

The Very Early Years (1936–1953)

We lived at 7343 Bennett Street in a small three-bedroom apartment behind the trolley car barns in Homewood, just outside of Pittsburgh. There were four children—Florence (Flo), the oldest born June 11, 1937; Constance (Connie) born July 16, 1941; Harold Jr. born November, 21 1945; and Dennis (Dennis the Menace, according to my sisters). Father's sister, Aunt Alice, lived next door.

We didn't own a car and traveled everywhere by foot, trolley, or bus. For entertainment, families discussed the day's events, played games, read books, and listened to the radio. TVs were far too expensive for the average household. The May 23, 1949, *LOOK* magazine advertised console and table televisions from \$395 to \$985. The average annual salary was only \$2,950 a year then.



Harold and Bertha Damp in our backyard, 1940s

On warm summer evenings, my brother sat on Father's lap while Dad sat on the back porch, shooting at rats coming from the trolley barns. I still have his Buck Jones BB rifle.

From time to time, Dad brought his Hahn's truck over to the house and let Harold Jr. climb aboard and pretend to drive. Junior loved this and recalled Dad's hardy laugh and willingness to sit and talk with his kids.

My Father would read to my sisters in the evenings and kiss them goodnight at bedtime.



Harold Jr., Florence, and Connie, early 1947

I arrived on an overcast, rain-soaked morning on May 19, 1949, at the Pittsburgh hospital, adding a sixth mouth to feed for our now extended family.

My sisters recalled Father carrying me on his shoulder when I was first born, walking up and down Bennett Street to calm me down. They said it was quite a sight, a tiny infant cuddled on the shoulder of a giant.

The Bernstein's grocery store was on the corner down the street. My mother asked the owners to call her if Tiny came in to buy sweets. Each day when Dad returned home from work, my sisters recall how Mom went through his pockets, looking

for candy wrappers to see if he had cheated on his diet. Dad loved baked goods and candy; he couldn't stay away from them even though the doctors warned him that his weight would be the death of him.

Early on Tuesday morning, February 27, 1951, Harold Jr. awoke to Mother crying. Father had fallen out of bed, and she stood over him. She called an ambulance, and Aunt Alice came over to help. They arrived too late for Dad; he passed away in Mother's arms while she waited for help to arrive. Mother was thirty-seven years old and now a widow with four children to raise on her own. I was only twenty-one months old at the time.

Dad had a premonition that he wasn't long for this world. On March 18, 1950, eleven months before his death, he wrote a short letter to his children:

"From Daddy to his kiddies,

Kiddies, if you would all love Mommy as much as Dad loves Mommy from his heart, Mommy and Daddy would be more than happy.

All I can do is ask the girls to help Mommy. Because Mommy has a lot of worries on her shoulders. Mommy would do anything for you, so be good for Daddy, and please help Daddy by helping Mommy.

All you have to be is half as good as mommy as your mommy is all.

Love Dad"

Mother was now destitute, there were no savings or insurance policies to fall back on. My parents lived paycheck to paycheck prior to Dad's death. Fortunately, Social Security provided just enough for the basics: twenty-five dollars a month for each child when Dad first died, increasing to thirty-six dollars in the late 1950s. Without it, we would have been living on the

street. To this day, I don't know how Mom handled everything on her own. She was a rock!

She had little time to grieve with four children to care for. Mother marshaled on as best as she could under the circumstances.



Dennis at two and a half, 1951

Aunt Pauline and Uncle Jack offered to adopt me shortly after Dad died. They knew Mom struggled, and they couldn't have children. Their only condition was Bertha could never tell me who my real parents were. Mother refused.

We remained on Bennett Street for another two and a half years. Door-to-door salesmen visited for everything, including vacuum cleaners, Fuller Brush products, photographers, knife sharpeners, and more. I enjoyed the presentations.

