

Memorial Day memories – rain or shine...



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“Picnic” is a natural collocate for what most of us will do this Memorial Day. Given our large family we sponsored the extended family picnics. This amounted to some 80 cousins descending on our property, and there was much to do to ready the place.

The first order of business was “police the grounds,” which was another way of saying every inch of the outside property had to be clear and in good order for our field-day events. The garage had to be cleaned and organized in case rain tried to spoil the row of barbecue grills and food tables with lots of hamburgers, hot dogs, potato salad, and Rice Krispy marshmallow treats. Every piece of equipment and apparatus was made available that day.

As an Army veteran and the parent of sons who served in three other military branches, our father made sure we knew the reason for gathering this day. Mini U.S. flags lined the driveway and other areas of the property, and the clotheslines were strung with red, white, and blue pennants similar to those found at car dealerships. But the prize symbol of the Memorial Day hosting was hanging Old Glory from a third-floor window at the front of our home. Anyone observing the picnic preparations would think we were hosting the Olympics.

We rarely saw our father without a tie, even at a picnic. Decked in his professional attire, he still wanted to manage the field events and award prizes given for running races, races with eggs on a spoon, balloon bursting contests, and other springtime challenges.

The younger children would gather around our father and perform tricks to win a trinket or piece of bubble gum. When the prizes were all dispensed, one bag

remained, which held the coveted boxes of sparklers – the one Memorial Day firework that was Mr. Safety approved.

The main event took place in the playpen, a hedged-in area, which housed a volleyball net. This event brought new meaning to weekend warrior with bragging rights for the family with the most athletic offspring.

Given that every point mattered, every play was argued, even with the “best” officiating. One uncle was brave enough to serve as official and final arbitrator of each play. With a hand in one pocket jingling his change and smoking a thick cigar, he took command of a field of scores of screaming kids and young adults.

The younger kids lined the perimeter of the court waiting to fetch an errant ball and deliver it back to the team he/she hoped would win. Others stood outside the hedged area but had no problem hearing what was going on, as the voices grew louder and louder as the day wore on. We played until dusk with no mercy for anyone’s kin. What broke up the games was an announcement that the grills, which had been burning all day, were now ready for toasting marshmallows.

Taking advantage of the throngs of children on display, a group of amateur 8-mm film operators used Memorial Day as central casting for the summer’s family movie making. These aunts and uncles were not satisfied with reels of film documenting Christenings, birthdays, First Holy Communions, school plays, and little league games with their children.

Their first attempt was a search and rescue for the Kidnapping of Baby Oglethorpe. Next was the Cowboys against the Indians, followed by the blue bandana pirates against the red bandana pirates. But the high tech splicing films were two doctor movies: “Flumor Tumor” and “Strange Cases of Dr. Casey Killdare.”

These films shot during the dog days of summer and requiring hours of splicing over the winter had excellent return on investment viewing. If for nothing else, they were the off-the shelf answer to, “What do we do with these kids if it rains on Memorial Day?”

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