

The Brantwoodian Villain

Jerry Woodfill

“Jerry, we’re going to a party tonight. Josette Chamberlain is going to be your sitter.”

Quickly, I postured my lower lip into a pitiful whimper, dropped my shoulders for Mom’s benefit, and stomped dejectedly from the room, all the while relishing the thought, “Wow, Josette, this is my night!”

In 1949, *Playboy* magazine did not exist. The closest “girlie periodical” was my uncle’s pile of *Esquires*, altogether tame compared to today’s TV, cinema, and other more unseemly opportunities for an 8 year old boy’s inadvertent (of course) perusal. But Josette, though only 14, was equal in my mind to any of those pinups pictured in *Esquire*.

Nevertheless, if I seemed eager for Josette to *sit me*, I feared Mom would be suspicious and call the prissy Wilhemina Ragsdale, a Dutch Reformed Sunday school student aspiring to be a deaconess one day. Wilhemina always lectured me on the evils of movie attendance when she was my sitter. Who needed the movies when Josette was in the house? She looked better than most of the girls in them.

But it’s neither Josette nor Wilhemina that this is about. It’s Josette’s younger brother Lance Chambelain. (of course not his real name) Her six year old kid brother was my familiar colleague in work, play, and crime. It’s that third category I want to address.

Lance was a prodigious budding felon having

the potential of a Mafia don though Chamberlain was certainly not an Italian surname. It was only by God’s grace, i.e., transfer of Mr. Chamberlain to another plant in a foreign land that spared me a life of criminality under the tutelage of “Light Fingers” Lance Chamberlain, the young thief of Brantwood.

Besides losing wrestling matches to Lance, I found his mischievous ways altogether harmless: swiping produce from Janzzen’s farmers’ market on Ridge Road was about as dire as his conduct got. Yet, I sensed, an underlying evil that might one day manifest itself to my detriment. That day did come.

Lance casually suggested we visit a neighbor’s son’s home. Seemed like a swell idea. I liked my playmate’s toys very much: lots of toy trucks, bulldozers, ships, planes, and cars. Then I discovered the problem. Both my friend and his parents were out of town.

The home had sort of a playroom between the garage and house. Lance must have done a thorough surveillance since his room was directly in front and above the planned crime site. Not only did he know of the home’s vacancy, he, like most crooks, knew how to gain illegal entry. The clandestine path would be through the unlocked garage into that wonderful toy-studded playroom.

Lance plied me with the convincing argument that this was “no big deal”...that our friend would want us to enjoy his toys in his absence. And this we did, until our parents found out about our “breaking and entering” for the purposes of felonious toy playing pursuits. Fortunately neither Lance nor I was prosecuted. We were six years old.

The second incident came three years later, The Great Iceball Caper. Brantwood’s trail to

Hammond began with the four lane Ridge Road. This served as a bus route to downtown Hammond. The bus continued four miles down Ridge Road before turning north bound for Hohman Avenue for the final leg of the trip.

The name Ridge Road is appropriate. The road actually follows a ridge bordering the Brantwood lowlands. Brantwood is approximately 20 feet below the natural ridge topology. There was a Brantwood stop on the bus route. Conveniently, it was across from the main entrance into the aforementioned wicked Wicker Park. So that the vast populations from afar might enjoy the park’s offerings without need of automotive transportation.

Few from Brantwood, except for non-licensed youth, chose the bus for travel to downtown Hammond. I was among the “wheeless” disadvantaged and often road Hohman Avenue into the heart of the metropolis of 80,000 Hammonites. (Actually, if one missed the bus, the walk home was but a few hours. I know, because that was my experience on more than one occasion.)

While these recollections seek to be factual, names have been changed to protect the guilty. The Great Iceball Incident was perpetuated by three Brantwood juveniles. I’m only sure of one of those three. That would, of course, be Jerry Woodfill. Likely, Lance, would be another but memory fails me except to say the incident was consistent with Lance’s *modus operandi*.

As was often the case in winter, Ridge Road was awash in ice, slush, and snow. This was a temptation for the three 9 year olds among Brantwood’s finest youth as they awaited the Hammond bus. We planned an evening at the

cinema for the late show at the Hammond Metropolitan Theater, a block from Goldblatts.

The incident might have been avoided except for an aberration in the law of random variables. Generally, only one of the trio might have been tempted to launch an iceball at a passing car. The probability of a three-ball launch ranked with a Calument City bar's back room slot machine displaying three lemons after a patron's hand crank. However, the gods of probabilistic outcomes had ordained just that unlikely event as a Gary bound car loaded with steelworkers slushed pass the iceball hurlers.

