

Introduction

Some memories re-shape reality. Others help clarify it. Forty years ago, I decided to write this book about growing up in my little home town in southern Wisconsin, but life has a way of intervening in even the best laid plans. In the time between then and now I think my memory has actually become sharper about my childhood. It could be that I have concentrated so hard on recalling these mile markers in my life that I've actually improved my skills OR that my memories have become reinforced and romanticized by time. I suspect that for most people there's a little of both involved in cataloguing the experiences of our lives, but memories always get shaped by - and change with - the passage of time. They're also influenced by our unconscious wishes to 'soften' our personal histories.

I was one of those fortunate souls that had a Huckleberry Finn, Tom Sawyer-like childhood, growing up in a small community where Midwestern values could have been the town's "Welcome to our Village" sign. Instead of a simple listing of population, ours could have read: "Evansville, Wisconsin, home to 2,500 people who care deeply about America and about each other." I loved this town and feel privileged to have lived there on and off during the formative years of my life.

The title of the book, "Where the blacktop ends" is really a metaphor for the place where my childhood was protected from all the nonsense that went on in big cities (where the blacktop begins).

About 30 years ago, I had the extreme good fortune of meeting the famous author, James Michener, in Grantley Adams Airport lounge in Bridgetown, Barbados. Michener was there, along with his researchers, gathering data for his book on the Caribbean. He had just recovered from a hip operation and was in the VIP lounge with his wife, Mari, waiting for a flight back to Florida where he was teaching creative writing. We had about a half-hour together, spoke of life in general and in particular about writing. I told him that I was thinking about doing a book about my childhood growing up in America's heartland. He asked what kind of book I had in mind. I told him that it was a combination of photography, poetry and anecdotes. I'll never forget his words to me, "Do yourself and your readers a favor. Make it one kind of book or the other; don't confuse your readers. Write what you know and write it well. You'll be glad you did."

I thanked him and then summoned the courage to tell him, "Mr. Michener, I have a confession to make. I've never been able to finish one of your books. They're so detailed and long." Despite his discomfort, Michener threw his head back in a jolting motion. His wife said, "Cookie, take it easy." Thinking that I had offended the man, I immediately regretted telling him the truth, but was relieved when he settled back into his seat. He leaned forward to me, and looked almost like a priest ready to give me absolution and said, "Tell me, did you like what you did read?"

I said, "Yes." Then he smiled at me and with a glint in his eye said, "Fine. That's good enough for me; I did my job." I rose from my seat, excused myself and rushed downstairs to the kiosk and bought a paperback copy of "Hawaii" and ran upstairs as his flight was about to depart. I pressed the book into his hand and asked him if he would be kind enough to sign it for me. He inscribed it, "To my friend, Stephan, on a fine Caribbean afternoon, James A. Michener."

I will always treasure that brief encounter, not only for the opportunity to meet a gifted writer, but also because it is a constant reminder to me that memories are made one at a time and often occur when we least expect them. I hope you will enjoy reading this book and that you will forgive me for including all the information about my family. I felt I needed to give you context and background on who 'we' were and how we got to Evansville. I sincerely hope that you find yourself smiling and maybe even chuckling to yourself as you read, and that my experiences trigger some pleasant memories of your own childhood. While life is lived forward and we can't live in the past, memories are the thing that binds them together.