

Cousin Tribute – David Welles Pierpont

By Alan Russell

I was saddened this weekend to hear of the passing of my cousin Dave. While we were not real close in recent years, he was my best friend during our time of growing up in Wolcott, CT. As I sat with tears in my eyes due to his passing, I was also overwhelmed by all the things that came flooding back from my memories of him. I'd like to relate all these things for posterity and hopefully give you readers a sense of why and how we were so close.

Setting the Stage

My father had a rough time growing up with his parents getting divorced, remarried, etc. When he was 16 and in 11th grade his older sister got a job at Scovill in Waterbury and the two of them moved there to live with his grandfather, Louis Russell. His world then began to revolve around that part of Waterbury as well as with his classmates at Leavenworth (the votech of its day) and with the local church, Mill Plain. One of his best friends was Clarence Pierpont (known as Zeke) who was a classmate as well as he attended that same church. The two of them became buddies. Zeke was 2 months older, having been born on 9/9/1920 and my father on 11/20/1920. They both began working after high school.

During the war, my father was one of the church members who served in the military and whom those not in the military corresponded with. This eventually turned into a relationship with Zeke's younger sister, Sylvia. This relationship was cemented in April 1946 when my father had a short leave from the Navy and this turned into a marriage in September of that same year. My father had always wanted a large tract of land and so he used his separation pay to buy a 23-acre piece of property in the north of Wolcott. The roads were only dirt and there was only Witham Rd (named after the prior owner of that land) and Seery Rd (named after the

developer of that part of Wolcott). There were only 3 homes in that development.

Meanwhile, Zeke had also finished his military service and was living back home with his parents in Waterbury. He was involved in the YTC (Youth Temperance Council) of their church and through that activity became acquainted with a member of the YTC from Meriden, Barbara (Babs) Bishop. He used that connection to attend YTC meetings with her and they were married in early 1948. My father participated in their wedding. Meanwhile, Mr. Witham, having sold his original house to my parents, had begun building another house in an offshoot of Seery Rd in 1947. But where for Zeke and Babs to begin their married life? What better than near his best friend, my father. They purchased that small house from Mr. Witham in 1948. The offshoot of Seery Rd had not yet been named, so when they went to the town hall to register their move, the town clerk gave them the option of naming it, so they chose Barclare – the combination of their two names.

This friendship and closeness of the two families was to last for the next 60 years.

The Next Generation

Both the Russell and Pierpont families did not waste a lot of time in starting their respective families. My mother became pregnant in the fall of 1947, Babs became pregnant about in early summer of 1948. Thus, it was only natural that their respective children would also become best friends. Both families eventually had five children – three boys and two girls. Two of them, Charles (Chuck) Russell and Robert (Rob) Pierpont, were born only 3 days apart in 1954 and with the then practice of a week of confinement, both Sylvia and Babs were in the hospital together. The final children, Sandy Pierpont and Edward Russell, were also born just a few weeks apart in Dec 1957 and Jan 1958.

Dave and I just naturally became best friends as well as relatives and neighbors. I could see the Pierpont house out my 2nd floor window over

the two intervening yards. Our parents also continued their close relationship over the decades. Two examples come to mind. One year our grandfather gifted the two men an extension ladder – but he gave one half of the ladder to my father and the other half to my Uncle Zeke. So, if either man needed the benefit of the longer ladder, he just borrowed the other portion. Secondly, when Uncle Zeke passed away in Mar 2006, my father's words were, "I've lost my best friend!" That played into his own loss of will to live and he died just six months later.

Growing, Playing, and Working Together

With the close connection of our parents, and with both Dave and I being the oldest of 5 children, the opportunities to become close ourselves was natural. The earliest picture I have of the two of us was taken around June of 1949 when I was 10 months old and Dave was just 3 months old. Our respective mothers were standing together outside the back door of our home and showing off their first-borns. The other picture was taken in the summer of 1955 when Dave and I were 6 and 7 respectively. I'm the one in the back with the coonskin cap and Dave has his arm wrapped around his younger brother Rob.



