

Carney
Pitchman
Indian Chief

The Autobiography of

Carl Herron
Brother Shadow

Carney, Pitchman, Indian Chief

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Super Heroes

If you make no sense of this, blame my subconscious. Maybe it is a sign of age but things have been bubbling to the surface and the only cleansing ritual is to put them on paper, so here goes.

A universal mantra all mothers seemed to have was, "Stop spending so much time on comic books, they'll ruin your mind."

Now I have nothing against comic books. I grew up during the tail end of the Depression on the East Side of New York and comic books were a wonderful escape. My Mecca was a used magazine store, where a week after a new issue hit the stands I could pick up a used copy in mint condition for two cents.

My friend Eddie was also a devotee to the action-packed colorful pages. By the time we reached the ripe old age of eight, we knew we had a mission in life. It was our fate to stamp out crime in our neighborhood. Because of our vast research we knew the only way to succeed in this noble adventure was to have secret identities.

We decided we'd become the "COBRAS".

We somehow got hold of black fabric from which we both made a one-piece costume. It was a mask that fitted over our heads and hung down in the back to form a cape. The problem of hiding our identity solved, we knew we needed a trade mark of sorts.

In those days all milk came in bottles with paper caps. The caps were secured with a piece of wire twisted around the neck of the bottle. Here was our answer, and it was free, an important consideration. For weeks we gathered these tiny bits of wire until we had hundreds of them. Stamping out crime, we knew, would be a long task.

Wrapping each wire tightly around a pencil, we formed a coil. The top end was bent out to form the

dreaded "Cobra." At last we were ready. With our costumes hidden beneath our shirts and our pockets bulging with cobras, we ventured forth.

Eddie lived in a tenement with a six-step stoop. There was a double door—the first unlocked, the second had to be buzzed open. On that first fateful day we were standing at the base of Eddie's stoop. I should explain that we lived on 26th Street. Obviously, anyone living on 25th or 27th Street was evil.

As we were talking, there appeared a group of six eight-year-old thugs from 25th street. Spotting the two of us and liking the odds, they came charging up the street.

Quick as a flash we ran up the steps and through the first door. Closing it, I put my back to it while Eddie became a COBRA, his identity safe!

By this time the thugs were losing interest and stopped banging on the door. They were on the bottom step of the stoop, hurling vile invectives at us.

We flung the door open. They looked up in shock. We each threw a coiled cobra at their feet knowing it would strike terror in their hearts; then with a loud hiss we leaped from the top step.

What a magnificent sight we must have been with our capes fluttering in the wind! We broke our fall on their evil bodies. This pissed them off and they beat the shit out of us and stole our capes and cobras.

The reality of fighting crime was not the only rude awakening to the facts of life the comic books taught us. We now knew that a secret identity and fearful trademark would not be enough.

Back to our research.

Eddie said. "The answer might be in comic books." He was right. On the back page of each comic book,

Charles Atlas would turn our bodies to steel through the magic of "Dynamic Tension." No longer did we have to suffer the fate of a puny one. No one would dare kick sand in our faces.

We clipped the coupon and sent it in. Alas, Charles Atlas wanted money for his secret.

All was not hopeless. The comic book also revealed how we could become rich. On the inside front and back covers were glowing stories of yes, even money to spend, all through the miracle of door-to-door sales. Of course, they were the doors of friends of your family and relatives.

Again we clipped the coupons and send away for the product that could make us rich and allow us to have bodies of steel. Besides we needed money to make new capes.

We tried to sell Cloverine Salve, a wonder balm that promised to remove wrinkles, heal cuts and burns and give your skin a glowing complexion. To aid sales they also gave you beautiful 8"x10" religious glossy prints in color to give away with each sale. We knew everything they said was true. Would God let his pictures be used if they were not telling the truth?

Well it seems as if a million other kids beat us to the punch and everyone had more Cloverine Salve than they could use in three lifetimes. The greeting cards designed by a famous artist, fared no better.

So you see, our mothers were wrong. Comic books were not useless trash; they taught many valuable lessons.

Charles Atlas was forgotten; we never got our bodies of steel. With money being in such short supply we turned our attention to ways of getting it. We didn't know the word at the time, but we became entrepreneurs. More about that later.

