

BEN AVON AREA HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

NEWSLETTER

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“LET THERE RE LIGHT!”

by

H. Ben Avon

When I was very small a black man lived in our basement. His name was Harry Charms, but he was rarely referred to by anything more than simply Harry. Harry was strong, dependable and Bible literate. He brought all three characteristics to his performance of chores in and outside our home and throughout the borough of Ben Avon.

For many years he served our Sunday and other “company” dinners as well as “washing up” kitchen and bathrooms, stairways, and floors along with mending screens in the spring; fertilizing and rolling the lawn; and cutting the grass.

Among my earliest recollections of him is one of his setting up the Christmas tree, one which reached the ceiling, and which was no small task when consideration is given to the fact that our old Victorian house had 10½ foot ceilings in our second floor living room. I, of course, completely believed that Harry was helping Santa Claus so that all Santa would have to do was add a few decorations before leaving our presents!

Our home did not provide enough work to keep Harry busy full-time, and I’m also sure my father was not financially able to be Harry’s sole support, particularly through the Depression Days of the Thirties. Harry,

therefore, often performed similar tasks for the Wilsons, the Samples and others and ended many of his days by sweeping and mopping up Espy’s drug store and Elste’s grocery market.

After dinner, and when he could on Saturday afternoons, Harry listened to the radio. He was a knowledgeable fan of classical music and the Texaco broadcasts of opera live from the Met. I believe my own interest in the opera may well have begun when he commanded me in later years to “listen, Mastuh Billy, that’s the music of the angels” as Wagner or Mozart or Verdi poured from the old arch-shaped radio that stood on a stand by his bed.

As I look back I realize I must have been an awful pest as a pre-schooler traipsing around after him while he worked. But I don’t remember an angry word. “Step back, now,” “Watch out!” and “Hold on tight to my hand,” are what come back instead. The latter particularly as we climbed onto our favorite “after-work” spot, the railing at the Emsworth railroad station.

There, doing as I was told, I did hold on tight, as I was in awe of the great steam-belching monsters that roared by dragging endless freights or long lines of dark-red coaches and Pullmann cars. Once in a while the passenger trains slowed to a creep -- held back by the signal then near the Ben Avon station-- and the porters would hang out of the open upper halves of the big metal doors. Many knew Harry as he had been a porter for

years and they waved and yelled as they rode by. It was only in later times that I surmised Harry's interest in alcohol may have ended his railroad career --but I knew none of that as I sat beside him and waved to those heroic figures in their breath-taking world.

About all I ever knew of his own youth was that he had a twin -- his "baby" brother by a few minutes -- and that as a lad he had been a bootblack with Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders. He had even been with them in camp when they made the legendary charge up San Juan Hill! At least so we all believed.

Beyond that I learned little of his personal life. Rumor had it that he had a wife somewhere -- maybe Chicago. And I never knew how he got connected to my family. He was simply the part of it who lived in the basement and who did whatever my father and mother asked him to do.

My father and he seemed to get along well and whatever was to be painted or repaired or planted was discussed by them and a plan made for its undertaking over the next days or weeks. Harry carried it out, apparently to my father's satisfaction, without further ado.

One of Dad's favorite stories about Harry had happened just before prohibition ended. My father had been in Richmond, Virginia on business and while staying in a hotel had been offered "moonshine"-- corn liquor -- on the sly and at a reasonable price by one of the hotel's elevator operators.

My father, who was not unacquainted with spirits, bought a bottle and tried a swig. I can still recall him saying that he thought his insides were on fire after one gulp and that he put the lid on the bottle, the bottle in his suitcase, and never touched it again until he

got home and unpacked. He went downstairs and, instead of throwing the bottle away, offered it to Harry. Dad said Harry opened the bottle, tilted it to his mouth, took a huge snort, swallowed it and smacked his lips saying only thank you and that it was the real thing!

Our lives went on together throughout the thirties -- years of everyone helping everyone else get through those times of no work, failing banks and soup kitchens. By then my father was running a service station near the Avalon street-car loop and I well remember the idle young men sitting on his front step in a line just waiting for someone to come by and offer them a job. One of the favorites was unloading a truckload of sod for a quarter -- and they fought to get it. But, of course, I understand now that it meant two admissions to a movie and a coke split with a girl on Friday or Saturday night.

