Y., five miles east of Middleport along the canal. They met during World War II in Washington, D.C. My father was in the Army and served in the Philippines. My mother was working for the FBI. They got married after the war. My sister was born in 1947, and then my dad was recalled into the service for the Korean conflict. I was born in 1952 in Fort Lee, Virginia, and we moved to Middleport very soon afterward. My dad went to work for my grandfather as a mechanic at Bill & Don's Gulf Station on the corner of State and Vernon streets. My uncle Don decided that a mechanics life was not for him and he soon left to go into the insurance business. The station became known as Bill and Byron's. Within a few years my grandfather passed away but the name remained as long as my father owned the business.

When we first came to Middleport we moved into a duplex on the north side of town at 57 North Hartland St. At the time, or perhaps just in my mind, the north side of town was considered to be the wrong side of the tracks, so to speak. It lies at an elevation that is lower than the Erie Canal, and so if ever a rupture occurred in the canal bank there, an awful lot of houses would end up with water in their cellars. We stayed at 57 N. Hartland Street for a few years and then moved across the street. I may have been five years old by that time.

Behind our first house was the Paper Mill Pond. To us it was the Mill pond, or simply “the pond.” It was the last remaining reservoir out of the four that were built along Jeddo

Creek back in the 1800's. It was a wonderful stretch of wilderness that, at least in our neighborhood, separated the village from the farm land. And to my way of thinking, it was the absolute best location in Middleport in which to live as a kid.

What made this location even more special were the neighbors. I was very lucky to have excellent role models to emulate. There were Ron and Tom Mufford, Jimmy Hare, Joe Nasal, and Tom Nasal. These guys were all four to six years older than myself, and when you're only five years old, that's quite a difference in years. Tom Nasal was two years older than me, and besides being a role model, he was also a best friend.

The guys I hung out with every day were Danny Ogden, Mike DiNardo, Tom Nasal, Bob Stanley, and to a lesser extent, my brother James and Mickey Monthony. Of the core group, Tom was the mature, serious one; Danny was the "John Wayne" steady as a rock guy; DiNardo was the cool dude; Bob was the good-natured "slow" one, but "slow" only to us because he was younger and we loved to pick on him; and, finally, I guess I was the flaky one willing to take a chance.

When I began kindergarten I met other people in town and gained new friends on the other side of the canal and out in the country at Johnson's Creek. I would often ride my bike to visit and spend the day with these guys. We also played Little League baseball during the summer months, and had school functions during the winter.

Back in the days that this book covers, Middleport was probably best known for its summer ending Labor Day festivities. It was the last big blow-out before the start of the new school year. Booths and rides were set up downtown on Main and State Streets and the lift bridge across the Erie Canal was left in the “up” position. During some years it seemed like over a hundred yachts would line the banks of the canal. Sometimes it was just as much fun to walk the banks and meet the people as it was to ride the rides. On Saturday morning a parade would leave from the high school, make its way down State Street, turn up Vernon, where my dad had his gas station, and end at the bank on Park Avenue. And then the fair would kick off for the long weekend. In the old days, the beer tent, which was set up behind the fire hall, was the biggest attraction, but sometime during the 70's or 80's it was discontinued as part of the festivities.

When I began to compile these memories, I soon realized that if I was going to hold the readers attention I would have to set some parameters, and so I've held the time line to the first thirteen years of my life, 1952-1965.

