The Colfax Street War

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It was in the city of Fall River, Massachusetts, in late summer of 1955.

Fall River lies east of Providence, Rhode Island, on the route from New York to Cape Cod. Its main claim to fame is that it is the city where “Lizzie Borden took her axe and gave her mother forty whacks”! With little change since 1955, it is still an old mill town, once the center of the cotton-spinning world. It has long since seen those textile mills follow the sun to the non-unionized South.

In the center of Fall River, Colfax Street is only three blocks long, lying between Locust Street to the South and Oak Grove Cemetery to the North. At the northern end of Colfax, the cemetery makes a 90 degree turn to the south so that it follows Colfax for its length, and directly behind our former home at number 75.

Between the backyards of Colfax Streets and the monuments of the cemetery runs a six-foot high stone wall. It seemed much higher back in 1955. Scaling the wall then required boosting yourself up on the wall and putting your back against my grandfather’s maple tree and inching up to the first branch, which you would use to then vault yourself up onto the top of the wall.

The cemetery was our great playground. We played amongst the monuments and peeked into the mausoleums hoping to see some sign of the departed. In the wooded area to the southeast, we pretended to be Indians, fashioning bows from supple branches and kite string, and cutting sassafras roots to chew on for the taste of root beer.

The next street to the East of Colfax is Beverly Street. Lined by those large three story apartment homes, surrounded by chain link fences, so typical of urban New England. While pretty, neat, single-family homes, with well cared for lawns, line Colfax Street, Beverly Street is a three block long stretch of undistinguished urban roadway.

That was my world in 1955 when the war began.

In that summer, Beverly Street was the home of our enemies. The Beverly Street Gang was composed of my archenemy and their chief, Roland Pelletier, his younger brother and second in command, Joseph, and several other nameless, nefarious fellows. It was well known that the whole evil group would as soon steal your bike as look at you.

In contrast, we, the Colfax Street Gang, were a fine, upstanding collection of the best America had to offer, dedicated to truth and justice (or as dedicated as grade schoolers could be), wishing only to be left alone. Comprising the Colfax Street Gang were my brother Bill, fifteen months my elder, our next-door neighbor Rose Helger, my good friend from the fourth grade, Napolean Girard (Nap for short), and the one great love of my life (at least until puberty) Louise Langley and me.
The origin of the war was in a game of cops and robbers gone horribly wrong. An insult was made in the course of the game, and, as a result, the sides separated to find weapons and make ready to ‘let slip the dogs of war’, in our case a Cocker Spaniel named Butch. Our weapons were staffs, in the fashion of Little John, (though of much less bulk), the best cut from saplings found in the cemetery woods. We would clash and clamor, banging staff against staff, while dutifully refraining from any contact with human flesh. We would run and shout, throughout the streets of our neighborhood, with the wild abandon that only children can experience.

The area of hostilities roamed from the orphanage on Robeson Street, the limit of our known world to the east, to Oak Grove Avenue, on the far side of the cemetery, which was the limit of civilization to the west. To the south, we ventured past the Portuguese bakery, with its delicious smells, to St. Rochs Church and school. We chased each other down streets and through alleys, at times the chasers, at other times, the chased. Every once in awhile we would stop, bang our staffs, yell insults, and then run again.

Mercifully, the war was brief; my memory fails me as to its actual duration. From fifty years later, it seemed to have lasted several weeks. In reality, it was probably just an afternoon.

While brief, the impact of its ending was dramatic. At the end of hostilities, in my front yard, Roland signified peace by breaking his staff in two in front of me. Unfortunately, a fragment of the staff found its way into my eye, necessitating a trip to the family doctor, a patch on my eye, and two weeks at home, missing the first week of school. Thus ended the Colfax Street War!