

Part 8. Get a Job

Field Hand

Mom and dad were determined that we would work, probably for two reasons: one, the money, and two, to keep us occupied and off the streets. Those are legitimate reasons given (a) our impecunious state and (b) the fact that both of them worked in Cambridge so we would be unsupervised until 5:30 p.m., particularly in that era when two-income families were the exception and leaving kids home alone was frowned on. But to us, being forced to work felt like punishment although it was no different than being forced to get out of bed at 5:00 a.m. in wintery cold Seward, walk down to McMullins store and shovel snow for 2 hours. Today I know it wasn't intended as punishment - but that doesn't change the memories, does it.

I look at my own children and my child raising and can't congratulate myself. Perhaps my own weakness as a parent was rooted to some degree in my own parent's failure? The thing to say in their defense, however, was that they loved us, although they were unable to show it. What we perceived was that they did not trust us to stay out of trouble. I don't know why. I suppose it was the natural conservativeness of parents in general. Dick and I had been too severely disciplined growing up to have the courage to act up now. They apparently felt that they still had to keep reprimanding and controlling and minimizing us, making us virtually little puppets they could manipulate. There was no reason for that, none. But the message was loud and clear, "We know you boys are going to get into some sort of mischief and we are going to prevent that. So there."

Oddly, the fact was never discussed that they needed us to work so we bring in additional money. Never. Why not? I don't really know. Dad had real hangups about sharing information about his personal finances with us kids -about anything to do with himself other than dinosaurs. For example, in about 1984 dad told me on the phone about the motor home he had just purchased. He was excited and went in to detail about the reasons for choosing that type instead of another types, the features and so on. He said he got a real good deal on it. Well. What's the next question to ask him? When someone says that to me about a purchase, it is an open door to ask them "just how good was your deal?" I did. He answered "\$15,000", and went on talking about the plans for traveling. Well, wouldn't you know it.

In the following week when I was talking to mom she said that dad was really upset when I asked how much he paid for the motor home. Go figure. He actually

seemed to be leading up to the key question as if to show his perspicacity by the build-up. So I helped him along by asking the question, feeling like it was what he wanted. I make this point to illustrate with a specific example how dad could not talk about money, indeed how he resented being asked an innocent question about his money. (In retrospect I have to wonder what her motivation was in telling me, a 40+ year old, about dad's childish pique. I think the answer, whatever it is, is not complimentary of her.)

When mom and dad revealed their plan to have us earn more money for the household, they turned the need around, they concealed it. The message was, instead, that us boys needed to go to work because we otherwise would be getting into trouble. How sad. It would have nice to have understood that by working we were actually contributing to the household by working. That would have helped us "boys" feel somewhat -not entirely- better about this strict requirement that we 'get a job'.

The other unhappy thing they did when discussing the new obligation of work was the requirement that we buy our own clothes. Again, it was reasonable and I am glad that we did it this way. But when we were informed of this new requirement, were given to understand that we complained too much about what mom picked out -probably true. It was almost as if this requirement was punishment for complaining. I give the detail about that lecture somewhere else. I don't know why they were unable to simply say, "We don't have enough money to buy all the clothes and shoes you kids want. We need you boys to help us." Nope, no way. Their manner in advising us that we now had to work made it sound like (a) another of their irritating lectures about responsibility and growing up, and (b) like we were somehow in trouble for not already doing it. There was no way to win with them.

In retrospect, I can see that there were reasons to support their anxieties about us getting into trouble. This was the booming metropolis of Boston that they probably, rightly, perceived as full of temptation for teenage boys. Perhaps they also realized that we had never been exposed to most of the nasty stuff that was out there -and it was out there- so they doubted our ability to resist. The truth was that I didn't even understand what was out there. That's the irony. Seward wasn't exactly a booming center of crime, even though we lived across the block from the red light district - that I didn't understand anyway. Obviously, they did not understand how powerfully repressed we had become through their constant judgment and criticism. Otherwise, they wouldn't have worried.

I am not sure it was realistic to believe that Dick and I would stray very far.

