

Hometown Denial

By Michael J. Atwood

In my first article, I stated that my family moved to North Attleborough in 1976. That's how I remember it. It was a cold day in February and I was five. We drove here in my Mom's Chevrolet wagon. But my father recently informed me that we actually left Rhode Island in 1977. It's funny how memory works.

Lately, I've been listening to the way my father remembers things and often wonder how accurate they are. But, in the end, it doesn't matter; the real gift is that he is still able to share them with me and my wife and my children. But today is different. Today my father, who lived in North Attleborough for thirty years, tells me that he never called it home.

"It's where I slept," he says over a cold Budweiser. "But it wasn't my home."

"You lived in the same house for thirty years, Dad," I remind him. "Exactly how is that not your home?"

He takes a swig from his beer and shakes his head.

"Nah," he says. "Never really related to the place. It wasn't for me."

I roll my eyes and look across at my wife, who sips a red wine and tries not spit it out as she laughs.

"But your kids grew up in North Attleborough. You were there for half your life," she says incredulously. "If that isn't home, what is?"

"It just wasn't for me," my dad insists. "I couldn't relate to the place."

However, my father does relate to the South Shore. He always has. He grew up there after his parents moved from Boston in 1932 so they could raise their new son outside of the city. I think of my own move from Los Angeles to North Attleboro and my own worries when I hear that story. My grandfather drove an ambulance and my grandmother was a nurse's aid at Boston City Hospital. They rented a small apartment in Charlestown but it was too cramped for three. They wanted a house and a yard. They wanted peace and quiet. They wanted a place to call home.

I remain silent as I listen to my father's hometown denial. We are at a pub in Scituate with my son who sits across the table reciting addresses that he's recently learned and my daughter is busy eating oyster crackers.

My father, who is 76, has never refrained from speaking his mind. But many times, he'll say these absurd things to get my reaction. To some, it's actually quite entertaining. He sees the waitress and flags her down.

"We're ready to order, Miss. I'll have the Chicken Parmesan, mashed potatoes, and the beets," he blurts without hesitation before she can even get out her pad. "I have to get my walk in on Nantasket before dark."

The waitress looks at him stoically and then takes the rest of our orders. I glance across at my old man and wonder if he's really serious this time.

If I live in North Attleborough for thirty years, would I not consider it my hometown?

Granted, the South Shore is a favorable place to live. They have high real estate values, great schools, lacrosse programs, kids learning to sail and studying Latin on

summer vacations. There's the ocean. It's the home of Bill Belichick, Tim Wakefield, Aerosmith and the Farrelly Brothers. Enough said.

But it's different than North Attleborough and some here find it a bit pretentious. My mother despised the region. When we'd camp in Wompatuck State Park, she'd slap away the mosquitoes and continually mutter things like, "Why didn't we go to the Cape?" She'd trade a two months on the South Shore for a day in N.A.. It just wasn't her style.

Dinner finally comes and everyone digs in. My kids devour chicken fingers and fries and my son demands more clam chowder. Then, we share a rare silence.

"I first came to North Attleborough in 1975," my father interjects after a few bites. "You were four, same age as your so. Just a little guy."

The stoic waitress passes by and my dad points his fork to his glass, signaling a refill of Bud. She nods with a frown.

"Your mother dropped me off at the Super Bowl game at B.U.... It was damn cold. I told her I'd take the train back but I got talking to these folks from North Attleborough after the game. Eventually, they heard I was going to take the train and they offered to give me a ride."

"What?" I say. "You rode back with the football team?"

"No," he replies irritated. "It was the gridiron club. Parents, nice folks, very friendly."

"Weren't we living in Rhode Island in 1975?"

“Yeah. I read about the North team in *The Globe*. They were damn good. Bob Guthrie was the coach. He won a couple of Super Bowls before Beaupre took over in 1976. Then Beaupre won more. Great football coaches.”

I shake my head in disbelief. This story has to be fiction.

“When your sister was born. We needed a larger house and I wanted to be closer to work. But, your grandparents were still back there. So we compromised: North Attleborough. It was half-way between,” he says pushing his empty plate away from him.

I don't remember my parents compromising on much. Don't get me wrong, they had a happy marriage but they were two separate souls. So for a geographical location serving as a solution, I am rather impressed.

“We first looked for houses on Anawan Road. I liked it but then we saw the house on Colburn and that was that. It was big. We couldn't pass it up,” he says. “We'll get some ice cream across the street.”

“Ice cream!” my son says gleefully.

When the bill comes, my father grabs it and pays.

“Well,” I say. “This has been an informative dinner. I'll be sure to let everyone know back in North about your hometown denial.”

He looks at me and shakes his head.

“Listen, fella,” he says intensely. “This is my home. Right, here, the South Shore. You got it? I want some respect here.”

“Yeah,” I reply. “I got it.”

“And for your information, the next time I’ll be spending any extended time in North Attleborough is when they bury me next to your mother in St. Mary’s Cemetery,” he says firmly. “You got it?”

I smile, sip my own beer, and smile at my son across the table.

“Yeah, Dad,” I reply with a smirk. “I got it.”