

Favorite Neighbor

By Belle DeCosta

Rhode Island, aka Little Rhody, is the biggest little state in the Union. Like most things small, it has a bigger-than-life personality. Miles of beaches and rocky coastline encase seaside towns, grande and small alike, much as a necklace bejewels a woman's neck. It's home to two historic carousels: The Flying Horse in Watch Hill, built in 1876, making it the oldest in the United States, and the Looff in Riverside, constructed in 1895.

I have a picture of my grandfather as a young boy in a sailor suit, standing in front of the Looff Carousel when it was part of Crescent Park. He loved to recount stories of his and his cousin Tilly's adventures visiting the amusement park. I look forward to this summer when I can bring my grandson to ride the same merry-go-round his great-great-grandpa enjoyed.

Rhode Island also proudly claims coffee syrup (for milk), hot weiners, Del's frozen lemonade, and stuffies as its native cuisine. Unable to imagine life without these palatable pleasures, Rhode Islanders regularly send care packages to the unfortunate souls who have moved out of state. *Yes, I said coffee syrup, not chocolate. A hot weenie is most definitely not a hot dog. Del's is far more than a common slushy. And while Cape Cod and the Islands offer quahogs, no one can stuff them like we do.*

And let's not forget our unique way of giving directions. Rhode Islanders never use landmarks that are presently there. "Take a left where the Almacs used to be, go down a ways until you get to the light at the corner where the old Kmart was, and take a right." Heaven help you if you're from out of state!

Each of these things could be a story all their own, but as near and dear to my heart, as they are, none are my most cherished piece of Rhode Island.

A little background... I moved to Rhode Island eight years ago, after a divorce. I had lived right over the state line in Seekonk, Massachusetts, for over forty years and ran a business in East Providence, Rhode Island, for twenty-five years. It was hardly a move of epic proportions – just under four miles. East Providence's housing market was more affordable, living on a single income. I was familiar with the city, and it had the easy highway access I needed for my present business. I bought a small fixer-upper ranch with two old maple trees perfectly spaced to hang a rope hammock and set about making it my own. Well, fixer-upper might be a bit of an understatement. It had, as they say, good bones, but boy did it need a makeover! The outside was so overgrown you could barely see the front and one side of the house. The previously mentioned trees had large branches hanging precariously over the roof, and the backyard was dirt, not a blade of grass in sight. The inside had potential but was tired, *okay, more like exhausted* and straight out of the 1950s. Still, something about it spoke to me. From the moment the realtor and I walked

through the door, I knew I was home. Armed with a vision and more determination than know-how, I rolled up my sleeves and got to work.

I live in a neighborhood of three-foot fences, so my surrounding neighbors and I got to know each other as we worked in our yards. I quickly discovered they were all willing to raise a hand for more than just a wave. One lent me a power washer, taught me how to use it, and insisted on picking up my loom and mulch in his truck to save me the delivery fee. Chatting over the fence with a retired neighbor, I lamented on how there weren't enough weekend hours to accomplish all I wanted to get done before winter. Two days later, I arrived home from work to a newly painted back fence. The morning after a nasty windstorm, I awoke early to the sound of chainsaws. I saw broken branches strewn across my backyard and dangling dangerously from the trees as I looked out the window. One neighbor was on a ladder cutting them down, while the other sawed them into a manageable size. I threw on my jeans and ran out to help their wives, who were busy collecting and tying the wood into bundles. *These people barely knew me!* When I continued to thank them profusely, one wife hugged me and said, "That's what we do around here." The other winked and said, "Hey, free wood for the firepit." I've since enjoyed many evenings around that pit and done a whole lot of thank you cooking, baking, and beer-buying over the years.

But, as much as we all look out for one another, everyone agrees the consummate neighbor lived in the old red house at the top of the street. The family's door was open to all; they were always friendly and could help with anything needed. I never left the property empty-handed. A large family, they had spread out over the years, with properties all over Rhode Island and parts of southeastern Massachusetts and Connecticut. But the smallest homestead, built in 1929, was our neighborhood's to boast. Benny's. A one-of-a-kind, no other store like it, Benny's. Akin to its home state, Benny's had a larger-than-life personality. *I believe that comes from the ability to offer so much in a small space -for Rhode Island and Benny's alike.*

The largest Benny's I ever shopped was still small compared to most stores. *Think pebble versus a boulder and our neighbor a grain of sand in comparison.* Oh, but the treasures they offered! Everything from hardware to toys, automotive, electronics, paint, housewares, electrical, and plumbing. Furthermore, Benny's provided many choices, not just a spattering of products to settle on. They also sold TV trays, desks, bikes, tires, reading glasses, and any battery you could possibly need. Seasonal? Spring brought everything you required for lawn care and gardening, including lawnmowers, kiddie pools, sprinklers, patio furniture, beach equipment, Adirondack chairs, grills, and marshmallows. Fall offered rakes, leaf bags, tarps, sealers, lawn football flags, Halloween costumes, candy, and decorations. Speaking of holidays, you could take care of all your Christmas needs at Benny's. Trees, lights, decorations for inside and out, tree skirts, wrapping paper, bows, cards, and gifts. Winter brought ice melt, scrappers, shovels, hats, hand warmers, mittens, and gloves. All in one easy-to-navigate space.

It's where I bought my grass seed, furnace filter, deck stain, wheelbarrow, toaster oven, gutter guards, and light timer. My hardware and garden tools, extension cords, mops, dog treats, beach chairs, doormats, nails, a fire pit, spray paint, cleaning products, and a garden hose. Also,

Snickers bars, last-minute cards, foil baking pans, a travel hairdryer, sunscreen, storage bins, bottled water, and had keys made... well, you get the idea. Benny's had it all. Their slogan was, "If Benny's doesn't have it, you don't need it." Agreed. Undoubtedly their stockroom possessed the same magical properties as Santa's sack. How else could they offer so much in such a small space, neatly displayed? Plus, you never had to look for their signature red vest-wearing employees. They were always present, smiling, and willing to help. And it was all just a brief walk up the street.

But alas, like so many other pieces of quaint Americana, its time came to an end in 2017, and as most Rhode Islanders, I was heartbroken. The owners said when announcing the closing, "Times have changed, and it's difficult for family-run chains to survive." A sad and unfortunate truth.

So, now, with a nostalgic sigh, I grab my car keys instead of sneakers and head out to the big box store bullies to make three or four stops instead of one. I roam the cavernous aisles in the acre-sized abysses looking for what I need, or, if I'm feeling particularly optimistic, someone to help me. Usually, I leave unaided and sometimes empty-handed. But after an exasperating afternoon of errands, I head home and manage a smile as I put my blinker on and think, *take a right at the corner where Benny's used to be*. Time's forward march may change some things, but never all.

That reminds me; I need to find out when the Looff Carousel opens for the season...