February 22, 2014

Dear Karen,

Please consider this writing for the southwestern Virginia Hometown Memories book. The content describes how I remember some of my childhood baseball experiences in Lee County. Since you asked for a letter, I wrote this as a letter to my dad, my kids and my grandkids. I hope you enjoy it as much as I have enjoyed creating it. It was your request spurred me into putting it together.

Thanks,

Dave

Here is my premise for the letter that I will include for you and my family but is not really a part of the story.

Note: Here I am in 2014 at age 67, still thinking about baseball in the old days. I started playing baseball when I was 7. In my 20’s, my coaching career began as soon as my playing days were over. For 60 years, baseball has been a constant, daily companion. Now, I am a dad and grandpa with 7 kids and 12 grandkids. With this letter to them and their spouses, I want to give them a little insight into me.

 For the love of baseball – The making of us

Dear Family,

 Leona Mines, a coal mining camp in the hills of Virginia, is my birthplace. This true coal camp had coal trains, coal mines and coal miners. Our community was complete with a one room school, only one neighbor with a phone and two with televisions. People gathered at church, “hog killins” and the Blue Diamond Coal Company commissary. Like most kids, we dug in the dirt, played in the creek, climbed into sand houses, crawled all over coal gons and watched for our kin (Poppaw Audia) to come out of the Monarch mine. There was no room for baseball. Lucky for me, baseball found me at age 7 when we moved to Pennington Gap. That’s the story I want you to know.

On Leigh Avenue, across from our yard was a lone boy playing with a bat, ball and glove. My brother, Louis and I or should I say, “me n Louis” went over to play with him. He showed us how the tools of baseball worked; how to “play baseball”. Since that day, baseball has been my game. And, that boy (Ronnie Edwards) in the field never had to play by himself again. From then through high school, it was “me n Louis n Ronnie”. We are still all close friends today.

 As I grew up learning to love baseball in the 1950’s, the times were full of great Yankee teams and players with legendary talent on and off the field. Joe DiMaggio was going out of baseball and out with Marilyn Monroe. Mickey Mantle was coming on by taking DiMaggio’s heroics on the field but never with the same dignity as the “Yankee Clipper” on or off the field. Yogi Berra was an unlikely looking 3 time MVP until he swung the bat. Whitey Ford pitched the Yankees to victory in every important game. The 50’s were exciting times in pro baseball.

In those days before we had television, “me n Louis n Ronnie” huddled by the radio to listen to games and sports reports. Every afternoon, we raced for the sports page to read about out teams, our heroes and the enemy teams. We studied stats, knew every player on our team and just about every other team.

Though we hung every word we heard or read about pro baseball, our real passion was the playing our games in the yard. There, with no fans, and not really enough players, we breathed and lived baseball as exciting, and just as important to the making of memories as any professional game could be. These times were “the making of us”.

I can still see and hear the radio that Mom allowed us to put at the open window just above where we played. With the Yankees or the Reds on, our summer days were spent acting out the action we heard as we became the likes of Mickey and Yogi with teammates named Whitey,

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Hank, Billy, Gil and Don. Occasionally, one of us would have to run off to chop wood for the cook stove, to burn trash or feed the rabbits, but “the game” continued. I didn’t care that Ronnie got to be Mickey and Louis got to be Yogi, as long as I got to hit too.

As we reached little league age, Ronnie played for the Sluggers, one of four teams at Leeman Field. Louis played for the Legions. I joined Louis the next year when I turned 8. Putting on that uniform and walking with Ronnie and Louis to Leeman Field are memories that will never go away. Sometimes we walked through town and sometimes we took the shortcut behind the school and over the hill. Games with entire teams, coaches, umpires, bases and a few fans were thrilling. At 8, I played right field, because I was young and inexperienced. In my second year, I played 2nd base because I learned to catch ground balls. Sometimes I got to play the “pigtail” position too. The “pigtail” played near the backstop well behind the umpire. Since it was a long way to the backstop, the “pigtail” retrieved the overthrown or missed pitches to save time. The “pigtail” got lots of action. I loved it. It was a few years later that I realized that the “pigtail” position wasn’t really a part of the game.

Leeman Field was built in the 1930s to be the largest enclosed baseball park in the world. It held that distinction in the Guinness Book of World Records for years. Still operational today, Leeman was home to the professional Lee Bears and Lee Miners, the Pennington High baseball team, the Lee County Fair and our little league program.

In the summer of 1956, “me and Louis n Ronnie” made the All Star team. At practice, two days before going to the big game in Abingdon, Coach Carl Ely called Marshall Beatty and me over. He told us that we could not play in the game due to our age. By national little league rules we were too young to be on the team. We lost 1-0 to Abingdon on a wild pitch in the bottom of the last inning.

That year, Dad and Mom ordered “me n Louis” each a glove from the Sears, Roebuck catalog. When the package arrived, we ripped into the boxes. My new leather glove smelled so good. For many weeks after, I took my glove to bed at night, holding it up to my nose as I dreamed of playing baseball. Even today, the aroma of new leather takes my mind back to when I was 7 or 8, sleeping with my baseball glove.

