

My Gang

Sometimes when I'm asked where I grew up, I reference a classic Jim Croce song and reply, "South Side of Chicago, Leroy Brown country." And sometimes I even add the warning that "I'm meaner than a junkyard dog." I'm not really, of course, but when I was growing up there I often wished I were. Being mean and tough were highly valued traits. Even more so now, it seems.

My Alma Mater, Harper High, barely made the news in 2012 when it logged 29 shootings, eight fatal. This just wasn't newsworthy, for it wasn't a single incident with multiple victims in a quiet, middle class school, like Columbine or Newtown. Gun violence in lower class American high schools just isn't news. The only thing notable about Harper High that year was the somewhat above average tally.

Chicago is divided into 77 police districts, and Harper is in Englewood, which now ranks at the top for violent crime. It is virtually a war zone, a gang war zone. And it isn't a war between just two opposing gangs. Instead there are dozens of largely disorganized, but well armed, gangs with ever shifting alliances. Membership is mandatory and solely determined by your street address.

It was different back in the sixties. It certainly was a tough neighbourhood, but compared to today, it was pretty tame. We did have a couple of cops whose beat was our high school, and their pictures appear in our yearbook. Guns weren't hard to come by, although not as many—or used as often as now. I do remember the last day of school before summer break, when the police raided all the lockers before the end of classes and carried out armloads of weapons to their waiting paddy wagons. I witnessed this because I'd had a free period and was standing at the school store across from the main entrance having a smoke. I'd heard rumours of something heavy going down, but I hadn't realized how many armaments had been stored in preparation for it.

In those days, the violence in our neighbourhood was not primarily gang violence. It was racial violence, and there were just two warring factions. The colour of your skin was the equivalent of mandatory 'gang colours'. Your address did predict which side you were on, but only because the neighbourhood was so totally segregated: if you were white you lived west of the major street, Ashland Avenue; if you were black you lived east of this border. Harper was two half blocks west of my house, but its school district extended east past Ashland, which was two half blocks east, into the black neighbourhood. So the black kids always traveled to and from school in large groups for their own safety.

There were some real gangs, but they were comprised of older youths. As far as I ever knew, none of my fellow students were members. These gangs were viewed with great respect—and fear. Again membership was determined by race. The Blackstone Rangers were, aptly named, black. The 69th Street Loafers, perhaps also aptly named, were the white gang. The former eventually achieved some notoriety as they expanded their territory and became more organized. But the local heroes for the white kids were the 69th

Street Loafers, including the local chapter, the Lil Loafers. I remember one persistent rumour that every Saturday night they would drive east of Ashland and randomly shoot a black guy just walking down the street. I doubt the veracity of this rumour, which is not to say that random shootings didn't occur.

So gangs, in the conventional sense, weren't part of my years at Harper High. But in another sense, I did belong to a 'gang'. It was comprised of the kids in my neighbourhood whose lives outside of school were lived on the streets. Most of them went to the Catholic high school, St. Rita's. We had no name or official membership or 'colours'. We were loosely defined somewhat like the "The Little Rascals" of those "Our Gang" early comedic films, although our mischief was a little more substantial.

We played softball or touch football on the street, giving drivers who interrupted our games a hard time by pounding on their car as they tried to get past us. We stole cigarettes from the dashboards of unlocked cars, occasionally doing a night run to add to our hubcap collections. We collaborated on relatively minor acts of vandalism. We challenged each other to dares, such as walking at night the four half-blocks from Ashland east through the black neighbourhood to the El station. We played "tough guy" games like exchanging punches to the upper arm until one of us flinched. The flincher then had to submit to a punch in the gut. Or we'd do that trick with a knife where you spread out your hand on a flat surface and stab back and forth between your fingers as fast as you can, trying to make the most harmless strikes in sixty seconds.

Only occasionally were any of us involved in serious violence, although a few of us carried knives, and we all knew the emergency self-defence measure of snapping off the nearest car antenna for use as a whip. Our fights were usually among ourselves, and rarely was anyone seriously hurt. A bloody nose or broken finger usually was the extent of any damage inflicted.

For most of the kids in my 'gang', this was their life. And for many—if not most—of them it foreshadowed their future. I'd estimate that many of them ended up 'graduating' to the army or to jail.

I was fortunate in having a life separate from my street 'gang'. I was in that small percentage of the students at Harper who were in the Honours classes and allegedly were being groomed for college. The school's catch basin also extended west and reached to what was then a more middle class neighbourhood, and, not surprisingly, most of the kids in Honours went home to those less mean streets. Also not surprisingly a substantial number were Jewish, something I only noticed because of their much envied absence on Jewish holidays. But there were a few 'brainy' types in my neighbourhood with whom I had a different, less superficial, relationship. With them I could share my real passions and interests, which would've been of no interest to my buddies on the street.

Then, apparently unlike now, it was possible and even relatively easy to distance yourself from the world of the street. Parents could usually keep their children from running wild

with the neighbour kids. My future wife lived half a block away from me. I still tease her about growing up “in a bubble”, because she really didn’t get to know much about the street life of her own neighbourhood. Her parents were “displaced persons”, recent immigrants from Germany, and were outsiders who shared more of the values, if not the resources, of the parents of the kids from the more affluent neighbourhood to the west. She was in the Honours program, and her life outside of school was limited to family and a few carefully chosen friends. I think that perhaps she missed out on something.

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The fact is that I remember my street pals with affection. I certainly wasn’t close with any of them, and I wouldn’t call any of them real *friends*. They were just my pals. Some of them could fairly be labeled “losers”. But we shared something that is important, if difficult to define. I don’t know from personal experience the bond that servicemen feel for each other after serving together, but although the Harper High neighbourhood wasn’t then the war zone it has become, I feel it isn’t an entirely different kind of nostalgic camaraderie I feel for my ‘gang’. Perhaps this is because I was (and still am) such a loner that I savour this remembrance of being a virtually anonymous and interchangeable member of a group, a group that just accepted me without requiring any qualifications other than simply being there.

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But then, unlike now, membership was voluntary. I don’t like to think that I was merely slumming, like a wealthy tourist visiting a relatively safe barrio to have a more direct experience of poverty, but I knew I was only just visiting my ‘gang’ and could go home to my books and my basement lab. For too many kids now, far more dangerous gangs are their only home.

—Ken Stange

“Prologue” is the introduction to a work-in-progress: *Chicago Days: Growing Up Absurd On The South Side*, a memoir.

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