

## Land of Lincoln. And McFadden

Illinois was flat. I mean, the whole state seemed pretty much level. It must have SOME topography, of course...part of it drains to the Mississippi, and part to Lake Michigan. But the flat goes on forever, field after field of corn. Which is not a knock on Illinois; I love the place. Ancestral home of the McFaddens and O'Connors, who likely settled it shortly after the glaciers receded. They then graciously allowed the Sauk and the Kickapoo and Pottawatomie peoples to settle there, and also a guy named Lincoln who was from Indiana or Kentucky or somewhere else, both of which are NOT the Land of Lincoln. Only Illinois can claim that. Those receding glaciers left tons of great soil, glacial till that is rich and flat and easily farmed, and still is east of the 100<sup>th</sup> meridian and so gets adequate rainfall to grow corn and wheat ("Rain will follow the plow" – what? Who came up with that shit? Land speculators, no doubt). The soil here is so rich that it's black from all the organic material. It's world-famous soil. I know that, because in the textbook for my Notre Dame botany class there is a picture of cornfields in MacLean County, Illinois, which supposedly has some of the richest soil in the world. I took note of that as my uncle Joe McFadden and I drove a moving van with Aunt Carol's things in it north through MacLean County to Rockford one cold Thanksgiving. My wife Cathy's mom, Nan Schwemm, always claimed Illinois sweet corn and tomatoes in late summer couldn't be beat. Can't really argue with those results. Must be the soil.

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*The venerable house at 411 S. State Street.*

Once we crossed the Mississippi we headed for Springfield, state capitol of Illinois and its spiritual center, as well as that of the McFadden world. Coming from the LA area, I found Springfield, supposedly a state capitol, to be small and really neighborhood-like. My grandfather lived not that far from downtown Springfield, where the capitol building and Lincoln's home and law offices were, and you could walk there from his house, along old streets, some of which were still paved with bricks. You could walk everywhere, and we were allowed to do so. We'd walk to the Illinois state museum, with its dioramas (I've always like dioramas and models. Probably why I have a model train in my garage).

Springfield was one of two big stops, the other being Worcester, Mass., at which we stayed for considerable time and which were really the *raison d'être* for these trips. Here we were guaranteed a) to stay with relatives, and be fawned over by aunts, uncles and grandparents, b) to play with cousins and/or local

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kids, and c) have some kind of lake experience which involved fishing.

My grandfather, Lou McFadden, lived at 411 S. State Street, one of those addresses that just stays with you, rolls off your tongue 50 years later. The place was magic. Built sometime in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it had tall ceilings, doors with transoms, and one bathroom, a walk-through affair between two bedrooms, with a clawfoot tub. No shower. My grandfather, whom we called PaMac (short for Grandpa Mac) eventually put a shower in the basement; it was just a showerhead that drained onto the concrete basement floor and was embarrassingly visible from the high basement windows. What if the neighbor girl, Katie Jeffers, saw me? Actually, Katie Jeffers was kinda hot. That would have been okay.

The basement! I spent as much time as I could down there. It fascinated me; we didn't have basements in California. And my grandfather had lived there a long time, at least since the 1940s; it was the house in which my mom grew up. Filled with old treasures, that basement had a musty smell, dank and interesting, and to this day any musty smell reminds me of it. There were tons of tools down there; PaMac was very handy. Whenever he came to visit us in California, he fixed everything in the house that needed fixing. My dad says he was in awe of Pa Mac, and everything he knew, and could do. At 411, Pa Mac built the back porch, which held the stairs that led to the basement. In that basement was sporting equipment from early in the century, bamboo fishing poles and tackle, old bikes, including a double bike, a tall unicycle and a big-wheel bicycle my uncles would ride in local parades. Railroad lanterns – some of our relatives were railroad men in Illinois. I've loved railroads since I was a kid (yes, I'm one of those guys with a model railroad in the garage,

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*PaMac, in his High Point College playing days. Game face on.*

though I don't wear overalls and a conductor's cap when I'm out there), and I have two railroad lanterns from PaMac's basement.

