

BEHAN FAMILY MEMORIES

by Julianne Behan Kelly

Growing up on the Point in the 50s, I enjoyed what we now refer to as a “free range” childhood. Free range means that in days gone by, children were given quite a bit of freedom to wander, explore, and even roam the streets of their neighborhoods. There were boundaries, of course, with Hunters Playground extending my own backyard to the east and Van Zandt Pier to the west. It was a magical place to roam, especially for the youngest (by 14 years!) child of George and Gwen Behan. Quite shy as a youngster, for me spending time by myself was a habit. It was interrupted by visits from my cousin, Carol Beekman, who was only 6 weeks younger than I. Either alone or with companions, I delighted in my special place.

I attended Saint Joseph’s School, at Washington Square, and in 5th grade a large enrollment forced the school day to be split into two sessions. My session began at 12:30, giving me weekday mornings all to myself! I remember walking down to the Pier, bucket in hand, to collect periwinkles and catch crabs. To catch larger crabs, I followed by mother’s instruction. I would crack open a mussel, tie a string to its broken shell and using this bait, “fish” for crabs that were too scary for fingers alone! Waiting for one to slide out from under a rock, I would find and latch it onto my bait, and then slowly hoist it successfully out and into my bucket. It was a thrill! After a quick trip back up the street to show off my catch, I would return to release them for another day. I remember my mother telling me how she and her siblings (more free range youth) would gather mussels and cook them in a tin can over a small fire they would build on the beach. I was fascinated and amazed. (I still am.) It seemed so exotic, like a scene from *The Box Car Children*, my favorite book.

On the hot days of September when the school day was over at 5:30 PM, my mother would walk me, after dinner, down the street so I could cool off in the Bay, jumping off the raft that was anchored to the pier. I learned to swim at the Van Zandt Pier, as she did at the Elm Street Pier. These were simpler times for sure; the Point was a working to middle class neighborhood by and large. Mostly there were stay-at-home moms and

one bread winner- my father. But my mother could indulge me in the wealth of where we lived by taking me for an evening swim at the pier after a day at the beach!

In the summer, Hunter Playground offered programs for neighborhood children. I can remember Crazy Hat Day and Pet Contests. I usually had a dog to bring along (not usually a prize winner) but one summer there were no discernable pets. I won the contest with a Praying Mantis, while my cousin entered a box of tiny hoppy toads collected from my mother’s garden.

I learned about environmental disasters on the Point. An oil tanker had grounded, spilling thousands of gallons of crude oil into the harbor. Carol, and her brother, Russell, came over to see the thick swells coming into shore. This was well before the Newport Bridge, and at the end of Washington Street, where it met the Naval Base, we found a seagull covered in oil. Somehow the three of us managed to secure the bird without losing an eye among us. Bringing it to the house on Third Street, it was a quick trip in my father’s Public Works vehicle to my cousins’ Champlin Place address. I guess my aunt, with her brood of five children, seemed to us a more accommodating shelter for the wounded seagull, and maybe my aunt wouldn’t notice. She did. Whether Animal Rescue or the Bird Sanctuary interceded, I have no recall. That image of thick, thick black, oily swells and one confused seabird has never been forgotten.

Learning about the seasons and the natural environment was part of growing up on the Point. My mother was a great friend of the sisters at the Cenacle, and each September, she would get permission for me and a cousin or two, to collect chestnuts from the huge trees on their property. We came home with grocery bags full of beautiful, shiny, mahogany-colored treasure. In wintertime, a good snowfall would turn Hunters Playground, in my imagination’s eye, into an Artic landscape, where I, with my trusty sled dog, Peppi, (of short haired hound extraction) could trudge through mounds of snow and drifts, hoping to make our way back to base camp through the blinding blizzard!

Ah, growing up on the point was GREAT for the imagination!!