

Small Town 4th of July



Flashback, if you can, to 1965.

John Glenn had circled the Earth in Friendship 7 but we had not yet made it to the moon.

The Beatles were in full swing and had appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show the year before.

Vietnam was being mentioned in the newspaper but we were not yet subjected to a daily listing of the casualties from the carnage in the jungles.

I'm living in small-town America, Appleton, Wisconsin, and I am 8 years old.

My brother, Paul, 15 months younger than me is 7.

My mother is taking us to the fireworks on the 4th of July.

My older sister Marie is probably in charge of taking care of my baby brother Billy who's likely fast asleep in his crib. My older brother Bob is a budding teenager, so he's probably off with his friends lighting snakes on the sidewalk, chasing around with sparklers or maybe he's with a neighbor family going to the same fireworks. The rest of our family kids are older and off doing, whatever.

I can distinctly remember a couple of years when my mom took me

and Paul to the fireworks; just us.

My mom must have really loved fireworks. Taking us to see them was an inconvenient ordeal of sorts and she could have easily just stayed home and relaxed.

Thanks, Mom, for helping us celebrate.

The fireworks took place at Pierce Park across town, so we had to drive to get there. We packed into a big, used Cadillac. We would find parking maybe a few blocks from the park, but it was getting dark, so maneuvering around all the traffic and the hordes of people who were heading to the fireworks must have been maddening for my mom. Hold hands, everybody.

She carried one of those lightweight folding chairs with the plastic webbed, interwoven seats, a blanket, and her purse. No picnic. We came after dinner. We traveled light.

I can remember one of the years we got there earlier, so she let us walk around the carnival midway. We even got to ride The Scrambler. I will never forget the forces put on my body as I spun around. I felt like I knew what John Glenn experienced. The distorted face as my lips flapped in the wind. How hard I held onto the safety gate. My hair, although cut short, flipping all over the place. And the looks on my brother's face. Priceless.

We didn't buy cotton candy. We didn't get any sodas or hot dogs. We had plenty and I think my mom didn't want to risk having to clean us up. We were well fed. At that time, I didn't even know the concept of a funnel cake and to this day I've never tasted one.

The next thing to do was to scout out where we were going to view the fireworks. Pierce Park is a huge place; especially to a little kid. It covers probably four-square blocks and cascades

down a steep incline to where it meets the Fox River. The Fox River is where they staged the barge from which to launch the fireworks. Safety first.

Up in the park, there are hundred-year-old oak trees that shade much of the park during the day. At night, on the 4th of July, you are looking for a patch of grass, where when you look up you see plenty of open sky so you can see the fireworks in all their glory.

We settle on a spot, spread out the blanket, my mom opens her chair to set and then she pulls the bug spray out of her purse. We spray ourselves liberally with OFF. The mosquitoes are in their glory on any warm, summer evening in Appleton. On the 4th of July, it's Mosquito Feast Day.

We settle on the blanket, and lay on our backs, waiting for the fireworks to begin. I'm probably humming something John Phillip Sousa wrote in my head. And then the salutes begin. They are trying to tell the crowd to settle in for the fireworks but I'm just annoyed by the noise. BANG, bang.

Next, we are treated to about 30 minutes of constant fireworks. We ooh and ahh as they blast above us. The crowd oohs and ahhs in unison too. I'm actually most fascinated with the patterns displayed by the fireworks that don't explode right above us but by the ones off to the right and left that are filtered to my vision by the leaves of the trees. I like seeing partial fireworks for some reason.

All the fireworks in those days were round blasts punctuated by a few more salutes here and there. They are not timed to go along with the symphony; in fact, there is no music playing unless some guy a few blankets over has something playing on his transistor radio. It's just the crowd and the fireworks.

The big finale blasts off. No mistaking it. This 4th of July display is over.

We pack up and make our way slowly back to the car. The crowd seems like millions of people to me, although the population of Appleton at the time was only about 50,000. It seems everyone in town, and maybe from a few towns over, was at the fireworks. When we get to the street there are headlights everywhere; all at eye level to us kids, so we are a bit blinded. The traffic cops in their uniforms and with wands are controlling the car chaos. We keep tight to each other and find our car. Pile back in. And lights out. I say that because I can't remember the drive home. I probably, immediately fell asleep from all the excitement overload.

Another 4th of July in the history books.

Cheers,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Zola". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.



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