He also had a shooting range down there! Well, sort of. From the front of the basement you could fire a BB gun at targets fixed to the back wall, where the dirt floor of its unfinished back rose up to meet the basement wall. So he taught us to shoot. "Squeeze the trigger like you're squeezing a lemon," he told us.

Pa Mac, being a great athlete in his day, also taught us boys – and Katie - how to throw a curveball. He had played baseball and football at High Point College in North Carolina, and he had competed against Ronald "Dutch" Reagan, when he returned to finish his teaching credential at Illinois State Normal University. I have two of PaMac's baseball bats from the 1930s (my cousin Brian McFadden has his baseball gloves). The bats are long and heavy, from an era which did not value bat speed as much as it did big lumber. One is a Louisville Slugger, a Paul Waner model. Waner, nicknamed "Big Poison", played for the

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*PaMac explaining the curveball grip to Katie. Or maybe the spitter.*

Pittsburgh Pirates and other clubs in the 20's and 30's. The other bat is unusual. It's a Burke Batrite, complete with bat logo (that is, the flying mammal bat), made in Athens, Georgia. Rogers Hornsby model; he played from 1915-1937. The knob end of the bat is stamped with its manufacturing date: July 15<sup>th</sup>, 1930.

PaMac always had a twinkle in his eye, and Dan remembers his handshake: long and hard while he looked you right in the eye, almost testing you. I always thought of PaMac as a big guy. After he passed away, my uncle Joe gave me a tweed coat that had been PaMac's, and it was really too small for me. Which surprised me. Always pictured him as bigger. But PaMac's draft registration card from 1940, when he was 34, lists him as 5'9" and 154 pounds. I'm built like him, more like a McFadden/O'Connor than a Coonan. I am wiry, at best, and probably have my mom's delicate bone structure. Dammit. Probably a big reason I "retired" from high school football after two years.

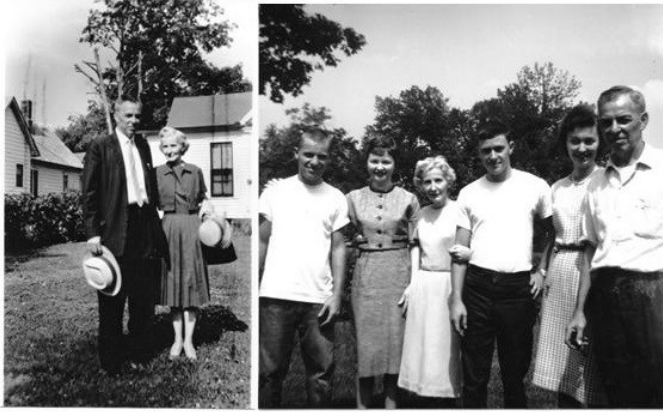
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On the other hand, genetics being what it is, I also received the O'Connor hair, which turns white as you get older. But at least it's there. My brothers have Coonan hair. Which disappears.

Grandma Mac, or MaMac, was Alice O'Connor, a small, tough Irish mom (which may be redundant) of whom I have few memories; she suffered a stroke in the 1960s and passed away in 1970. My memories are of her in a wheelchair, both legs thin and encased in braces. My mom was the oldest of four. By the time we were making our cross-country auto trips, in 1967, Jim was gone; he had been killed in an auto accident, along with three other young men, in 1965. He was a motorhead and loved cars. I have vague memories of him from a train trip we took to Springfield in 1963. All the pictures from that trip show Jim and Joe in jeans and white t-shirts, prototypical early 60s youths. I remember that Jim and Joe took Terry and me out for a drive, even went to a drive-in burger place and got milkshakes. Which I'm pretty sure we spilled in the car. Those memories are a haze; Terry and I were four, about the first age at which memories stick. All I know is that Jim was gone by the time we visited in 1967. I can't imagine what it was like for my grandparents to lose a son like that. Because of Jim's death and MaMac's illness, Mom and Carol used to say that at least they had had a happy childhood.