I mean that both literally, because we would hardly leave the cul de sac we lived on, and figuratively, in terms of values. I remember the sense I had when standing under the house-high catalpa tree in the mouth of the cul de sac, looking both directions along the sidewalk that curved in both directions. Not anxiety, but I had no desire to walk either direction. It was unfamiliar and I was hurting so much that all I wanted was to be left alone in the house. I had no money and everything cost money. The thought of going out to encounter more mis-understood people and circumstances was sufficient to ground me at home. Of course, mom and dad didn't realize that. How could they? They never talked to us about how we felt. By the time we were this old, I know it would have been futile to have tried to talk to us. Teenagers do not talk with their parents freely about things that matter if the parents have not done that all along - and even then it's chancy. But when our feelings had been steam-rolled and beat down, there was no way in hell we would have revealed the extent of our confusion and anxiety.

Employment Office

The job hunt was pretty simple. Mom and dad found that there was a state employment office near our home, and that the agency had daily summer work available for unskilled farm hands. We certainly were that. Dad finally hauled us to the Employment Office against our wishes. We were not allowed to say anything about it after a few feeble complaints were quickly rebutted with something like, "Well, you gotta' grow up some day, you gotta' learn to work, you gotta learn responsibility." Of course, the sad thing was that mom and dad were absolutely correct. But wasn't it possible to make it a little easier?

We were forced into the child labor market after school let our in 1957, Waltham was still a depressing, even though we'd lived there 9 months, an overwhelming place. We didn't understand the idea of day-labor or piece work, but that didn't matter, did it. We were going to do it anyway. Dad did try to dress the experience up as being helpful to us. I believe he really did when he finally got around to hauling us captive to the employment office. But the history of our relationship didn't allow any bridging. In the end, his efforts came across as another attempt to make sure we did what he feared - because he feared we wouldn't do it.

This was one of those standard government-issue buildings with drab colors and nondescript design, filled with tired, irritated apparently over-worked (un-)civil servants. Inside the dark dingy office were benches filled with out-of-work

people looking forlornly at each other and everyone coming in, expecting or hoping against hope that a job would materialize. We waited until a bored clerk could take us. Dad took us up to the counter and earnestly explained what he wanted, some kind of day work. He said he'd been told this was a place where we could sign up to get a list of available bodies. The woman said that was true and handed us some forms that we had to fill out.

We went to a desk and filled out the forms and got in line again. The woman checked the papers over to see that they were accurate and complete. They were. She told us that we needed to be at the office every morning before 7:00 a.m. if we wanted to work. They would not call us to offer work. We had to go there and be available. The way this day-labor thing worked was simple: farmer Brown called in before 5:00 p.m. the evening before saying how many of what kind of laborers he needed. The clerk took that information and filled out some forms that were used the next morning by the supervisors that put us common laborers together with farmer Brown. The clerk said there was a lot of work for kids like us if we wanted it, looking at us, knowing we didn't.

We were told to check at the office on a daily basis to see if there were any jobs for that day. I hated it. We didn't want work. We wanted to stay home alone. But nope, we had to be productive and responsible. It was depressing to go to the Employment office early in the hot humid morning. Weather there was terrible, too cold and wet in the winter and too hot and wet in the summer. Standing there in the hot sun amidst a flock of silent watchful men and kids was a miserable way to start a summer day. We had no choice. So dad would drop us off with our sack lunch around 7:00 a.m. and take off for Cambridge. Hardly a good-bye, more likely an exhortation to "Work hard!" We'd get out of the car feeling conspicuous and out-of-place. The knot of men just stared at us for a bit and looked away.

Truck Gardens

The Greater Boston area had lots of truck gardens to feed the metro area, which were run with lots of cheap unskilled laborers. Truck gardens are sprawling vegetable farms with acres and acres of beans, squash, radishes and so on. The soil in the area was good so the crops were substantial, which meant lots of work. In Vernal we learned about harvesting crops so this was a natural thing for us to. The difference here was that we had to pack the vegetable for market rather than just throw them into a bucket or basked.