The descent of that iceball triad tripled the impact. The windshield devastation obscured the steely eyed foundry workers' visibility, splattering iceball shrapnel as destructively as a terrorist's IED. Had a single ice bomb struck such a blow, most drivers would have been content to scream a four lettered expletive into the auto's inner-void accompanied with a center fingered hand jester at the attackers. But a mortar barrage of triple the magnitude called for a like retaliation, much to our horror and dismay.

At once, the offended vehicle, braked, backed rearward, and pursued its attackers with a vengeance not unlike that wrought on Japan after Pearl Harbor. Outrunning an automobile was not a prospect any of us relished. Our only salvation rested in fleeing to the one acre wooded home site adjacent to the bus stop. To this end, each felon chose an alternate route into the dark sheltering abyss of the night.

Perhaps, it was Lance who tripped on the garden hose left inadvertently in the yard for the

winter. Actually, this was providential. Beside the hose was the family barbecue rig, also left exposed to the winter's elements. Beneath its rusted members, one of our gang hid. By wedging his small body so that his legs and arms wrapped around the propane bottle, he was obscured from the angry search party's scrutiny. Had those vigilantes shined their flashlight his way, they might have mistaken the bottle with its encircling arms, legs, and Lance for a child Buddha resting in the snow.

The remaining twosome had no such tripping misfortune. Theirs was an unobstructed diagonal snow dash across the acre of real estate. A chain link fence was the final hurdle. The memory of leaping that fence remains vivid. It was as much a prison wall as any which incarcerated felons in the Joliet State Prison which had housed bank robber John Dillinger for a season.

That fence was actually something of a protective barrier for the Brantwoodians. It existed to separate the Ridge Road "riff-raft" from the privileged estates of the well-to-do dwelling on its other side. Its purpose was to keep people out, but, for now, I was the one being kept out. I can't imagine how I was able to jump that hurdle being no more than four foot tall. It has to do with those tales of super-human feats accompanying threatened survival. But I did.

Whose yard had I landed in was the question? Had they heard me? If so, an irate home owner's shotgun blast might be no better than being drawn and quartered by those angry steelworkers. I studied the darkly lit home. It was vacant. Again, I was a prowler, a trespasser on its premises. It was

the same home Lance and I had broken into three years before. This had to be another of life's ironies, a rule I'd often heard preached on *Martin Cane Private Eye*, a crook always returns to the scene of his crime.

It was Lance's father's transfer that broke up our misguided friendship. But I had not seen the last of the Villain of Brantwood. Several years later, the family returned for a visit. We were asked to provide lodging for my old friend Lance.

Immediately, I hid my entire 1953 Topps baseball card collection in our attic. It simply wouldn't be right to confront Lance with such temptation. Congratulating myself on the wisdom of my baseball card decision, I shook Lance's hand as he left, carrying his suitcase to his parents' car. And that was the last time I saw Lance, more than a half century ago.

Months later, a mysterious package was delivered to our home by the postman. It was from Lance's mother. Expecting, perhaps, a gift in appreciation for Lance's visit, Mom happily cut the twine, tore open the small card board box, and reached through the discarded newspaper wrapping for the gift.

Both of us were anxious and excited, expecting something special. The package was quite heavy for its size. Together we watched as she pulled from the package our gift. It was a Colt 22 Revolver, dad's army hand gun. The attached not said it all. "I found this in Lance's suitcase. He told me it accidentally fell in while he was packing."

"Sure it did." We both thought and smiled.

The Brantwoodian Villain Comprehension Questions



Jerry's Dad's Army Pistol : Vintage 1944 Brantwood, Indiana

(Enter answers on the line to left of each question.)

- _____ 1. Jerry's tone compares his friend Lance to:
- a future Eagle Scout
 - a fellow Sunday School classmate
 - a brilliant student
 - a future felon
- _____ 2. Jerry's inference about Lance's mother's explanation of finding the gun is?
- Lance was truthful
 - Lance mother was untruthful
 - the explanation was laughable
 - the package was a gift
- _____ 3. Jerry was suspicious of Lance because:
- Lance had wicked friends
 - he beat Jerry up
 - he stole fruit
 - he was related to John Dillinger
- _____ 4. Lance led Jerry into crime?
(T)rue or (F)alse.

