Sign of Prosperity

Dad's ring symbolized level of approval and success.

By Len Marcus, Camarillo, California

Sitting in a black velvet box, as if on exhibit in front of me, is my dad's ring.

The band of the ring is yellow gold with the initials RM in platinum, something that used to be called a signet ring. On top of the R is a diamond. As a child, I thought this diamond was the biggest in the world. In an adult's reality, it's a little under half a carat.

But it is more than a ring with initials. It represents my family's prosperity—or lack of it—many years ago.

My father worked at Jonett's Knitting Mill in the Spanish Harlem section of Brooklyn, New York. Dad spent many years working there but, as I often heard him say, "The job is seasonal."

From many visits to the mill, I recall the huge knitting machines on which stood cones feeding thread into the machinery that, as if by magic, turned out tubes of knit fabric.

By looking at Dad's ring finger, I could always tell if he was either working or spending time between seasons. If his ring was missing, Dad was out of work, the ring serving as collateral for a loan.

I have memories of going to the loan office; Mom called it the "hock- shop." I didn't understand what was happening, but I knew it wasn't a good thing. While in line, no one made eye contact and no one talked.

When we were next in line, Dad answered a few questions and

gave the loan officer his ring. The man put the ring in a small manila envelope and sealed it, then handed Dad some money and a payment book. We made weekly payments until Dad was back at work and retrieved the ring.

I don't remember my mother's father because Grandpa Sam died when I was 2 years old, in 1943. My mother later told me that Grandpa didn't want her to marry my father.

A Father's Blessing

However, before my parents were married, Grandpa had his prized diamond stickpin made into the signet ring that he presented to my father. It became Dad's symbol of approval and his prized possession.

In 1949, when I was 8 years old, Dad took my mother and me to see a movie at the Laugh Theatre in Manhattan. As this outing required a trip on the subway, we got dressed up and Dad, of course, wore his ring.

In the middle of enjoying a Buster Keaton movie, Dad sneezed and the ring flew off his finger. I can still hear the sound of metal bouncing across the concrete floor. There we were, all dressed up, crawling around on our hands and knees in the darkness and desperately searching for the ring, with no success.

After the movie, the lights were turned on. Two ushers, wearing maroon uniforms with brass buttons and carrying flashlights, joined in our hunt. We looked for another hour, until it was time for the next show to start.

Mother gave the theater manager our name and phone number, but we had lost all hope, heading home in despair on the Brooklyn-Manhattan Transit train to Bensonhurst. None of us spoke the entire way.

Two days later, the manager called to say that the cleaning man

had found the ring and that it was locked in the theater safe. When we picked up the ring, Dad shook the hand of the cleaning man and slipped him a $5 bill. I'll never forget the look of gratitude on Dad's face.

My dad died in 1993, at the age of 92. His plan had been to give me the ring when I got married, but when I turned 40, he gave up on his original plan and gave the ring to me as a birthday present.

I've never really worn the ring, but I treasure its memories and preserve its sense of importance and the feeling of continuity and security it gives me.

Someday, when I'm gone, the ring, in its velvet box, will pass on to my godson Andrew. I hope it means as much to him as it does to me, and that's why I've written this memory.