

The Kid from Mazon

Small towns make up for their lack of people by having everyone be more interesting.

-- Doris "Granny D" Haddock

By Bill Hill

When I heard that Mazon is going to be celebrating its sesquicentennial in August, it inspired me to think about how much I love the place. It helped shaped me in my formative years, and its community values protected me as a young child.

I'd like to share some memories from the 14 years I lived there. When I finished this post I discovered that I had mentioned 57 people. For those of you who lived in Mazon in the 60s and 70s, I think you will recognize many of them. And I am hopeful that my memories will help you recall some of your favorites.

I'm 72 and I've lived in Arizona for 40 years, but I usually get back to Illinois at least once a year. And every time, I pay a visit to Mazon. I drive down nearly every street, I visit the cemetery where both of my parents are buried, I stop by the grade school where I had so many great memories, wishing I could go in and shoot some hoops with Jerry Farber. And I stop at the house where I spent most of my childhood. Most of you probably call it the Esgar house, across from the bank. (Dick, Cheryl and family lived there for 45 years after we moved.)

I spent the first 14 years of my life (1953-1967) in Mazon. I was the 5th of five children born to E.K. and Alvera Hill. My siblings are Wanda (MVK 60), Jerry (MVK 64), Bob (MVK 67) and Sylvia. My dad was Mazon's mayor until he died in 1964, when I was 10. Living in Mazon after my father's death was very hard for my mom; everything made her think of my dad. So, in 1967, when I graduated from 8th grade and Bob graduated from MVK, we moved to Morris. My mom continued to work at Mazon Grade School cafeteria for a few years, but I had to start a new life in Morris, where I was always considered "the kid from Mazon." And that was OK with me. After I got out of college and I started my first job as a reporter at a suburban Chicago newspaper, I would tell my friends what it was like to grow up in rural Illinois, in a village with just 700 residents. They loved how I talked about my childhood, and they loved calling me "the kid from Mazon." And I wore that label proudly. For me, it was a badge of honor. I knew that I had a very special life experience that none of them had.

So what made Mazon so special? Let's be honest. It certainly wasn't its amenities. It was the people. The sense of community. We took care of each other.

I hope it's OK if I share some of my wonderful memories with hopes that they will resonate with those of you who lived in Mazon in that era. And, remember, it's all about the people.

- For me, it all started in a two-story house on the southwest corner of Grand Ridge Road and 7th Street. We were kitty-corner from Max Olson's service station, and across the street from Harry Hough. At the time, Ye Olde Cragg Cabin sat in Harry's backyard, mostly ignored. I never expected that years later I would write a feature about the cabin, which served as part of the Underground Railroad, for the Morris Daily Herald.
- Next door was Lydia Foster, the grandmother of my first best friend, Billy Parker. Lydia treated me like a grandson. Her chocolate chip cookies were the best!
- When I was 6, we moved a few blocks east to the house on the northeast corner of Depot Street and Grand Ridge Road (also called North Street). And I was soon introduced to sports by next-door neighbor Mark McCormick. We played basketball on his cinder driveway (no, the ball did not bounce true) and in the summer we would settle in at 1 p.m. for "The Leadoff Man" and eat peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. After the game, we'd go outside and play catch, or hotbox, for hours. My favorite hotbox friend was Donnie Bivens. I think he just loved to get dirty. 😊
- Mark's parents, Don and Gwen, both worked for the post office. Mr. McCormick was also our Little League coach, who ended every game with "and that's all she wrote" as he closed his scorebook. Don and Gwen also took me to my first MLB game on a Sunday afternoon when the White Sox were hosting the Baltimore Orioles. We sat in centerfield. I think it was probably 1961. Aparicio. Fox. Minoso.
- I became obsessed with sports – an obsession which I believe played a key role in leading me into my 43-year career as a journalist. As kids, we would ride our bikes all over town trying to recruit as many kids as possible to meet in the big open field behind the Witt house to play baseball. We never had 18 players, but we did our best. We played pitcher's hand out. Hitters had to call their field so the outfielders could move to left or right.
- A few years after we moved to the house on Depot Street, the McCormicks moved a few blocks east where they had built a new house. Moving into their house was the Houchin family. Keith was the basketball and baseball coach at MVK. He and Bev had five kids. I was a couple years older, but I played a lot with Keith and Kirk and we got reacquainted about 15 years ago via Facebook.

