

“YESTERDAY AT FAIRMOUNT PARK”

I have been told so many extraordinary stories about life in the old neighborhood, aside from my own experiences that I have written about over the past thirteen years. I have always written my version of the story in the first person present tense. The following story told to me by Artenzio Brascetta demonstrates how our values have significantly changed over the past sixty or seventy years.

North Phila. October Circa 1940:

The day begins as a typical Saturday in the Brascetta household with the kids anxious to get out and play. Mother, Maria is preparing breakfast for Artenzio and his brothers Americo, Nicholas, Vincent, Nino and their sister Dolly. Their father Gildo quietly says, “Artenzio, go over to Fontina Rosa and get me a DiNobili cigar before you eat your breakfast.” Artenzio doesn’t waste a second and bolts out the front door. At the corner of Taylor and Indiana as he enters the store he hears, “Hey Artenzio!” It’s his best buddy Anthony Melfi. “Let’s go to Fairmount Park today and join the Boy Scouts!” Without a question Artenzio says “That is a good idea!” Artenzio is so anxious to get going he buys the Italian Stogie for his dad and rushes home. He grabs an Italian Roll and drinks his milk down in one gulp. He announces to his Mom, as he stuffs the roll in his pants pocket, “I finished Mom can I go meet with Anthony?” “You better be careful and don’t be late for dinner!” Artenzio kisses his Pop and begins his journey with Anthony. Walking down Taylor Street they knock on the Felici’s door and Nick answers. “Is Franky home? We’re joining the Boy Scouts.” Like a flash Frank heard Anthony and is ready to go with them. Not having the money to take the trolley they have a long walk ahead. The three buddies continue walking and turning at Cambria. They say hello to Mario Dell’Aguzzo sitting on the step of

his family’s luncheonette. A few minutes later at the corner of Chalmers Avenue and Cambria Street they watch a bunch of guys from Paradise Bar having a game of rough-touch football on the center grass island. They finally arrive at Thirty Third and Diamond Streets and are asked by a Boys Scout dressed in uniform with a sash across his chest with all these badges sewed on it, if they were there to join the Scouts. Anthony says, “We want to join and get a uniform like you have!” The scout directs them to a large circle of kids who are listening to a man speak about the events of the day. After they give their names to a lady who is sitting at a folding table they are assigned to a group of scouts who will demonstrate how to use friction to start a fire. Anthony Melfi is in his glory and when the older scout asks for a volunteer he is quick to raise his hand. Artenzio and Franky are asked to gather kindling wood with a group of boys. The older scout assigns Anthony the task of creating a spark by gently banging two small rocks against each other. When Artenzio and Frankie return with the other boys and lay the small twigs on the ground Anthony begins to click the rocks together, but after fifteen minutes and no spark the boys get restless and begin to clown around. The older scout takes his hatchet out of the sheath and attempts to get their attention by tossing the hatchet close to Anthony’s left foot. Anthony anticipates what is going to happen and grimaces for the blow. As sure as it is a beautiful sunny day in October the hatchet penetrates Anthony’s shoe. Without hesitation Anthony shouts, “You cut my shoe! It is ruined and my Mother is going to kill me.” Artenzio and Frankie rush over to their friend and they all begin to argue with the older scout, to no avail. They said it was Anthony’s fault because he did not move out of the way. The boys are very disappointed and begin the long

journey home. Anthony keeps repeating over and over again that his Mother is going to kill him for ruining his new shoes. Arriving at 30th and Lehigh Anthony sits down on the curb and cries that his foot is hurting him. Artenzio removes the left shoe and sees blood all over Anthony’s sock. Frankie stands in the middle of the Street and after two refusals a kind gentleman pulls over and agrees to take them to a hospital. In the back of the car Artenzio and Frankie intently try to hold Anthony’s toe on to his left foot. Anthony is still worried about his shoe and could care less about his toe.

Their efforts were in vain. Later, after being attended by a female physician at Women’s Medical who had called Anthony’s sister Eleanor, the boys were informed that Anthony’s big toe was severed. Long gone are those days when a material object would take priority over our own well-being. There was such a precedence that was instilled in that generation and for a few generations after them that we had to hold onto our goods, because our parents may not have been financially able to replace the item. Sometimes, as in this case children tend to fear the worse. I’m sure that in this case Anthony’s Mom forgave him for his shoes and was more concerned with his toe. I can’t help thinking that if this had happened today the Melfi’s would be in for a big settlement from the Boy Scouts of America. If only some of our old neighbors, Laura Rizio, Joe Martosella, Danny DiGiacomo, Bobby Lucarini Jim Lardani, and Frank Nicastro, were practicing law at the time. The injury didn’t hinder Anthony Melfi, because a few years later he joined the Merchant Marines. He was a Philadelphia Policeman who retired as a Detective. I did have the pleasure of knowing “Melfi the Cop”, as he was known and he knew everybody!