

Memories are made from this

By J B Leftwich

It has happened to all of us.

The Voice from the Past, the Bolt Out of the Blue, the Mover of Memories popping up when you least expect your memory bank activated.

This week it happened to me -- again: a voice on the telephone awakening ancient thoughts and setting a pleasant but sometimes melancholy stage populated by actors of more than a half century ago.

In this case, the voice on the telephone belonged to Edna Boyd Larsen, widow of Eugene Boyd who was my good friend during and immediately after high school at Baxter Seminary in Putnam County.

I was plowing corn, and singing. I could see Gene as he approached the cornfield, far down the hill. I pretended I didn't see him. I wanted him to hear my imitation of Bing Crosby.

"You don't sound like Bing Crosby," he said as he approached me.

"Maybe Fred Astaire?"

"Yeah, More like Fred Astaire," he said: "He can't sing either."

We lived many days together, Gene and I, as we emerged from adolescence, went to college and moved into the work force. He was one of the class's brightest boys along with Kenneth Haggard, J. C. Sadler and Carl Denny. All had bright minds.

This was the high school class of 1937 which sent most of its boys to fight on foreign fields and later to become part of the Greatest Generation.

We were home after our first year in college, different colleges. We had seen a couple of former co-ed schoolmates at a ball game the night before. Gene wanted to follow up. He was interested.

"Let's drive to Wild Goose Creek tonight," he said.

"Just pop in on them without warning? They've probably got dates.

"They're probably just like us," he said. "No dates. Let's pop in on them."

We did. And they didn't. Have dates, that is. But the drive home was more memorable than the dates.

The heater in Gene's car went out, and the windshield glazed over. I tried to scrape clear a spot, but our breathing was faster than my scraping. When we arrived home, frost coated Gene's hair. He was gray headed.

"I know how you're going to look fifty years from now," I told him as he tried to comb the ice from his hair.

But I didn't. He never made it.

'Twas an unusual class, maybe no more talented than earlier classes or subsequent classes or other high school classes, but enhanced in my mind because it was my class.

Not only was my memory activated, my thoughts also turned to the mechanics of memory -- the search engine that digs into stored lore usually lying dormant.

Lyricist Holt Harvill wrote of "foolish things" which "remind me of you," including "a cigarette with lipstick traces and an airline ticket to romantic places." In "Memories" from the play *Cats*, midnight, lamplight and withered leaves free imprisoned memories. Bob Hope's memory was stirred by "candlelight and wine, castles on the Rhine...."

Most memories appear to be activated by sounds and scenes. Not so for our son Jim whose memory deposits are awakened by aromas, even odors. Writes Jim:

"I don't need Jules Verne's invention to trek through time. All I need is a warm summer evening with heat rising through the last rays of the sun while I'm traveling. It's funny how that time of day and the smells that seem to be more prominent in still air provide recollection transportation.

"The simple act of taking kitchen waste to the compost heap can remind me of slopping the hogs at MaMa's. Or, the evening smell of freshly mowed grass can remind me of watermelon served at Fourth of July picnics for Castle Heights summer school students."

Even an unpleasant smell opened a memory of his Castle Heights wrestling team. Said he: "Body odor can remind me of wrestling Buzzy Fryer in our unwashed sweat suits." He has a point.

Each time I smell skunk odor, I am reminded of our one-room school near Buffalo Valley and the wood burning stove which freed the polecat scent trapped in our overalls.

A Voice From the Past set in motion a memory search engine. Dean Martin, in a popular song of yesteryear; sang of building blocks of memory -- often trivial events. Sang he: Memories are made of this.

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