Then times changed. Harry still lived with us but he began to drink more on weekends and, after trips to the Hill district of Pittsburgh, Harry would return home by street car. On occasion my sister would board the same trolley in the company of another girl or two, or as she grew up, with a boy friend after a show at the Bellevue movie. Harry would be leading the passengers of the streetcar in prayer. This was not a put on, at all. He could quote scripture endlessly, and, as far as I know reasonably accurately. But for a teenage girl, particularly one with a date, to be singled out for greeting with "I knows you, Miss Kitsy, I knows you" by this swaying black man who had the attention of everyone on the car with his sermonizing, was an experience she came to dread.

But my sister's embarrassment (as she otherwise felt as close to Harry as I did) was not the real problem. What brought the police with flashing lights, billy-clubs and handcuffs

was when Harry became a more belligerent and noisy drunk. In his little basement room he could hear the young couple above him in their bed. While their activity was apparently audible to him more than anyone realized, when he was sober he was too gentlemanly to ever mention it. But when he was inebriated he offered loud commentary along the lines of "I knows what you is doin' -- Harry knows!" which embarrassed the young bride (and probably the groom) to the point of eventually demanding he be ousted or they would have to move from their apartment in our house.

After a couple of such exciting events when the police took Harry away to sleep his drunk off in the basement jailroom of the Ben Avon Borough Hall, a temporary expedient of moving him into a hastily constructed room in our garage was tried. This solution, however, was not practical as our garage lacked heat and water and as winter approached it became obvious that it was not a fit place for anyone to sleep. At this point Bill Elste of Elste's Market came to Harry's rescue and provided him with a heated room on the second floor of his garage and a shower in the basement of his store. It was in these simple but relatively comfortable quarters that Harry lived out the balance of his life, still working for others and us as he had previously. All of which is not to say his life was not still punctuated with occasional trips to the "Hill" and ensuing bouts with the police and nights in the jail where on Sunday morning after Sunday School one or two boys and I would go and talk to him through the barred window.

I believe now that it was during the summer of 1945, just before the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan, that along with our Victory garden I was raising some hundred and fifty chickens over our hill above the railroad and the river. We, and many of our neighbors, were grateful for that enterprise at the time -- but that is another

story. At any rate, I remember I was giving the chickens fresh grass clippings to supplement their feed, one hot evening shortly after dinner when I heard my sister cry out in real distress.

I raced up from the coop and across the yard to find her and our mother in each other's arms. "Harry's been hit," my sister said through streaming tears and nodded toward the boulevard. I tore on down the walk in front of what was then Alston's and found him on the brick pavement just above the Forest Avenue viaduct. Traffic had stopped and as I reached Harry I was sure he was still breathing. But blood was running from his mouth into a sickening puddle beside him and his breathing soon stopped.

With various neighbors and my sister, the one eyewitness, the story was soon reconstructed that Harry had stopped at Samples' and was crossing the boulevard to come to our house for his money (my father always paid him after he, my father, came home from work). Some one -- I never knew who, although he did stop -- drove over the brow of the hill from town fairly quickly and came across the line to hit Harry on the wrong side of the road -- apparently thinking Harry would step back, but Harry tried to hurry out of the way with the result they both went the same direction. Harry's death was ruled an accident and no charges were filed.

I still often think of him when I enter a dark room and turn on an electric switch. It is his voice I hear in my mind saying, as he turned on a lamp, "And the Lord said, 'Let there be light!'"

H. Ben Avon is the pen name of a man who grew up in Ben Avon and still lives in the area.

Ben Avon Area Historical Association
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We appreciate the support of all who make contributions in excess of their membership fee.

Archive Donations

Bill Uhl Farm Hardware

PUBLIC MEETING

Wednesday, Oct. 23, 2002
7:30 PM at Community Presbyterian
Church of Ben Avon



Tom Steiner will present a slide show and lecture on West View Park. We look forward to fond memories of the local happenings at the park ending in 1977.

Bring a neighbor! Show off your memorabilia! Share your stories with us.