Books

As I get older my short term memory seems to....seems to..... I forgot what I was going to say. Did I ever tell you that I can rattle off not only my Army serial number, but the number of the first rifle issued to me? The telephone number from an old radio jingle I will take to my grave: Melrose 5-5300. A call to that ancient number would put you in contact with "Three Little Foxes, at your service, Dum de de, well, well, well."

Totally useless information, but I have it at my fingertips. I find myself wandering in the memories of my youthful formative years.

Books have always been a love of mine. It all started with Sam. Sam was a crotchety old man who ran a second-hand book store a block from my house. In front of his small, narrow store stood a stall with back-dated copies of "The Saturday Evening Post", "Colliers", "Life", and "National Geographic". Most of them had the top half of their front cover torn off. A mysterious occurrence that I never understood.

Just inside the door, behind a beat-up old table, sat Sam. The walls of the shop were lined with wooden shelves, creaking under the weight of the total knowledge of mankind. Well, perhaps I exaggerate a bit. Sam never bought his books by title or author, instead he purchased them by the foot or the pound. It didn't matter much since I seldom saw anyone buy a book from the shelves. The action was at the tables that ran from front to back. They were loaded with magazines of every description.

The last table at the rear of the shop, was paradise. On it rested stacks of used comic books. Not like the sterile, each-comic-sealed-in-its-own-plastic-bag shops of today, but musty piles of well thumbed-through books of delight. The price for

most was 2 cents. Happily, the exact amount one received when returning a soda bottle for deposit. There were always fools who, with reckless abandon, discarded their empties in street corner trash barrels.

Of course my mother frowned upon the amount of time I lavished on my treasures. "They will ruin your mind!" To pacify her, I'd occasionally spring for a copy of "Illustrated Classic Comics". These cost a nickel. Culture was never cheap.

I learned about life from those colorful pages. The constant battle between good and evil, the importance of a secret identity, and the power of magick words. I almost got myself killed several times searching subway tunnels for Shazam's cave.

Of course sex reared its ugly head. At first it was a crush on Lois Lane, Superman's girl friend, but I got over her when I met Sheena of the Jungle.

I was wildly in love with Sheena of the Jungle. She was more attractive than Lois and wore less clothes. It was while in this very impressionable state I made a discovery that would change my life.

Making my daily trip to the back table of Sam's emporium where the mile high stack of used comic books lay in wait, my eye was struck with the lurid cover of a pulp magazine.

In the past, nothing deterred my pilgrimage to the back table; after all, Sheena was waiting for me. Alas, the poor jungle girl was soon to be forgotten. That day I never reached the back table.

To a young boy whose mind was being ravished by the painful rites of puberty, this table filled with pulp magazines was the source of fantasies for years to come.

Here were women more beautiful, with less clothes, and more realistic than my former love, Sheena. (Although, in truth, in all my years I have never

met or even seen a woman who could measure up to the dream girls that adorned the covers of pulps.)

As if that was not enough, sharing the covers with these beautiful women were tentacled, fanged, horned, and scaled alien monsters about to do unthinkable (and anatomically impossible) things to these poor maidens.

It didn't seem to matter where in the universe these aliens came from, they all had the hots for Earth women.

Once I got over the shock of my new discovery..... it took awhile, I was lured by the cover illustrations to actually read the stories. Real words on a printed page, line after line and not just short sentences placed in balloons over a comic book figure. I was HOOKED!!!!

In the beginning, of course, the stories with the most lurid illustrations were the ones I read first. I was disappointed. Oh, they were exciting, but never quite as explicit as the pictures. Then I started to get the hang of it. I learned to read between the lines, take the suggestions and let my imagination fill in the things they could not describe. At that tender age I was becoming a sophisticated reader.

Soon I was devouring every story (even those with tame illustrations). I was finding certain authors were more exciting and interesting even if some busty maiden wasn't being threatened by other world monsters or "Mad Doctor".

I became more selective in my choice of magazines, looking for these authors rather than just the hook of the cover illustration.

Their names were the magics Merritt, Howard, Lovecraft, Bloch, LeFanu, Machen, Bradbury, Stroker, Rohmer, Poe, Blackwood, Quinn, Leiber, and so many more.

One night, having read the entire contents of my latest magazine, I made a serendipitous discovery. In desperation for more, and to avoid the chore of homework, I began reading the ads. A number of book sellers advertised in the pages. The ads were staring me in the face all the time, but I never noticed. These magical authors, my heroes, wrote "Real Books", not just magazine stories; they wrote books with hard covers. I could hardly wait to see Sam the next day. Maybe he had these books.

