A Daily Adventure: A School Boy Walks Home through Memories 30 years Ago

It was 1978 and I was a 5th grade student at Ruby S. Thomas. Thomas elementary school was only a mile from our apartment at Mark Twain. But in that short mile was an adventure every day waiting for a 10-year old latch key kid making his way home each afternoon. Both Mark Twain Apartments and Ruby S. Thomas are still there but most everything between has changed albeit some rare exceptions. Tucked into the neighborhood behind the Boulevard Mall, Thomas was where I first excelled having returned from overseas as a military brat.

I remember many of my classmates, even my teachers, Ms Johnson, Ms Arkell, Ms Bozarth, my principal, a larger-than-life figure, Kirk L. Adams Sr. And the layout of the playground, especially the monkey bars and jungle gym in the sandbox. I don’t remember the portable classrooms that sit there today. And it was those math fact sheets that challenged me and where I focused my academic skills – 70 addition ‘facts’ in 56 seconds! During lunch, I collected school lunch pretzel sticks and re-sold them a dime apiece on the playground. But it was the journey home that left me with my most unforgettable memories of people and places.

As the bell rang out each afternoon and we ran outside, noisily and full of unfounded enthusiasm, we quickly left the school grounds. It was a few hundred yards first down the street, then
up the road through the massive Oleanders to the back of the Boulevard Mall. Today, it is blocked and filled with dirt to extend the mall parking lot even further. It was the first of three areas to navigate in my path home, either it was the Boulevard Mall, Boulevard Market area or Maryland Square, some days, it was even two.

My first decision homeward was whether to go through the Boulevard Mall, specifically what was Broadway Southwest. It’s where Macys now sits minus the expansions over the years like Dillard’s and the second mall corridor. And only then through the backside entrance next to what was Freeds Bakery which now thrives a few short miles away. The pastries smelled delicious but it was the pet store directly across from it that always peaked my interest. Woolworth’s lunch counter, Orange Julius and the humidor at the old Tinder Box Cigar shop breathed enticing aromas down the single mall corridor each afternoon. Some of that was offset by the JC Penney automotive center, long since closed, as was the Sears automotive center years later. I usually exited near The Vineyard, no longer in operation but where my dad would take the family to celebrate important occasions like our birthdays.

But each day it was the silver-haired guard whose name I never knew that scooted the kids out, everybody except for me it seemed, that dictated my routes. At age 10, I didn’t realize that some children pilfered but he knew, and he always did his job professionally. Sometimes I wondered through Broadway Southwest on the escalator, innocently intimidated passing the
women’s lingerie on the second floor and then onto the third floor and televisions. But there were no toys there like at the bottom floor of Woolworths, no longer a department store nor is there a bottom floor, or the basement of Sears, now filled with everything but toys, or better yet, Toy Paradise which lay in one of the other directions home.

Nestled between the Boulevard Market, where my dad would buy the square pizza at the deli for us on payday, and the Parkway Theatres, Toy Paradise was aptly named with all of the toys a boy could dream of: models, mechanized die-cast metal tanks, Cox fly-by-wire planes, remote controlled cars! Star Wars had just come out at the Parkway Theatres, where Marshals and Circuit City now stand. I saw it 12 ½ times. I rarely ventured 500 feet south to the Mann Boulevard Theatres next to the Flamingo Wash channel which later evolved into a BookStar and much later, razed, and now yet another strip mall anchored by Jason’s Deli.

The vast, open desert field – at least in the eyes of a 10 year old - bordered between the Parkway, Twain and the apartments still hadn’t been developed into the Mervyns-Service Merchandise-Vons strip yet. It has evolved into its latest incarnation as Vons and Molasky Neighborhood Park. And so it didn’t offer any grand adventure walking home like some of the other paths except for the occasional spotting of a lizard.
Today, Maryland Square Shopping Center doesn’t exist; it’s an elementary school adjacent to several empty shells of former buildings, shops, and that old marquis. In 1978, it was the centerpiece of much of my world. I would cross over from the Boulevard Mall, sometimes enter the 7-Eleven, one of the few things still remaining, slip behind USS Fish and Chips, now a taco shop, and run through a 100-foot back alley filled with cooking oil and debris. First though was avoiding the drive thru traffic from the bank that once existed. Then exiting right next to the Baskin Robbins - Jamoca was my favorite courtesy teaspoon sample - and making my way to Kens Coins and Shelleys Stamps as it was still on the Southern side of the Square. One of the two would glance through the window and buzz me in the security door. I’d save up to buy old ‘wheat’ pennies and ‘steel’ nickels from Ken. At three minutes a day, he must have spent hours that year teaching a kid about coin collecting. I couldn’t even pronounce numismatics properly for at least another decade.

Crossing over and walking up the Northern side of the Square through all the parked cars – the Novas, Monte Carlos, AMC Pacers, and the bean stalk light poles, there was Al Phillips the Cleaners but more tempting was the pastry shop at the tail end of the concrete walkway. The ladies working there would let me buy donuts from the bottom, far side of the display case for pennies, always letting me have it for less – whatever I had in my hand was good enough it seemed.
But it was WonderWorld where I most frequented, where I played and once tilted the pinball machine near the café counter that caught the attention of a store manager. Passing by the bins of two dollar cloth sneakers my mom would buy me and with a fenced in liquor store within the store, I searched the toy section looking for plastic ‘army men’, 100-count, in plastic netting, and the latest board games. When I was done there, I would cut through the inside gate to the adjoining Smith’s grocery store where the change lady Gerri worked. She knew my divorcing parents. She’d let me sift through the coin sorting machine as it turned every so often, looking for old coins just so long as I sat on the stool on the far side from the single row of slot machines.

And over the months and year, my path took me across what used to be Oshmans Sports which is now a state unemployment office, and Stop N’ Go, which is now a fenced in Boys and Girls Club, even the Untouchable Sub Shop, now a small grocery mart, where a few years later I first played Space Invaders. In yet another variation, it was McDonald’s, now rebuilt and re-positioned 50 feet to the North in what used to be the old parking lot, and across from the old Big Boys restaurant, now IHOP, which offered – and I collected and brought home – 72 of those yellow, promotional ‘ring things.’

Rosie the Crossing Guard signaled the end of my journey as I waited to cross under her safety. I only knew her as Rosie. But she was always there on Twain Avenue, past the old veterinarian’s office, and the Big and Tall clothes store
display, both gone as well, and past what was called Roman Villas but now Park View apartments. I only had to pass by the abandoned, partially built apartment complex on Twain, now also a strip mall named Twain-Swenson, opposite of the formerly named Apple apartments, now renamed as Pinewood. Across the street, what was another open field and where I often shot my Crossman BB gun, yet another strip mall, Twain Center.

At the end of the afternoons near hour long-adventure was an empty apartment and a television with five channels. As the afternoon movie hosted by Gus Guiffre ended on Channel 5, Ultraman, Speed Racer and Get Smart all waited for me at home. When those ended, there were Lego’s.

A lot has changed. I miss the people, the places, and my daily adventure home when I was only 10.