

# Dad's rock-solid patriotism

One of my father's ways of showing his love for his family was to build things of quality and permanence, something he had precious little of growing up.

The swing set in our backyard didn't lift or shift, no matter how hard you swung, because my father built it himself out of iron pipe, sinking all four posts into the ground and encasing them in concrete. He did the same to support the roof he built over the patio. And when he decided to erect a flagpole in the front yard, iron, steel and concrete became the materials of choice.

I don't recall any discussion about putting in the flagpole, rather that it just started going up one day. Some of our neighbors had flagpole holders affixed on the front of their houses, but we were the only ones on our street with an actual flagpole in the front yard.

I felt embarrassed when I saw what my father was up to. Even as a 10-year-old, I thought it over-the-top to have something that would be more at home in front of the White House than standing in front of our modest Cape Cod.

I do remember my father being very ingenious about the way he engineered the project. He set the four-foot-high I-beam steel base in concrete. He let me write my name with a twig in the concrete.

The next day he took his white-painted (carefully primed, then covered with three coats of enamel) steel pole with the gold ball on top — the thing had to have been 20 feet tall — and he attached it to the base, running two thick bolts through the base and pole, and then he hoisted the thing vertical with the block and tackle that you use to run the flag up, tightened the bolts, and voila — we had Newport's most imposing residential flagpole.

For a while, the flag was run up and down daily, but that finally sputtered out because my father insisted that the rules of raising and lowering the flag and folding it when you took it down be adhered to, and Good Lord, even though he was in the military, his wife and children weren't.

My older brother was a Boy Scout and got into the whole flag bit for awhile, but even he eventually tired of it. The whole thing humiliated me. I recognized that this was just too much of a display of patriotism. Wasn't it enough to live in the United States and be a good citizen? Did you really have to have this huge flagpole in front of your house?

Nonetheless, the durability of the setup was not lost on me, like the swing set and the patio roof. I admired my father's diligent workmanship. Unfortunately, it

over-influenced my adult life.

Early in my first marriage, there was the badminton net I was going to put up on the front lawn of my in-law's house. I went to the lumber yard and bought two really beefy wooden posts, big enough to support a heavy fence and, using a post hole digger, sunk them into the front yard. When my mother-in-law set eyes upon them she rightly said they had to come out.

Can you imagine? Preparing a badminton court that would survive all but an aerial bombing!

And then there was the exterior door I salvaged off the street to put in the doorway to the study of my New York apartment. The thing weighed at least 100 pounds. What was I thinking?

I recently drove back to Newport and pulled up in front of my boyhood home. The flagpole was gone, but damned if that I-beam base wasn't still there. The current owners had a bird bath mounted on top of the base.

Feeling around the bottom of it, I pulled back some grass and found the concrete and my etched name. My fingertips grazing lovingly over the ruins of ancient Newport revealed all that is ever permanent about the past: the intent of what we build.

— Charles Pinning, an occasional contributor, lives in Providence.