There was a well-worn path between our respective houses (but avoiding the intervening yards as they liked their privacy). But there were also paths in the woods behind our house that went past the pond, past the two pine trees, and through the blueberry glen, eventually coming out at the end of Barclare Lane. With the safety of the isolated neighborhood, we had lots of opportunities to play together. The only thing preventing even closer togetherness was that the grade cutoff in Wolcott at the time was the end of the calendar year. So, since I had been born in 1948 and Dave in 1949, we were in different grades in school. Instead, Dave became a classmate of my sister Beth, even though he was closer in age to me (7 months) than to her (9 months).

We also began working together. Some of that was volunteering. When my parents' house needed to have a new roof, my father contracted with a neighbor. As they ripped off all the old cedar shakes, they tossed them down into the yard where Dave and I gathered them up. But some working together was for pay. Mr. Seery began clearing a section of the woods at the far end of Barclare and turning the trees into charcoal. He would load the branches into a structure of metal/cinder block, seal the entrance, and light it on fire. Over several days the wood would turn into charcoal. But then it needed to be bagged so it could be sold. That job was assigned to Dave and I. One would use a shovel scoop to gather a small pile of charcoal, the other would hold the bag open for the shovel to be emptied in, and then when full the bag would be sealed with a metal twist-tie. Mr. Seery paid us so much per bag. When we came home, we would be black with charcoal dust and be sent immediately to the bathroom to wash up.

This same working together would come into play in another way. For a while, Uncle Zeke was the head of the local forest fire crew. In those days the local volunteer fire company would handle structure fires and anything that they could reach with their hoses. But if the fire was back in the woods, there were state forest fire crews who had "Indian tanks," fire rakes, and brooms to make breaks in the leaves and put out the burning stumps. Although we were not technically old enough, Dave and

I were part of his dad's crew. Most fires occurred during the summer when there was no school, but there were even rules about how we could be released from school in the spring/fall if needed. Dave and I worked alongside each other on many fires – either in Wolcott or in surrounding towns.

Heading Off to Later Life and Marriage

As I mentioned above, I was a year ahead of Dave in school. When I graduated in 1966, I went to college in Michigan where I spent the next 5 years. Toward the end of that time, I met and fell in love with the woman who became my wife, Donna. We got engaged on 9/5/1970 and married the following year. We lived in CT for the next 4 years, then moved to PA in 1975 where we still live.

Meanwhile, Dave chose a military route – enrolling in the US Air Force. After the war he was assigned to Langley AFB in Hampton, VA, where he met the woman of his dreams, Bev. They were engaged just two weeks after Donna and I. But they set the date of their marriage for 6/19/1971, a month before Donna and I got married on 7/17/1971. So, while I was born 7 months before Dave, and graduated from high school a year before him, he married a month before me!

Dave and Bev remained in VA until Dave's passing this weekend. Donna and I remained in PA. Both couples had their 55th anniversary earlier this summer. There were other parallels – both couples had two children: two girls to Dave and Bev, one boy and one girl to Donna and I.

Later Connections

Living in separate states, there were not too many opportunities for face-to-face meetings in the last half-century. Most of these were when both couples were visiting family back in CT – either during the summer or at Christmas. My children also remember meeting them when they stayed with their grandparents in Wolcott for a few weeks each summer.

But there was one time when we met in VA. I had taken my two children on an extended vacation to the south. We went down through DE and across the Chesapeake Bay Bridge to VA where we stayed on the beach. The following day we went to Dave and Bev's house for a visit. We then continued west to Monticello, up through VA to Luray Caverns and then back to PA with a stop at Gettysburg.

We also have maintained touch through social media – being friends of each other in Facebook. While it's not the same as meeting face-to-face, it does mean that we've been able to continue keeping touch with each other over the years.

Conclusion

As I've been writing the above, the tears are freely falling again. Dave was not just a cousin and a neighbor. He was my best friend for many years and we shared a lot of experiences together. Now at the age of 77 he has gone on before me to glory. I will miss him until we meet again in heaven.