

Where's Willie?

.....Written by Andy Rochman regarding his memories of Wydown Shoe Service

I could fib and say what I liked best about eighth grade at Wydown was Latin class, but I'd likely lose your readership. Survey says - number one answer - after school activities.

The time, the late 1950s, and Wydown was a melting pot of kids you'd never laid eyes on. It was great to bum with new kids who had not yet intelligence-typed you (nor you, they) and were from a different social and economic background. Clayton had its castes and to a Claytonian, the response to the question "Where did you go to grade school?" had similar defining qualities to the general St. Louisan query "Where did you go to high school?"

The parents of Glenridge, Meramec, and Maryland kids drove Olds 98s, Lincolns, and Cadilacs, generally owned their own statuesque homes, and employed full-time domestic help; those from McMorrow and DeMun drove Plymouths and DeSotos, rented or lived in small post-WWII box-like brick construction, and had no domestic help; and those from Bellevue took the bus, generally rented or lived in small frame homes, and were the domestic help. The exception: DeMun families that lived north of DeMun School were in the high end of the social pecking order (it must have been very conflicting to attend DeMun!). It was no wonder kids that went to Bellevue School thought Glenridge School kids were snobs (they were). Anyway, Wydown desegregated the social classes.

No, sooner did the bell free us from Dingle Martz's Latin conjugation exercises than we would grab the Lindell-Wydown bus or streetcar. On nice days, we'd bicycle (no locks in those days, folks), walk, or hitchhike. In any event, the route was due west on Wydown. The end was first Glaser Drugs and then next door to Wydown Shoe Repair.

At Glasers, we satisfied the US RDA requirement for fats, salts, sugars, and preservatives. For 55 cents, which included tax and tip, you got to sit at the soda fountain counter, swivel continuously on the back-breaking, round dark green vinyl covered stools, and wolf down a handmade hamburger topped with a whale-thick slice of Bermuda onion, hot-and-greasy hand-cut French fries, and a hand-mixed cherry-coke with those miniature crystal-clear ice cubes (they were actually little square tiles). Then, it was off to the shoe shop.

Wydown Shoe Repair is Clayton's oldest business. In 1930, Dominic Cerulo emigrated from Italy and opened his shoe repair shop on Wydown. The business continues today in its original location under the operation of Dominic's son, Jack. In the repair-rather-than-replace days of the 1950s, the shoe shop boasted as many as 7 employees (today Jack runs it with some part-time help). During the Big War, they used to switch shoe heels to extend wear just as with auto tire rotation. Like the naked city, Jack has 8 million simply hilarious stories about goings-on in the shoe shop during its halcyon days, some of which we'd best better leave as unprinted folklore.

Jack still chuckles about the games of chance that used to occur in the front of the store during the 1950s. As you entered the front door, you faced a counter where customers brought their shoes for repair. Sitting on the counter was a penny gumball machine that was sponsored by the Clayton Kiwanis Club. Grocery, bakery, milk, dry cleaning, and drug deliverymen used to congregate at the shop and place quarter bets on which color gumball would drop out of the clear glass globe when they put a penny in this slot machine substitute. Sometimes, the shop's paying customers got irritated because there were so many gumball players clogging up the path to the counter.

Just to the right of the "gumball" counter was an antique shoeshine stand. Two "shoeshine boys" or bootblacks manned the stand. (The term "bootblack" may be inferred to be politically incorrect in the 21st century but truly had no racial undertones in its origin.) One stalwart -- the stand's CEO -- was Willie Goward, slightly built, and balding -- an expert shoe dyer. For 42 years, Willie chomped on the same Roitan cigar, which was believed to have been surgically attached to his lower lip. He always greeted me "Haw Rawmin," with his rolling articulation facilitated by the dripping cigar juice. And then there was the inimitable Charles, Willie's full-time staffer with his not-able-togrow-in-fully mustache -- one of the transient shoe shiners I remember with fondness. Charles must have been all of 22 and had been a cotton picker in Arkansas prior to his becoming a shoe shop denizen. Like Crusoe's servant Friday, Charles apparently had no surname, at least not that Jack can remember.

These guys never knew what it was like to blow \$50 on a meal; the streetcar and bus were their principal means of transportation; and the *King's English* they knew not. Yet, they took the same pride in their work as if shining shoes were synonymous with completing a million dollar deal.

After gassing ourselves up at Glasers, my friend McGoo and I would hoist us up on the shoeshine bench. A shine, including 10-cent tip, cost two bits.

We'd provoke Charles. "Hey Charles, where's Willie?"

"Willie in da back doin' this," Charles would drawl as slowly as humanly possible, his announcement embellished with an obscene hand gesture. Charles never sensed he was behaving inappropriately and corrupting innocent youth. He clearly was not the tightest lace in the shoe.

Willie, who was within an earshot, would mechanically respond, "Charles, you ain't nothin' but a dumb ole nanny goat." And Charles would complete the performance with "Willie, you ain't nothin' but a dumb ole coon." Jack would then chime in, half-joking, half-embarrassed: "Charles, cut that stuff out or I'm gonna send you back to Arkansas." This was high humor to 13 year olds - McGoo and I always doubled over in laughter. The daily ritual varied nary an iota, as if played from a script.

The story had absolutely nothing to do with race, at least as far as we were concerned. Willie and Charles were just hard-working joes doing a little verbal sparring to break up their day with some comic relief. They never took each other seriously or with animosity.

Our daily itinerary continued unchanged until our awakening that girls were even more fun than a shoeshine.



Andy and Jack (July 2002) Wondering "Where's Willie?"

Dominic Cerulo passed away in 1969. This was painful as it was when the gentle grocier Mr. Grulich (we always called him mister) followed and the ever-popular, always-with-a-new-joke pastrami-slicer-par-excellence Bob Protzel (we always called him Bob) went to the borscht belt in the sky. We knew each other by name in those days when business was personal.

With conglomerates, chain stores, and absentee ownership and children doing men's job, you don't have to worry today about succumbing to such sentiment any longer. The kid du jour that today asks matter-of-factly and without making eye contact, "Can I help you," won't be around tomorrow. And, you'll respond to the lack of service by patronizing another retailer who offers a lower price.

While Glaser's is no more (the soda fountain closed circa 1961), tradition continues in a peculiar sense: A Starbucks now operates in the Glaser's space. There is a new ritual.

Each morning, I imbibe the sacred Java beverage with my nostalgia-seeking-baby-boomer-turned-middle-aged cronies and Jack Cerulo comes in for his morning caffeine fix.

"Morning Jack."

"Hi ya Rock."

"Hey Jack, where's Willie?"

We both smile.