

My Father's America

HIST 380

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My father was born in 1959. During his young life, he lived in Wisconsin, first in Madison then Milwaukee. In his teens, he moved to a Chicago suburb. After college in Rhode Island, he first worked in California, where he found and married my mother, before moving to Aurora, Illinois. I was born in 1993, my sister in 1995. He is the second of four children, and he is the man I interviewed for my oral history project.

Walking backwards through his history, my father is the son of two Catholic, somewhat recently immigrant families. His mother is 100% Irish Catholic (last name McKenna) and attended the University of Wisconsin, Madison for what was essentially a Mrs. degree. My grandfather was the son of first generation Italian immigrants. His father was a farmer in Italy, and became a farmer in Connecticut. My grandfather accomplished the American Dream though, and attended first Brown University, then University of Wisconsin, Madison for a PhD in Psychology.

My father was born nearer to the start of my grandfather's career, at a time when the family was the poorest. He grew up while my grandfather was building his career, and by my father's adulthood, my grandfather had a successful, lucrative Industrial Organization consulting business. He had two loves as a teen and a young adult: baseball and basketball. My father is a 6'7 $\frac{1}{2}$ " lefty with a build similar to my own. Unlike me, however, he was dominant as both a pitcher and a basketball player. He eventually went to Brown University (like his father) to play basketball.

Although my grandfather did not start out his family life making much money, my father's (and my, I suppose) family was not the "Workingman's Wife" style profiled in Rainwater. My grandparents moved several times as my father grew up, leaving for better neighborhoods for my father and his siblings and better opportunities for my grandfather. It was expected that the male children would

go to college, my uncle was in fact hammered into being a “college boy,” as he took something like 6 years and 5 colleges to get his bachelor’s.

My aunts had a different expectation, the eldest daughter (born 1957), was the wild one, the one caught up in the anti-establishment zeitgeist of the 70’s. She did not attend college straight out of high school, instead she fell in with the “wrong type” and had a fiery falling-out with her conservative father. Although she eventually went on to nursing school, she still smokes as a byproduct of that time. The other daughter, the youngest child, was not even expected to go to college. She married young and has been a suburban housewife her entire young life.

1 Earliest Memories: 1960’s

1.1 ‘Everyone was shaken’

My father’s first memory, as far as American History is concerned, is the shooting of JFK. My four year old father was shopping for new winter boots in Madison, with his mother and older sister. An announcement came over the loudspeakers, and everyone hustled over to the bank of TVs. My father heard from ‘what was assuredly Walter Cronkite’ that the president had been shot, and his mother brought them back outside to the car. On the car’s radio, they heard that the president had been killed. My grandmother cried at the news, to which my father says ‘I rarely saw my mother cry.’

1.2 Polio and Air Raid Drills

My father has twin stories as artifacts of his elementary years. He remembers getting polio shots (and sugar cubes) in school, and he remembers air raid drills. I grew up with neither.

1.3 Russian in the Water

As my grandfather started gaining income, the family moved to a suburb near Milwaukee called Shorewood. There was a public beach that my young father and his neighborhood friends would play at when they weren’t playing baseball. One day at Atwater Beach, my father and his friends saw a man walking out of the water, then the lifeguards running towards the man. The man was a Soviet defector, a stowaway who had jumped ship somewhere in the lake. He was grabbed by the lifeguards, and was yelling in Russian and struggling. The life guards handcuffed him to a pole in the shower area, and my dad got a look at him without the mask. He had not shaved on his trip, so he was bearded and foreign. My father says ‘He was just this scary Russian guy.’

What's interesting is that my father was not scared of Russians, generally. He was too young for McCarthy's Red Scare, and he certainly doesn't have any ill will to Russians today. As he relayed the story to me, he made it clear that the novelty of the man in the water was what caused him to remember the incident, not the Cold War overtones. Surprisingly, this event happened in the mid to late '60s, only a few years after the missile crisis. A much stronger fear was the threat the Vietnam War posed to my father. My father was 16 years old when Saigon fell, and up until that point was very concerned about being drafted into the conflict.