On the first day at the Employment Office as job fodder, the supervisor came out and call out what kind of people were needed or called out specific names. In our case, a Farmer Brown apparently wanted 2 kids that didn't cost too much. The supervisor called our names and pointed him out, so we trudged dejectedly over to farmer Brown with our sack lunches. After cursory introductions, we all got into his pick-up and were driven silently out to his truck garden. It was in Sudbury.

This farm appeared to be dedicated to flowers. We weren't used to dealing with flowers. He took us out to a field that had been cultivated in preparation for planting seedlings. There were 6 foot wide swaths of land with hard-packed paths between, from one side of the field to the other. Pairs of milk crates sat on these walkways across from each other, supporting a 2 x 10 board. That was what we laid on to reach the middle of the strip of tilled land.

Mr. Brown brought over some trays of flower seedlings. The seeds had been planted so densely that the roots of 2-3 inch seedlings were intertwined. He showed us how to tear off a swatch of seedlings, and how to plant them. It was depressing. The day was hot and muggy as usual. It was not easy to tear out a 4 inch square of dirt and roots without damaging them. I am sure I crushed a lot of them. Then we took those blocks over to the field. He assigned us to adjacent aisles so we could accomplish more?

He showed us how to pull individual -more or less- plants from the block. The soil had been thoroughly soaked the day before so we'd poke a finger into the dirt to make a small hole, stick the poor little flower down in the hole, and then scrunch soil up around it. They weren't to be too deep or too shallow. I understood that part, but I didn't really understand where the dividing line was on the plants and knew he could see that.

After coaching us a bit, he turned us loose. We each laid on one of those boards that were elevated above the beds and started the back-breaking work. The beds must have been 100 feet long looked like they stretched to eternity. Our job was to plant a complete swath - in one day? I don't know what his expectation was, but he had a lot of land to plant and I think he expected to get a lot more work out of us than he did. One little plant at a time. This was torture. Lying there on our bellies on narrow boards, feeling like we'd tip off and mess up the flowers, straining our backs in unfamiliar work, alone, Farmer Brown just watching. He finally wandered back to his barn to work and told us he'd call us when it was noon.

He let us know, after about 10 hours, that it was time to knock off for lunch.

Like most truck gardeners, he kept an old beat-up refrigerator in his barn of cold soda pops for his laborers. This was the only courtesy and it was a courtesy because warm soda is what you know it to be. It was the only refreshing thing of the day to open a bottle -not cans- charging the normal dime a bottle. He asked us if we wanted one to go with lunch. Yes, Please, we said, ever obedient and polite. That must have struck him, a rough old guy -at least 30 years old- as pretty funny, these two scrawny little kids who didn't have a clue what they were doing. Polite and courteous and completely a loss. Probably as poor specimens as he ever got in the Employment Office Mystery Drawings. We went over to a shaded spot under a tree and sat down. We ate our dry sandwiches and drank our pop, enjoying the relaxation, albeit short. When the time came, half an hour later, to return to work, Farmer Brown called us back. Groan, dread, agony. We hurt so much already and knew that 4 more hours would never end. The sun was high and the heat was probably in the 90's. The unbearable humidity rose up off the dark wet beds, heated by the sun.

We got back on the boards with our clods of crushed, wilted flowers and gamely continued. There was no choice. We couldn't even quit. How would we get home if we did? The MTA didn't run that far out. Besides, we'd get killed when mom and dad got home, so we did the only thing that kids can do in that situation - shut up and work. It was tough and I imagine that a good share of the plants I transplanted failed. I just did not get the hang of doing it. I could not manage to tear of a single seedling without damaging the plant or tearing off the roots, so I ended up planting several at a time - which was not allowed.

The proof that we had failed was pretty dramatic. Farmer Brown drove us back to our house, since it was closer than the Employment Office. He wouldn't provide more than a monosyllable in response to us as we -politely- tried to make small talk with him. I don't know why we felt compelled to try to talk to him, but we did. It didn't work. He paid us off as we got out of the pickup at which point we -politely again- thanked him. For hiring us, for Christ's sakes! We hated it but being namby-pamby sweet little boys, we did what mom would expect us to do - or what we thought she'd want us to do. It was ludicrous and he was probably embarrassed at our innocence and naivete. He didn't ask for us the next day.