- Coach was the best. How many 10-year-old second basemen know how to turn a double play correctly? I did, thanks to Coach. Pretty cool.
- There are two Mazon men whom I will always love -- Coach Houchin and Paul Simpson, who was the custodian at MVK. They were best friends and every summer for five or six years they took my brother and me to a Cubs game at Wrigley Field. I still vividly remember the first time, in 1962, going up those Wrigley steps and suddenly seeing this beautiful green ballpark. It was mystical after only ever seeing Wrigley on a black & white TV. I shook Lou Boudreau's hand. I got Ron Santo's autograph. Willie Mays hit a home run.
- In 2007, I became an editor for MLB.com, the league's website, and as part of my job usually was involved in our World Series coverage. I made a promise to myself that if the Cubs ever got to the World Series, I would purchase tickets for Coach. Well, our beloved Cubbies waited too long. Coach passed in 2010. So I did the next best thing when the Cubs in 2016 played their first World Series game at Wrigley Field in 71 years – I got tickets for Keith and Kirk. We had lunch before the game and toasted Coach. A day I'll never forget because I got to share it with boyhood friends.
- Back to Paul Simpson. I'm sure all the guys who grew up in Mazon in the Sixties remember playing basketball at MVK on Saturdays in the winter. Jerry Farber and I, and a whole bunch of others, would be outside the MVK front door, shivering as we waited for Paul to let us in at 9 a.m. He would kick us all out at Noon. We'd be back at 1 p.m. when he opened the door again. We would play hoops for five or six hours, all because of Paul. Nowadays, liability concerns would probably prohibit him from doing that.

SCHOOL MEMORIES

- Our first grade class in September 1959 had 31 students. And 21 of us were still together for graduation eight years later. Our teacher was Myrtle Misener, who was getting near the end of her career at that point. My best friend was David Layton, who moved out of town after that year. We had four Billys – Mellen, Parker, LaFave and me.
- Our second grade teacher was Marjorie Johnson. I will always be grateful to her for spending so much extra time with me, helping me with my phonics.
- I think Mrs. Johnson had us in third grade, too. Highlight of the year was Jimmy Pfeifer bringing a lamb to school for show & tell.
- In fourth grade, Mae Carter was our teacher. I used to mow her lawn for \$1. Best memory was the Christmas pageant. I played "Alvin" of Alvin and The Chipmunks.

Joe Keck was either Simon or David Seville. I think Billy Parker might have been Theodore. We were a big hit!

- One of our new classmates in fourth grade was Wayne Bradford. Trust me, you wanted Wayne on your team when you were playing kickball.
- I loved our math races, especially when I got matched against Linda Wills. She was tough!
- In fifth grade our class grew dramatically as we gained six students from Woodbury School, including my cousin, Kevin Schaefer. Either that year or the next we got split into two groups because we had about 36 students. That split persisted until we graduated. I didn't like that we were split up.
- Our sixth grade teacher was Sadie Douglas, who was also the school principal. Mrs. Douglas really stressed handwriting – does anyone teach that anymore? I think not. – and except when I'm scribbling notes like a reporter I still have pretty nice handwriting, thanks to Sadie.
- Our seventh grade teacher was Lenore Burkhart, who happened to be my aunt. Great teacher, and I think she was purposefully tough on me. I remember once asking her how to spell a word. She didn't say a word. She just handed me a dictionary. (I have used that same technique many times as an editor when a reporter asked me how to spell something.)
- At the end of seventh grade, Sandy Dorn, one of my best friends, moved to New York. And Frank Lasser, our science teacher whom everybody loved, moved on to MVK. I never liked science much, but Mr. Lasser was an amazing teacher.
- I remember Mr. Lasser taking his classes on fossil hunts around Mazon Creek, which is known as a fertile place for fossils. There's an exhibit at the Field Museum in Chicago with 65,000 specimens from Mazon Creek.
- And how can we not discuss Larry Anderson, our eighth grade teacher. As a teacher, I remember him most for teaching the Constitution, which I loved. But most of all, Larry was our coach. We made fun of his flat top, but man, he loved being our coach, and he went the extra effort to make sure our results got phoned in to the Morris newspaper. What kid doesn't like to get his name in the paper?
- At graduation, we sang "Born Free." Judith Wyffels was our new music teacher that year. Our commencement address was given by my godfather/uncle, the Rev. Edward Henninger.
- I think back fondly of Mazon Grade School. The gym will always hold special memories. And outside, the playground with its swings, and teeter totters and giant strides. (Do they even make those anymore? Probably considered too dangerous.)