On one occasion, a local photographer came to our door and sold Mother a session. They didn't have color film then, and the studios added color to the prints by hand. A Stanley salesman sold Mother a stainless-steel kitchen utensil set. I still use them

whenever I cook and fondly recall her using them all those years ago. Things made back then often lasted a lifetime.



Family portrait, 1951
Connie (left), Florence (top right), Harold (center),
and Dennis (lower right)

Doctors visited us when we were sick. Yes, they came to our home with black bag in hand. My brother and I had the croup, and they set up tents in our bedroom with hot steamers to help us breathe. I remember the large glass containers topped with chrome spray heads and the incessant hissing of the steam as it exited the vaporizer and filled our tents.

On another occasion our home was quarantined when my brother and I had what I believe was scarlet fever. Later in life, this came back to haunt us, as we both were diagnosed with atrial fibrillation (A-fib) in our forties. We all had the croup, whooping cough, measles, and the mumps long before vaccin-

ations were available, and our tonsils were removed around age five, a standard procedure then. I recall lying in the operatory for my tonsillectomy and the doctor asking me to count backward. Not long after surgery, a nurse brought me ice cream.



1953 Damp family photo—from left, Florence, Harold Jr. (top), Dennis (bottom), Bertha (Mom), and Connie

While living on Bennett Street, Mother attended secretarial classes. She practiced in the evenings for hours on a second-hand 1920s skeletonized black Underwood typewriter. I recall falling asleep many a night to the rhythmic cadence of each keystroke that emanated from the kitchen as she honed her skills. Florence watched us while Mother was at school.

Mother applied for various office jobs after completing the course. Her job applications were rejected time after time. Without a high school diploma, no one would hire her. This plagued mother throughout life; she was relegated to menial jobs. Their father's actions early in life caused Mother and her sisters irreparable harm.



Harold Junior's First Holy Communion, 1952

My siblings and I lived with different relatives for a month while Mother recovered from surgery two years after Father died. I stayed with Aunt Pauline and Uncle Jack, Harold with Uncle Matt and Aunt Verne, Connie with Aunt Tillie and Uncle Phil, and Flo with Aunt Sally and Uncle Chuck. I have distinct memories of living with my aunt and uncle. I would have been about four at the time.

It's odd what one recalls at times like these. Uncle Jack, a Pittsburgh policeman, bought me a Dick Tracy car with a yellow garage that year. When you wound it up, Dick Tracy's car burst out of the garage and flew across the room.

I can still visualize things and events from staying with my aunt and uncle: Uncle Jack coming home from work in his police uniform, my helping with the dishes while standing on a

chair at the sink, the couch I slept on, and wall decorations and ceramic figurines in the living room.

Uncle Jack had a robust voice. He was average height, slightly balding, and sturdily built. Often when he talked, his vocal inflections contradicted what he said. You knew what he actually meant, not from the words alone but from their pronunciation and his subtle facial expressions and mannerisms. I enjoyed his company and watching him handle the sensitive issues of the day.

Aunt Pauline was slender, short, attractive, and kindhearted. She and her twin, Aunt Anita, were friends throughout their lives, and both had similar mannerisms. Pauline was soft spoken and gentle. However, at times her voice betrayed that sentiment in a good way. First and foremost, you knew how much she loved Jack. They were devoted to each other.

Aunt Pauline placed knickknacks on a miniature wooden staircase above the couch. Centered on the coffee table was a large ceramic red bull and matador. A beautiful bronze statue of a naked lady drinking from a bowl and standing on a dark-gray granite base was placed prominently on an end table in their living room. Uncle Jack brought the statue back from Europe at the end of World War II. He was a distinguished Army veteran who served throughout Europe and Africa during the war. Those images, seared into my memory, are crystal clear today. I remember Aunt Pauline's kind smile as we talked and did the dishes.

After Mother recovered from the operation, things returned to a semblance of order on Bennett Street until we moved to Finleyville six months later.