

Pop

Eulogy for Robert M. Van House by Paul Van House

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When I was growing up a common question was "What does your father do?" Answers from the other children would include doctor, dentist, lawyer, and other easily definable occupations. When I was asked, I was never quite sure what to say. My dad had told me he was an engineer but I never saw him drive a train.

I do remember that dad always drove a different car home from the office. He would drive every manner of Oldsmobile, Chevy, Buick, and Cadillac. Occasionally there would be a Corvette in the driveway. The other kids thought we were rich. The thing I remember most about these cars was all the extra gadgets and gauges. Well before Anti-Lock brakes became the norm, Pop had cars with a device the size of a small suitcase in the trunk. He explained it was an anti-lock brake system. Then he'd take us for a ride, doing exactly what he told us to never do when driving. After a quick acceleration to highway speeds, he would slam on the brakes. Then we'd get out and look at the skid marks. Instead of one long skid mark, it was a series of short skid marks looking like hyphens. I was told this device would save lives but I didn't understand.

Another time it was a Cadillac was equipped with a small radar screen on the front grille. This device was supposed to apply the brakes in order to avoid collisions. As we were driving along Alex-Bell near Rahn, there was an old barn at a sharp curve in the road. Pop approached the curve and announced he was not going to use the brakes. I think the idea was for the radar device to sense the barn and gently apply the brakes. Well, the brake application was not gentle and THAT car did not have anti-lock brakes!

Then there was the time in 10th grade when I told my friends about the great cars my father always drove and that he was picking me up after school in what he had described to me as a "surprise" vehicle. I waited anxiously on the second floor of the Magsig building with friends gathered around looking out the window expecting a Corvette or at least a shiny Oldsmobile. What happened next was beyond belief. Parked below in front of the building was a dump truck with my father behind the wheel honking the horn. Pop thought I'd be excited because I was always urging him to drive the dump truck. My friends thought this was the funniest thing they had ever seen. I was quite embarrassed!

I guess I never really understood that the work my father did was important to the automotive industry but if you drove a General Motors car in last few decades of the 20th century you were the beneficiary of my father's research. In fact, many of the ideas he came up with are probably still in use today.

Pop rarely talked about his life. But after he got a computer he took time to write out several stories about growing up. From buying the family's first radio to his life on the road when he was, for lack of a better term, a bum. He talked about seeing some of the blasting when Mount Rushmore was being sculpted. He and his friends heard there were jobs there but nobody was hiring. He rode in boxcars with hobos to Washington state where he hoped to sign on a ship to Alaska as a crew mate. That, too was a bust. He eventually got a job with General Motors, and with the exception of his service in World War II, that was his only job.

Who are your heroes? I used to look up to Astronauts. After a while, my heroes were baseball players. I never really thought of my father as a hero. But looking back, I see a man who tried to enlist in every branch of the service in order to help his country during World War II but was turned down because he was color blind. Finally he asked a recruiter wasn't there something he could do? When he was told the Navy needed engineers he signed up. To me, that embodies the spirit of heroism.

I also saw a man whose mind was never at a standstill. After working all day, he'd come home and dream up things like building an airplane out of fiberglass in the basement. He got a portion of the tail section finished before stopping work on that project. He built hi-tech cross bows and compound bows. When Alzheimer's robbed him of his creative thoughts he was working on a device to stop grocery carts from blowing across parking lots by the wind.

But he was more than work. My father was probably most comfortable in the woods. He built a tent camper from scratch in the 60's. I was too young to help but I would imagine it was a family project. Well, maybe more like forced labor. My sister tells me that when it was time to apply the waterproof coating to the trailer bottom Robert applied the first coat then broke out in hives. David was assigned the second coat he was allergic, too.

For coat number three, Linda was chosen....she was allergic as well. Linda implies a fourth coat was planned but Pop decided that three coats would be enough!

After a few years we stopped using the trailer and went tenting, fishing and canoeing in the wilderness of Ontario. On the first trip I managed to fall into the lake while rinsing dishes, providing great enjoyment to Pop and my brothers. We went to the same place for several years, a spot on McMaster lake which required a day-long journey down the University River, across beaver dams and what seemed like a mile-long portage between lakes.

My last trip took place when I was a new teenager. It was just Pop and I. First we drove several miles down a dirt and mud road built by loggers. We put in the University River when the road went no further. It was a grueling 2-weeks of canoeing, portaging and pulling the canoe through shallows. I was getting pretty tired of this routine so when the river finally got narrow and deep I was quite upset when Pop made us pull over to inspect the river ahead. Of course, the woodsman was right. There was a rather large waterfall just around the corner. We eventually canoed out into Lake Superior and waited unsuccessfully for the lake to calm down. After 2 days we decided to put out early in the morning. It was quite rough by the time we stopped at a lighthouse for directions and hot chocolate. When we made landfall I was put in charge of guarding the canoe while Pop hitchhiked back to the head of the logging road then hiked by foot to fetch the car. I got tired and bored after about an hour and decided I would go into town to buy a hamburger. I stuck out my thumb and got a ride right away. A few miles down the road I saw an old unshaven man leaning on a canoe paddle with his thumb out. It was Pop! I slunk down in the seat hoping the car did not stop to pick him up. Luckily for my hide I made it to town and back before Pop and nothing of ours was stolen. I didn't tell Pop about the hitchhiking incident until just recently. Pop was quite proud of this trip as the Rangers told him they weren't aware of anyone in recent history that had canoed the University river.

My brothers and father took one final trip to McMaster lake. It was the same story, paddling, portaging, crossing beaver dams. But when it came time to take the hike to McMaster lake all the trees had been cleared by loggers so the path could not be seen. Using a compass, Pop and my brothers found the lake.....and discovered a camper and several other vehicles. It turns out all the canoeing and portaging was not necessary as a road had been built to the lake.

Fishing was done during the summer, but in Autumn it was deer hunting with a bow and arrow. Both my brothers took part in this ritual which consisted of driving to northern Michigan and camping in snow in a small pup tent. Every few years we would get venison, but every year Pop and his two older sons made memories.

I don't remember being showered with hugs and kisses by my father, but looking back I see a man who was not afraid to take time to teach his children some valuable lessons. My work ethic comes from my father. I don't think calling in sick was in his vocabulary. I see a man who urged each of us to do our best work and strive for something better. I see a man who disagreed with my initial career choice but then bragged to his co-workers that I was in charge of a radio station. I see a man who was getting old and ill, but was brought to tears when he learned his only daughter was fighting cancer. My father may not have been a hero by dictionary standards, but to me, he stands out as a big hero and the most important man in my life.