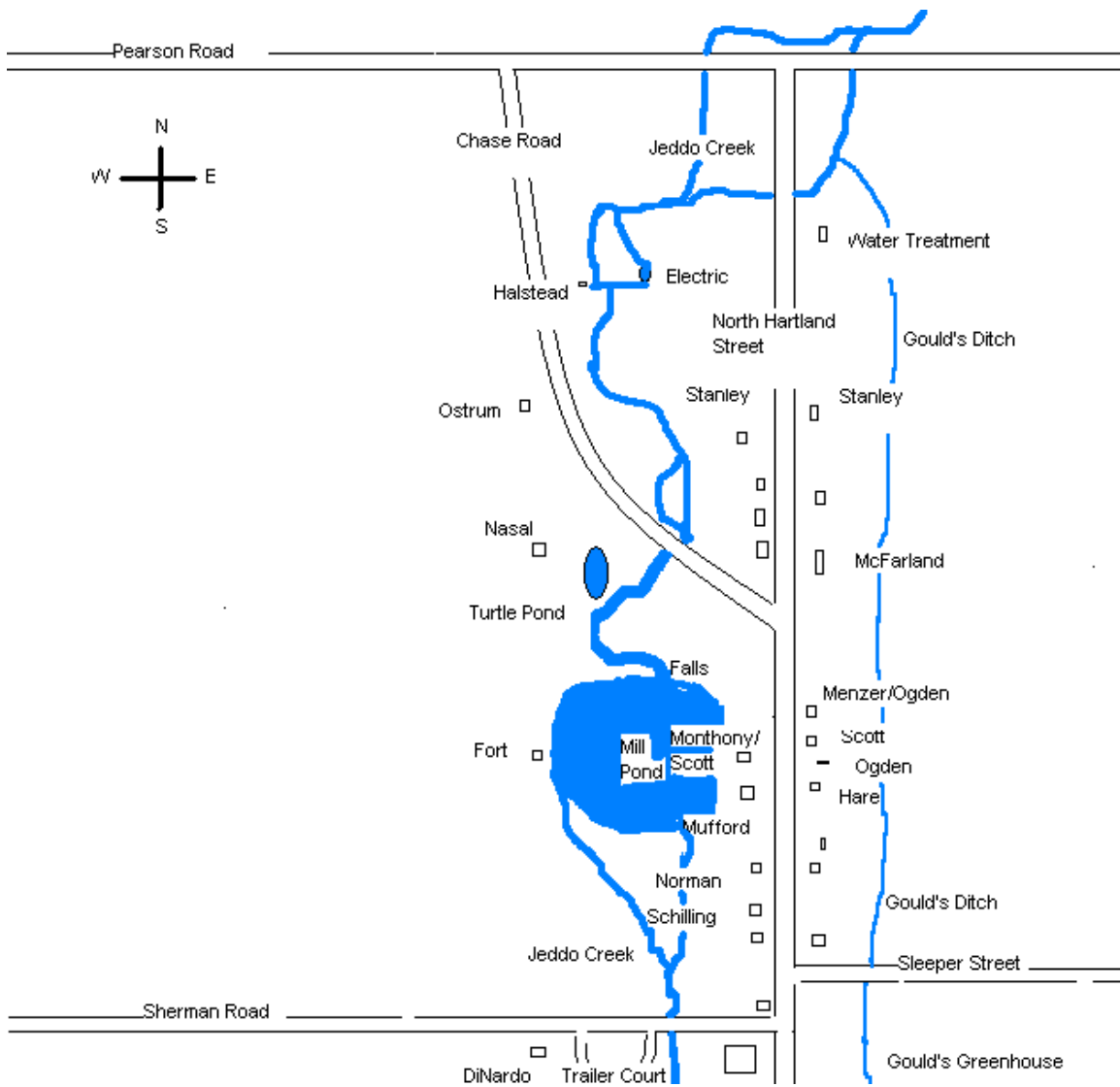
It was a different time back then, although one can say that about any era. People left their keys in their cars overnight, and one hardly ever locked the doors to their house. Shaw's Dairy was still delivering milk to the doorstep, although that was about to come to an end. Interestingly enough, when they stopped delivering the milk, Middleport's population stopped growing and, in fact, began to go into a decline. No! Just kidding. Really.

I've also mostly confined these stories to the neighborhood in which I grew up. This is where I had the most adventures, developed the closest relationships, and experienced my fondest memories.

I hope you enjoy the stories.



# The Watershed



## **1 To Drop Like A Rock**

“Aarrggghhhh! I'm the monster!” I shouted. “I'm going to get you!”

I chased my sister, Edith, through the living room and up the stairs.

“I'm going to get you!”

Stupid brother, she thought as she hid behind the bed.

I soon discovered where she was hiding, but she eluded my approach and ran into the other bedroom.

I ran through the doorway, following her.

“Boo!”

“Ahhhhh!” I screamed in fright. My body shook like jelly as I fell to the floor.

Dang! She was hiding right around the corner. She scared the be-jabbers out of me!

Edith ran back downstairs.

This is fun, I thought, as I got up and followed her. I was still the monster, after all. And I was still going to get her.

We were in the duplex at 57 North Hartland. This was my first house. It was old. And it was small. There was a kitchen and living room and two bedrooms upstairs. There was a coal burning furnace down in the basement, and a bin where the coal was stored. I had recently watched as the coal truck backed up inside the yard. The men opened up the cellar window and then took the chutes from the side of the truck. They hooked them up between the truck and the window and then tilted the bed of the truck. The coal slid down the chute and into the cellar. Dust billowed up from out of the window.

During cold weather, Dad would stoke the fire before he left for work in the morning. Sometimes I watched him do it. Later on, when I would complain that I was cold and Dad was at work, Mom would tell me to put more coal in the furnace. The first time I did it by myself was scary. But I got used to it.

