

Next in Line - Winter 1940

If you sat quietly looking at magazines in Clarence's Barber Shop on a Saturday morning and didn't make a nuisance of yourself, you could pick up a nickel or a dime by just being there. Clarence didn't like young kids to get haircuts on Saturdays because it was the only day off for many in town, and the men usually came into the barber shop on a weekend.

I really didn't need a haircut, but I sat in one of the six chairs lined up against the wall. There was a small oak table dividing the chairs on which my favorite magazines were stacked – Life, Look, Field and Stream, and the pink tabloid, the Police Gazette, which described the tales of lurid crime across the country.

The barber shop was a brightly painted room with a waxed linoleum rug in black and white squares, two long store front windows looking out on Main Street, and a wide mirror that stretched across the wall in front of the two cushioned barber chairs.

There were two customers in the shop, one in the chair getting a trim, and the other reading The Police Gazette. After the two got their haircuts, I was next in line. After a while another customer walked in, looked at me sitting there, and with a disappointed look on his face said to Clarence, "How long do I have to wait?" It was Primo Viti, a partner in the Old Town Tavern.

"Five minutes for Charlie in the chair and fifteen minutes for the kid waiting next in line."

Primo was always in a hurry. "I've got to be in Hartford in an hour for an important meeting. Say, kid, here's a nickel for your place in line."

I sat there looking a bit disappointed also, but it was all part of the game. I didn't say a word and continued looking at the pictures in Life magazine.

"I'll make it a dime," said Primo.

"O.K." I said, hoping that I didn't sound too anxious.

It worked every time. I took the dime next door to the Avon Drugstore to buy some candy. Everyone was happy.

A half hour later I was back in the barber shop sitting and waiting in line again. This time I went in to finish reading the article in Field and Stream about trout fishing in Vermont. I was there also to warm up because it was so cold outdoors. There was a kerosene heater in the middle of the room that provided warmth, and also heated the water for those who wanted a shave or a hot facial treatment. I remember the comfort of that room in the cold winter months.

This time I waited my turn, and when no offers turned up, I simply said to Clarence, "I've got to be home for lunch. I'll come back another time."

That Saturday was December 2nd, my eleventh birthday. The weather was very cold and the winter winds were biting. There wasn't much to do in the bitter cold, and even ice skating was out because of the wind, so I tried the barber shop one more time.

This time I sat and listened to all the old-timers swapping stories in the barber shop. Occasionally I heard a few cuss words that I never heard before, but usually the men tempered their conversations to the fact that a young kid was sitting there.

Clarence was complaining to John O'Neill, the owner of the garage next door, while he was cutting his hair, "Would you please tell your brother-in-law not to buy any more shaving brushes from me in the future?"

"Why?" asked John.

"He will order a shaving brush from me, pay for it, and then come in a week later to return it and demand his money back. He does it every time."

"What's wrong with the brushes?" asked Mr. O'Neill.

"Nothing," said Clarence. "Look at this one he returned last week. Now I'm stuck with it. I can't return it to the wholesaler. I'll have to use it in my shop."

John O'Neill examined the brush, a fancy one with a yellow handle. He compared it with a standard brush that Clarence used.

"Here's the problem." John said. "The hairs on this brush are about one inch shorter than the standard barber shop brush."

Now John E. Leonard, who was married to O'Neill's sister Kathleen, the school teacher, was the best maker of trout flies in Hartford County. Could it be that John O'Neill just gave Clarence the clue as to the reason why John Leonard returned all those shaving brushes?

Clarence said, "He must be cutting the brown and gray hairs off my brushes to use them in tying his trout flies."

Finally, Clarence the barber caught up with the machinations of Avon's expert fly fisherman. Later, Mr. Leonard tried the same thing with "Basi" the barber, who took over Clarence's business – but "Basi" had been warned about this scheme.

I sat there in the barber shop, amused by all the stories that were tossed about, until it was my turn to get a haircut. This time I got a trim to my "butch haircut" and it didn't cost me a penny. As a matter of fact, Clarence gave me a dime and sent me home.

I got all my haircuts free. I was the only kid in town who could spend his idle moments "sitting next in line" at the barber shop on a Saturday in December.

You see, Clarence the barber was not only my friend and barber, he was also my godfather.