

The Grass Was Never Greener: A Benny Farm Memoir

Robbie Dillon

In 1967, I was six years old and living with my mother, grandmother, and younger sister and brother in an apartment in Montreal's west end. It was the year of Expo, one of the most successful World's Fairs in history, and bids to host the Olympics *and* a major league baseball franchise were in the works. It was a time of incredible, positive change, when every moment seemed impossibly ripe with possibility.

The apartment where my family was living was fairly spacious, with stained woodwork and wrought iron balconies that attested to the aspirations of previous occupants. By the time we moved in, however, the building had been neglected for many years and had fallen into a state of disrepair.

The room where I spent most of my time, and remember in most detail, was the kitchen, with its stained porcelain sinks and a rusty gas water heater that stood in a corner. A panel had fallen off the side of the water heater, leaving a ring of exposed blue flame that I found fascinating and was constantly being warned to stay away from. There were plump, brown cockroaches that waddled nonchalantly through all the rooms as if they, rather than we, were the rightful occupants. My mother shrieked every time she spotted one, but my brother and I made a game of chasing them across the floor with cans of Raid that we sprayed on them from inches away. Rather than killing them DEAD, as the TV commercials insisted, it seemed to leave them with little more than a decent buzz.



Our backyard was the gravel coated parking area behind the building. We shared the space with a small-time biker gang who had rented one of the adjacent garages and used it as a makeshift clubhouse. My brother and I would play with our Tonkas, our sister with her Barbies, while the bikers drank beer, sat around on lawn chairs, and worked on their choppers a few feet away. One of my playmates was an elderly man who spent most afternoons on the steps of the building across the street. I passed many a delightful hour recounting my childhood adventures and aspirations while he drank from a paper bag.

I had never known anything else so it all seemed quite normal to me. I had no idea my family was poor, or that my mother and grandmother, both working as waitresses on alternating shifts at a nearby deli, were desperately scrambling to improve our situation.

Part of their plan involved a government housing project called Benny Farm, a place that my grandmother described in glowing, edenic terms worthy of a southern preacher's



visions of the promised land. In Benny Farm there were vast green fields full of friendly, rosy-cheeked children. The rent was much cheaper so there would be money for extras like ice cream, hockey sticks and new school clothes. To our young minds it seemed a tiny slice of paradise was about to fall into our hands.

But first we had to get in.

Applicants were rated according to a point system, rather than on a first-come-first-served basis. Some people had been on the list for many years. Points were awarded according to a variety of factors that included financial status, number of children, and whether or not a person was on welfare, which was seen as a mark against, rather than for, them. Because the project was originally built to house returning war vets and their families, points were awarded to those whose spouses had served. My grandmother argued quite strenuously that because both of her ex-husbands had enlisted, she was entitled to double points. She also felt that her work in a munitions factory should have been recognized. “I nearly froze my ass off polishing those goddamn shell casings,”

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she once berated one of the long-suffering administrators, “don’t tell me I’m not a veteran.”

The process was long and nerve-wracking but we were finally accepted at the beginning of that centennial summer of hope and change. Benny Farm was indeed much as my grandmother had described it. The project’s simple but solidly constructed three-story red brick buildings, 60 in all, were arranged in circles around two grass-covered interior courtyards—one on either side of busy Cavendish Blvd.—where children could play without fear of traffic.

More importantly, for me and my siblings, there really were hundreds of kids. There were sandboxes and playground equipment, and asphalt tracks where we learned to ride our bikes in safety.

Each of the apartments had a balcony that overlooked the common area. All of the grown-ups knew each other’s kids, so someone always had



an eye on us. This was a good thing, in hindsight, but didn't seem so when our parents were constantly being updated on our every misdeed. In the evenings, neighbours chatted with each other across the balconies, and the courtyards echoed with the sound of parents calling their kids in to supper.

There was an asphalt baseball diamond that doubled as a hockey rink in the winter. In the fall, fathers, boyfriends, and older brothers would get together and spend a weekend setting up the boards for the rink and then take turns watering it. At one time there were so many kids the housing project was able to ice its own hockey league with teams in a couple of different age divisions.

The Benny Farm Tenants Association was a fairly well-organized group that met regularly to discuss issues of common interest and arrange special events. Once a month, they distributed a mimeographed newsletter to every tenant. Happy Birthday to Barb Delisle who turned 29 again on January 8th. The O'Brien family cat, Scruffy, has gone missing. She is a black-and grey female with white feet. If you see her or have been feeding her, please let them know.

In the summer, the BFTA arranged a carnival. There were hotdogs for a dime, soft drinks for a nickel, a small merry-go-round and other rides for the smaller kids. In the evening, families would set up their lawn chairs around a bandstand on the baseball diamond. There was live



music and there were clowns and magicians, and a demonstration by the police or fire department.

My family lived in Benny Farm for a little over a decade. The low rent made it possible for my mother, who had dropped out of school when she became pregnant at 16, to work fewer shifts at the deli. She was able to go back to school part-time, completed a degree in accounting, and eventually went on to purchase a house and summer cottage of her own.

Several years after we moved out, it became apparent that developers were intent on getting a hold of Benny Farm. There was a lengthy and hard-fought campaign to have the buildings, which seemed fine to the people living there, condemned as unfit for habitation. One by one, the units were boarded up and torn down to be replaced by a mid-range condo development. Strangely, the cockroach-infested tenement on Decarie that my family was so desperate to escape is still being rented out to this day. All I can assume is that those huge interior courtyards of Benny Farm, in the heart of what became a very desirable upper-middle-class neighbourhood, were too tempting a prize to pass up. The yards where I ran and played and kissed my first girl probably seemed like a waste of valuable real estate, but for me they were where I learned what a real community was all about.

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