

You Can't Go Home

By Calvin Weisberger, MD

They say you can't go home. Well, I tried. To be precise, I went back to what was my home for the first 16 years of my life to see what was there. I suppose I was somewhat shocked—but then, perhaps I shouldn't have been. When I grew up in Kingston/Edwardsville, in Pennsylvania, my neighborhood was decidedly the wrong side of the tracks. I never thought anything of it, because my street was home. The people seemed to be right out of Damon Runyon or Jack London. There was Pidgy, Donald Duck, Gunshi, and a host of characters that would have spiced up *Guys and Dolls*. Our grocery store was set between two beer gardens. Across the street were several pool halls, gambling establishments, and a bowling alley. While the coal mines were still in operation, people had worked and lived there. Schools were full of children; the standard small business establishments for a neighborhood were operating. When I left home at 16 or 17 to return a few times until medical school and then not after, I carried a pleasant image

in my mind. That was 40 years ago and the pleasant image remained in my engrams. Somehow I knew the area had gone downhill with the demise of anthracite coal mining. While I was in medical school, our store/home burned down, and my mother moved away from the street. I never returned to the area after the late 1960s. My first recent view of the street came on the detour through it that I took following my mother's funeral. The image was so fleeting that nothing really stuck in my mind. But last May, I returned to the street for the first time in all those years to see what had become of my old neighborhood. After I got over the initial shock of being there, all kinds of impressions flooded in. First was the impression of size. The Main Street I grew up on would be an alley in Santa Monica. The block I grew up on was

really short. The property I grew up on was tiny. Where home was now sits a low-slung bar populated by denizens straight out of *Deliverance*. The dirt I played in is still there, the dirt where I fell learning to ride a bike is still there. I don't know about any of the people. The business establishments are gone; most of the storefronts are empty. The schools are closed. The streets throng with memories but few people are visible. Those who

eyed the stranger with a camera, a sport coat and tie and stood next to a nondescript white Oldsmobile probably thought he was a federal agent photographing the bar/pharmaceutical establishment. Well, I suppose home is gone, home has changed; or perhaps it's me who has changed. Perhaps the essence of the place has remained, and my reference points have changed so much that I no longer can appreciate what is there. If there are children in that neighborhood, it still is home to them. It probably still seems like a significant part of their world and not the depressed area it seems



Home is where the bar is?



Main Street, Edwardsville, Pennsylvania

to me. Instead of gray dirt and dingy buildings in disrepair, Santa Monica is now my reference point. To my children, now adults, a wide tree-lined street with well-manicured lawns and a thriving city around them is their "home" memory. What will their home look like in 40 years? Will they be able to return and see the same neighborhood, or will degeneration strike their roots? We all carry a component of where we came from in our personalities. We all have behavior that is shaped by our early life experiences. Wherever we come from, whatever our home is like, we carry it with us. As we carry fond memories of beloved people, we can carry fond memories of home, whatever it has become. Perhaps in the end, home is not so much a place as an idea. Mine is still there—its corporeal reality just belies its spiritual existence. ❖

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