

Stockton Chronicles

“How did I get myself into this?!” I thought, as I ran away from the grove and into the woods. It was every man for himself. My friends Joseph and Thomas were nowhere to be seen. A plump local cop was in hot pursuit. Over glacial rocks and around trees, I scrambled to find a path where there was none.

What seemed like only seconds ago, Joseph was using a hammer to beat down the door of the local outdoorsman’s club. Thomas was under the pavilion taking a dump on a picnic table. I lamely broke a reflector on a driveway marker. Surely, I had no experience in the arts of door bashing or table crapping.

What was our motivation? Hanging out, trying to be cool. As usual, we were bored. This was Stockton #7, a village outside of Hazleton, Pennsylvania. In the heyday of coal mining, before strip mining took over, there were several villages named “Stockton,” and they were numbered to tell them apart. The villages used to be home to coal miners and their families who lived in company-run, cookie-cutter homes with few accommodations.

After moving around Pennsylvania for several years, my family settled into my aunt’s old four-room house at the very east end of the village. We lived there for eight years from the time I started second grade to when I started high school. After renting for a while, we bought it to renovate and build on.

As late as 1982, modernization was still not fully present. We had a black and white TV with VHF/UHF, but there was no cable for years. We had running water, but it wasn’t hot. We boiled water on a coal stove, which also served as central heating. It

could be described as “central” only because it sat in the center of the kitchen. There were four rooms and a dungeon-like cellar with a dirt floor, exposed foundation, and a small moat of water running around the edge of the cellar floor. Each room, including the cellar, had one lighting outlet in the ceiling or just inside the doorway. Light bulbs cast their yellowish tint on everything, making the place seem darker rather than brighter.

Our renovations would include installing a bathroom tub, shower and sink – three things that didn’t exist for several years – and breaking through the mint-green plaster wall in my bedroom to create the attic stairway, and eventually an attic. The house was cheap and really didn’t have much to offer except seclusion and quiet (two things I’ve been looking for ever since).

Stockton was surrounded by young forest, silt banks and a network of dirt roads. At the west end of Stockton was a grove. Cut out of the surrounding woods, the grove contained a small pavilion, office building and field. The grove was used by local hunters and outdoorsman, and for company picnics. You wouldn’t even know the place was there unless you were told about it. The single access road was recessed in the woods in such a way that you couldn’t see it from the main road.

Joseph and Thomas were headed toward the grove for some mischief, and I agreed to tag along. The cop got a decent look at us, and I feared the worst.

As I ducked behind some bushes, I recalled some of my prior adventures with Joseph and Thomas, and I couldn’t believe it had come to this. To avoid being spotted by the local traffic on the main road, I used the dirt utility road that ran behind the houses on the north side of the village. As I passed some junk cars, I recalled one of my earlier adventures.

Ron Hupczy Jr., a local auto mechanic and road-paving contractor, lived across the street from us. In the beginning, he had only a few working vehicles filling his driveway and clogging part of the dirt road next to his house. The Hupczy brothers purchased the other side of our half-double, began renovating, and moved more cars and trucks into the yard next door. What started as a few trucks turned into a fleet of cars, utility vehicles, mechanical gadgets and trailers strewn across the quarter-acre lawn in various states of disrepair. It was as if the Jawas from *Star Wars* moved in. The only thing missing was a Sand Crawler and a few R2 units for color.

The end result was a weed-laden mini junkyard. Besides being an eyesore, the junkyard harbored all kinds of pests. Mice, snakes, rabbits, squirrels, birds and various stinging insects all made their homes in the nooks and crannies of the dilapidated vehicles. The grass would grow up around everything, and would only be cut once or twice a summer. The neighbors rarely, if ever, complained because this was an accepted practice in small coal towns all over the region, but to me, the Hupczy's yard was the worst of all.

On one particularly boring late afternoon, my friends Joseph and Thomas – two of my total of perhaps five friends – came to my place and we tried to think of something to do with ourselves. Joseph and Thomas came from a fairly well to do family. Their dad worked a good job during the day, and drove a nice new red pickup that he parked in the garage that he built. Their mother was a secretary and a model housewife. Joseph and Thomas had an admirable *Star Wars* figure collection, and just about anything else they

wanted. But I guess even their lifestyle got boring after a while. We didn't have much to do in those days. Riding bikes got old, and video games were in their infancy (remember Pong?)

We gathered a pile of apples from the large tree in my yard, along with some rocks, sticks, pinecones and spray paint cans. As nightfall approached, we eyed up the vehicles in the junkyard, and made our plan of attack.

The apples, pinecones and other debris were dropped into the gas tanks of several abandoned Ryder-type trucks. Then we washed it down with some water. Whether the vehicles would ever be driven again was anyone's guess, but after the job we pulled, I highly doubt it. The spray paint peppered the canvas of delivery vans and cargo vans.

There was no reasoning behind the activity. While our neighbors certainly were not the best landscapers, they didn't do anything to harm me. I guess it was a thrill. Other than boredom and stupidity, I have no defense.

A few days later, my father and I were swimming in Ron Hupczy's newly constructed aboveground pool. Ron was talking to my father and I remember being very antsy about what they might be discussing. Had they found me out? Had someone ratted on us?

As I dried myself off and started for home, Ron and my dad approached me.

"Do you know anything about some vandalism over there?" They asked, pointing towards the junkyard.

"No." I answered. It would be one of the first significant and memorable lies I would carry with me through life. They probably knew better, but they didn't push the

issue. For all intents and purposes I was off the hook, and so were the other boys involved in the incident.