There is a quality of toughness here, or resignation, or acceptance of suffering. Maybe that's not peculiar to the Irish, or to Irish moms, who have long known this suffering. In the 1800s and early 1900s Irish moms watched their children leave for America, many never to return. This was such a significant parting that a wake would be held for the departing son or daughter. Can't imagine. Suffering, of course, figures strongly in Catholicism (and also in Buddhism),

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*Left, PaMac and MaMac in front of 411; right, Jim, Carol, MaMac, Joe, Mom and PaMac in 1963.*

and is offset, and surpassed, by joy. Crucifixion and resurrection. I find this quality in the McFaddens. PaMac lived another 14 years after MaMac passed. My brother Terry visited PaMac in 1984 when he was dying of ALS, the same ailment that took another great athlete named Lou, Gehrig. PaMac said to Terry, “You know, Terry, you keep playing until you hear the whistle blow.” That whistle blew for him in September of that year; he had been too sick to make it to my wedding in Santa Fe in July.

So for two of those trips, PaMac and Carol were in the house at 411, and that’s how I remember it. We boys would sleep on the back porch, a closed-in but not really finished space that held some chairs and extra beds and sofas, and things that did not fit in the basement or hadn’t yet made it down there. Screened windows through which I’d somewhat fearfully watch summer thunderstorms (unknown in southern California). There was a record player and old 78 rpm records, such as Arthur Godfrey’s non-PC Too Fat

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*Mom, PaMac and Carol at the nexus - the kitchen table at 411.*

Polka (“She’s too fat, she’s too fat, she’s too fat for me”).

My grandfather, like many older people, would be up early, in the kitchen, making coffee and listening to the farm report on the radio. Later in the day the radio broadcast would give way to a baseball game on the kitchen TV. Springfield being more in the southern part of the state than the northern, PaMac was a St. Louis Cardinals fan, rather than a Cubs fans. The huge table in the kitchen, which now resides in my parents’ home in El Segundo, was from the ancestral McFadden home in Bloomington, and was the gathering point at 411. When we boys wandered in from the back porch in the morning PaMac would be drinking coffee at the table and reading the morning paper, maybe smoking his pipe. “Would you like a highball?” he’d ask us. That was code for orange juice, and we got a huge kick out of it. PaMac would sometimes fix us pancakes; he had become a good cook in his bachelorhood. He’d break off the uneven



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edge of the pancake, the little plop of almost sliver-dollar-sized cooked batter, and say to us, “Here’s your allowance.” When I was at Notre Dame, Terry and I, and then Dan, would take the train down from South Bend to Springfield for Thanksgiving at PaMac’s.

PaMac spent his career in education. He taught PE, I believe, at the high school level, and then spent 20-plus years as principal at Metheny Elementary School. He was involved in teachers unions, serving for a while as president of the Illinois State Federation of Teachers. Both of my parents were children during World War II, and the stories of the sacrifices made on behalf of the war effort resonated with me. Apparently very few drove cars during the war, maybe because of lack of gasoline and rubber for tires. Grandpa Mac put his car up on blocks (in the garage he had built) for the duration of the war, and walked everywhere. Everyone did. Mom and her siblings walked to St. Agnes School. Certain foods were in short supply, and were rationed, allocated via ration stamps. Butter was scant, and so folks ate oleo (margarine) instead. PaMac, like others, planted a Victory Garden. Again, that resilience, that grit.

