

SUMMER OF '69

My cousin Chris and I had just finished a pop bottle run. We were now comfortably lounging on a stack of newspapers on the bottom shelf of the magazine rack at Hansen's Variety Store. Little did I know just three years later I would be working there as a stock boy and protecting those pop bottles from boys like me and Chris.

The year was 1969, a hot summer in our hometown of Chebanse Illinois. I was twelve then; Chris bragged he was eleven years and seven months. Those extra months seemed important to him. We didn't know it at the time, but Neil Armstrong was fixing to walk on the moon. We'd see that later that month while visiting our grandfather, who sat there awestruck.

This was a common theme for us over that summer and the next. We traded in pop bottles we had found alongside roads and bridges, plus a few we might have borrowed from the backyards of unwary housewives. Now we were enjoying the fruits of our morning travails and waxing nostalgic.

Coins in hand from bottles, we'd buy ourselves each a pack of Topps baseball cards for five cents, a Mars bar, also a nickel, and an RC Cola for ten cents. We could only afford one bottle, so we split it between us. At the time, we drank RC because it came in a 16-ounce bottle, rather than those puny twelve-ounce Pepsi bottles.

We were enjoying the air conditioning, helping ourselves to a variety of magazines carried by the store in the enormous wooden rack. Usually, we'd leave chocolate prints on the corners from our Mars-bar-fingers. Chris usually had some on his face as well.

We only read those periodicals that dealt with some of the more important points in the life of 12-year-olds, such as *MAD* magazine. *Eerie* magazine, which usually had a picture of Godzilla or Dracula on the cover. Sometimes I'd pick up a Tim Magazine just to see why dad had a subscription, but had no clue at what could possibly interest a person.

Sports Illustrated was the most popular choice when it was baseball season, especially if they had pictures of Cubs players. A few weeks back, Ron Santo was on the cover, leading off of first base. I vividly recalled that game as Ronnie got on with an error by Mike Shannon when they were playing the Cardinals at Wrigley. Ronnie would soon score off a homer by Willie Smith. The Cubs won that game 3-1, scoring all three runs in the 8th inning off Bob Gibson. Both pitchers, Bob Gibson and Cub Fergie Jenkins would pitch complete games, something I appreciated more when I got older. Sadly, complete games are a rarity today.

There we sat, much to the consternation of Aunt Bob who ran the store. She'd throw us out soon or the first time someone tripped over our feet. Everyone called her Aunt Bob, although nobody knew if she was really somebody's aunt, nor why they called her Bob.

Chris looked at me while holding his hand out for a turn at the bottle. I took a big swig and belched proudly. Aunt Bob, who was leaning over the counter to keep an eye on us, gave me a disgusted look.

Chris says, “Web,” (everyone called me Web when not calling me a derogatory name) “ya really think the Cubs can win the pennant this year.”

Handing the bottle to him, I comprehended the immense weight of his question. He seemed to be putting a great deal of trust in my opinion. While pondering my answer, I noticed he was wiping the top of the bottle with his T-shirt, evidently afraid of catching my germs. I winced, making a mental note to leave some backwash in the bottle next time I took my drink.

“Well, Chris,” I began slowly, “it all depends.”

“On what,” Chris asked impatiently. At this point I should tell you that I really suspected Chris was still harboring feelings for the crosstown White Sox but wouldn’t admit it. He was just warming up to becoming a Cubs fan because they were having a good year and might go on to the World Series. I surmised he had to be asking me that question only because he knew more about Sox players than Cubs, so he was hedging his allegiance.

“Well,” I said philosophically, while eating the last bite of a Mars bar I can still taste to this day, “if Santo and Banks keeps hitting those homers, and Williams and Beckert can keep those batting averages up, I think they can.”

Chris didn’t reply. I could tell he was thinking, or still hedging. I also noticed he still had his dirty hand wrapped tightly around that RC bottleneck.

“Oh, and Jenkins’ arm don’t fall off,” I said, while reaching for the bottle.

Paging through an old copy of MAD, looking for more Spy v Spy cartoons the editors scribbled on the sides and tops of the pages, a thought came to me.

“Chris,” I said. “You a Democrat.”

“Why yes,” he answered indignantly.

I nodded in unison before asking him the next question. Guardedly, I said, “You know why we’re Democrats?” This was a question that had been eating at me for the past few weeks, although I really had no idea why, nor the difference between a Republican and a Democrat.

It was Chris’s turn to think before answering. While he was contemplating his answer, I unwrapped my baseball cards to see who I got. This ritual had to be done slowly so as to be lucky enough to get at least one Cubs player. I secretly wished to get New York Yankee players too, but never told Chris, him being a closet Sox fan and all. At the time, I think I owned about five different Micky Mantle cards, including the one attached to the spokes of my bicycle with one of my mother’s clothespins.

Chris finally answered. “Grandpa Webber said we were. He told me if the Democrat party was good enough for those Kennedy boys and that Adlai Stevenson fella, well, then it was good enough for us.”

I nodded, thinking about how to make sense out of his answer. At the same time, I noticed there was a card in my pack for a Cubs pitcher I had never heard of by the name of Don Nottebart.

I was frowning about that card when Chris continued with his thoughts on politics, according to an 11 year and 7-month-old small-town boy, "Then grandpa said President Johnson was the greatest president he's ever known." This type of information from our grandfather made things official.

I nodded, content in the fact that me and Chris were Democrats, just like the rest of our family. I really had no idea who that Stevenson fellow was, but since I was older than Chris, I didn't want him to know about my lack of knowledge.

At that moment though, we were safe in the cocoon of our small town, not knowing about the eventual collapse of the Cubs season or the upcoming Watergate scandal. Life seemed simpler before the Cubs went on their August losing streak, losing the pennant to New York Mets.

I still despise the Mets, all these years later.