

Childhood Chant Amidst the Trees

In 1952 a man named Fred visited every house on Ballentine Boulevard in Norfolk, Virginia, a Navy town on the east coast now recognized as a Tree City. Unlike other door-to-door salesmen in that era—he wasn't selling encyclopedias or vacuum cleaners—he was selling a vision and a plan. His vision, to make all of Norfolk a garden; his plan, to enlist his neighbors to join him in planting crepe myrtle trees throughout the city.

By the time my family moved to Norfolk five years later the population was well over 200,000 and every year 1,000 new trees were planted. For the next three decades we attended a church about a mile from Ballentine Boulevard where Fred Heutte, Norfolk's first Director of Parks and Forestry, and his neighbors had taken up the trowel.

On Sundays, amidst streets bordered by crepe myrtle trees with clusters of magenta blossoms and trunks striated from peeling bark, my family walked the short distance to our small neighborhood church. My siblings and I trailed behind my mother like five little ducklings waddling down the old, cracked cement path. I lingered after the others—a heroic warrior, a sidewalk missionary.

I quietly recited The Chant.

“Step on a crack, break the devil's back! Step on a line, break the devil's spine!”

Zigging and zagging like a drunk sailor, I stepped on every crack and line I could.

But only the trees knew this.