When we arrived in Springfield, we pulled into the alley behind 411 and parked in front of the garage, which was a one-horse barn until PaMac got after it. PaMac’s neighbor, Don Jeffers, told us he’d always say, “The gypsies are here!” when our car pulled in. All this was a wonder to me. An alley – we didn’t have those in my neighborhood in El Segundo. I can still hear the sound the tires made when they left the brick street and rolled over the gravel of the alley. And there was no fence separating PaMac’s yard from the alley (there is now, 50 years later) nor were there fences between some of the yards. How could that work? How did dogs stay in the yards? They didn’t one time I was

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*Left, The Coonan-McFadden band packs them in at 411. Right, the Jeffers boys: Steve, Pete and Mike.*

riding on of PaMc's ancient bikes and a dog lit out from a yard and chased me down the street. And coming from southern California's dry Mediterranean climate, I couldn't help but notice how lush the neighborhood was. Stuff just grew there. Big old Midwestern broadleaf trees, maples and oaks, which didn't so much border yards as just blur the property lines, with their generous overhang. That is frowned upon in southern California. I've had neighbors trim my overhanging trees and throw the trimmings over the fence into my yard.

But the alley. We'd hang out there, playing ditch with my cousins and with the neighbor kids, the Jeffers. Because we could! Even after dinner! It was warm out, and the light lasted a long time in the summer. And then the fireflies came out, and that was a trip. What the fuck? We did not have little glowing bugs in SoCal. In later years my kids, too would love the fireflies, at Cathy's parent's home on Delevan Lake, Wisconsin.

Cousins were automatic playmates, like siblings you just didn't happen to live with. Brian, Kevin and Mike McFadden belonged to Uncle Joe, who was then married to Marilyn Vespa. An Irish-Italian union. I've been told that works, and I can confirm that, from

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personal experience. My two and half years with Sher, whose people hailed from Sicily...yep, it works. The Vespa family had a place on Lake Springfield, and we spent time with the cousins out there, swimming and fishing. PaMac, who was a hunter and a fisherman, had huge bamboo poles in his basement, and with these we went after the catfish that lived in Lake Springfield. Grandpa Mac, in shirtsleeves (he, and my dad, were from generations which didn't wear shorts. Whereas I hate pants and wear shorts every day) and with his ever-present pipe, would patiently bait our poles and teach us to fish, even watching the poles, when our patience timed out, one foot on a pole. That's how I caught a fish there. PaMac caught it for me, while I had stepped away. That catfish was taken back to 411 and fried up, and it was pretty exciting for me. I am not really an angler but I have been fishing a few times, and I can tell you every fish I've caught. There have been that few of them. I caught a small bass at Lake Almanor when I was a kid, and I caught a tuna on the one ocean fishing trip I've been on. And that may be it. In the same vein, I can tell you every important or notable play I've made in sports; there have been that few of them, as well. In Little League, as an otherwise light-hitting second baseman, I hit a double off the wall for the major league Tigers to tie the league championship game. Which we went on to win, entitling us to get our butts kicked by the Giants from the other side of town; they had Bob Helsom, a future major league prospect, who actually threw curveballs as a 12-year old. They were the first curves I had ever seen, and had me bailing out of the batter's box. We really stood no chance.

We and the cousins loved to hang out in PaMac's unfinished back porch. There were some old musical instruments out there, and we took them up,

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*Occasionally we hung out with Joe and Anne Ineich. Right, the whole gang at 411 in 1976.*

temporarily forming the Coonan-McFadden Band, which was more like a concept, than an actual band. Much like Steely Dan. Heavy on rhythm, we were, and light on melody. Or vocals. Nonetheless we made the adults listen to our atonal music, and they recorded the moment. There has been no mention of a reunion tour.

The other kids we played with were the Jeffers, who lived next door to Grandpa Mac. I think they were a little bit wilder than we were. Mike was closest to our age, maybe a year older than Terry and me, and we did typical kid stuff. Rode bikes, played catch, played ditch. But one year we went back, and Mike had changed. He was a surly teenager, and was actually mean, and to me, a lightweight, a little threatening. Huge lesson. People change, and sometimes not for the better. Another lesson: teenager is a rough occupation.

