

Richardson Tales

by Randy Richardson

#4 WHO WAS BATTERY DAN?

About 1903 H. Smith Richardson, my dad, persuaded a member of Congress to appoint him to the Naval Academy in Annapolis. At that time the Navy was struggling to enter the 20th century. One of its training ships was a square rigger. Another of its cherished antiques was the Code Uuello, code of conduct for military units of either French or Spanish origin probably dating to the 1800's. One of its provisions had it that no senior cadet could enter a plebe's (first year cadet) room without the presence of the plebe.

A close friend of my dad was Meriwether Lewis, grandson or great grandson of he who walked with Clark over the Virginia mountains and took their small band on to California in 1801. Meriwether was a handsome, large and athletic lad with a lively interest in girls. He kept a set of civilian clothes hidden and used them after lights out to court a girl in the town. At that time the Academy allowed upper classmen to haze plebes, a favorite version of this being inspections of their lodgings. The upper classman, nephew of a New York Senator, who was also sparking the same girl, discovered evidence of Meriwether's incursions. Thinking he was invoking a rule under the Code, he searched Meriwether's lodging and brought evidence to the administrators of breach of the Code. To the upper classman's horror, the code administrators decided he had himself violated the Code because Meriwether wasn't present and, as a consequence, Meriwether had the right to meet the upper classman in a bare knuckle fight. Meriwether hit too hard and killed his opponent.

The New York Senator led the congressional inquiry into the rules governing students at the Academy, swept the Code into history and made Meriwether the scape-goat of the tragedy. But justice must have been over-run by vengeance because one of the outcomes was the formal punishment of Meriwether - cutting off his insignias on the parade ground attended by the entire core and banishing him from the Academy. Dad decided while watching this ceremony that the U. S. Navy would not be in his future. Meriwether left the US and became a mercenary soldier in a variety of South American nations and the former friends never again met. Dad left for New York in company of a like-minded cadet.

The two former cadets had, it turned out, outrageous expectations of their job prospects in New York. Their first job was washing dishes in a Greek restaurant. Other jobs in their future were of similar sorts, delivery work, clerking in dry goods stores and, for dad, driving a street car based in a car barn overlooking the Harlem Canal. On the far side of the canal, at the dawn of the 20th century were only farms. Dad was a "relief driver" who arrived every morning at 6 AM. On days when his car wasn't needed he'd be dismissed in the afternoon without pay. That made him a life long believer in unions.

There must have been a depression in the City's economy about 1904 or 5 as the kinds of jobs the two ex-cadets could get became harder to find. At that time NYC had charity lodgings known as Mills hotels. The two former cadets were living on the cheapest food they could buy in such hotels. Then dad's companion suddenly remembered that, while he wasn't a New Yorker, some relatives were and recalled their mention of a distant relative - one Battery Dan - an important figure in Tammany Hall. Post haste, the two

they could buy in such hotels. Then dad's companion suddenly remembered that, while he wasn't a New Yorker, some relatives were and recalled their mention of a distant relative, one Battery Dan, an important figure in Tammany Hall. Post haste, the two former naval cadets now worried and aware of their slim prospects, went to see Battery Dad. He scribbled introductions to the Pennsylvania R. R. for each and the cadets became railroad freight bill clerks down at the tracks where the line entered the City. (That's the rail yard serving today's Penn Station.) It was in one of the toughest parts of the city and my dad became a pretty good boxer. I remember his enlightening me on the important connection between right and left hook and when each were appropriate.

Not soon after, a Presbyterian minister from Greensboro, likely a relative, found dad in New York. He told dad that his father's drug store was going broke and he must return home at once. That ended a very difficult time in dad's life. While he had a strong memory of Battery Dan he never attempted to find this important benefactor in his life.

Some years ago by chance, I scanned one of those local magazines that are unique to New York. Such publications either cover events in one part of the city or a limited number of topics, mostly political, concerning the city. The one I stumbled upon dealt entirely with those sections of the city south of Canal Street, and therein was a page or two about Battery Dan. He was an Irish waif who somehow managed to smuggle himself aboard an immigrant ship out of Cork several years before the onset of the Civil War. He served as a drummer boy in that war, returned to the horrible employment treatment the Irish were subject to in that period and decided politics should be his profession.

When dad encountered him he was an important figure in Tammany Hall. The article had it that for some years after dad met him, Battery Dan was a judge in a court in Tribeca (where Heather lives and site of the Twin Towers.) According to the article, he was famous for his wit and disregard for the lawyers appearing in his court. That's understandable in a judge who likely never made it past grade school.

A year or so later Susan and I were in P. J. Clarks, a watering hole for many generations of politicians – that evening, jammed with young people searching for Eros, I was talking to Danny Levezzo, the owner, and mentioned Battery Dan. His reply: "Wait because his grandson will be coming in any minute."

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