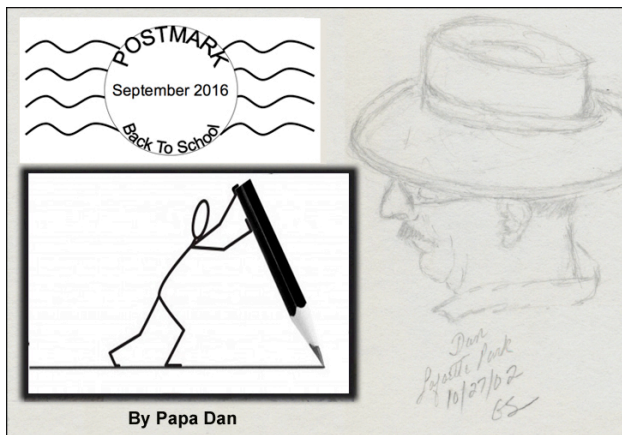


## A Back-To-School Story — A ‘Pencil Pusher’ Looks Back

By Dan Sapone



**This past month, as my grandchildren head back to school, this former ‘pencil pusher’ reflects: How has the back-to-school experience changed?**

---

### Who’s Your Daddy?

Growing up in Antioch, a middle-class California town, in the 1950s, the boys I knew competed on the school playground in the same ways, I assume, that boys did in other places. Hierarchies were established, often starting with a conversation like this one:

“Hey, you can’t cut in front of me, I’m up next.”

“Well, I called it.”

“What do you mean you ‘called it?’ You can’t just call it!” (Remember when you could call it, you know, “I got dibs.”)

“Nobody wants you to bat with runners on base. You never hit the ball out of the infield. You’re an automatic out.”

“Oh, YEAH? (then comes the big one at this early stage of the argument):

“And you throw like a girl.” (It didn’t get much more personal than that in 1959.)

Next comes the appeal to fairness. “You gotta wait your turn.”

Fairness fails and is trumped by an appeal to personal strength. “Who’s gonna make me, YOU?”

Up to that point, that’s pretty standard stuff; but, unless the boys were willing to throw punches or were stopped by some external interruption, the argument could move completely outside of the playground into more sensitive territory.

“You’re as wimpy as your dad.”

So, where did that come from?

Antioch was a serious factory town in the 1950s. We had a DuPont plant, two Fiberboard plants, a Crown Zellerbach paper mill, a Glass Containers factory, Fulton Shipyard, Continental Can, Kaiser Gypsum, Union Carbide, Dow Chemical, a rubber mill, two canneries, Dexter Hysol out on Bailey Road, the Redwood Manufacturing Lumber Yard, and a U.S Steel plant just outside of town on Loveridge Road. Turns out that a major percentage of the dads in the vicinity worked in one of these facilities. (By the late 1960s, about one-third of the local moms also worked outside the home, but in Antioch back in the fifties it was mostly dads – just like a script from TV shows we watched like “Father Knows Best” or “Leave It to Beaver.”) So, when a guy was challenged on the playground, some portion of his status was wrapped up in his dad’s occupation; so the next level of insults could take a new direction, refining the playground hierarchy:

“I bet your dad’s the smallest guy at Fiberboard.”

“He doesn’t work at the stupid Fiberboard plant; he drives a forklift – the big one that hauls tons of stuff.”

“Tons of what? Peaches at the cannery? My dad works at U.S. Steel. They make steel for cars and airplanes and big stuff.”

“Big deal! My dad’s a foreman. He orders guys like your dad around all day long.”

“Yeah, well . . . “ he searches for something to top that → *and here it comes,*

“Your dad doesn’t do REAL work, he’s just a pencil pusher.”

### **What’s a ‘Pencil Pusher?’**

OK. If these boys were lucky, the inning ended or the bell rang or Sister Bernadette showed up with her uncanny ability to sense when boys were heading for trouble, so it seldom escalated to an actual fistfight. But those of us watching from outside of the argument were left wanting to know: What’s a ‘pencil pusher?’ What kind of job was that? It was made to sound pretty insulting. Guys, and gals, were wondering: was my dad a ‘pencil pusher?’ If he was, just how embarrassed should I be? Was that as low on the totem pole as the kid on the playground made it sound? Did that insult win the argument? It would have been instructive — to us fourth-grade bystanders at least — if the exchange had been allowed to run its full course and we could find out who won the argument in the only definitive way we knew: which one ended up on the ground crying and which one walked away with all of his teeth?

