

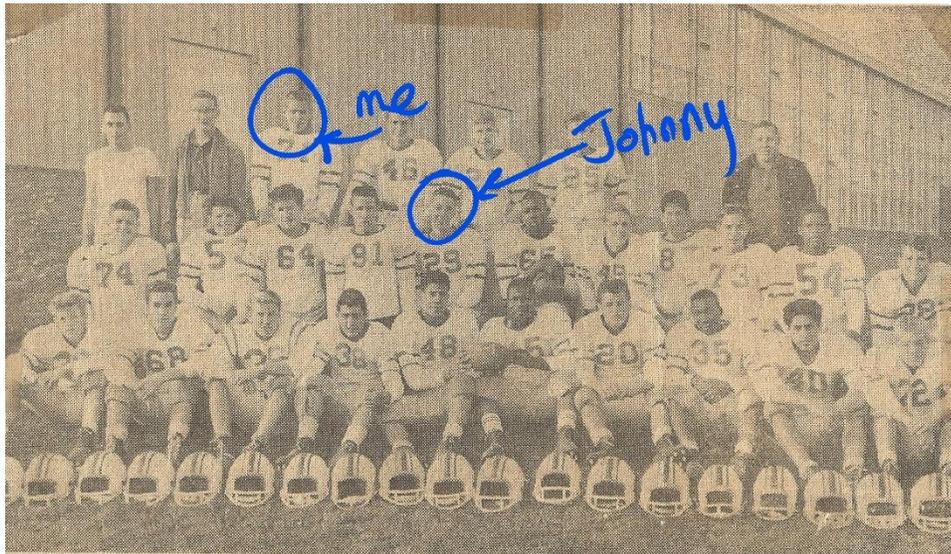
Tree Rings

by

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Chapter Nine

Coffee with Johnny Senger, TBD



FIRST-YEAR CHAMPION in city junior high football competition is the Crosby Junior High team which defeated both North and South and finished with the best record of five wins and one loss. Squad personnel are, left to right: sitting, John Nicholas, Dave Piacenti, Bill Hermanski, Bruce Pivero, Cocapts. Tony Gibson and Jim Whitfield, Tony Villanova, Larry Hunt, Dick Joseph and Steve Gleason; kneeling, Glenn Hodenius, Gerry Coppola, Wayne Seace, Owen Boyington, John Senger, Jim Moore, Dave Melle, Jack Martin, Bob Pettibone, George Williams and Jack Latimer; standing, Coach George Sylvester, Manager Terry Cook, Gene Kraay, Peter Calderella, Terry Andrus, Bob Williams and Coach Earl Hatch. Crosby's one loss was to the Pittsfield High jayvees.

Me and Johnny Senger, 1963

I'd like to have a cup of coffee with Johnny Senger. We will sit in a booth in a Mom & Pop café or diner and drink from real coffee cups, not from paper cups with Starbuck logos. Of course, Johnny may not drink coffee, though I suspect he does as a man of the land, a gardener, I think, at least his father was, a landscaper. I can't say that Johnny was my best friend, but he is the first friend I

recollect with clarity. Johnny lived at the top of Hampton Avenue. He lived next door to my brother's friend Ray Connors. We lived just down West Housatonic Street from Hampton Avenue and would meet Johnny and Ray and walk to Pomeroy Elementary School every morning. Other kids would join us, so we were nine or ten strong by the time we reached the corner where we would buy Bazooka Bubble chewing gum for a penny at the West End Market after school. Few kids walk to school these days.

Johnny was raised a Roman Catholic. We learned our catechism at St. Mark's church on West Street not far from where they built the new junior high school in 1962. I wonder if he still practices, Catholicism, that is. We could discuss that over our cup of coffee. Johnny and I talked about going to the seminary together to become priests. He attended a seminary for one semester and then left. I don't remember which seminary. Despite my mother's encouragement, my father would not allow me to do it. I remember my mother telling Patti Baker's mother that I was going to be a priest. I found it embarrassing. Mrs. Baker smiled at me and said to my mother, "The girls will be disappointed." Patti was a Jew and I considered her a good friend in grammar school, though like Johnny, we became distanced as we moved on to high school. I liked Patti, maybe even considered her my girlfriend in third grade. Or was it fourth?

Johnny and I shared an adventure at the gravel pits near Barker Road in 1960, late summer. I write about it in my working manuscript *The People Next Door*. Johnny and I, and our friend Billy Allard were set up by my brother and Ray Connors who had encountered Richard Parise's gang at the pits a few days earlier. My brother and Ray scheduled a confrontation with the Parise gang on a Saturday morning and enlisted me, Johnny and Billy to participate. We agreed. The morning of the fight, my brother and Ray were nowhere to be found. Me, Johnny and Billy went ahead anyway and got our asses kicked in fine fashion. We didn't do much together after that, although I don't think it was the ass-whipping that made us grow apart.

I sat in Mrs. Batty's science class at Crosby Junior High on November 22, 1963 when the school principal announced over the intercom that John Kennedy had been assassinated. School was immediately dismissed. That was a sad day, the first of many to follow when Camelot fell, and Arthur sailed to Avalon. I hope Johnny doesn't want to talk politics when we have our coffee. I was never good at it and I pay no attention to the news.

Johnny and I were teammates on the Crosby Junior High Football team that fall. We had good careers at Pomeroy Elementary School, but football lost its appeal to me at Crosby. I played at Pomeroy because I wanted to; I played at Crosby because my dad wanted me to. Neither Johnny nor I contributed significantly to the success of the junior high team. That was the last time I remember doing anything with Johnny Senger. We'd say hello to one another after that, but never did anything together as friends are apt to do in high school. I wonder if Johnny watches football anymore. Back then we liked the New York Giants and the Baltimore Colts.

I will tell Johnny that I like to write, and we can talk about that working manuscript, *The People Next Door*. It is inspired by a statement I read in John O'Donohue's beautiful book *Anam Cara*: "Imagine the difference it would have made to your life had you been born into the house next door." I think Johnny would enjoy that, talking about writing, then again, maybe he doesn't read much these days. I will ask Johnny if he remembers old Bobo Dapson who lived next door to me and maintained his son's

veterinary hospital. Bobo's grandson David drove the ice cream truck. He was nice to all the kids like me and Johnny. Johnny will remember.

I would like to meet Johnny's wife and children – assuming he married a woman who bore offspring. I will tell his sons and daughters that their dad was a good friend when we were as young as our grandkids are today. I suspect she is nice, Johnny's wife. He had a pleasant smile that was certain to attract a pleasant wife. He will tell me good things about them – his wife and kids – when we have that cup of coffee.