Our Uncle Joe loved baseball too. He said Joe DiMaggio was the best ever and that we should play only baseball. Usually he showed up just as our unraveled ball had been retaped for its last life. Getting out of his ‘51 Chevy, he arrived holding a little round paper bag with the top all twisted. Tossing that bag with a shiny, new baseball inside, to us with a smile on his face, Uncle Joe was our hero.

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In my 8th grade year, Dad’s job with Blue Diamond Coal Company required that he work in Hellier, Kentucky. We moved to nearby Elkhorn City. The summer after 8th grade, I made a Pony league team. After only one game, due to Blue Diamond’s shut down of coal operations in Hellier, we moved back to Pennington Gap.

In our high school days, the “games” had to move out of the yard. As Pennington High Bobcats, Ronnie was a pitcher and 3rd baseman, Louis was a 1st baseman, outfielder and pitcher, and I played shortstop. During the 1960/61 school year, we won the Lee County Championship with a playoff win over Keokee. Coached by Joe Robinson, our teammates were Larry “Skunkman” Parsons, Larry “Bird” Ely, “Mayor” Hughes, Tom “Meatball” Ely, Jerry Pridemore, Milliard “Mickey” Smith, Carl Smith, Pat Tritt and Mike Robinson.

We never won the county championship again but high school baseball was still the best. Being outside in the spring air made daily practices a reward. The entire school day schedule was changed for baseball. Our games were at 1 o’clock. Students could pay a dime to attend the games. The schedule was adjusted so students wouldn’t miss the same classes on every game day. I can still hear our Principal, Prof Beeler, announcing over the intercom that the baseball team could now be excused. After a special, early lunch, we put on our uniforms. What a satisfying experience that was to be in a Bobcat baseball uniform, on the baseball field, under the warm sun and with classmates cheering us on, playing the game we loved. Whether I went hitless or had 4 hits didn’t matter too much. I felt like a winner either way.

We had no organized summer leagues during our high school years. We formed our own by calling players we knew from neighboring towns like St. Charles, Dryden, Flatwoods and Jonesville to schedule games. Our favorite field was at the Cumberland Bowl Park in Jonesville. A well suited area for games, the park gave us fans, too. People from all around, caught parts of our games as they went to and from other activities in the park. In those days of few phones and cars, I am still surprised at how well our system worked.

In those days of segregation, our friends, who happened to be black, formed a team too. “Me n Louis n Ronnie” never felt as honored as we did when these friends asked us to play with them. In the absence of some of their regulars, they came searching for us. Playing on this team with players like John Livingston, who could “hit it a mile” and Steve Parkey, who could hit, field and pitch with the best, we almost never played our normal positions. Don and Fred Hammonds played short and second with such grace and strength that I was more than happy to move over to 3rd. We played in places like Chevrolet, Kentucky and Bullet Park in Big Stone Gap, Virginia.

Our cousin, Hershel McElyea of Lee County, was a catcher for the “Class D” pro teams at Leeman Field in the late 40’s and 50’s. In the late 50’s and early 60’s, that level of baseball

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lost popularity in Lee County. Players migrated to Wise County to play in the Lonesome Pine semi-pro league. Hershel got “me and Louis” an invitation to play for Clintwood with him. Though we had roles as fill in players for the older, wiser and better players, “me n Louis” made the team. Among our teammates were cousin Hershel, Swede Sage, Lawrence Statzer, Gene Parsons, Don Williams, Jack Rasnic and even Frank Scott for one game. The regular players got paid from a hat passed around between games of the doubleheader. Louis and I had to sign amateur contracts to maintain amateur status and we never got paid. The owner, Mr. Daniels, did make sure we ate our fill of the team fried chicken dinners his wife had prepared, then packed into the trunk of their car. We traveled faithfully every Sunday to places like Clintwood, Castlewood, Dante, Hurley, Haysi, Grundy, Coeburn and St. Paul to play two.

As the mid 60’s came, as I moved on to Berea College, as the coal industry declined, the amateur and semipro baseball in Lee County faded away. Playing 3rd base at Berea under Coach C. H. Wyatt for 4 years took my attention. I intended to play semi pro ball again after college. Things changed. My boyhood dreams of being drafted by the Yankees after college were altered. Instead of the Yankees or any other pro team, it was President Nixon and the United States Armed Forces who selected me. My serious playing days ended. My coaching days were set to begin. Marriage, military and kids helped me with my decision to coach. That decision kept me “in the game”

Love,

David and Dad and Poppaw

PS - Coaching baseball was an excuse to stay close to the game and to you all. More than wanting to win games and train players, I coached because I wanted to play the games with you. My constant sports’ companions changed from “me n Louis n Ronnie” to “me n you”. I love having my baseball background, formed by all those hours of playing mountain baseball in Bonny Blue, St. Charles and Pennington Gap. It was and is such a blessing from God. Just the same, I have loved playing with you. If we could, I would love to do it all again with you. And, if I had the chance to once again to play the games with my brother Louis, my “brother” Ronnie and my Sear’s glove in our yard in Pennington Gap, I would be a very happy boy!