

Tales of the summer  
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By Dinah Cardin

On a recent visit to my hometown in the Ozarks, temperatures hit well above 100 and relatives and neighbors warned me of the perils of breaking a sweat.

Each time I attempted to soak in some of the predictable sunshine, they shook their heads in disapproval and commented on my lack of common sense. Every conversation circled back around to the triple-digit temperatures.

While New England stocks up for a snowstorm, these people hunker down during a heat wave. The summer heat is their perceived enemy and no one wants to leave their sub-zero, climate-controlled homes and cars. So, I found myself mostly sitting idly in the air conditioning, pondering the green outdoors.

In a way, they were right. It was hot. One evening, some friends and I sweated through a midnight chat on my mother's deck. The flicker of a lit candle seemed to add to the heat. The familiar sweet and sickening smell of a dead animal filled the air, and a chorus of cicadas and tree frogs threatened to drown out our voices.

Once, I did manage to break free for a sunset stroll around the neighborhood. Within minutes, my great uncle was cruising alongside, rolling down his car window to inform me, once again, of the heat and to advise me to wait an hour. But my mother said going out after dark risked stepping on a snake. There was danger lurking everywhere.

A relatively safe activity was relaxing in the cold air conditioning with Truman, my 89-year-old grandfather.

As he channeled the past, memories came back of the summers of my youth, of Jack Buck excitedly calling the St. Louis Cardinals games through the sweltering night, my grandfather tilting back in his chair, a smile of bliss spread across his face.

Even now, as I live in Red Sox country, the game's ties to summer are undeniable. I don't care much for sitting through an entire game, but welcome the background drone of it on TV or, even better, on the radio.

Sitting in my mother's living room, Truman weaves a family tale, just

for me, which has just as much to do with the great American pastime as it does with how I came to be.

My great-grandparents, it seems, met because of the sport. Near about 1912, Everett was spending time in a state park, where he played baseball for the town team. He was apparently enjoying himself so thoroughly that he carelessly lost his wallet. The retriever of it was none other than Mabel, who would become my great-grandmother. Six months after their chance meeting, they were married.

Fast-forward to about 1934 and my grandfather, one of nine children, is playing minor league baseball in Oklahoma. Not one person who grew up on the dirt floor of his home in the middle of nowhere southern Missouri, "out Mineral Springs Road," as they say, went to high school. So he followed the hot sport to a dry, flat state ... that is until the principal of the local high school asks him to come home, live with him and graduate. The first football game this baseball player will ever see, he will actually play in and score a touchdown.

The one hitch is that he must work those four years as a shoe-shiner at the South Side Barber Shop. The male domain stays open 'til midnight. As town historian Howard Rolland writes: "The air was blue with smoke and the floor wasn't swept much. Some men used the bathtub in the back before getting a shave and a haircut. The only good smells are the after-shave tonics on the shelves behind the barber shelves."

Shoe shines cost a nickel. For muddy boots or two-toned shoes, the boys charge more. As the local men tilt back their heads for a shave, my grandfather puts his stool underneath and goes to work, polishing away.

One day, Mary Francis, the woman who would become my grandmother, is walking by the barber shop and spots Truman. She turns to her Aunt Gertie, who is said to have "smoked like a steam engine" and married several husbands of her own. She tells her aunt that there is the man she will marry and soon they are on a first date that leads to 50 years of marriage.

While telling these stories of yesterday, my grandfather's eyes glaze over. He stares off, into the distance. I see him drifting to the stories he won't tell today, ones I already know.

To his years as a navigator in the Army Air Corps that take him to exotic places like the island of Guam, where he built a hut for my grandmother that blew away in a storm before she could join him. To the time he hitchhiked home in a blinding blizzard from a military

base on Christmas morning to reach his wife who was in labor with their first child.

He has a habit similar to my grandmother's constant humming in the kitchen. He repeats everything three times in his pure Ozarkian drawl, an accent that, like many regional accents, is increasingly watered down as time passes.

"He sure did," he would say. "He sure did ... He surrrre did."

My grandfather managed to work his way up from a young teller to president of a bank, bought out over the decades by bigger and bigger conglomerates. He has now started his own small, local bank with some investors and is chairman of the board.

He has a good friend, a former schoolteacher who bought up a string of Holiday Inns, amassing a fortune and now travels the world in his private jet, staying in hotels he owns and opening sports fields and buildings in his name.

He recently started a minor league baseball team in the Ozarks called the Springfield Cardinals. My grandfather has season tickets and gets to sit in the icy, air-conditioned box with his old friend whenever he wants.

It's nearly noon and our time is up. Truman needs to drive downtown to the Rotary Club, an organization he joined in 1947.

He comes back, slowly making his way to 2006 and I say, "Isn't it amazing how each story triggers the next?"

"Yup," he nods. "Each story triggers the next. Each story triggers the next. Each story triggers the next."