Sad to say, Sam didn't stock books that real people read, but he did tell me where I might find them. He told me about Book Row on lower Broadway.

What strange things went on in that dusty book store?

Watch for the next exciting chapter !!!!!

Book Row

As Sam instructed me, at the first opportunity, and with what seemed at the time my life savings, I made my way downtown to BOOK ROW!!!

From Astor Place to 12th Street almost every building on both sides of the avenue had at least one street level bookstore. Most had tables and bins outside the door piled high with books, magazines, engravings, and sheet music; in fact, if it was printed there was a good chance it was there.

My game plan was not to spend a penny until I had checked out all their wares. Ah, foolish youth. I started at the southern-most store in Astor Place.... I never got beyond it that day.

Once past the deceptively small entrance I found myself in a room that had to have every book that was ever written, or so it seemed to me then. The owner of this establishment was no Sam. It was ob-

vious that he did not buy books by the foot to fill his shelves.

After hours of wonderment I made my first real purchase. Sax Rohmer's "Dr. Fu Manchu" It cost \$2.00 and wiped me out (my life savings didn't amount to very much in those days). I thought the price a little high but the owner pointed out that it was a first edition and very cheap. I didn't know what the hell he was talking about but he sounded very convincing and I took the book.

"Invest him with all the cruel cunning of an entire Eastern race, accumulated in one giant intellect....Imagine that awful being and you have a mental picture of Dr. Fu-Manchu, the yellow peril incarnate....."

Fu Manchu in spite of being incredibly evil became one of my first heroes. It was the beginning of the realization that pure evil and things from the "Dark Side" were much more interesting and entertaining than anything I could ever find in the pure goodness of a "Tom Swift and His Electrical Grandmother".

I still have that glorious first Fu Manchu, along with the rest of the series, all first editions. I found out what that meant, and as long as it didn't cost more than two dollars, I always tried to get first editions. I was on my way to becoming a collector and a book junkie.

No book is an island. Everyone who has ever started the adventure of reading soon finds out that each book has a way of leading you down many paths. It may be something as small as a paragraph, or perhaps just a sentence that sparks your curiosity about a place, or person, or new subject and the search is on. Like a web whose spidery roads, byways and alleys branch off in all directions.

My first Fu Manchu made me want to know what the "Boxer Rebellion" was. A book about that 1900 event made me want to know about secret societies and the

religions of China. The library was a big help, after all my book budget was very limited.

Books on the religions of China got me involved with the Yin and Yang, the I Ching, and other subjects that were for me at the time very strange and esoteric. I plowed through them, understanding as best I could. By the time I got my second Fu Manchu, I read it with a certain amount of smugness. I understood the mind of my hero.

It took me two years to reach the northern most book shop on Book Row. Aside from fiction my favorite subjects were religion, mythology, and the supernatural.

I learned to respect the book dealers on this fabled Row. I was never able to stump them with my questions. I would ask about some very obscure book or author and they would cite chapter and verse and recommend others on the same subject. They were my guides or gurus and they never let me down. Try that in today's giant book stores. You get blank stares, or, "I'll look it up on the computer."

Aside from "The Strand" on 12th and Broadway, it thankfully is still there; the largest second-hand bookstore was Sam Weiser's.

This time my quest was for more information about traditional Germanic Gods and Norse mythology. Reading some rather general books on mythology, I kept coming across brief references to some very strange names having to do with old religions in Northern Europe, but never very much detail. As in most of these general books, the emphasis was always on Greek and Roman mythology.

Armed with a list, I dared not try to pronounce these strange words, so I made my first trip to Weiser's shop. I approached the first sales person I could find and handed him my list and in my best adult voice asked where I might find more information on these subjects. He looked at the list and then at me, smiled and read the list aloud. It was the first time I ever heard these words spoken.

"Let's see", he said, "Gylfaginning, Njals saga, Yggdrasil, the war between the Aesir and the Vanir, the Lay of Vafthrudnir..... I think you might want to start with the Elder Edda by the eleventh century Icelandic poet, Snorri Sturlason, aisle 14, about the third shelf from the left." He jotted the information down for me and left. To say that I was impressed would be the understatement of the year. To this day, I still get a kick out of tossing off, when the conversation is about mythology or Tolkin, "Oh, my favorite source is the eleventh century Icelandic poet, Snorri Sturlason." See, I just did it again. After my fourth visit to Weiser's I became aware of a staircase going to the basement and some rather unusual folk disappearing into the gloomy looking depths.