I was beginning to feel my oats, as a teenager. The oldest Jeffers, Terry, had a great record collection, including that wonderful Herb Alpert album, with the woman covered in whipped cream. Left quite an impression on me. As did Katy Jeffers, the cute younger sister of Mike. I definitely was beginning to take notice of the fairer sex, particularly on our 1976 trip, between my junior and senior years in high school. On that trip we spent significant time with the Ineich

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*In 1957, Mom and Dad married at St. Agnes Church in Springfield. Aunt Carol was maid of honor, though her shoes stayed on at the reception (more on that later).*

kids, Joe and Anne, who lived in Jacksonville. Their dad, Paul, was my dad's roommate at Notre Dame, and their mom, Sallie, was Mom's best friend; they had arranged the blind date that led eventually to my parents' 60-plus years of wedded bliss! In fact, Springfield was where my mom and dad were married, in 1957, after countless nights in the couch at 411 when Dad visited Mom there, coming down from Notre Dame. Personally, I found Anne Ineich to be pretty cute. And those kids were runners, like me; Joe would end up at Notre Dame with myself and Terry. Never saw Anne Ineich again. Or Katy Jeffers.

With my long, oily, 1970s hair and aviator-style glasses, I had no idea of what was up or down in the world of relationships. But I sure began to recognize what I liked. Aunt Sheila, for one. By 1976 Uncle Joe was married to Sheila: sharp features, sharp tongue, dark skin (there that is again). I was hooked. Like facing Bob Helsom, I stood no chance. One time I was sitting with everyone else at the crowded table in PaMac's kitchen. Sheila maneuvered around the end of the table, putting her hands on my shoulders as she squeezed past. A charge of electricity coursed through me. Oh, seventeen.

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*We soaked up Lincoln lore at his home and tomb.*

We also toured the sites in Springfield and surrounds, relatives in tow. We became steeped in Lincoln lore, visiting his house, law offices, former home in New Salem, and his tomb at Oak Ridge Cemetery. So weird to think of the great man, entombed in there, after a long solemn, slow train ride brought his remains back to Springfield from Washington. How could such a great man, whose work was not quite done, be taken so suddenly and randomly from the country?

Lincoln was so Midwestern. Salt of the earth. Solid citizen, like my McFadden cousins. Between those three McFadden boys, and us six Coonan kids, my Aunt Carol did not lack for nieces and nephews to dote on. Carol had never married, and had even planned on entering the convent for a while. The McFaddens were preparing to say goodbye to her forever; it was one of the cloistered orders, who separate themselves from society, and their families, for good. It didn't happen, and I'm not sure why. But I'm not alone in thinking it would have not been a great fit, for at least one reason: Carol was a notorious night owl and slept as late as she could. Hard to imagine her making it to morning prayers in time. Or at all. As it

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*Beloved and inimitable Aunt Carol, "AC", willing foil for her goddamn nephews.*

was, she still dedicated her life to others, as a social worker.

Carol sometimes took us kids to the Illinois state fair, which was mindblowing. State fairs are HUGE. And we had never even been to the LA County fair. I still remember the midway there, with its freak shows: bearded women, midgets, strongmen. I had no idea. Kind of a little scary. But there was Carol, laughing away the whole time, in her white summer pants and striped top. Life was good when you were with Carol.

Carol was the happiest person many of us will ever know. She could not go more than 10 seconds without laughing. She just got a kick out of everything, and she had such a special relationship with her nieces and nephews. She called Katie and Nora her “sweet nieces”, whereas we boys were her “dadgum nephews”. Which Dan later changed to “goddamn nephews” and that stuck. Carol was too prim to say that, of course (unlike our generation) and so in

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correspondence she would refer to her “g.d.” nephews. And we dogged her mercilessly. Dan would hoist her up, on many occasions, and she would just laugh. We began a tradition of drinking out her of shoe at family weddings. It got to the point where she would hide in the bathroom at wedding receptions to avoid anyone taking her shoe. Dan gave her eulogy, and drank out of her shoe at that event, too; Carol couldn’t avoid the shoe-drinking, even in death.

