



My Uncle Dave. . .

By Richie Snyder, as told to his friend Al (Butch) Love



Uncle Dave with his nephew Richie Snyder at 4 years old



Dave with girlfriend on beach



Five brothers 1927

There have been many stories and memories written about the history of Wildwood and the people and places who played a big part in the development and character of our island. There were the politicians like Bradway and Baker, the builders and business owners like Ed Zaberer, Hunt and the Morey Brothers. But not much is written about the local personalities, the common people who lived and worked all their life in our town but did not get the recognition they deserved. You will not find information written about them in the George Boyer Historic Museum. I wanted to tell the story about a man who all the locals loved, admired, and called him their friend. To the thousands of visitors over many years who saw him walk the beach every day in his white shirt and shorts or at night manning the front door of a nightclub handsomely dressed in a dark tuxedo. I am sure they asked each other who is that Guy? Well let me tell you about that Guy. He was my Uncle Dave Snyder and this is his story.

Dave was raised along with his four brothers, Harry, Warren, Richard, and Paul, (my dad) by my grandparents Isabel and Harry Snyder in a section of West Wildwood they called the Annex. Not many people today know there was a place called the Annex. The Annex consisted of my grandparents house and two smaller wooden homes that were mostly used in the summer as vacation places. Nothing else was there. It was isolated from the rest of West Wildwood and could only be reached by boat over the bay or by walking the railroad tracks over the trestle bridge.

Nothing is there today but part of the bridge and railroad tracks. To say they were poor is an understatement. The reason they all lived together in that house on the wetlands over the bay was my grandfathers occupation. He was the bridge tender for the old trestle bridge coming into West Wildwood. He was hired by the Pennsylvania and Reading Railroad to man the bridge openings and closing to permit the trains to cross over. He would crank the handle by hand to lower the bridge for the oncoming train. The house was right by the tracks and the soot and coal burning from the train would leave a dark cloud over the house and their clothes. They could see and hear the train coming over a mile away with the chugging and smoke rising from the coal fired engine.

This was during the time of The Great Depression and he was lucky to hold that job. Dave said his fathers salary was only a few dollars a day and the house was provided by the railroad. The house was a wooden structure, with oil lamps, heated by a coal heater, and complete with an outhouse. No running water. Nothing special but they never complained. The brothers could fish and crab from their deck and the sunsets were beautiful. The boys were only separated by a year or two each. Harry the oldest, then Dave who was born on September 8, 1920, followed by Paul, Warren, then Richard the youngest. They all walked to school over the bridge and to the Glenwood Avenue Elementary School. An old three story wooden structure which went up to the eight grade at that time. In the winter months the trip was dangerous but they stuck together and helped each other cross. As the picture shows they were a hardy bunch and stuck together as brothers should. Uncle Dave was the biggest and no one messed with his brothers. They looked like they were from Tom Sawyer or Huckleberry Finn.

The brothers attended the Glenwood Avenue school and then went on to Wildwood High. All except my Uncle Dave. He was born with a hearing problem and no one knew it. No doctor checkups at that time. In school he would sit in the back of the class, talk loud, and didn't seem to pay any attention to the teacher. After several warnings Dave was forced to leave by the school administration in the 8th grade at the age of 13 years old. The only other elementary school in Wildwood at that time was located on Park Blvd. across from Maxwell field where the Park Side Courts is located now. But it was only for colored students and Dave couldn't get in there either.

Since he was not attending school his father made him work to keep busy and help support the rest of the family. He never stopped working for the rest of his life and always supported himself, with no handouts and a really limited education. At 13 years old he started working at the Ottens Harbor Ice Company on Dock Street. The work was hard and the hours were long. He wanted to quit but his father insisted he keep working because he had acted up in school and was thrown out. Life was not fair it seemed at the time. Working four years there he developed his muscular body from moving and lifting blocks of ice some weighing up to 100 pounds.