My Decent to the Underground

I was a late comer to TV but a big fan of radio. It will come as no surprise that my favorite radio shows dealt with mystery and horror. Shows like "Lights Out!" and "Inner Sanctum" were a weekly must.

A plot that popped up often concerned a hapless victim entering a small musty book shop with a curious owner. He would reluctantly sell a dusty book that promised to change the customers life and grant his most secret wish. A cryptic warning always came with the sale. It usually boiled down to something like, "People don't always know what is best for them."

Of course the book always led to disaster and when the poor soul went back to the book store, hoping the owner would have another book to bail him out of his mess; the bookstore was a vacant lot or boarded-up place filled with cob webs, unused for years.

There were many variations on the theme and I was pleased to find them popped up again and again on TV and in movies. One of my favorites was in a film where masks were rented for the Mardi Gras.

What, you may well ask has this to do with my personal descent into the underground?

On my first trip down that wide staircase into the bowels of Sam Weiser's second hand book shop, the plot of every one of these stories flashed through my brain like strobe lights.

It seemed to get darker with each step. A large cork bulletin board, on the wall of the basement landing was covered with notes, business cards, and announcements. In fact there were so many they spilled off the board and were stuck to the wall with tacks and tape. Some were new, others yellow with age.

They all proclaimed offers of strange and marvelous things. Soo Ling would toss the yarrow sticks and help you understand the message the I Ching had for you. A disciple of Madame Blavatsky was conducting seances in Irving Place, only a few blocks away. Sister Rosa would read the tarot for you and reveal all, and a student of Cherio's Language of the Hand would be in town for a month and, by appointment only, would read your palm.

Down in the Village, a Swami was reading aloud the entire Bhagavad-Gita for the enlightenment of all who came to his small curio shop. The list went on endlessly. I found a home and I had not even seen a book yet.

Leaving the bulletin board with its inviting promises of things to come, I made my way between the tall aisles of many quaint and curious volumes of forgotten lore. If the amount of books was staggering, the subject matter was beyond belief: Folk lore and mythology from every corner of the globe (and a few that weren't even on the globe), religions, both esoteric and everyday from East and West, North and South.

There were books on Witchcraft, spiritualism, ritual magick, Voodoo, fortune telling in all its myriad forms, Philosophies, Ghosts, Demons, and Possession. There were bound notes by Dr. Rhine on his experiments at Duke, lectures by Kay on Semitic religions, and Gershom Scholem's scholarly works on Jewish mysticism, and on and on.

As I wandered, dazed, through these aisles of mysteries I became aware of something else very special in this very special place. In nooks and corners, scattered around the basement the owner had thoughtfully placed old over-stuffed chairs and small sofas. Most were faintly illuminated with brass lamps hanging from the ceiling by long, thin chains.

There, oblivious to anything going on around them, sat the regulars pouring over books they could not afford to buy, scribbling notes on scraps of paper or in bulging notebooks, seeking the secrets of the ancients.

Smoke from their forgotten cigarettes burning away in the ashtrays, thoughtfully supplied, wreathed their heads. Caught in the glow of the lamps it gave the appearance of a halo. Someday, I thought, I too will sit there.

The biggest miracle of the place was that no sales person would dream of disturbing these scholars with anything as crass as a suggestion they should buy something.

On that first day I made no purchase. There were few visits to come where I would leave empty handed. I did, however, copy down the address of Sister Rosa and vowed to have her read the Tarot for me.

Alas, the old Sam Weiser book store is gone. It moved several times and with each move became more modern and glitzy. The last one was more of a New Age shop with showcases of the newest tarot decks

and crystals. And now, I believe, even that is gone.

Gone are the brass lamps, chairs and unobtrusive sales people. Or was it ever there; were the regulars real or simply phantoms from a long ago Twilight Zone???

The Mummy

Being hooked on books at an early age led to a passion for the New York Public Library as well as the wealth of museums the city had to offer. It seemed that each book I read led to something else. Reading about Ancient Egypt, then seeing the series of Carl Laemmle's Mummy movies drew me to the Metropolitan Museum of Art which had a large Egyptian area, including a tomb brought back from Egypt stone by stone and rebuilt in the museum. On too many days when I should have been in school, I stealthily explored all the twist and turns of that tomb.