For as much as we hung out with other kids in Springfield, and toured the sites with family, I didn’t mind, at all, spending time by myself at 411. I could while away hours poking through the basement. There was an attic, too; though we didn’t go up there; it was accessed by a pull-down ladder from a trap-door in the ceiling – the very high ceiling – above the kitchen. I maybe went up there once. After PaMac had passed, Uncle Joe found a brace of Civil War pistols up in that attic.

I also spent considerable time in the library, the hallway leading from the front door to the living room. PaMac had built floor-to-ceiling shelves in that hallway, and they were packed with books by the time we made our visits. Among the treasures were some law books that had belonged to Lincoln! They came from the personal library of a Judge David Davis, who had lived in Bloomington, and had been an associate of Lincoln’s, even serving as his campaign manager and in his cabinet. One of PaMac’s relatives, Minnie O’Toole (I know, that sounds like it was made up) was the caretaker for the Judge Davis house, and PaMac ended up with the books. Form your own conclusions. For all I know, Minnie may have made off with the Judge’s silver, as well. And those Civil War pistols...maybe Minnie O’Toole’s fingerprints are on them still.



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One of the books in the hall absolutely captivated me. *Mystery at Laughing Water* was a book my mom had read as a child, about a Nancy Drew-type teen who solves a mystery while at summer camp in the North Woods. Maybe it was the natural setting, or the mythos surrounding a summer camp to which everyone returns. Coulda been the kid-solving-a-mystery thing. Encyclopedia Brown, the Hardy Boys, Jupiter Jones and the Three Investigators, The Mad Scientists Club...I was a sucker for all of that. Ate it up. At age 10, I wanted to be a detective when I grew up, and I started a (short-lived) detective agency. I booked one case, which was never solved. I suppose that makes it a cold case, and maybe I should circle back around to solving it. Pick up the trail. Other career ambitions were equally unreachable: when I was in sixth grade, I wanted to be an NFL wide receiver, like my hero Jack Snow of the Rams. Delusions of grandeur. But in fourth grade, I wanted to be a forest ranger. Wrote an essay about it, illustrated it with a drawing of me standing on the deck of a fire lookout tower, peering through binoculars. And wearing a flat hat. A Ranger hat. Exactly like the one I wore (or avoided wearing) for the National Park Service. Seeds sown in fourth grade, and maybe on those cross-country trips.

Anyway, I liked *Mystery at Laughing Water* so much that later in life I bought a copy for my girls, when they were old enough to read it. They never took to it, like some other things I tried to interest them in: *The Hobbit/Lord of the Rings*. Catholicism. But, like those things, it's there if they ever want to pick it up.

Springfield has always been a place charged with emotion and memory for me. Why is that? Because of Grandpa Mac, the second finest man I've ever known (my dad is first)? Because of the grit and

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resilience, the persistence, of that McFadden family, weathering wars and untimely loss of family members, and illness? I've long believed that persistence is the only quality that really matters. Was it because of the primacy of family? There's also that sense of place...kindly, stately 411 was the center of the McFadden world for 50-plus years, and had an aura of history itself. The basement packed with vintage. Tall ceilings and transoms. The front hallway bookcase with books that belonged to Lincoln. Clawfoot tub in the bathroom. A brace of Civil War pistols in the attic.

411 was also a window into the Midwest for me, a portal into a world very unlike where I grew up, and one in which I would spend – gladly – my college years. Flat, fertile land, rivers and streams clogged with trees and foliage, leaves turning in the fall. A sense of belonging. I didn't stay in the Midwest to live, but the Midwest stayed in me.

When Cathy and the kids and I drove through Springfield one year, we pulled into that alley behind 411. My grandfather was long gone, and someone else lived there. Cathy was driving. I rolled down the window and took it all in and the memories came rushing back. I missed my grandfather, and our time at 411. I cried like a baby as we drove away, down the alley.

