

**“A Childhood Memoir”**

**Life Experience**

**Authored by**

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## A Childhood Memoir

Myself and my brother Gary Harrison were both raised by our grandparents Thomas and Evelyn Beck since the ages of 1 year and 1 month respectfully. We grew up in a small coal mining village known as Ralph in southwestern, Pennsylvania. My grandfather was a coal miner at Robena mine in Greene County, Pennsylvania and my grandmother was a stay at home mom. Back then it was customary for the wife to stay at home and care for the children. Because Gary and I were raised at such a young age we considered our grandparents mother and father.

My biological mother(Barbara) and father(Chard) separated when I was one year of age. Due to uncertainty surrounding the separation my mother asked my grandparents to care for me. My mother met another man(Donald) who became Gary's biological father. Due to unexplained uncertainty in their lives they asked our grandparents to care for Gary at the age of one month. Although Gary and I weren't biological brothers we considered each other brothers growing up.

Growing up in a small coal mining village taught me many lessons about life. A blue collar work ethic had been passed on from many a generation. I learned at a young age from my grandfather the importance of never missing or being late for work. This was a great value instilled in me that I have carried throughout my entire life. Back then if someone missed or was late for work they didn't have a job to come back to. Excuses of any kind weren't tolerated.

This blue collar work ethic was also taught to me by my grandmother. There were many chores to carry out on a daily basis. Cleaning the house, preparing meals, canning food for an upcoming winter, baking pies, making nut rolls, taking care of the finances, washing and drying clothes, and taking care of the coal stove to name just a few. Clothes were washed on the back porch with an old tub and wringer and dried on a clothesline either outside in the yard or inside the dining/living room. We heated our house with a coal stove located in the dining/living room. I learned how to keep the fire burning throughout the day and night as well as taking out the ashes that accumulated in the lower part of the stove. It wasn't uncommon to get up in the middle of a cold winter night to put more coal on the fire to keep warm.

Our coal was delivered by truck from an alley to the coal shed above our house. Our backyard leading up to the shed was about a 45 degree climb. During winter with snow and ice on the ground, coal buckets in each hand, falling and sliding down the slippery hill coal and all was the norm.

Picking wild berries, apples, cherries, and peaches was a tradition handed down for canning and baking those delicious pies. I would spend an entire day armed with large buckets in each hand picking the plentiful

blackberries for those wonderful pies. Most of the blackberry bushes were near and around slate dumps that were remnants of coal mined over the years. I can still to this very day see the look on my grandmother's face, eyes as big as peaches, when I returned home with both buckets full of blackberries.

Just up the road from our house was the village grocery store named DeCarlos. To run an errand for local families rewarded you with a quarter. That quarter could buy many goodies. A 16 ounce glass bottle of Pepsi cost 15 cents. A popsicle just 5 cents. How could one forget the small brown paper bag full of penny candy for a meager 5 to 10 cents. When there weren't any errands to run we would scour the woods along the road for old glass bottles to return to get those beloved sweets.

Sports became a big part of my life early on. Baseball, football, and basketball would become an outlet from the hard blue collar lifestyle. Just as working required to do one's best, so did playing sports. I would spend countless hours perfecting the craft of these three sports. When there weren't other kids to play with I would find ways to play by myself. I became very good at baseball and during a little league tryout with managers from all teams present I was the very first player picked. Unfortunately the league games took place in a town far away. I was heartbroken that I couldn't play because of an inability to get there.

I made it a point to know every professional baseball, football, and basketball player on every team. I recall listening and rooting for Pittsburgh Pirate baseball during radio broadcasts. Listening to the great Bob Prince announce play by play was a privilege. Hearing him say phrases such as "a bloop and a blast" hit to win a game or "a can of corn" to make a catch and end a game brought optimism and hope.

As a child there are hopes and dreams of playing professional sports someday. During my teenage years I committed myself to the game of basketball. I spent countless hours shooting, dribbling, and handling the basketball. We had a dirt basketball court to play on and I would come home every night with my shoes and ankles covered in dirt. In the winter with a foot of snow on the ground I would play perfecting my outside shot. I was determined to make something of myself. I carried a basketball with me all the time just as Pete Maravich did.