1.4 'They found his head in a coconut tree'

In about the fifth grade, my grandfather and his family moved down to the Chicago area, and my grandfather opened up his consulting agency in Chicago. One day, my father's teacher came into the class and said "Well, I've got to talk to you about Mark. Mark's not going to be here for awhile, and when he comes back you have to be nice to him, he's had a tragedy." The tragedy was that his brother had been killed in Vietnam. This was the first person my father had heard of who died in Vietnam. When Mark came back the next week, my father remembers sitting around with other students, pelting Mark with questions. Mark was a little bit uncomfortable with talking, but he said "My brother got blew up, by a bomb, and they found his head in a coconut tree." Which was "just incredibly disturbing."

1.5 'Completely Strange'

My grandfather was the first Registrar of University of Wisconsin - Madison. One warm day in the summer of 1967 (the "Summer of Love"), my grandfather built a kite to fly with my father. They went out to campus, and flew the kite on the campus lawn. My grandfather was talking to some people on the lawn, and my father remembers seeing hippies, kids with long hair, walking around this green. My dad says "that was completely strange, because my dad was pretty much east coast straight-laced."

My father was not as 'straight-laced' as his father, but he was by no means a counter-culture revolutionary. He makes no mention of the Civil Rights struggle, except for the assassination of MLK. When he saw that I grew out my hair to a floppy mane and was sporting an unkempt beard, his response was a chuckle and note that when he was in college, kids would come home looking like I do now and freak out their parents. He remembers growing out his hair into a "bushy afro" and how much his mother fussed about that small diversion from the All-American look he had before college.

1.6 Assassination of MLK

When Martin Luther King was assassinated, the south part of Milwaukee rioted. My father remembers when the Governor imposed martial law when “nobody could drive on the streets, there were no commercial airplanes, all you saw were troop trucks going down. I remember at the front of our house, because we were on a little bit of a hill and looking south. You could see the smoke coming from the areas that were rioting.”

1.7 Assassination of RFK

My father remembers during the 1968 elections, debating with his friends about the candidates. Being a son of Catholic parents, and because of the assassination of his brother, RFK was the most interesting candidate for my father. My father felt RFK was “viewed as the wounded younger brother who’s emerged from his quiet.” When RFK was shot, my father heard the news on the TV during his dinner. My father was really “interested and disturbed,” so he was the first one up the next morning to turn on his mother’s black and white TV in the kitchen to hear the news that RFK had died. My father says “At that point forward, the country basically blew up. John Kennedy was gone, King was gone, and now RFK was gone. To this day I believe that Kennedy would have been elected, and that this country would have been on a *much* different trajectory, if he had made it.”

2 1970’s

2.1 ‘Watergate started off as a really small story that just wouldn’t go away’

“Everyday we put the news on, the 6 o’clock news on, and there was *another* unbelievable story coming out of Washington about it. I’m watching the television with my dad, and that’s when Dick Nixon had his famous ‘I’m not a crook’ speech, and my dad used the word ‘paranoid.’ To quote him: ‘Oh my god, he is *absolutely* paranoid!’ And I never knew what ‘paranoid’ meant, until that day.”

2.2 A decade of malaise

Nixon ended up leaving office just right before he was impeached, “almost making the *country* come to a standstill.” Coupled with the first oil embargo and Vietnam falling apart, “this set up the 70’s for what I consider the decade of malaise in the country. People were disgusted with the government, their great heroes had been killed, needlessly. A generation of young people turned their back on the establishment, completely changed the mores of the country, to the extent that I think it got silly, to a large degree. The Greatest Generation’s children went off to college, and basically thumbed their nose at their parents, and thumbed their nose at the establishment. What happened in the 70’s was, it

was the first post-World War II recession where the post-WWII manufacturing economy started unraveling.” The big change was who this recession started affecting: “Up to that point, American businesses, you’d go there out of the military, or college, or training, then you’d work up, get promoted after five years, work for another five years, get promoted. You really didn’t lose your job, and you could basically have a career for 40 years and have a pension and retire reasonably well. What happened was the economics collapsed, contracted. That was the first time they started launching middle career, mostly male, virtually all male, out of the workforce, because they couldn’t afford to keep them anymore, because they were, you know, *reasonably* unproductive. They weren’t very productive, and they were too expensive, and they got them out of the workplace.”

“The 70’s, post Nixon, post fall of Saigon, just was a decade of Malaise and markets weren’t doing well, unemployment wasn’t good, inflation started spiraling out of control.”

2.3 Jimmy Carter

My dad was a junior in high school when Carter was elected. “He gets to Washington, almost immediately, he’s inept.” My father remembers telling his parents two things: “If the Vietnam War is still going on, I’m going to Canada.” and “If Jimmie Carter gets in, I’m moving to Canada, too.” Well, he never moved to Canada! Still, my father says Carter was “arguably the smartest man ever to occupy the White House, however he was completely politically inept.”

