

Friday Night Boys' Club

At week's end, many hours of toil drifted away with the storytelling.

Memories of Friday nights from the summer of '53 wash over me like frothy waves on a hot, sandy beach, cooling and soothing me before retreating into the past.

In my sixth year, I saw my grandfathers as two tall pillars on which the weight of our large family rested. They were giants in my eyes. Dziadzia (Polish for grandfa-ther), at 6-foot-2, and Grandpa "Vots," an inch taller, were both strongly built immigrants from Poland who believed that hard work brought success.

And work they did, in the factories and foundries of South Milwaukee, Wisconsin, lifting more weight than I believed was humanly possible. My mother took me to visit Grandpa Vots at the foundry one day, and she cried on the drive home after having seen how hard he worked for a living.

Then, just in time to revive everyone, glorious Friday afternoon arrived. I'd wait for the bus to drop off my granddads, and we would walk, hand in hand, to my dziadzia's home.

The Friday after-work ritual meant a walk to the corner bar to cash payroll checks. Sometimes I'd go along for the guaranteed nickel bag of potato chips and a small glass of Orange Crush soda.

I'll never forget the heady mixture of smoke, wood and stale beer that permeated your hair and clothing—and I absolutely loved it! Sitting high on a stool between my grandfathers, I would watch them drink their ice-cold "shorty" beers and felt special and content.

Back at Dziadzia's house, Busia (Polish for grandmother) served a fish fry large enough to feed the Polish army. Fortunately, my

grandfathers were two of the best fishermen I've ever known.

While the ladies cleaned the kitchen, my grandpas grabbed some beers and headed for the front porch. That's where the magic happened. It started with the arrival of two, three or sometimes four of my granddads' friends, gathering like young schoolboys on a playground.

Little by little, the week's many hours of backbreaking labor were washed away as they shared stories of their youth and simpler times. Right before my eyes, I saw my grandfathers grow younger, even childlike, in their behavior, a transformation that didn't delight my grandmothers in quite the same way.

When twilight fell and the mosquitoes came out for their Friday night meal, the group moved indoors to begin what would surely provide topics for future storytelling—a poker game. Occasionally, I'd sit on Dziadzia's lap and count his pennies until my mom laid me down on Busia's bed. I'd drift off to sleep hearing a lullaby of laughter, clinking coins and Polish exclamations that I'd learn much later were “colorful” words not intended for young ears.

Over the years, the Friday night assembly continued, but its numbers dwindled. The reminiscing grew more wistful, although I still recognized the youthful transformation during those few storytelling hours.

They're all gone now, but I still see them each time I drive past the old porch. And whenever I hear Nat “King” Cole sing, “Roll out those lazy, hazy, crazy days of summer, those days of soda and pretzels and beer,” the 6-year-old girl in me returns, with a grandpa on each arm.