When high school rolled around I made the basketball team during my sophomore, junior, and senior years. We were the Uhlans from German Township High. During each of those three years I would either walk or hitchhike 6 miles home after practice 3 to 4 times a week. You don't have a choice when you live that distance from high school. My grandfather worked and my grandmother didn't drive. If you had the desire and blue collar work ethic this is what you had to do to succeed.

During my junior year our basketball team made it to the Western Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic League championship game in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. That was a big to do if you came from a small coal mining

village 60 miles away. We lost the game by a point on a last shot from the opposing team(Edgewood High School). The following year in 1974 we played the same team for the championship and this time came out victorious. To this very day our 1974 high school basketball team is the only team in the history of the school district to ever win a basketball championship. A very proud distinction indeed. Our team was honored in 2018(44 years later) by being inducted into the Fayette County Sports Hall of Fame in southwestern, Pennsylvania.

I would be remiss if I didn't talk about my dog growing up. His name was Stubby because of a short tail at birth. Stubby was everything to me and I was everything to him. Two peas in a pod. Every single morning Stubby would sit and wait at the bottom of the stairs for me to come down from sleeping. Everyday Stubby would sit on the steps at the front of our house waiting for me to come home from school. Stubby would sit and wait as I spent countless hours practicing basketball. He would sit on my chest and stomach as I lied down watching television. Stubby taught me the meaning of love. He was everything to me. One day as a senior in high school I came home and Stubby wasn't sitting on the steps waiting for me. He had been hit by a car and died. I was completely devastated. I can never forget that I wasn't able to say goodbye to Stubby. To this very day I have never had another dog. I hope I will see Stubby again someday. All I can do is hope.

Mischievous acts were a part of growing up. Halloween was a time for those neighborhood pranks. We would gather corn from cornfields that were used to feed animals such as cattle. It was called Indian corn. Bagfuls were collected and when Halloween night rolled around we would throw handfuls of this corn from the road in front of a house onto the neighbor's front porch. It would make such a loud noise.

Another neighborhood prank was to fill up a balloon with water and toss it from an elevated yard in front of a house onto the windshield of a car driving down the road. It didn't go over very well with some drivers. They would stop their car and run after us. We always got away because we knew all the safe passages.

When my brother and I were old enough our grandparents bought us a Honda 50 motorbike to ride and share. It was my turn to ride it one day and my brother wouldn't share it with me. He took off on the motorbike down the 45 degree backyard toward our house. I picked up a stone and being a good baseball player hit him in the back of the head from 30 yards away. Down he went hitting his head on the washtub hanging on the side of the house and inside he went crying. I got that motorbike back but of course got in trouble.

Christmastime each year was a very joyous occasion. Listening to all the Christmas songs on our 45 record player was wonderful. Sitting by my bedroom window for hours on Christmas Eve night hoping to see Santa and his sleigh fly through the sky brought hope of getting gifts on Christmas morning. One unforgettable Christmas morning was when my brother and I awakened to two brand new shiny purple Schwinn banana seat bicycles. Santa

sure was good to us.

I was the artistic one of our family and took great pride and joy in decorating the Christmas tree and house every year. Hanging the garland, silver icicles, many varieties of bulbs, and those colorful lights on the Christmas tree was such a treat. Decorating the staircase with stockings filled of little gifts was joyous as well. One can't forget adorning each window with those multicolored lights and of course setting out the manger scene under the tree.

A tradition every Christmas Eve was to set out cookies and milk for Santa. Awakening Christmas morning seeing the milk and cookies gone was proof that Santa had come to visit.

Sunday was a time for family. Back then only hospitals and select drug stores were open. There was no shopping as this was termed the Blue Law. Every Sunday would start with a drive in the country followed by Sunday dinner. We weren't wealthy so some dinners would consist of just bread and gravy. Grandma would break pieces of bread into a large bowl and top it with homemade gravy. Despite it being the sole entree it sure was a wonderful meal. Other favorite meals were fried green tomatoes and mush(fried cornmeal). Grandpa's brother Babe lived 6 miles away and often times would walk to our house to have Sunday dinner. Babe was such a gracious man to be around. He would always look dapper in his long overcoat and dress hat.