Hey Pachuco!

Truck gardening is tough work. Not that it's particularly heavy rather because you work out in the hot sun, in 90% humidity, for long hours, getting dirty

with prickly things in your skin, getting sunburned, no chances to take breaks, and so on. Working with kids we were afraid of because they were obviously "bad boys." Actually, I imagine they were normal boys but we were too self-conscious and self-righteous to engage them as friends. They tried to talk, asking questions about us, where we were from and so on. We answered their questions, but briefly and we did not reciprocate. In the end, it was like they were interviewing us and that didn't interest them. They weren't mean to us usually, but there was a distance between us and it was obvious they thought that we thought we were better than they were. That is not exactly accurate but the difference doesn't matter. We didn't fit in.

Do you have any idea how hard it is to work with Cubans who don't like you, who don't speak a word of English, who are fairly vile-in-our-estimation in their habits, and so on? It was rough. There was a certain animosity between some of the Cubans that spilled over on to us. We didn't have a clue what the issues were because we didn't speak a word of Spanish. They screamed at each other as we worked our way along rows of vegetables and when things reached a fever pitch, there were even an occasional knife thrown. We would mind our own business, not even looking up at these folks who didn't speak any English, hoping they would forget we were there. For the most part they seemed to. But I don't know, obviously, whether that had anything to do with the fact that we stayed out of their way. At that age, 15-16 what did we understand about interpersonal dynamics, particularly about cross-cultural problems? Not much. Actually, if I were confronted with those types of problems today, I'm not really sure I could do much better than we did - pure avoidance on my part.

So we spent some awful hours out there. On some mornings, as in when we harvested string beans, we would be out of bed at 5 am so we could meet the pickup truck at 6 to be out harvesting by 6:30 because the humidity was so devastating by noon that no one could stay out there and pick beans. Other day we worked when the sun was high, thinning vegetables, or transplanting flowers, a horrible job because the roots grew together. And harvesting squash was the worst. Tall plants that we crawled around in to get squash, with tiny hairs rubbing off onto our skins, creating nasty itches that only stopped after we showered.

Later: I remember several more positive episodes of work in Boston that need to be mentioned to balance this negative picture. These all involved Harvard University but let's talk some more about Waltham first.

Mrs. Cavicchio

Mrs. Cavicchio was married to Mr. Cavicchio. Mr. Cavicchio owned a large truck garden out west in Sudbury but he didn't like to supervise to field hands. So Mrs. Cavicchio supervised the field hands, including picking them up in the morning at the Employment Office.

Their truck garden was a typical sort of place with cold spring crops like peas and radishes, ending with fall crops like pumpkins and squash. We ended up spending most of the summer of 1958 on this truck garden and went through an interesting evolution, particularly considering that Mrs. Cavicchio had known some of the other kids for a year or so.

The most interesting plants were hot peppers. I had never seen live hot peppers and was intrigued by these long skinny, pointed peppers. Some were red, some yellow and others green. The acreage devoted to hot peppers was small, but the output was substantial in terms of dollars. When we asked about the peppers and how they were eaten, one of the kids told us about Mr. Cavicchio. He said that Mr. Cavicchio loved the hottest peppers and would eat them raw with his fried steaks. They were so hot that he actually sweated but he somehow thought that was a good thing so continued.

Turned out that hot peppers were actually hazardous to your health. The kids we worked with, about half a dozen, were pretty rough - which in retrospect interests me. Why were we, genteel sort of kids in our mom's eyes- put out there on the dirt with these wildmen? Whatever, we were there and saw eye opening things that we wouldn't have witnessed otherwise. The weather was always hot and humid, 90 and 90. Just unbearable, particularly in the morning when the sun was converting the dew that had collected overnight on the leaves into humidity. It wasn't much different than standing in a shower so we all took our shirts off early in the morning and parked them in the barn with our sack lunches.