That house was constructed kind of strangely. Heating ducts ran only to the first floor. One could stand over the register there and get plenty warm. There were also registers in the second floor, but no heating ducts ran to them. It wasn't a very efficient system. A thin piece of tin or aluminum in the register was all that stood between the first and second floor. Heat rises, and I guess enough heat was supposed to go through that tin to heat the second floor. From the first floor, you could see the tin in the ceiling. On the second floor you could stand over the register but you couldn't warm your bones.

Why am I talking so much about the subject of heating systems?

Because monsters are crazy, of course.

I chased my sister back up the stairs. Once again she hid just around the corner in the second bedroom. But this time I didn't let her scare me. She pushed past me and hid behind a bed in the first bedroom. My mother was in there making the beds or moving furniture around.

Instead of chasing after Edith, I decided to hide myself. She would be back. She wouldn't be able to resist. This time, I would scare her. After all, I was the one who was supposed to be the monster.

“Arrrgggghhhh,” I groaned as I pulled up the grate in the register in the floor. Monsters are mean. And monsters are strong! I set the grate around the corner and then squatted down in the hole in the floor.

Whoosh!

I dropped like a rock. I landed in my father's easy chair down in the living room. My mother and sister came running downstairs, their eyes wide.

“Oh my god, are you all right?” my mother asked.

I was no longer the monster. I was sitting there sucking my thumb.

“I hurt my little finger,” I replied as I held up my hand.

It was a good thing my dad wasn't sitting there at the time.

## 2 Fire and Ice

I figured that the fire would melt the ice. It seemed to be common sense. After all, it was one of the first things they had taught me.

“Don't touch that stove!” my mother would harp. “It's hot! You'll burn yourself!” And I'd yank my arm away, trembling in fear.

“Keep away from the furnace, now,” my father would advise. “Don't be touching that door. It's hot!” he'd tell me as he opened the furnace door to drop in a shovelful of coal. I could see the eerie, orange glow coming from inside the chamber and feel the blast of heat. Powerful stuff, there, I'd think to myself.

And now they were going to start a fire and melt the ice. Did they not know any better? It had been such a great week. How had it gotten to this point?

“Now, this is an early Christmas present,” my mother told me as she finished bundling me up in my winter coat.

Did Santa Claus come early just for me? I wondered about it as she pulled the mittens up over my hands. He must think I'm a pretty special dude. I grabbed hold of my new sled and went outside into the snow. It was already above my knees and still coming down. Winter was great.

I slogged through the snow to the hill. The pond was frozen over. It had been for more than a week now. Part of it was covered in snow. The wind had blown clean the other half of the pond, revealing sleek, shiny ice.

I put the sled on the ground at the top of hill, laid down on top of it on my stomach, and gave a push with my hands.

Whoa!

Over the edge, down the slope, over the hump and down again. I glided out onto the snow on the ice and came to a stop.

Man! That was cool! I grabbed hold of the rope attached to the sled and pulled it back up the hill to do it all over again.

This time I took a little running start, eased the sled into the snow, and then hopped onto it on my belly. I gave another push with my hands and whoa! Over the edge and down the slope and onto the ice. Man, that was a great feeling. That little hump in the hill made all the difference. It put my stomach into my throat! Great! And the running start made a difference, too. I went faster down the hill and further onto the ice. My goal swiftly became to reach the tree stump that poked out of the ice fifty feet from the shoreline. I still had thirty feet to make up.

I tried going down the hill sitting on the sled instead of laying down, but I'd tip over on the hump and go sprawling down the hill through the snow. That was fun in its own way, but it didn't get me any further towards the stump. I needed that running start.

“Try waxing the runners,” Jimmy Hare suggested after he had watched me sled for a while. “Go ask your mother for a candle.”

“What do you want a candle for?” mom asked.



“To wax the blades on the sled. So I can go farther!”

“Well, you're not going to waste my candles. Here,” she said as she offered me a stick of paraffin wax that she used for canning fruits and vegetables.

Surprisingly, it made a big difference in the speed of the sled. And it got me fifteen feet further towards the stump.

And then we noticed the Muffords walking across the pond. Mr. Mufford was carrying an ax. Tommy, Ronnie, and Linda followed behind him. Edith was out there skating around with her “early” Christmas present—new skates.

“I'm gonna go watch,” Jimmy said. He slipped down the hill and headed out onto the ice.

This ceremony had become a winter tradition. The pond was not “open for business” until Harold Mufford tested it out. I used to think that Harold lived just for that moment. He'd walk almost all the way across the pond and then chop a hole in the ice with his ax. Water would come gushing out the top of the hole and spread out along the ice for a short distance, and then quickly freeze. And then Harold would announce that the pond was safe to play on. Ronnie and Tommy would shovel off a hockey rink. The younger kids like me and Danny, would shovel off a maze in the snow where we would play tag. You

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