I found that, as with most tombs, it had dead-end passage ways to thwart future grave robbers seeking the wealth that was buried with the dead. My fingers traced the hieroglyphics that covered the walls, trying to make some sense out of the strange pictures. In the library I searched out the books on Ancient Egypt by E.A. Wallis Budge, Keeper of the Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities in the British Museum and my young mind tried to understand. I was a kid from the east side of New York and didn't really have anyone I could talk to about it. I visited "my tomb" during school hours when the museum was almost empty. No one bothered my explorations.

I was alone in the tomb and retracing my steps to the now familiar false passage. Coming to the dead end wall I tried again to read the hieroglyphics. Perhaps I would discover the curse made popular by the movies. It was on this visit I found that one

of the stone blocks seemed loose. Being a kid and alone, I had to test just how loose this stone was. I found, to my surprise, that I could ease it out from the wall, and I did, carefully placing it on the floor. I peered inside the dark recess. Thoughts ran through my head. Would I find a hidden cache of the infamous Tana Leaves that could bring life back to the mummy?

With trembling fingers I reached in. My arm was in up to my elbow when my fingers made contact with something. I grasped it and pulled it out. It was a piece of paper, folded many times. I opened it. Even in the dim light of the tomb I immediately recognized the importance of this paper. It was a numbers drop sheet.. something a local bookie would use to lay off bets at the Mob level. Having made extra pin money from time to time running numbers for a bookie in the pool hall I knew I was dealing with powerful forces and put it back.

Running numbers for a bookie consisted of going to all the local candy stores, and other mom and pop stores to pick up the numbers the people bet on. Just about everyone played the numbers back then. No bookie would trust us enough to pick up the cash that was bet. They did that them selves. If you knew what was good for you, you never messed with a pickup. It was just another way to pick up extra cash, like selling newspapers or shining shoes.

Another Hero

Heroes come in many shapes and forms, not all are giants, except perhaps in the minds of their worshippers.

Back in the late thirties, early forties, the times they were a changing. We moved into a tenement on the east side of New York. Across the street there was still a blacksmith shop, but not for long. It was soon torn down to make room for an apartment house.

Horses were vanishing. The wagons that delivered draft beer and coal were being replaced with huge, chain-driven, Mack Trucks. Still, there were the horse-drawn produce wagons with drivers with voices that would carry to the tops of the five- and six-storied tenements telling of their fresh tomatoes, corn, and other goodies.

And then there was "THE ICE MAN", our hero.

In the winter, keeping food cold was simple. It was put in a box on the fire escape. But the sweltering summers of New York were another matter. If there really was something called refrigerators we were only vaguely aware of them. It was the stuff of dreams and only the rich people uptown had them. For us there was THE ICE BOX and the twice daily chore of emptying the water pan underneath; but it also gave us our hero.

Phil, the epitome of masculinity, was our ice man. Tall, lean, thick black curly hair peaking over his shirt. He was a man with the strength of ten, for he was pure in heart.

From his horse drawn wagon, Phil delivered the much needed ice. As kids, we watched in awe as he extracted with his ice pick twenty five to fifty pound blocks of crystal coolness from the huge two hundred pound blocks of ice. He worked with the precision of a surgeon and talent of a sculptor.

All the tenements were walk-ups. Phil, with his pick in a belt holster, would pick up a fifty pounder with his trusty ice tongs and throw it up on his shoulder, protected with a patch of leather, and walk up to the fifth or sixth floor. At each apartment he would custom cut a block of ice to fit your ice box. Single handily, he got us through those terrible hot days. He knew how we all depended on him and he never missed a day. This alone would have been enough in any book to secure his place as a hero, but, to us kids, there was more.

There wasn't much we could do to escape the heat. We could turn on the fire hydrant but the cops or firemen would always turn it off with many vile threats. We could take a dip in the East River, but that always held the possibility of some pretty heavy punishment from our parents. Just because a couple of kids would drown in the undercurrent every week, they thought we shouldn't go swimming there. It wasn't that refreshing anyway, with the sewers regurgitating very yuckie filth; you smelled worse when you came out than when you went in.