- _____ 5. Jerry made trips to Hammond:
- on his bike
 - mostly walking
 - taking the bus
 - hitch hiking with steelworkers
- _____ 6. Why did the steelworkers stop?
- to give Jerry a free ride
 - to clean their windshield
 - to catch Jerry and punish him
- _____ 7. What did Lance tell Jerry about playing with his friend's toys?
- "No one will find out."
 - "His friend would wish them to."
 - "His parents wanted them to."
 - "They'd let their friend play with their toys when they were on vacation."
- _____ 8. What did Jerry think about Lance's sister?
- He didn't want her as a sitter..
 - She was a future deaconess.
 - She looked like a movie star.
 - None of the above.
- _____ 9. Why did Jerry pout about Josette, Lance's sister, *baby-sitting* him?
- he disliked her very much
 - she might invite Lance over
 - he used *reverse psychology*
 - she looked like a movie alien
- _____ 10. What did Jerry attribute the foundry workers' anger to?
- they dislike Brantwoodians
 - the roads were terrible
 - the improbability of three icefalls
 - they'd had too much coffee

- _____ 11. Why didn't Lance lead Jerry into a life as a juvenile delinquent?
- Lance was incarcerated in prison
 - Lance's father was transferred
 - the steelworkers' frightened him
 - he became a Cub Scout
- _____ 12. How did Lance hide from the iron workers?
- he ran into the Wicker Park forest
 - told them it was Jerry who did it
 - used a barbeque propane bottle
 - jumped a neighboring fence
- _____ 13. What did not describe Lance's sister?
- a magazine pinup girl
 - a movie starlet
 - a beautiful magazine cover model
 - an aspiring deaconess
- _____ 14. What did "Light-Fingers" mean?.
- Lance had extreme dexterity
 - he played the piano artfully
 - he was very skinny
 - he was skilled at stealing fruit
- _____ 15. Jerry's attitude about Lance was?
- he was extremely evil
 - he was just like Jerry
 - his regrettable ways were harmless
 - he liked Lance because of his sister
- _____ 16. What was meant by "a crook returns to the scene of his crime?"
- Martin Cane Private Eye's* motto
 - Jerry returned to his place of crime
 - it was a popular move of the 1950s
 - Lance was a crook

_____ 17. Why did Jerry hide his cards?
 a. he didn't want to tempt Lance
 b. he was sure Lance would steal them
 c. he stolen some of them from Lance
 d. Lance didn't care for baseball cards

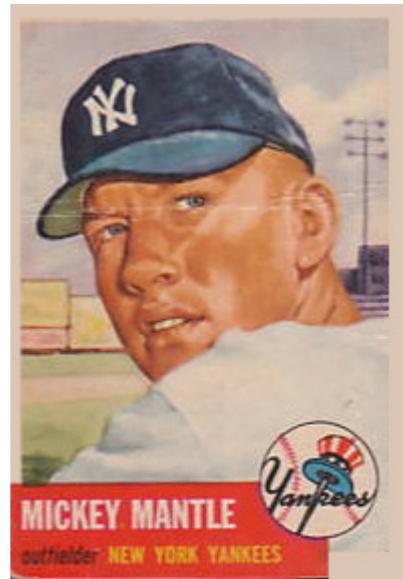
_____ 18. John Dillinger was a _____?
 a. prison warden
 b. famed bank robber
 c. former Indiana governor
 d. movie star of the 1950s

_____ 19. How did Lance know his friend's toys would be accessible?
 a. his friend told him to sneak in
 b. he heard his friend mention leaving
 c. from Lance's room across the street
 d. his friend left him a note

_____ 20. When Jerry uses the terms "riffraff", his tone is _____.
 a. aloft, haughty, and prejudiced
 b. benevolent
 c. understanding
 d. supportive of others

10. perpetuated extended, continued
 11. modus operandi habit, way of acting
 12. aberration flaw, error
 13. triad threesome
 14. shrapnel explosive fragments
 15. abyss bottomless pit
 16. scrutiny study, examination
 17. vigilantes lawless avengers
 18. prosecute legally charge, try
 19. caper escapade, historic event
 20. riffraff commoners, undesirables

Audio Dramatization as a Reading



My 1953 Topps Mickey Mantle:
 The card Lance never got.
 Present value \$1,000 to \$2,000

Brantwoodian Villain Vocabulary List

<u>Word</u>	<u>Synonym</u>
1. postured	posed
2. colleague	associate, partner
3. deaconess	female church worker
4. prodigious	impressive
5. tutelage	training
6. manifest	make known, reveal
7. detriment	damage
8. topology	surface character
9. recollection	recall, remembrance

Purchase price: 1953 – one cent

Value 2008: \$1000 - \$2000