In 1939 World War II started in Europe and the USA entered soon after. At this time his three brothers Warren, Harry, and Richard were graduating from high school and enlisting in the service. Warren entered the Army and Harry and Richard the Navy. My father Paul was married at this time. Uncle Dave desperately wanted to join them but was turned down first by the Army and then by the Navy. His hearing was so bad they rejected him. He then went to working at a clothing plant called the Wildwood Clothing Company on Lincoln Avenue pressing military uniforms. He was there until after the war ended.

His younger brother Richard enlisted in the Navy in 1944, right out of high school when he was eighteen years old. A year later at the age of 19 he was dead. He was a seaman on the USS Indianapolis, a cruiser which delivered the components of the atomic bomb to the island of Tinian. The bomb was dropped on Hiroshima soon after and



...The Legend



Dave on Wildwood beach in 1964.

helped end the war. But as the ship was headed home and unescorted because of this secret mission it was struck by two torpedoes from a Japanese submarine in the Philippine Sea and sank on July 30, 1945. Out of 1200 crew members only 317 were rescued from the shark infested water. Because of radio silence the Navy did not know the ship had sunk until survivors were spotted in the water four days later. Richard was not one of them. It was the last Navy ship sunk in the war. Richard is listed as killed in a book about the Indianapolis called "In Harms Way" by the author Doug Stanton. It was a sad blow to the whole family. I was named Richard after my uncle's brother.

In the 1950's Wildwood started to become the Mecca of entertainment on the east coast. The nightclubs on Pacific Avenue were jumping and big name stars were appearing every summer. Uncle Dave was a natural with his looks and physique to work as a doorman/bouncer at the best of the clubs. For years he stood at the entrance with his big smile, tan, white hair, and tuxedo at nightclubs such as John's Oasis, Beachcomber, and the Hurricane. The stars knew him from appearing each summer and the crowds lining up at the door always exchanged pleasantries with him. He was a fixture in the nightclub scene. He had the skill to end a fight or escort the parties out of the clubs with his easy charming style.

During the day Uncle Dave had his walking routine. He was living on Maple Avenue at this time and would walk the beach each day from Maple Avenue to the Rock Pile past Diamond Beach then return and walk to the Anglesea Inlet in North Wildwood. Every day. And in the winter months on the boardwalk when the weather got bad he wore just a white sweat shirt and his famous white shorts and sneakers. He was the guy people spotted talking and waving to friends along the way. The lifeguards all knew him and waved. He walked at a brisk pace and if you wanted to talk with him you had to accompany him for a block of two. He would only stop to have a picture taken of him with a friend or visitor. He loved the notoriety in his own vain way. He was the king of the beach.

In 2003, several bar establishments sponsored a fundraiser to raise money to help buy beach equipment for the North and Wildwood Beach Patrols. More than 100 beachgoers clad in white t-shirts with the words "A Walk With Dave" printed on the front met on the beach. With Uncle Dave at 83 years old leading the way they walked his daily routine. Some of the younger ones could not make the full walk.

In the 1980's the clubs in down town Wildwood started to close and there was no need for a doorman there anymore.

His life style did not change as he was quickly hired by Moore's Inlet in the Anglesea area of North Wildwood. He loved that job as he could dress casual in his famed white tee shirt and white shorts. He manned the second floor rear entrance again as a doorman overlooking the bar area and he could view the ocean close by. Again the masses saw Uncle Dave at the club. Many high school reunions were held there and old friends came back year after year. It was at this time he finally got a hearing aide. He no longer had to lean forward to hear and try to read lips. He could now listen to his favorite Phillies baseball games on TV or radio without asking anyone in sight what the score was. Again the climate changed and Moore's Inlet was torn down to develop condos. Uncle Dave had worked there for 22 straight summers and loved every minute of it. That was the last job he would hold.