Phil came to our rescue daily. The wooden floor of his horse drawn wagon was always strewn with slivers of ice. As he started to make his rounds, he would call out, "Come on kids, hop on.", and we did so as he made his deliveries. Leaning against the canvas covered blocks of ice we sucked on the cold slivers in delight. At the end of his rounds he gave us apples to feed his horse. A city kid could ask for nothing more. I have no idea where Phil is now but the line from Kipling's "Gunga Din" comes to mind. "He'll be sitting on the coals, Giving drinks to poor damned souls, And I'll get a swig in Hell from Gunga Din."

THANKS FOR EVERYTHING, PHIL!

I Don't Want a Haircut

When I was a little kid I loved to go to the barber. There were two barbers on our block. One that most of the adults went to. The other was the favorite of the kids.

It was a small shop, just two chairs but only one barber. One he cut hair in, the other he rested in when not busy. His small apartment was in the back.

A very important consideration back in those days was the fact he only charged twenty-five cents to cut kid's hair.

It was fun to get your hair cut there. He had all sorts of games to play with and when you were finished, he had a big jar of candy that you could take your pick from.

He cut both boys' and girls' hair.

To me it was also a magical kind of place. You sat in the chair facing a big mirror. On the opposite wall there was another big mirror. When you looked in the mirror in front of you there seemed to be hundreds of you reflecting in the mirrors. Each one got smaller and smaller until you almost disappeared. I always wondered where I went. Did I really get smaller and smaller?

All this went out of my head one day. On my way home from school with friends I passed his shop. There were cops all over the place. My first thought was something happened to my barber. The cops wouldn't answer any of our questions and told us to go home.

Later we found out what happened. A mother was worried about how long it was taking her little daughter to come back from the barber shop. She went down to see if she was still there. There was no one in the shop and when she went in she saw the chair was covered with blood. She went to a phone to call the police. They came and found our nice barber sitting at his kitchen table nibbling on pieces of the little girl.

The whole neighborhood was in a state of shock. The barber shop, of course, was closed.

Three months later it was opened again. My mother sent me to get my hair cut.

I peered into the window before going in. He was back!!!

I ran all the way home. "He's back" I screamed hysterically. It took awhile for her to calm me down. Off she went to check it out. She thought he was back too. She went to a pay phone and called the

police. They told her it was the barber's brother who took over the shop.

Regardless of what the cops said there was no way I was ever going back to that place. My mother understood my terror.

This presented a problem. All other barbers charged a dollar to cut kids' hair. At that cost I would get a haircut about once a year.

Pop found an answer. About three blocks away was a barber's school and the haircuts were free. Hey, the students had to practice somewhere.

I don't remember ever getting a student that had passing grades. You never knew what your hair would look like when they finished with you. It was at that time I took to wearing hats. A coincidence? I think not.

To this date, I still hate to have my hair cut. In the Sixties, after coming back from Korea, I just let my hair grow becoming a flower person, much to my wife's distress.

I also hate to go to the dentist for the same reason. I had all my dental work done at The New York School of Dentistry. It was free. The chairs were lined up just like at the barber school, with a waiting-horrified-kid sitting in each chair.

The teacher would come in with several students and work their way up the row of chairs. My most memorable experience was watching this red-headed kid in the chair next to me. One of the students, under the watchful eye of the teacher was trying to extract a tooth.

If I didn't know that I was next it would have been like watching a cartoon.

The student was having all kinds of trouble and wound up with his knee on the kid's chest and twisting and pulling on the tooth. Blood was spurt-

ing from the kid's mouth while a couple of other students were holding him down.

He finally got the tooth out and the assembly moved to my chair with their jackets splattered with blood. I got lucky. Perhaps it was fear. My tooth practically jumped out at the student.

Having to do with nothing, there was a dentist on the second floor of a building on Third Avenue whose sign was in the window. I often wondered why he never changed his name. The sign proudly proclaimed "Doctor Candig" Dentist. Could it have been the dentist that worked on the red headed kid?

The Pitchman

Pop and I never had what you would call a father/son relationship. He didn't treat me like a kid; I was more like a friend, someone he could share things with, a friend and fellow working stiff. He was my guide and my buddy.

Life was more than having fantasies, or stamping out evil. At a very young age I became a shill for my father.

It was sort of an accident that I became a shill. A shill, for those who may not know, has a number of jobs. Aside from helping by carrying the "tripes" or "keister" (tripod and suitcase) , the shill was the first person to stand and watch whatever was being pitched. No one likes to be the first to stop and look, but if there is already someone there they might. For the same reason the shill is the first to reach in his pocket to buy whatever is being pitched.

