

D.C. Kid

I grew up in the Nation's Capital, the city of Washington, D.C. The moniker D. C. and where it came from is usually not well known unless you are from the environs of the city. The designation D.C. or District of Columbia was the name given to the city by the presidential commission appointed to purchase the land. They didn't like Federal City or Federal Town as it had been called. Designed by a Frenchman, Pierre L'Enfant, Washington became a beautiful city. A Capitol Building of gleaming white limestone and marble sits atop capitol hill overlooking the Mall and an array of stately Greco-Roman government buildings and monuments stretching all the way to the Potomac River. From there you can see the Washington Monument touching the sky with the majesty of the Lincoln Memorial in the distance behind it. Half way down the Mall to the right sits the home of our president, the White House. Further down on the left is the Tidal Basin and the Jefferson Memorial. North of the Capitol you find Union Station, an architectural monument, that was once a rail transportation hub for the nation. Union Station is filled with beautiful historic statuary and surrounded by fountains. The US Post office is next door and at one time all the nations major hotels were just across the plaza. South of the Capitol is the Rayburn House Office Building, one of the largest buildings in the city. It is a magnificent white limestone edifice to the once Speaker of the House of Representatives, Sam Rayburn. East of the capitol you'll discover the Supreme Court and the Library of Congress. The Supreme Court is another beautiful limestone and marble structure but visitors are more often struck by what goes on there and come away with a feeling of reverence. The library of Congress is the largest library in the world, but what I remember about it is reading the Declaration of Independence. When I was a boy, it was displayed in a glass case in the lobby and anyone could go to see it. I remember reading it and feeling pride at being an American.

D.C. is full of people and my Mother used to say there were three types; politicians, bureaucrats and regular people. I knew a politician once, Eleanor Roosevelt. My Mother was the cook for Henry Wallace, Vice President of the United States and somehow all us kids got to mingle, at least until we were about eight to ten years old. You even had duties to perform and one of mine was attendance at Mrs. Roosevelt's summer brunches. They seemed elegant affairs, yet a burden to an eight year old kid like me. We dined on a large screened-in summer porch. Everything was white, the tables, walls, ceiling and even the limestone floor. Mrs. Roosevelt and some important ladies sat on a raised dais at the front of the porch, her guests at tables below and us kids on wooden bench seat picnic tables at the rear. The food was great, it just took such a long time to get there. First there was talk and juice; I guess the ladies had coffee. Then there was talk and some tiny pastry. Finally, you got to eat but that was soon followed by talking from Mrs. Roosevelt. When Mrs. Roosevelt stepped down from the platform, you knew it was time for the parade. All the kids had to get up, go forward and greet Mrs. Roosevelt. You went up two at a time, girls from the left and boys from the right. When you got to the line, a bit of black tape marking the floor, you stopped; girls curtsied and boys stood straight. Then in unison you would say, "Good Morning, Mrs. Roosevelt". She knew us all by name and would greet us with a hearty, "Good Morning". Then she would have a casual question or comment. I remember her telling me on time, "I loved your Mother's dumplings". When she finished and looked up, that was your signal to exit the screen door on your side of the porch; and it better not slam. Finally, at long long last, you had gotten out to play.

As a boy, Mrs. Roosevelt was a pain-in-the-rear, but now that I'm older I feel it was a privilege to have known her.

I'd been away for about ten years when I returned home to D.C. I flew into Dulles Airport, they were just beginning construction when I left. Looks like they did the job right too; it's a big beautiful edifice suitable for Washington, D.C. The beltway and freeway systems were new and driving was a lot easier. I had a little time so I thought I would drive through town and take a look at our old house before going to my Dad's apartment in Upper Marlborough. Upper Marlborough, that was a place for farmers when I was a kid. I could hardly believe that it was full of apartment houses now. I crossed Memorial Bridge, drove past the Lincoln Memorial and headed down Constitution Ave. It was the Washington I knew and it felt good to be back there again. I hooked a right over to Independence Ave. and headed up the hill on the south side of the Capitol. There was something different; it was the Rayburn Office Building. I was struck by its size. I just had difficulty relating to how huge and how white it was. The old Independence Ave next to the Capitol was a line of old two story red brick colonial row houses. They were old and small and run down but that's where our first congressman lived when we moved the Capitol from Philadelphia in 1800. As I drove past I remember thinking, "Loosing those houses must have given those Historical Preservation Gals a fit" and I realized I kind of missed those old houses too.

On down Pennsylvania Ave I went across the Anacostia River then left on Minnesota Ave. We were coming into my old neighborhood, the place where I grew up, and things were looking a little strange. By the time I got to my house on East Capitol Street there was anxiety in my body. Things had changed and I expected that but there was something else; things seemed smaller. Minnesota Ave wasn't the main thoroughfare I remembered; it was just a two lane road. The terrace up to our front lawn wasn't twelve feet high; it turned out to be about half that. Our house had shrunk too; it's funny how it had become so much narrower. Sure time resolved all those differences and got everything back in proper perspective, but I learned something that day. I learned the true importance of childhood memories and how cherished they actually are. They are truly bigger than life.

John Marinshaw
248-7897
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