

BY SIGRID BATHEN

The Death Of Innocence

The family gathered in Chico for Thanksgiving again this year, at our parents' longtime home near Bidwell Park. The news this Thanksgiving was about a young man afflicted with cerebral palsy who was found by a park worker lying in a pool of blood in the frigid cold. The young man had been beaten to death.

He was found under an oak tree in Bidwell

Park, where homeless people sleep at night. That is where 25-year-old Frank Pringle, who lived with his grandparents in Chico, apparently suffered the fatal misfortune of riding his bicycle with \$5 in his pocket near the Sycamore Pool.

The stories said police believe Pringle was killed for his mountain bike and \$5 sometime during the night before he was found on that freezing Monday morning three days before Thanksgiving. Such harsh contemporary details are now inexplicably linked to my memories as a child playing in the park with a sense of total innocence and complete security, when we worried only about catching poison oak and getting home before dark.

Which is not to say we were unaware, even then, of some dangers in this vast natural resource a few steps from our front door. Our father, a businessman active in civic affairs, a city councilman and mayor, cautioned us that the park was sometimes a haven for undesirables of various sorts, that the city really couldn't afford, even then, to patrol it properly, and we should always go in groups.

When I was older, not heeding (sometimes with a vengeance) my father's counsel, I often went alone on bike rides in the park, though always accompanied by our Labrador retriever, who liked to swim in the creek and retrieve rocks we threw in the water (who were we to tell him he was probably bringing up different rocks?).

Once, I remember hearing a rustling in the bushes behind me and turning to see a young teenage boy cheerfully exposing himself. More annoyed than frightened, I called my dog, who was very large and threatening (albeit with the actual temperament of a housecat), and he would make a grand crashing entrance through the underbrush, while the kid barely had time to pull up his pants and run off. It was an isolated experience, one never repeated through all the hours and days upon days I spent with my friends and my siblings and my dog in that park.

As a journalist experienced in covering all variety of urban traumas, I look wryly back on that idyllic time when I was ignorant, innocent—and safe. Today, when the grandchildren visit our parents, they are never permitted to go into the park without one or more adults, and never at dusk.

The changes in the tenor of the place hit me squarely a few years ago when I was walking with my parents and my daughter by the One-Mile dam, near where Frank Pringle was killed this past Thanksgiving week, and we came upon a large, wild-looking man yelling at a cowering young woman much smaller than himself. My reporter's antennae, which are not unlike those of cops, quivered with a sense of danger, and it was apparent to me that this man was either very high or very drunk and in any case probably quite dangerous.

We heard him yelling something to the young woman about cutting off her finger if she didn't give him back the ring she was struggling to remove. And as I quietly urged my daughter and my parents to move away, thinking I would call authorities to help the young woman, I was astonished to see my mother, who is just a shade over five feet tall and was then past 65, walk up to this big drug-or-alcohol-crazed man, shake her finger at him, and tell him in no uncertain terms to leave the woman alone.

I was horrified. And thunderstruck when, meek as a kitten, he did precisely what she told him to do. And we continued on our walk.

It wasn't long after that when I read an account in the News & Review, which my mother kindly sends me, about a serious assault on a jogger near the One-Mile dam. I made my mother promise she wouldn't intervene in any more domestic struggles in the

park.

My memories of Chico and most particularly of Bidwell Park are no doubt colored by the roseate haze of childhood nostalgia and '50s myth. It is also sadly true, however, that the world I thought could never touch Chico—the world I know from the big cities where I've been and the sometimes ugly stories I've covered—has reached Chico now as well, although the elapsed time between the memories and the current reality is, as time goes, scant.

My parents moved us to a big, beige house on a long, narrow half-acre a short block from Bidwell Park in 1957, when I was 10. For months, my parents had planned every detail of this house, from the redwood paneling in the living room to the high windows in front, because my mother didn't—still doesn't—like people looking through her house.

It was our third house in Chico, a definite "move up," as the realtors are fond of saying, from the tiny, old two-bedroom on Arbutus Avenue near the Hooker Oak School, where my parents moved from Sacramento in 1948 when I was nearly 2, and where we lived until I was 5. It was also a move up from the new three-bedroom tract house, painted white with blue shutters and a red door, but still with only one bathroom, on Downing Avenue, where we lived until I was 10.

Even before we moved there, we learned to swim in the Sycamore Pool (we called it the One-Mile dam), delighting in the slippery feel of its rough concrete floor. Now that I know the slippery stuff was algae, I'm less interested in swimming there today, and in fact I won't let my own daughter swim in the One-Mile after reading reports in this publication about effluent in the creek above it—a fact that I also find excruciatingly sad.

Our father had a pool built in our backyard when I was 11, so the issue of swimming in the One-Mile or the Five-Mile (or the new CARD pool by Chico Junior High) became largely moot in any case, although when we went on to high school and college there were the usual adolescent revels in still-famous Upper Park swimming holes. Who wanted to party in their parents' backyard?

Our father worked six-plus days a week in his store, Sierra Stationers, which he bought in 1949 (and sold in 1980). Always on his "day off" Dad worked in the yard, laying the sprinkler system at the new house by the park, building a huge fence (which still stands), pouring concrete, planting a lawn and shrubs and trees.

That house, and the park—it almost seemed like "our" park, as I'm sure it does to countless others—have remained over the years a personal oasis of sorts, a place I could go to escape the pressures of my life, to walk in the park and marvel at its cathedral of tall oaks with the sun streaming through the leaves.

As I write this, I look at a picture of my 13-year-old daughter on her bicycle in the park this past Thanksgiving. The effect of the afternoon sun on the vivid autumn colors in the canopy of trees near my parents' house never fails to startle and amaze me. It is an ethereal sight, awesome in its simplicity, and it reminds me once again that growing up in that house next to Bidwell Park was an extraordinary gift, a palette of memories to cherish.

Memories tainted now by the stories of assaults on joggers, crazed drunks threatening to cut off women's fingers, and now a young man with cerebral palsy being beaten for his bike and \$5, dying in a pool of blood under an oak tree on the frozen autumn grass. □

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