Another very important job is to watch out for cops, uniform and plainclothes. In most cities you could get a license to pitch. The problem was the license was only good for streets where there were

no people. No self-respecting pitchman ever paid for a license.

While I'm at it I may as well tell you what a pitchman is. For one thing he, or sometimes she, sells things on street corners. A pitchman demonstrates his wares, unlike a peddler who may have a push cart full of merchandise that he sells. There, the only action is the bargaining for the price.

What makes a pitchman different is that he would demonstrate his wares, make it seem easy to use, or something you could not do without. Every pitch was a performance. They not only sold things but entertained the "tip". (The tip is the crowd that gathers around.) A good pitchman can stop a person who thought they had no interest, and with his pitch sell him something he does not need, and make him feel good about it.

Getting back to me, I was only five years old and could not do any of those jobs. On occasions both my Mom and Pop were working at the same time and there was no one to leave me with. Pop would take me with him and make sure I stood right in front of him where he could see me, while he delivered his pitch. The couple of times he was pinched by the cops they let him go when they realized they would have to take me to jail too.

Babysitting me gave Pop an idea. He was pitching the Dot and Dash Lettering System. He sold the pamphlets that had the instructions for a dime (marked down from fifty cents)- a bargain. He demonstrated the ease with which you could make professional looking signs using this simple method. When we got home he taught me to do the Dot and Dash until I could do it almost as well as he did.

Now I was no longer just the kid he was watching, I was his shill. I still stood in front of him, but now when he was ready to turn the tip (stop demonstrating and start selling) he'd look down at me and say, "Sonny, you have been watching me for awhile, do you think you could do it?" I would look up at him and say, "I think so, mister."

He picked me up in his arms so I could reach the easel with the big white pad on it.

"What's your name, sonny?" and I would answer, "Bobby". He handed me the big black crayon that he used and told me to try and write my name. I would look at the pamphlet as if I was studying it for a bit, then with crayon in hand I would write Bobby with the dot and dash system in a flash.

"That's very good Bobby, you have been paying attention." Then he would hand a pamphlet to me. "Here Bobby, you can have this one free."

Then he turned to the tip and said, "If this little kid can do it imagine what you can do with it." Everybody reached for their dimes to buy.

By the time I was six I knew how to spot a cop in or out of uniform. When I saw one I called out "Slough" which meant fold it up and get out of there.

If there was an Olympic event for closing a keister and tripod from a dead stop Pop would have had a closet full of gold medals.

Surviving

A little background. My father was born in a small coal mining town in Pennsylvania. This was long before there were unions. The company owned everything, the houses the miners and their families lived in, the store where they bought their food and other necessities, and even the church.

If you remember the line in the song, "Sixteen Tons", "St. Peter don't you call me, cause I can't go, I owe my soul to the company store." That line pretty much sums it up for what life was like for those cold miners and their families back then.

At the age of twelve my father was working in the mines, pushing the coal carts.

There was a cave-in that took his father, his uncles as well as many of the men of the town.

He stayed in town for a year to make sure his mother was all right, then took to the road. He rode the rails, living the life of a hobo for a year or so. He told me many times about his youth.

"It was tough for a kid, between the railroad bulls and their dogs, and some of the hobos trying to take advantage of the kids, but I was getting to see the country and learned a lot of things for survival. At one stop there was a carnival playing in the town and I was able to talk myself into a job with them. At first I did odd jobs for them, then after a year they gave me a booth to run with games of chance. Another year and I graduated to become the talker for the Ten-In-One. I traveled with the carnival for several years then quit the carnival to try my hand at Vaudeville. By this time I was in love with traveling. I stayed with vaudeville for a few years, being one of the many minor acts, doing recitations, and female impersonations. Finally I struck out on my own, becoming a pitchman." I was so proud of Pop when he told me all this.

There were all sorts of things we had to do to survive when things were bad during the depression. My mother and father took turns going to the open market on 29th Street between Second and Third Avenue. There were fruit and produce stands, meat markets, fresh fish stores with barrels of live fish swimming around.

My mother went to the butcher shops and smiled her way to some free ham bones. She always took me and my brother along. My brother was still in her arms. This was always good for a few free slices of baloney. Then she would head for the bakery and promote a loaf of day old bread. I don't know if they gave it to her because they liked her or to get my

screaming little brother out of the shop. Everyone had a part to play.