ABOUT-TOWN MEMORIES

- I used to run around mostly with Jerry Farber. He lived above his mom's café, Erma's. I remember going there with \$1 in my pocket and getting two cheeseburgers (and the buns were grilled), with fries, and a large cherry coke. I also remember the day I was in Jerry's apartment, ready to watch the Cubs game. The Noon news on WGN came on. It was June 15, 1964. A day that shall live in Cubs infamy: they had traded Lou Brock for Ernie Broglio.
- Before it was Erma's Café, it was the D&R Café – owned by Don and Ruth Bivens. In the back room there was a table where guys played cards. In one corner of the restaurant, Don had his barber shop. \$1 for a haircut. My brother Jerry was there one day. He was probably 10 or 11, waiting his turn. Doc Breisch came in and wanted to cut the line. He offered Jerry \$1 to let him go ahead of him. Jerry said, "That's OK, I have a dollar."
- Doc Breisch's office. Remember that smell? Remember how dark it was. He delivered a lot of Mazon babies. (I used to mow that vacant lot next to his office. That was a lot of work for \$2.)
- We had two grocery stores. Chuck Beck's on the West side of the street, and Don Misener's on the East side. That's where I bought hundreds of baseball cards, starting in 1961. Five cents for a pack of five cards, plus a stick of bubblegum.
- My brother Jerry was Mazon's first Eagle scout, but then the troop disbanded because they couldn't find a scout leader. But when I was in seventh grade, Leonard Hansen stepped up and took that role. He was great. The troop was having a lot of fun. And then Mr. Hansen died while he was on vacation in Florida. So the troop disbanded. Very sad.
- One day, when we were 10 or 11, a bunch of us were using the restroom at the laundromat to fill up water balloons. Bill Wallin caught us! He was not playing Santa Claus that day!
- Halloween was always a special night. Friends don't believe me when I tell them we hit EVERY SINGLE HOUSE in town before calling it a night. It usually took two grocery bags to collect all that loot.
- Those friends also don't believe my "out on the farm" stories. Nearly all of my many uncles were farmers and I spent quite a bit of time on their farms, which gave me the chance to have Uncle Herman (Schaefer) shoot me in the eye when he was milking a cow, to watch farm animals being castrated, chopping corn out of bean fields, and having corn cob fights with my cousins.

RANDOM MEMORIES

- One of my other good friends, who was a year or two older, was Bobby Plott. We both were reading the Chip Hilton book series and we would share books. I actually bumped into Bob once at a Notre Dame football game in the late 70s when I was working on a magazine story about Notre Dame's "Subway Alumni" fanbase.
- I don't think there's any doubt that our best baseball player was Dan Arnold. Awesome pitcher.
- I loved living near the Grundy County Fairgrounds when there was the sound of stock cars and midgets racing. When I was old enough I would sell scorecards at the races. Their marketing slogan was "the highest-banked quarter-mile track in the nation." Still can't believe the track isn't there. We also had the longest county fair (10 days) in the state, probably because of the race track. I loved the tractor pulls.
- Mazon was a dry town. No booze. But just a couple miles west of town was Gladys' tavern. I had a couple orange pops there. What an interesting smell for a child to experience, all that stale beer seeping through the wooden floor.
- The Feed Bag. What a great name! And what a great meeting place for folks.
- Quarter midget racing (we had two cars) at the track out at the intersection of routes 47 and 113. I remember hanging out there with Larry Olson.
- Sledding at the grain elevator for hours; it was the closest thing we could find that constituted a hill.
- Water fights between our volunteer firefighters and other nearby fire departments.
- Pancake breakfast and catfish dinner fundraisers. Great for bringing the community together.
- When I encounter people in Arizona raving about the sweet corn they're eating I tell them they have no idea what they're missing, having not eaten freshly picked corn in Grundy County.
- Our school bus drivers were Max Olson, Austin Isham and Ken Pfeiffer.
- Remember Forrie Fottler? (I'm probably not spelling his name correctly.) He had this little stand on the site where they built the new fire station. I remember walking home from church on Nov. 24, 1963, and stopping to get the Sunday Tribune like I always did. As I stood there looking at the TV I saw Jack Ruby shoot Lee Harvey Oswald. Wow!
- I don't remember what year it was – I know it was before my dad died in 1964 – the whole town came together one day and the men chopped down all the trees that had Dutch elm disease. There were scores of them. At Noon, they all sat down to a huge potluck lunch put on by all the women in town. I will always remember that day because it symbolizes how everyone was in it together. Neighbors and friends.

- As you might imagine, throughout my life, when asked where I grew up, I say, “a little town you’ve never heard of. It’s about 80 miles from Chicago, down in the cornfields.” Well, just once, I got surprised. In 1994, I was sports editor at The Arizona Republic and I was attending a conference of western sports editors in Salt Lake City. I’m sitting at a table with about 10 other people and we’re telling each other where we’re from. I give my usual spiel, and the sports editor from Sacramento says, “where exactly?” I say, “a little town called Mazon.” He blurts out: “Red Devils! Larry A’Hearn!” I’m stunned. Turns out he was from Joliet and he covered MVK for the Joliet Herald-News a few times. Small world.

Time to wrap this up.

Man, I sure wish I could shoot some hoops with Farbs.

Signed,

The Kid from Mazon