

What It's Like To Be A Baby Boomer



Frosty Wooldridge

Part 2: High school, Cuba blockade, race riots, separate drinking fountains, Vietnam War

In my high school sophomore year, my father moved us to Albany, Georgia. At the age of 15, I jumped from a northern climate to the hot, muggy temperatures of the Deep South. Additionally, from getting beat up by bullies back in Michigan, I joined a whole new pecking order of southern hicks who wanted to show me where I stood—at the bottom of their pecking order.

I promptly grabbed an 80-customer paper route with the Atlanta Constitution-Journal at 5:00 a.m., seven days a week. I also played football, basketball and track. At the time, the Cuban Missile Crisis jumped out of the SAC base there in Albany. Enormous B-52's filled the skies 24/7. President Kennedy finally made a blockade move that Khrushchev, couldn't handle—so the Russian leader backed down after the blockade. However, Castro remained in power and became a nemesis for the next 50 years. Essentially, the Monroe Doctrine held, but Cuba continued as a thorn in our side in the Western Hemisphere.

At 15, I slowly began understanding that the world carried a different tune of violence, wars, political positioning and

tension. As a kid living an average middle-class, middle-American life, I didn't really know about or understand the geo-political intrigues of WWII, Korea or the impending Vietnam War.



I delivered papers seven days a week at 2 cents a paper. I worked as a pool cleaner at 60 cents an hour from 7 to 10 a.m., and lifeguard at 75 cents an hour from 10 to 6 p.m. and dishwasher from

6 to 9 ever night, seven days a week. My mom said, "You're saving for college." By the time I hit 16, my father said I could drive his 1953 Chevy station-wagon with a straight six and three on the column. A beast! All I had to do was pay for the insurance, tires and maintenance. It only carried 1st and 3rd gears as 2nd gear blew out and we didn't have the money to overhaul the transmission.

With all of that, my brother Rex and I found ourselves being picked on, beat up and hassled by the top four bullies of the school. As you can imagine, at 6'2 ½" and 180 pounds, I wasn't a pip-squeak anymore. I started lifting weights with Charles Atlas instruction. All four of the chief bullies suffered horrible pains after Rex and I beat the crap out of them. Rex matched my size. After those events, nobody bothered us for the rest of our high school careers.

From 10th to 11th grade—school, study, paper route and sports. Dad umpired games, wrote articles for local paper and gave our family the best of the best. He didn't drink, smoke or curse. He and mom danced on Saturday nights. Life for us—pretty normal! The Cuban Missile Crisis faded, and the Cold War didn't seem much of a big deal to me. I really didn't understand the way the world worked at that point. Still very much naïve! That would quickly change in the spring of my 11th grade year.

My brother Rex and I drove home from baseball practice in the 53' Chevy. We talked about the last game with Macon. Then, I noticed one of my dad's friends pull up behind me, motioning me to pull over and honking on his horn.

"What's up, Mr. George?" I asked, as he came to my window.

"I got some bad news, Frosty," he said. "I don't know how to tell you boys this, but your father was umpiring behind the plate at the Albany game today. At the top of the second inning, he called a batter out, grabbed his chest, and fell over the catcher, and died on home plate of a massive heart attack."

"Oh my God!" I cried out.

Rex started screaming, "No, no, no...." in the seat beside me.

All of a sudden, our world changed drastically. From enjoying a great childhood to being thrust into instant pain, sorrow, and total loss of structure in our lives.

Mr. George jumped into the car and drove us home. A couple of preachers sat with our mom, our other brother and sister. Neighbors brought food, but all I wanted to do was run away. I comforted mom, but didn't know what to do. Later, they left, and our little family sat in the living room, crying, sobbing and confused about life.

Three days later, we attended an open casket funeral of my father. One day I saw him vibrant with life, and three days later, he's decked out in a casket, with his life vanished. We traveled to Michigan to bury him at the Reed City cemetery of his youth. As they lowered him into the grave, U.S. Marines gave him a 21-gun salute. (Even 55 years later, as I write this story, huge tears stream down my face. It's still as painful to lose my dad a half century later as it was in 1964.)

To this day, I hate funerals. I never attend open casket funerals. I attend memorials and I speak about my friends' lives and celebrate their time on this planet. And, at this later stage of my life, I'm going to a lot of funerals. My old Army buddy Archie said, "Frosty, if we live long enough, we'll keep going to these memorials until we too, are the main attraction." Always the joker, that Archie!

I staggered through the summer. I stumbled into my senior year at Dougherty High School. While I became a top player on the championship basketball team, it didn't mean much because dad no longer sat in the stands. I think all young men play for their dads to be proud of them. I lost that, and, it took something out of me. But I can say that his legacy to me remains today: true grit, never say quit and uncommon tenacity. He proved an average man, but he stands as a towering figure in my life.

During those years, Dr. Martin Luther King marched from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. Race riots spread. And yes, I was in the middle of "separate drinking fountains, schools, bathrooms, motels and restaurants." Then, Kennedy suffered assassination on November 22, 2063. Upon reaching 18, I registered for the draft. Lyndon Baines Johnson began building up troops in Vietnam.

My life as a baby boomer was about to go on a hell of a ride.

Coming in part 3: College years, Vietnam, buddies dying,
discovering the US Government lies like a thief.

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