My father would hit the produce stores, asking and getting the greens they cut off the carrots and beets. He always said the greens had more nutrition than what they kept to sell. He was always a great storyteller and everyone looked forward to seeing him, even if he didn't spend any money. By the time he left he had a bag full of bruised fruit and vegetables. The hobo training was still paying off.

My mother then put it all together into a big stew that would last us for a few days.

Evenings I'd buy newspapers from the delivery truck. I bought them at the same price they were sold at the newsstand. They were two cents each and I would buy fifty then make the rounds of the bars and sell them for two cents each and hope for tips. The drunker my customers were the bigger the tips. I'd get home about ten at night and dump the change on the kitchen table. Everything went into the pot and every little thing helped.

At one point we had hit rock bottom and my father signed us up for home relief. He hated doing it. To him it was like admitting he had failed. Before we ever got a check a woman from the home relief board came to inspect our flat to make sure we were really entitled to the benefits. I don't remember what she really looked like, but in my mind now the image of the woman in the Wizard of Oz who took Dorothy's dog, Toto, away in the basket on her bike always comes to mind.

The first thing she did was open our ice box to see if we had too much food. There was no problem there. Then she spotted an old table radio that someone gave us. One of the knobs was missing and the body was held together with tape. She told us, "Anyone on relief was not allowed to have such luxuries and we would have to sell it before we could get a check."

My father pushed her out of the flat and exercised great self control. He wanted to throw her down the stairs. We never did go on relief; Pop found some other way to get by.

Once a month we really put on the feed bag. On Third Street, between Second and First Avenue, there was a very large apartment that the Communist Party rented. Back in the depression, Communist was not a dirty word. They were instrumental in organizing much needed unions. The vast amount of people in the country were out of work, many near starving.

Anyone who offered something where everyone would get a piece of the pie had support, not only from the very poor, but educators, people in the entertainment industry, and just about anyone with some compassion.

Once a month the place on Third Street would hold an open house. Anyone could go, and it was free. The attraction was the big spread of food they put out. That, plus great entertainment, mostly folk singers. I saw Woody Guthrie, Josh White, Leadbelly, Paul Robeson, Burl Ives, and many more. For these singers this was not a regular gig. Do your bit, pick up the check and leave. They were there at the beginning and at the end. They listened to the speeches and sometimes added their own two bits. They were not snobs. They would mingle and talk to anyone.

My father played the harmonica and always had it with him. I remember him asking some of the singers if they knew this or that song that he had picked up when he was on the road in his hobo days. When they were not familiar with it, he would whip out the mouth organ and play the tune. They were all collectors of any kind of folk music and were always interested in learning more.

They'd go off to a corner with Pop and he would sing the words until they had them. Pop's voice was nothing special when singing but he could carry the tune and they were very kind to him. They also

asked him about his hobo days and he was in his glory. He might not have been able to sing, but he sure knew how to talk.

Of course, as a kid it was the music I remembered.

Josh White had a beautiful voice, higher than I expected. Paul Robeson and Leadbelly were two big men with voices to match their size. When Robeson opened his mouth the room almost vibrated with his deep basso voice. The first time I heard Leadbelly I had trouble understanding his words, but I caught on after awhile, and that twelve-string guitar was something else again.

Woody looked like he just got off skid row but when he started to play and sing everyone in the room was clapping their hands and singing with him; he had a magic about him. I don't remember all who came and don't know if Pete Seeger was among them, but he reminds me of Woody today and has the same effect on any audience. I became a folk song junkie at a very young age.

I didn't know any of their names when I first went to these meetings, but Pop did. We had an old crank up phonograph and when we got home, well fed, he would dig through his pile of the old 78 records and pull out the ones of the people we just heard at the open house.

We'd gather around that old machine and have our own hootenanny. A funny thing, my brother Bob was still too young to read, but after awhile Pop would ask him to get a certain record from the stacks that sat on the floor and he would go through them and always come up with the right record. Pop used to love to show off this remarkable talent during the Saturday Night Parties. To this day my brother has no idea how he did it.

We went to the open house once a month. Before we went the first time I remember Pop telling me, "Enjoy the music and eat as much as I liked, but not to pay attention to the talks that came later. They all meant well but it just doesn't work." Then