One afternoon things got out of hand and somehow I think I was the unintentional instigator of what turned into a riot and a visit to an emergency room. We had been picking the hot peppers again and while the kids were kibbutizing, I heard one of them say something about how if you broke a pepper open and rubbed in on someone's back, the skin would blister. I was always ready for a lab experiment and piped up with a question like, "Really?" Just an innocent question. I'd never heard of peppers that hot even though I grew up with pickled hot peppers on Fuller's dinner table.

Given the rowdy state of mind of most of the kids that afternoon, my naive question provoked the lab experiment. One of the kids yelled, "Yeah. We did it to Joey last year. Like this!" At which point he grabbed a pepper, broke it open and

jumped over at another kid, trying to pin him to the ground so that he could rub the pepper on his back. The other kid took exception to this rough treatment and dropped whatever vegetables he was holding. The temptation was too great. The day had been a rough one and everyone was keyed up so a melee broke out - which could only happen when Mrs. Cavicchio was not directly watching us.

Soon all the kids, except for Dick and I, were rolling over plants, getting dirty as heck, yelling and screaming, trying to burn each others' back with a crushed hot pepper. About this time Mrs. Cavicchio returned and was madder than I had ever seen her. Being a short, dark Italian woman, she knew how to yell which she did with authority. Suddenly one of the boys started screaming and everything stopped. He was rubbing his eye and yelling that pepper seeds had gotten into it. Someone took a gallon jug of water and started pouring it into the affected eye which helped a bit but not much.

The only thing Mrs. Cavicchio could do was load the kid into her station wagon and haul him into Waltham to the emergency room. That's what she did, and at that instant she forever set Dick and me apart from the other kids. She turned to us and ordered us to keep an eye on the other kids and tell her when she came back if they didn't work or were getting into trouble. From that point forward, we were her pets and subject to frequent snide comments and rudeness.

Copy Boy for the Hearst Syndicate

Big name. Even to a teenager. In 1958. Earl Hawkes, a member of the Cambridge Branch with one child, Rich who was Dick's age, was General Manager for the Boston "Record American" in those days. Got me a job as a copy boy. Wonderful job. Best I had in Boston for a heroic wistful 16 year old wishing independence and maturity on himself.

The Record American -or whatever its name was- was housed in an old decaying brick building five or so stories high square in the middle of the old city. A tabloid with a good circulation third, behind the *Globe*. It lived off advertising as newspapers do so copy boys were the analogue then of today's digital communication networks, which shunted drafts and mock ups and layouts and proofs and photos and cuts and color separations between the ad agencies, the stores and the newspaper. Pungent ink and paper smells filled these places, acidic smells in the electroplating shops where cuts were made, nasty acids and etching stuff that really is tough to dispose of because of its toxicity, like dry cleaning

fluid in that respect. Dirty, stained, drab and dingy. And absolutely wonderful.

I'd go to the ad office in the building to see what was waiting to be either delivered or to be picked up. The deliveries were of proofs usually of ads or were returns of originals copy, etc. The pickups were the same sort of stuff. Just shuttled it back and forth.

Their camera was the most impressive camera I've ever seen. The guy took me to see the camera and didn't say much. Was just giving me a tour. But when he showed me the camera I couldn't see it. I didn't want to sound stupid so I listened. A real good technique - better to be quiet and thought a fool than to open your mouth and prove it sort of thing. Finally, I got it. The little ROOM the size of a small bathroom WAS the camera. That funny window on one side had the enormous bellows with lens in it and the opposite wall of the little room was where you could hang huge sheets of undeveloped film. Outside of the lens was a track that had a little car sort of thing that rolled toward or away from the lens with really bright arc lights hanging there to illuminate whatever size thing was hung up. The thing to be photographed was put in the middle of the stand-up 'wall' on the little car and the photographer would maneuver the little car toward or away from the lens to get the size image he wanted. I have never seen such a huge camera.

Do you know the "camera oscura"? In the middle ages in Europe some of the rich apparently had such a thing. It was nothing more than a room that was absolutely light-tight, with a door that could be opened on one side. People would walk into the room and shut the door. And the operator would then take the cover from off a tiny tiny hole in one of the walls. This obviously allowed light in. When it came in and shined on the opposite wall, and actually made an image of the world outside. Upside down. This camera was that size and made upside down images. Had to be a pinpoint hole to work. That's how cameras work. Too.

