

## Radio Thing

*Revealing early attitudes towards projects...*



We lived in Baltimore, in a transient neighborhood of beaverboard houses, inhabited by people from all over the country, drawn by wartime jobs at the port and the Martin airplane factory. The men wore hats with wide brims and the women wore tight dresses with bold patterns and pronounced shoulders.

In addition to other memories, such as playing with Genie, the pretty little brunette who lived behind us, and getting a haircut while sitting on a board, I remember projects. Some were mine, but most were the work of others.

There was the playhouse. My father constructed it from tarpaper and slabs of scrap lumber. It was located to one side of the backyard near the garden he planted in the remains of a rotted tree. Looking up from the child-size entrance to the playhouse I could see into the small kitchen where my mother could peer down on me. Looking out I could see other houses.

Although I appreciated what my father did, I had mixed feelings about the results. The playhouse didn't seem quite right, like the defective toy pistol purchased on a family outing to downtown Baltimore. The pistol, molded from gray rubber, had a bent barrel. I recall standing in the kitchen, complaining, and my mother saying that she felt sorry for my future wife.

There was the wooden packing box which served as a boat. One day after the creek beside our house flooded, older boys let me join them when they floated the box across

watery backyards into the stream. We went past several houses then paddled to shore before our leaking boat sunk and the creek rushed into an aqueduct under the road in front of our house. I liked the box boat fine, how it bounced on the water, and how it provided a different perspective on the familiar backyards, slipping by like moving pictures.

There was the cardboard cutout of a half-track military truck. My mother gave it to me when I was sitting on the steps behind our house. I think she got it from a cereal box. Bending down, she smiled and said something about my uncles, both of whom were in the Pacific, one in the Army and one in the Marines. I was supposed to assemble the pieces. At first, it seemed wonderful. There was the connection to my uncles and the war. And the truck itself looked good the way the tank tracks in the back balanced the wheels up front and the snout stuck out at a rakish angle. But I could not get the assembly right and became frustrated.

And there was the thing that I imagined was a radio. Of course I knew it wasn't a radio. We had one of those in the sparsely furnished living room at the front of the house. Although we must have listened to the radio at night, perhaps even FDR's fireside chats, all I can remember is hearing a station (I think it was country) in the middle of one long day or another and being bored.

The radio thing was an object located in the hallway, just before the kitchen door. I don't know what it was, actually. There were some pieces sticking up and a lot of other pieces attached here and there. It might have been a crib for my sister who was born in 1943. But I saw it in a different light – at least for a moment. Knowing that none of it was real, just like the Uncle Wiggly stories read by my grandmother were not real, the assembly acquired a fictional reality. The crib or playpen or whatever it was became the material for my story, something I would create. For a moment, I felt expansive and grand.