There were many favorite times growing up in our small coal mining village. Steve the milkman would deliver our bottled milk by truck once a week. Most of the time grandmother would order white milk but on special occasions we would get chocolate milk. Chocolate milk was such a treat. Another favorite time was hearing the ice cream truck(goodie man) coming. The music and bell was unmistakable. We would wait with great anticipation as the truck got closer. Just a nickel or dime in hand would buy that special treat. The nearest town to us called Republic was 6 miles away. Visiting Charlie's shoe store to pick out new shoes or having new soles put on our shoes was always a fun time. Charley would do such a great job. Visiting the Five and Dime and A&P grocery stores brought delight as well. I can still remember the aroma of that fresh ground Maxwell House coffee as Grandma poured it into the bag from the machine.

There weren't always favorite times growing up. Both our grandparents worked hard and when Saturday came around it was time to unwind. Once shopping was done it was time to visit a saloon or two for many hours. During these visits I would sit at a table at the end of the room and watch sports on TV. I would have a sports magazine with me to know all the players who were playing that day whether it was baseball, basketball, or football. I gained much knowledge doing this.

After the saloon visits were over it was time for our grandfather to drive us home. I recall my brother and I sitting in the backseat crying as our grandfather swerved over the road coming home. The suspense didn't end there.

Once we arrived home there was more in store. The parking area for our car was below our house and across the road. There was a tree at the end of the parking area where the ground sloped down approximately 60 degrees. When my grandfather had too much to drink he would use this tree as a safeguard from going over the slope. Sometimes he would miss the tree and the front of the car would go over the slope. There were quite a few times when a tow truck had to pull our car out. Our next door neighbor would say "Old Beck must have been drunk again". Embarrassment was part of growing up.

The least favorite time growing up for me was experience with my biological father Chard Harrison. I never really knew my father. He and my mother separated when I was 1 year old. My father had various run in's with law enforcement and served time in the penitentiary. One time he tried to rob a saloon and was shot in the neck by a detective who had been following him. My father was able to get away and walked up a mountain with the bullet lodged in his neck. He was a boxer in his younger days and a very tough individual to say the least. Due to my father's toughness and history with law enforcement more than one police car would be dispatched when trouble arose.

As a result of this affliction I grew up terrified of my father. I lived with the worry that my father would come and kidnap me. He would always want to come and see me but my grandparents wouldn't allow it. One day he came to our house when my grandfather was at work in the coal mine. I was about ten years of age at the time. He came into the house and tried to take me away. As my grandmother tried to stop him he punched her in the face with his bare fist and she fell to the ground. I was screaming and crying as he grabbed me into his arms. As he was going out the door with me in tow my brother hit him in the head with a glass bottle. This staggered my father and I was able to get loose and run away. It is truly amazing how fast one can run during a fight or flight response. I must of ran a mile in just 2 minutes. During this fight or flight response I had a bowel movement. I remember stopping for just a few seconds to let it out of my pants as I continued to run as fast as I could. After awhile I returned home and learned that my father had left. The police came and documented what had happened. My brother had rescued me from this terrifying event.

An indirect adverse experience I lived as a result of my father's troubled past was not getting playing time on the high school basketball team. Although I was the best shooter on the team I wasn't given playing time by the coach. This was a political gesture handed down from the athletic director to my basketball coach. Years prior my father attended the same high school. My father was a member of the high school track team and after having a disagreement with the track coach(later the athletic director) hit the coach and knocked him to the ground. My father was dismissed from the team. Unfortunately this came to haunt me later on. I remember walking down the hall in

school and having the athletic director say to me “Harrison, are you going to school here”. Every child growing up has hopes and dreams and to have them taken away is harmful and unfair. During a practice scrimmage with a higher class school I scored all 16 points for our team. I thought to myself after the performance I would surely get playing time during games. It wasn’t the case. Although I didn’t get to play much during our high school basketball team championship runs, I like to think that my ambition and drive at practice was a factor in our team winning a championship. It drove the other players to play better that made our team a champion.

Five days after graduating high school I enlisted in the U.S. Army during the Vietnam era. My upbringing and work ethic taught to me during the coal mine/steel mill era prepared me well for the military. My grandparents have since passed on. I will always be grateful that they were there for myself and my brother. I’m truly blessed.

Sincerely and with much gratitude.