

Unlikely Influences...

I remember Old Man McFadden. We used to steal berries from his berry patch years ago when I was a kid. It was summertime, and we were that mixture of hopeful innocence and devilish prankster that describes most kids our age during those never-ending warm days.

He lived in a ramshackle house on leftover farmland that was a remnant of a time before the housing developments encroached upon rural New England. Most such farms were small scale operations that required a large dose of stubborn Yankee resolve to eke anything out of the rugged, rocky soil. McFadden's berry patches were his only connection to the ancient tradition of bringing forth the land's goodness, and they weren't much to speak of.

We would be sitting around contemplating the mysteries of the universe from within the framework of our eleven-year-old perspective, when someone would suggest that a snack of fresh blueberries and raspberries would be appropriate right about then. In an instant we were transformed into warriors with a mission.

McFadden had implemented a highly sophisticated early warning system around his berry patch consisting of tin cans strung on cotton cord and "hidden" among the perimeter bushes. He also had an old blue tick hound named Blue who hung out on the broken down back porch and slept.

We would step over the early warning string and pluck the berries till our heart's content, giggling from the thrill of our impending detection. When we had stuffed our mouths and pockets full of booty, we were ready for the dramatic climax to our stealthy mission. We'd step outside the string, note our escape route, then grab the string and shake it violently. The tin cans flopped and rattled around, creating a small racket which was reinforced by our generally unintelligible screams and shouts, fueled by youthful adrenaline and the giddy rush that comes from dancing on the edge of certain doom.

McFadden would come storming out of the house, shouting and threatening while old Blue rose up on his front paws, bellowing like Armageddon, with absolutely no idea of what was going on. We would continue shaking the string right up to the heady moment when you figured you had challenged the dark forces as much as you dared. At that point, we'd charge through the woods as only eleven year olds can, darting and weaving around trees and bushes, confident that no adult could catch us.

Back within the safety of our suburban existence, we would collapse under a favorite tree, laughing until we were exhausted, most of the berries crushed into goo in our jean pockets (our mothers, I'm sure, loved that). Mission accomplished, all present and accounted for and just in time for dinner.

McFadden lived out his final few years with a sister somewhere upstate. His meager patch of earth was eventually bulldozed into yet another development for the commuting masses. A small piece of childhood memory went with it. McFadden didn't realize it at the time, but he was to become a part of those early experiences you carry with you for your whole life the ones that, for better or worse, help shape you into the adult you eventually become.

Here's to you, Old Man McFadden...