Well, I'd get bus fare from my boss and take copy out to get on the MTA to go wherever I had to go. Some days I was way out in Newton, other days across the street practically. I'd go to all the big stores, Filenes, Jordan Marsh, Sears, etc. etc. So I got to know where the ad offices were. Always in the back out of the way difficult to find. No one wanted to talk to a lowly copy boy, you're late again, I've been waiting, I got a deadline a hour ago, where you been, etc. Nothing but hassles. No problem however, just ignore them and don't talk back, do what your boss said to do and keep him informed of everything you did. He'd cover you as long as he knew. Some of the problems were left over from the day before or week before so tag end on weekends was battling cleanup with irritated people who were mad to be at work who directed the madness at you.

I got to know down town well. Had to go everywhere. Learned the Freedom Trail by heart, starting at Boston Common, knew all the places, Paul Revere's home, the Old Burial Ground, site of the Boston Massacre, where Old Ironsides was docked, Old North Church where Paul R. hung the lanterns, and everything in between. Funny to discover that the site of the Tea Party is now about a mile inland. Bay has been filled to make real estate. There's a brick circle in the intersection to mark it. Fauniel Hall, Hay market square, etc. Really wonderful. And I was alone so could look and do what I wanted to do. As long as I got my work done.

Payday was a kick. Had to walk in a line with the union guys past the pay cage. A dingy little wire cage with a 200 year old bald scrawny book keeper with a green eye shade and garter to hold his right sleeve up handing out pay envelopes. Yep, little 3 inch long manila envelope with bills and coins in it. Muttering and cussing about taxes. Smelling like tobacco, beer, onions and ink.

It was while working at the newspaper that I really started my library. I would go to a book store near the office and look through books. I would buy the small Random House versions because they were hardbacks for only 2 dollars. I'd take it and go to a sub shop and buy a 50 cent sub and sit there and read, having visions of myself sitting heroically alone in the big city. Which was true in a real sense.

I have a general comment here. Mom and dad were deadly serious about us learning to work and to fend for ourselves. I've said that already, but I need to mention it again, because I want you -like me- to hear it again and again. No time for being silly or having a good time. And heaven forbid that we should spend any of our hard-earned money on frivolous things. That was the height of stupidity.

I tell you about this because I want you to perhaps understand why my outlook was so different than your mothers about making you work in high school. She just wanted you to "have fun" because you were going to grow up so needed to take advantage of your teenage years. I didn't understand that. I still don't, really, but I see that the stress in me had less to do with the reality, and more to do with the fact that I believed differently than she did. You poor kids are the one who may have felt the brunt of the conflict.

Now, I have to admit at this age [59] that from this point in my life that perhaps they weren't that harsh about 'wasting' money. Perhaps they even understood how it was for kids who earn their own money who want to buy something simply because they want to buy it, not because it was healthy, or good, or useful, or anything practical. Just buy it because a girl friend wants it, a big

stuffed tiger, or a silly half inch wide belt for himself, etc.

Interjection later: it is significant looking back along the chain of memories of my parents to consider how often they spent money on frivolous, ephemeral, silly things. Can you guess the frequency? Never. Well, there it is. They didn't expect of us something they didn't exemplify.

But regardless of what they might have felt inside of them, the only thing us kids could see from the outside looking in was constant judgment about our choices, a narrowed eye, a knitted brow, a faint shake of the head. That was all it took. We had learned early in life what their physical cues were for expressing disapproval. They were basically burned into our nervous system such that we didn't even think consciously, "Oh, oh. There it is. Run." No, the our responses to their visual cues were conditioned, automatic and irresistible. They were the background against which we lived. Constant, incessant, eternally present.

I bring this in here because this atmosphere was inextricably linked with that message of "get a job, make you own money, some day you'll be on your own." It all created the sort of atmosphere one feels in a Thomas Hardy novel, i.e. *Return of the Native*, *The Mayor of Castorbridge*, etc. Ominous, foreboding and so on.