But they would find out about the grove, I was sure. It was so obvious, and besides... we were being *chased*. We were never *chased* before! Everything else was *peanuts* compared to this.

Running around the back of our yard, I slowed down and tried to control my breathing to appear normal. I glanced out the corner of my eye at the now abandoned and rusted burn barrel next door. Yeah, the grove was pretty serious, but they never found out about the bullets.

I know very little about guns. They may have been handgun bullets. At any rate, I pilfered them from my step-grandfather, whom we called Pap-pap. Pap-pap lived at the top of the hill in the middle of the village with my grandmother. He was a hunter and a packrat. He would leave dangerous items and substances out in plain view for any young teenager (like me) to find and get into trouble with. This included whiskey, power tools, and bullets. Lots of bullets of different shapes and sizes all stacked in honeycomb-like cases on the porch. Luckily, the guns themselves were kept elsewhere.

Over a period of time I acquired a handful of small bullets, merely out of curiosity and some kleptomaniacal urge to *have* them... to touch their coldness and hardness. They were my brass jewels of deadly treasure. I had enough to get me in trouble if Pap-pap ever found them, but he never seemed to notice as I took two one day, three the next, gradually building my stockpile.

Of course, I eventually wised up and knew I had to get rid of them, but the question was, how? I couldn't just throw them away. That would be a waste. I couldn't just take them back and risk being found out. Even if I returned them with the same secrecy that I stole them, that choice would have been too smart. No, I had a better idea.

During the summer, Old Man Hupczy, father of Ron, would burn scrap wood in a large metal barrel. Everyone in our little town had a 55-gallon drum (aka a "burn barrel") in their backyard. Usually propped up on cinder blocks or bricks, burn barrels were part of the area culture, before air quality laws and before people proved (and then disproved) anything about ozone depletion. If you had paper waste, or anything else reasonably flammable, you simply burned it.

Old Man Hupczy's wood came from the renovations his son Ron was doing to the other side of our half-double. The material consisted mainly of old slats used as support for (usually) mint-green plaster walls. There were probably hundreds of those brown slats, all jagged and splintery. You had to handle them carefully or you would end up with a handful of splinters and stitches in your finger from a rusty nail like I did once..

My family also had a supply of slats from my father's own renovation attempts on our side of the house. So one Saturday afternoon during the summer of bullet stealing, my friends and I concocted a plan to create some fireworks and play a "prank" on old man Hupczy.

We gathered into the fort under my apple tree to set up our gag.

"Did you bring the masking tape?" someone asked.

"Yeah here it is," another answered.

"OK, now tape the bullets to slats like this," one of us said while twisting the tape around like spaghetti on a fork. Then came the test run.

"Can we put our wood in your pile?" we sheepishly asked the old man.

"Sure," he agreed, to our delight.

None of us had any idea what to expect. From the fort, we watched with anticipation and giggled as the old man cranked up the fire, and began to feed it with wood, including our test slat. Within moments of being placed in the barrel, the heat from the fire ignited the gunpowder inside the bullet. BAM! The noise was similar to the noise you hear from air pockets or gases, only louder. Success!

"Here's some more," I said, as I handed him a few more pieces of our wood. With each load of wood, we would impishly run back to my fort for cover. Whether the old man ever thought our behavior was strange, or whether the masking tape looked odd to him has always been a mystery. He continued to put the slats in the barrel without hesitation. Each time, our bullet-laden slats would snap, crackle and pop with their special surprise. Only once did the old man seem to think something was up. He looked into the fire with an expression on his face that said "That's odd..." and shook his head, probably attributing it to his hearing or imagination. For a finale, we prepared a couple slats with several bullets. BAM! POP! POW! It was the highlight of our day, and probably our summer.

Lucky for us, the bullets were not contained or directed in such a way as to create a projectile. We never got caught. No one was hurt. Of course, looking back, we were all very lucky. But at least I got rid of the bullets.

I walked into the house looking no different than I would have if I had spent the day playing in the woods. Dirty, hot and tired. But inside, I was squeamish and my mind was racing. I went right to my room.

Later that summer night, while I was watching *Doctor Who* re-runs, the phone rang. My mom answered, and immediately I knew something was up.

My mom got off the phone with a very concerned look on her face.

“Honey, do you know anything about some vandalism over at the grove?”

“Umm...” I stammered. There wasn’t much hesitation. I never have been a good liar, and at that point the incident at the grove was probably the worst thing I had ever been affiliated with. I was practically a gang member. Take my fingerprints now, and lock me up.

My mom explained it was Pap-pap on the phone. He knew just about everyone, including the cop that was chasing us. As it turns out, Thomas – whose father was home when the cop called – had confessed to his father at the risk of a beating. The officer had contacted Pap-pap, and together with Mr. Bugda, they were able to locate me.

Now it was just a matter of fessing up. Luckily, my dad was at work (he typically worked third shift) putting off the expected punishment. Mom explained that he would be very pissed if I didn’t admit my wrongdoing. So I told my mom what I knew.

I was forbidden from associating with Joseph and Thomas, and I was grounded for a short while. That meant I couldn’t ride my bike, something I loved to do. Since

Joseph and Thomas did the most damage, their parents were billed for most of the repairs, and my dad picked up the bill for the reflector. It couldn't have been more than ten bucks. The whole experience was chalked up to being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and from that point forward I would have perhaps three real friends instead of five.

For a while at least, I was more careful about the places I went and the people I associated with. I would find other ways to amuse myself. To this day, every time I see a junkyard, burn barrel or picnic table, I think of my youth.