Of course, one way or another most of us who cared eventually learned, or decided for ourselves, what it meant to be a ‘pencil pusher.’ To those who used it as an insult, it meant a job that didn’t require physical strength and skill to build things — the work that made someone a ‘real man’ in a factory town like this one. After all, as we were all

taught by our 'Greatest Generation' parents and teachers, the post-war economy was built on production of things like cars and trucks and refrigerators and all the other things that TV commercials told us we needed to buy. Those products, the stuff they were made of, and the containers they came in were produced with physical labor in factories like those in our town. Many Antioch dads did that work.

But gradually, as the 50s turned the corner into the late-60s, we baby boomers were presented with other choices. To some, a 'pencil pusher,' it turned out, was someone who used his brain to plan or organize or communicate the ideas and processes that made the manufacturing economy successful. He might have been an accountant or insurance broker, a union leader or a lawyer, a newspaper reporter or a manager. AND, increasingly, gradually, pencil pushers turned out to be women, as well (a feature that distinguished the 1960s and beyond from the 1950s).

My dad, who worked in the steel mill after completing less than a junior-high education in the Santa Clara Valley, went to night school to become a pencil pusher (i.e., an insurance agent). So, from my earliest memories, my dad made clear to me that I was going to college so I could become a pencil pusher of some kind. He never used that word, but there was no question that he didn't want me to work in one of the Antioch factories. Increasing numbers of us who graduated from that playground, later graduated from high school and went to college fully intending to become very good at pushing a pencil and, eventually, using other 'labor-saving devices' like typewriters, telephones, calculators, and much later, computers. Pencil pushers, it turned out, helped turn many kinds of labor jobs into well-paying union careers and provided opportunities for promotion that broadened the middle class and made it increasingly prosperous as the 1960s matured in our town.

### **Boing! With the 1960s, athletics begin to dominate**

The 'Pencil Pusher' conflict of the late 1950s, which I observed mostly as a bystander, didn't have much of an effect on me personally, since it was all about competition on the playground; and I was not perceived as competing with anyone. I was a kid who carried around a leather briefcase that my father gave me to carry my books. Reading was the 'sport' that he encouraged every way he could. On the playground of the 5th and 6th grade, I was pigeonholed in the category of the "uncoordinated," which kept me safely out of competition with other boys. I was picked last when teams were picked (when I HAD to play baseball in PE), I found that if I gravitated to tetherball, while it was technically a 'sport,' it seemed to keep the competitive forces of the playground at a distance. But then, as I went back to school in the fall of the 7th grade, everything changed. EVERYTHING. During the summer and fall of 1962, I grew six inches.

As I described in an earlier story on *ConVivio* (<http://convivio-online.net/a-moment-in-the-sun/>), the basketball coach (in conspiracy with Sr. Bernadette and my mother), forced me to join the 7th-grade basketball team — VERY much against my will.

At first the others on the team seemed amused when I showed up; but to my (and their) surprise, I did pretty well without embarrassing myself too much. I got a bunch of rebounds, blocked some shots, threw the ball down court to Gary to start the fastbreak, and helped the team win. For the others, it was no longer amusing when the coach made me one of the starting five. Then it became serious; but some of them got used to having a formerly uncoordinated kid become *one of them*. After a few weeks of this, one day Tom Augustine — an all-sport athlete — gave me a nickname. He said, without malice, just stating the facts, “You’re not really any good, are you, you just have ‘BOING,’ right? You know, like a spring.” We were friends, so I took it well. He was right. I didn’t have the usual set of athletic skills. I had ‘boing.’

As a result of some coaching and persistent practice in my backyard, by the time I showed up in high school, I was a real-live starting high-school basketball player, with all of the privileges and respect that went with it. No foolin’. Apparently, by the last half of the 1960s, the fact that my dad was a ‘pencil pusher,’ no longer did me any harm. Perhaps that stigma had begun to disappear, even in a factory town like Antioch, and we had to earn our own respect (or lack of it).

