

Treasure Island

It couldn't happen today. Such magical places no longer exist. A place where a little boy could explore the limits of mind and imagination. A place to make new discoveries figure things out - things about science and engineering and people and especially himself.

It was a perfect place for me and I went there as often as I could. I was born with two eyes whose images of the world did not agree. With both eyes open, one image was being ignored by my brain. It had no choice because otherwise it couldn't resolve the conflicting images the eyes presented. Each eye was good enough on its own, so I didn't wear glasses. I didn't know I was seeing with one eye and therefore had no depth perception. Perhaps that explained why I was so incredibly bad at sports.

I could play baseball but couldn't hit the ball. I could see the ball yet didn't know quite where it was or when it would be near me. With only one eye reporting in, there is no way to triangulate the distance to the ball. The one eye my brain was paying attention to could report either that it was in front of me or behind me, which is where it usually ended up. Not knowing how far away something was was a big minus in just about any sport, or any endeavor where something moved. So my magic place was a perfect place for me, because nothing moved. I could take my time. I could formulate a plan. I could think it through. In my magic place, I didn't need depth perception.

I wasn't the only person who found this place welcoming. An old man, a hermit, shared this place with me. We never talked. We saw each other from a distance. We were there to fulfill the our needs - to get something that we needed in our life. His needs were basic survival, and mine were anything but that.

The place we shared was an open pit garbage dump. The hermit lived there at the upwind edge of the piles of garbage in a tin-roofed lean-to. He rummaged through the day's garbage after the trucks left for the day, looking for clothing or something to eat. I went there many days after school. There were just the two of us. I could see him moving through, quickly, with an occasional quick glance at me but mostly looking away as if here were ashamed. I would stay away from him because he clearly wanted the distance. I had an encounter with one other hermit earlier in my life. That earlier recluse would shoot his shotgun above my head when I got too close. I still can hear the buckshot ripping through the leaves overhead. Hermits wanted to be alone - it was a life they chose, and I would respect that with my fellow explorer on our treasure island of a garbage dump.

Oh what fascinating treasures awaited, buried in the piles of garbage! Once I got past the odors, I could search for those things that fascinated me, which was just about anything mechanical or - even better - electrical. A clock to take apart. Or perhaps a radio.

I didn't know it, but I was becoming an engineer one bolt, one wire at a time. I was learning how to think logically, to see how things interconnected, to see what made things work. Almost nothing worked after I disassembled it and tried to put it back together again, but that was okay. It was all discarded junk anyway.

Sometimes I would find something that would interest me, perhaps that I had missed on an earlier exploration, right on top of the heap. Was that from my unnamed hermit? If I

found something that might be what he would want, such as a discarded warm coat when the weather turned cold, I would make sure it was clearly visible should he pass that way. It was an odd sort of synergy, but it worked for both of us.

Every now and then I would stumble across something that would interest me that wasn't at all to do with wires or gears. I came across some "girlie" magazines carefully hidden, interspersed with some electronics hobbyist magazines. At my age then, I kept the electronics magazines, but even those had too much of a garbage stench to them to keep for long. The other treasure I remember was a partial deck of round playing cards. I had never seen round playing cards, nor had anyone else I asked about it. I wondered "Who used these, and when?" But nobody else seemed to care even a little bit about the answers to those questions.

Today, that magical place where I could explore and retrieve mechanical or electronic treasures to disassemble and understand - such a place would not be allowed. I know of no open-pit dumps, and if there were any, they wouldn't allow a small boy in to clamor from pile to pile. The legal liabilities would be enormous. Now garbage dumps are carefully layered landfills, securely fenced, with bulldozers neatly arranging and compacting. My hermit friend would not be allowed to live there and surviving off discarded food and clothing in the dump, either. We were both there because we wanted to be there - me at the start of my life, with the treasures I was finding shaping my future career as an electronic engineer, and he at the end, choosing to live the life of a hermit, only wanting to be left alone in his tin-roofed lean-to. Now the legal liability issues alone would preclude either of us from such an arrangement.

Open-pit dumps are gone for me everywhere except in my memory. The old hermit is gone; his tin shack was probably unceremoniously bulldozed back into the dump from which he got all the original pieces. All my disassembled clocks, motor casings, radios and mechanical gear assemblies are still there, today probably far below a covering of fresh soil, grass, and trees. It's all gone except in my memory and perhaps because of the way the experiences there changed me, in a small part of the projects I would complete much later as an electronic and computer design engineer.