

Wednesday, April 22, 2009

The Wonder Years



Who could forget the popular television show, “The Wonder Years” starring the young Fred Savage. The show chronicled everyday life of the fictional Kevin Arnold growing up in the 60’s and his on again off again love affair with Winnie Cooper.

For me, the wonder years were 1955 to 1960. In the summer of 1955, our family, which then consisted of myself, my mom, and three younger sisters moved to a little town located on the Suisun Bay about 30 miles northeast of San Francisco. The town was called Port Chicago. I was nine years old. We were dirt poor but fortunate to have a mother that hung in there, determined to make a life for her four kids.

Port Chicago had a population of less than 2000 and was famous, or should I say infamous, for the worst state-side disaster of World War II. In July of 1944, 320 sailors were killed in an accidental explosion that history would dub as the Port Chicago Mutiny. The collateral damage from the blast was massive and its effects were felt for several miles. The event has been the subject of several books and media accounts over the years, and there was even a movie made about it. A detailed account can be found [here](#).

But here comes the real story. Last week I rolled out of bed at my usual time of 5:00 AM or so. It was April 15, tax day. Like many in this e-culture of ours, I get most of my news online and that morning was no exception. For some reason though, I got sidetracked, and started thinking about my childhood days in Port Chicago, and the kids that I ran with during those formative pre-teen wonder years.

So I hit the Google trail and came upon a book review on Amazon.com entitled “Port Chicago –Images of America”, written by Dean L. McLeod. This find turned out to be a treasure chest of old photos of my adopted home town. One of the photos pictured a Naval Memorial erected at the site of the explosion in memory of the victims that died in that 1944 disaster. Flanking the monument in the photo were two people - a park ranger and a Port Chicago native named Ken Rand.

Ken Rand was his real name, but I knew him as Kenny Whitmore. Kenny Whitmore was my best friend during my Wonder Years in Port Chicago. He went by Whitmore then, because, like myself, he was the product of a broken home and for some reason it was decided that it would be better to use the same last name as his mother and new stepfather

to avoid confusion. Little did I know that he would eventually reclaim his birth surname in adulthood, which explains why I was never able to uncover any trace of him during my searches over the last 50 years. You see, I was looking for Kenny Whitmore, not Ken Rand.

As it turns out, Ken Rand became a successful journalist, relocating to Wyoming and later Utah. In between real jobs, he wrote over a dozen books and countless short stories, creating his own original genre in the process which I would describe as a humoristic blend of science fiction and the Twilight Zone, against a backdrop of the old west. Go figure! But that's what I would expect from the Kenny Whitmore that I knew.

Among his writings were three serious documentaries about Port Chicago, the most notable being "Port Chicago Isn't There Anymore – But We Still Call It Home". In his Introduction, which can be found [here](#), he describes the life and times of the people in this little rural community by the bay. Unfortunately, none of these books ever hit the NY Times best seller list due to the limited pool of patrons that would care much about this little town with the funny name. But for Kenny, I'm sure it was a labor of love and I'm sure he felt that someone had to do it, and why not him?

I was elated with my discovery. I found his Blog and perused his online book store. I spent the next two hours reading excerpts from his books and short stories. Already an hour past the time when I should have been heading to the office, I fired off an email to him in hopes of getting an answer and rekindling a relationship that had come to an abrupt halt in 1960 when I moved away from Port Chicago.

That afternoon, I received a reply to my email. It was from his daughter, Molly. In her own words, this is what she said...

Dear Woody,

This is Ken Rand's daughter, Molly. Dad is dying from a very rare intestinal cancer. He will pass possibly this week. He's glad to hear from you. Please take care and thank you for getting in touch with him.

Sincerely,

Molly Rand Wyatt

Needless to say I was overcome with a mixture of grief, emotion, and wonderment. Why did I pick this particular morning to so aggressively seek out an old friend, an act that I had virtually neglected for the past 50 years? And to think this effort occurred during what could possibly be the last week of his life, makes the action even more remarkable.

I exchanged a couple more emails with Molly that day, one of which I recalled some details of our boyhood adventures. In Molly's reply she said she read this to her Dad, and he smiled. I guess I was hoping that in some small way that I could bring some spiritual

comfort to Kenny and his family by the mere fact that a friend from a half century ago suddenly emerged out of nowhere with a seemingly unexplainable need to make contact with him. And so it went. That was my day on Wednesday, April 15, 2009. It was Tax Day.

And finally, there is this inscription that appears on the July 30, 1988 memorial to those that died in the Vietnam War...

“To the people of Port Chicago:
Port Chicago’s gone forever more.
Things will never be the way they were before.
But people who pass through it say to people who knew it.
What a pretty little town it must have been” - Tom Gott, 1969