2.4 Iran Hostage Crisis and Playboys in the Physical Plant

During my father’s summers at Brown, he worked at the Physical Plant, preparing the buildings for the next school year. It was mostly janitorial or maintenance work, carrying tables or polishing floors. About a week into the job, my father’s boss, the head of the Physical Plant, comes up to him and says: “listen, I’ve got a guy that’s coming in here to work a summer job, he’s Iranian and his older sister goes to school here. He doesn’t speak a lick of English!” So my father had all sorts of adventures with Nasser, mostly centered around the amusing fact that Nasser barely knew any English. One of the stories was when they found a stack of Playboys at the bottom of a desk on campus. Nasser was blown away by the *breadth* of the material contained in those magazines.

Nasser’s father had been a high ranking minister in the Shaw’s regime. When the Shaw fell, there was a bounty on his head and he had to flee into the underground. His family fled separately and made it to the US a year before the father managed to make it, and months before they had heard even if he was alive. Through my father and Nasser’s work relationship, he got invited over to the family apartment, for dinner with the family. He still remembers one word from his time there, the word for “table”.

This was all before the hostage crisis. Afterwards, my father remembers: “the hostage crisis occurred, and unfortunately I ran into him, and what happened was, the sentiment of people, you can go back to World War II to the Japanese Americans, the sentiment is you’re Japanese descent and you must be one of them... It was just palatable that he endured a lot of people looking at him and not being too nice to him and his family.”

3 1980’s: Reagan

My father says: “Reagan gets elected and almost instantaneously there was a change in the culture of the country.” “In came Reagan, he was actually great for the country because the country was kind of stuck in neutral, and he brought back a sense of pride to the country.” The interesting byproduct for my father though was the attire. He says: “You could see in the span of 18 months, kids kind of had hair like yours [i.e. unkempt, bushy and in every way non-professional], long beards, long hair, it went from post hippie to absolute yuppie-ness. Izods. And that became cool. You wouldn’t be caught dead wearing an Izod or boat shoes or anything that represented the elite class in the 70’s. All of a sudden that was fashionable.” “The other thing that happened with Reagan, all the old hippies that now were in their mid 30’s, all of a sudden they realized ‘oh yeah, well I’ve spent a decade being stoned, and oh, I went to U Michigan and I actually got my B.S. in Political Science, I guess I’ll take the bar exam, I guess I’ll go to law school, I guess it is cool to make a lot of money.’ So all those hippies that were against everything in the 60s and the early 70s all became the money grubbing, greedy baby boomers we so endear now.”

3.1 The NBA as a miniature US

My father enjoys basketball. He is not a ‘fanatic’ about it, but he follows the sport, played it in college and is interested in the history. It is his opinion that during the 70’s and 80’s the NBA followed the same sort of road as the country as a whole. He says in the 70’s the NBA “wasn’t doing well, financially, it didn’t have that much interest, the teams didn’t play well together, it was just basically a failing league. Then along came Magic Johnson and Larry Bird. They were from widely different background, with a different level of athleticism and style of play, but they were essentially the same player because it was all about the team first. They put themselves second to their team and they made their teammates better. It now became cool to not only be the star, but as the star you wanted to make your teammates better and win, because being a star on a losing team didn’t matter anymore.”

4 1990’s: Arkansas is Bush Country

The story my father has from the 90’s is a story about a business trip down to Little Rock, Arkansas in 1992. Speaking about the trip, my father said, “I

fly in, I take a cab to my meeting location, and as I'm leaving the Little Rock Airport, and this is during the '92 election, there's a big banner on a chain link fence as you leave. It says 'Arkansas is Bush Country.' At that time, of course, Bill Clinton was the governor of Arkansas." After the meeting, my father was talking to one of the men at the meeting and offered to drive my father home. On the way back, my father says "Tommy, you know, the strangest thing I saw leaving the airport, this big banner that said 'Arkansas is Bush country'" Tommy pauses and replies "You all Yankees have no idea what you're going to do, you're going to vote that man in as the next president of the United States and it's going to be the worst thing that's happened. You've got to understand that we fired him, twice and that he's lied to us, many times. What y'all are gonna find out is that he's just a pathological womanizer." My father remembers being speechless.