### **In High School — What next? The ASVAB Test**

So, at Antioch High School, basketball wasn’t going to get me much more than a little respect on the basketball court; it was time to take the next step, whatever that turned out to be. The next step, as my guidance counselor informed me, was to find out what I was good at to prepare myself to go to college. She had spoken to my dad and, she told me, “He made some things clear – you are going to college whether you like it or not, you know that don’t you?” I hadn’t heard it put quite that way exactly, but it wasn’t a surprise. And she said something more: “He also told me that he was hoping that you would take over his insurance agency after you graduate. You know, ‘A. J. Sapone Insurance And Son’ and all of that.” So she told me, “I advised your father that he would have to wait and see if that turned out to be what your son is good at. He may have other skills and other interests that he’ll figure for himself. So, he may end up taking a different path.” She told me that she didn’t think he would be thrilled with that outcome, but he seemed to accept that as a possibility. She also suggested a strategy. “The Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) of standardized tests was going to be offered in a few weeks,” she told me. I want you to take that test and we’ll see what it tells us.”

“I won’t have to join the army, will I . . . because, you can for... “

“No, everybody gets to take it. It tells us what kinds of professions you might be best suited for, based on your interests and talents. It might help.”

So the test came and went and we waited for the results. The background: by 1967, the values of popular culture began to be influenced by some recognizable themes. Appreciation for the outdoors, for individualism, for public service, and other attributes that came to us from music and TV resulted in some predictable answers to questions designed to identify personality traits. So when the results came back and were reported to us, I learned that I was most suited to becoming a forest ranger. The wonderful joke was that more than half of my friends learned that they had the same destiny. One saw me holding the familiar envelope and said “Forest ranger, right?”

“Right.”

When I asked my counselor about it she confirmed the glitch in the data analysis, “Yes, I guess you’re going to have to figure it out for yourself.” That, of course, had been her real advice all along. So, “back to school” had new meaning. I went off to college with that question: did my future have an “And Son” sign hanging on it, or was there something else I had to choose?

As my grandchildren head back to school at various stages of their education, perhaps they are in the middle of a similar process.

### **With the 2016 Version of “Back to School,” What has Changed?**

Looking back across the decades that followed, many things have changed. The education I receive prepared me for a long career as a ‘pencil pusher’ — a writer and editor. Pencils began to take a back seat to other tools that dramatically accelerated the advancement of ‘pencil pusher types’ of an increasing variety. As the 20th century passed into memory, in an equally dramatic reversal, the middle class itself has begun to shrink as many labor jobs — jobs that were so well esteemed on my playground in the 1950s — began to draw a diminishing share of the benefits of the increasingly globalized and technology-driven economy.

As an older guy recently retired from my career as a ‘pencil pusher’ — a guy with seven grandchildren growing up on very different playgrounds — I have some questions:

- Are the conversations on their playgrounds different today?
- Does the occupation of their parents play a greater or lesser role than it did on my playground?
- What will be the shape of the middle class that they will graduate into? What will it take for them to access the quality of life that was made available to me?
- Will the education available to them prepare them for the world they will meet when they graduate?

My grandchildren seem to have some advantages -- they all seem to be smarter than I was at their age; they all have university-educated parents; they have access to vastly more technology that I had (I had a transistor radio, and electric train, and a bicycle and they have . . . well, other stuff), and they are exposed to much more cultural diversity than I was (my town and my playground had none). The technology they have at their fingertips provides them with information and answers that my generation had to dig for by going to the library. Is their instant access to information an 'advantage' or does it bypass some of the learning experiences I had? Will they be sufficiently prepared in subjects related to 21st-century science and technology? AND — equally important to this 'English major' — will they have a solid foundation in the Humanities necessary to be a well-rounded human being?

I think they will. The evidence for that optimism is my observation that their parents (our children) are providing them with experiences that expose them to reading, science, the arts, and personal interactions that are helping them develop into curious, confident observers of the world around them and smart thinkers. I see those parents actively involved in their children's school, extracurricular music and arts programs, and sports teams. And the kids are proud of the things they do. So, I am optimistic. Still, I suspect that there are things we older folks can do here in this 21st-century 'back-to-school' season to help them succeed.

As for the conversations they have on their playgrounds – I guess I'll have to ask them.

