

A Perfect Pennsylvania Wintry Day

By Gil Moegerle
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The children's book *A Perfect Day* by Carin Berger provides those of us who grew up a half century ago in small steel towns northwest of Pittsburgh with wondrous flashbacks to what we would call perfect PA wintry days.

My siblings and I understand the fun she describes of making first boot tracks in deep, newly fallen snow that covered our double lot property. We know about flopping into snow drifts – the deeper the better. We three brothers certainly know about building snow forts and firing snow balls down on neighbors named Suskavich and Conley. With our sister we built snowmen, carrot noses and twig hair included, and created snow angels until we ran out of untouched yard. Our family didn't do the skiing or ice skating about which Berger writes, but we can check off every other form of glorious winter fun she illustrates.

This includes sledriding down a wonderfully steep road – Fourth Street – one block over from our home at 411 Darlington Road. That hill provided many life threatening childhood thrills including dodging parked cars and high speed exits into yards as traffic approached. I recall a prankster neighbor who guided his sled up behind mine as we tore down the hill, then reached over and slid my runners sideways. My luge turned 90 degrees to the right and headed straight for a parked car, flying under it and shooting out onto a neighbor's property. I was

somewhat less fortunate. I reached both hands up in a flawed attempt to use the car to stop my flight, not realizing that would mean my face would also serve as a brake. Like any kid who loves speed and sleds I climbed back up the slippery grade to Darlington Road and prepared for another run – this time more vigilant about my so-called friends.



The all-time record one-day snowfall in our little town was 18 inches. Average annual snowfall is 41 inches. For perspective, that is 19 inches more than the national average. I am just saying – when I claim we grew up in a winter wonderland, I have hard data to back me up. And when I refer to our quaint LITTLE hometown, I am talking about Beaver Falls, 30 miles NW of Pittsburgh. When we were children there were 17,000 residents. The latest census counted 8,800. Such is the fate of PA river towns built on the American steel industry.

A perfect winter school day was of course a snow day – school cancelled. Otherwise, a perfect school day included running out the front door of our warm home across our frozen yard to the street corner on Darlington Road at the exact moment the big yellow school bus we called The Pusher slowed to a stop. We named it thusly because, in contrast to buses that had a truck style engine and hood up front, ours had an engine in the back. Therefore, the front was snub-nosed and, we assumed, might work well pushing a stuck vehicle back onto the road. Never mind that none of us had never seen a school bus used for this purpose. Our goal was to reach the bus stop having never slowed our pace let alone stood for painful moments in the freezing PA wind.

If we missed The Pusher, we walked two miles along Darlington Road, down the rather steep 11th Street hill, past the train station, then up 8th Ave. to the big brick Beaver Falls Area Senior High School. That's right, I walked two miles to school on several wintry occasions. One of mom's favorite sayings was, "What you don't have in your brain you must have in your feet."



At this point in my story I usually add, for the benefit of my grandchildren, before mowers were invented my siblings and I cut the lawn with sizzers. They roll their eyes at my grandpa humor and I fear my walking to school story is also considered pure myth. Unfortunately, it is not.

If you asked me to describe the best part of a perfect winter day growing up in PA I wouldn't have to think twice about the answer. It was jumping off The Pusher, racing across our snow-blanketed front yard, past snow forts awaiting the next epic seige and snowmen beckoning us to add accutremments, taking the frontporch steps two at a time and bursting through the front door. Mom was a stay-at-home mother whose greatest passion in life was her children. So the first joy of coming home was the whole-hearted welcome we received and her focused attention on how our day had gone. It's good to be loved.

Mom was a great cook and baker. The second pleasure of that moment was smelling something homemade in the kitchen. Among favorite examples I could describe – pot roast, raisen cookies, rhubarb pie (OK, maybe not the rhubarb pie) – my hands-down best welcome home smell was mom's homemade bread. I dare you to name a wintry day smell or sight that tops a crusty, golden loaf of bread coming out of the oven. No doubt this childhood memory is the reason high on my retirement bucket list was learning how to bake crusty bread. Check.



Allow me one final memory of a perfect winter day growing up in Beaver Falls. My siblings and I experienced the magic of a fully functioning living room fireplace giving off its twinkling buttery light, its crackling and popping, that rustic country smell of slowly burning oak and its cozy warmth. If you have ever sat at night in the embrace of a roaring fire looking out the window at fat snowflakes drifting lazily to earth, covering tree limbs and roofs and painting white the entire neighborhood then you know the magic of a perfect wintry PA day.