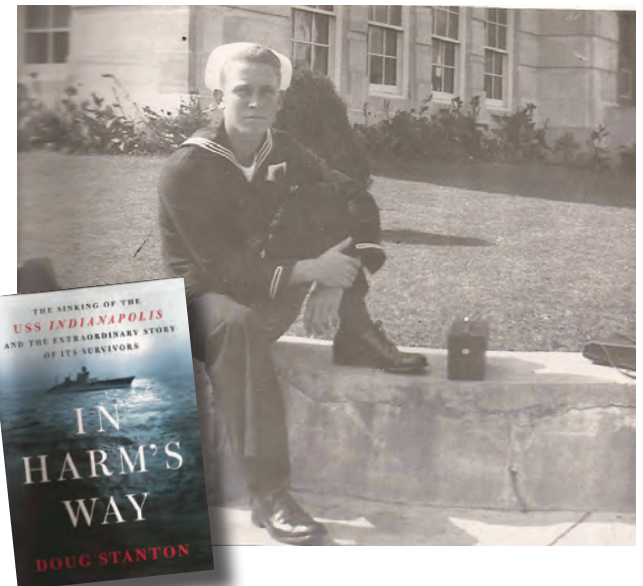
By this time Uncle Dave was 84 years old, his health was failing and he lived in the Lions Center. His walks became shorter and his memory fading. I believe he wanted to convey to me the history of the Snyder family and we had long talks at this time. Uncle Dave was like a father to me as my own father Paul had left my mother and me when I was seven years old and moved to another state. Paul was not ready when he got married at 18 to raise a family. I was the only member of the Snyder family still alive. Uncle Dave only once considered marriage and backed out and never had any children of his own.

Uncle Dave died on September 23, 2008, at 88 years of age. His viewing was held at the Ingersoll-Greenwood Funeral Home in North Wildwood. Hundreds of viewers passed by Dave with Wildwood Mayor Ernie Troiano Jr. a long time friend at the head of the line. What they saw was Dave laid out in a Moore's Inlet Tee shirt with what appeared to be that perpetual smile on his face. His plug for the last club he worked. What they didn't see under the blanket pulled up to his waist was his favorite white shorts that he was wearing. Only Dave, me and the undertaker knew this was his last wish. At the viewing many came to me and told great stories of their friendship with Dave. One man said as a kid he lived on Uncle Dave's block and he would give them money so they could afford to go to Sportland's Pool and swim with the other kids on his block. Uncle Dave died with just enough money to cover his funeral expenses. And with only a red 1953 Buick that his brother Warren left to him. But he had a million dollars worth of happiness throughout his life.

Uncle Dave claimed that he walked over 88,000 miles in his life time. Only he would know for sure because there was never a record kept. It was fitting that on his funeral card was listed his name, dates, and the title "THE LEGEND". On one side of the card was the Irish Blessing with the words that began "may the road rise to meet you", on the other side was a prayer called "FOOTPRINTS". It referred to a man dreaming about walking the beach with the Lord. How true. Most of his friends can visualize Uncle Dave walking his way to Heaven and smiling to all the others along the way.

I too was born and raised in Wildwood all my life. I can not think of a better place to live. Uncle Dave would agree with me.

So for all of you who wondered who that man was in the white shorts who smiled and waved to everyone on the beach all those years, well that was my Uncle Dave Snyder. Sorry you didn't meet him.



Uncle Richard in front of Wildwood High in Navy uniform



Dave with a fan walking the beach fundraiser

In Loving Memory of
Dave Snyder
 "The Legend"
 Sept. 8, 1920-Sept. 23, 2008

IRISH BLESSING
 May the roads rise to meet you,
 May the winds be always at your back,
 May the sun shine upon your face,
 The rains fall softly upon the fields,
 And until we meet again,
 May God hold you in the hollow of His hand.

Ingersoll - Greenwood Funeral Home
 North Wildwood, New Jersey

FOOTPRINTS

One night a man had a dream. He dreamed he was walking along the beach with the LORD. Across the sky flashed scenes from his life. For each scene, he noticed two sets of footprints in the sand, one belonged to him, and the other to the LORD.

When the last scene of his life flashed before him, he looked back at the footprints in the sand. He noticed that many times along the path of his life there was only one set of footprints. He also noticed that it happened at the very lowest and saddest times in his life.

This really bothered him and he questioned the LORD about it. "LORD, you said that once I decided to follow you, you'd walk with me all the way. But I have noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life, there is only one set of footprints. I don't understand why when I needed you most you would leave me."

The LORD replied, "My precious, precious child, I love you and I would never leave you. During your times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you."