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Around Town: It's time to wake up and enjoy the fruits of redone riverfront

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By [Brian O'Neill](#), Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Our 11-year-old daughter was on the computer, sweetly killing zombies Saturday night. She had been at it so long I feared she might become one.

When I was her age in the late '60s, I had to walk a mile to the mall with my buddy, Richie Ruth, to shoot stuff in this primitive, pre-computer game called "Jungle Drums" in Kresge's. I can't remember what we blasted, but we'd never have the dimes to play as long as she did.

I asked my girl to declare a truce with the zombies. I'd read her a story. She killed the machine. I grabbed "Rip Van Winkle" off the shelf.

I knew Washington Irving's classic tale was there someplace. As I began reading, though, the story seemed so fresh it became clear I'd never read it.

I knew the gist. Almost everyone knows about this 18th-century man who came back to his village after a 20-year nap. But I had no idea that lazy ol' Rip felt about his wife about the same way Rodney Dangerfield felt about his, which is why he went into the woods so often.

I was just to the part where Rip ran into the old Dutch guy and his gang playing a boozy game of ninepins, when my girl went all Van Winkle on me. I shut the book as she dozed for the night.

When I awoke the next morn, I finished the story and wondered what a modern Van Winkle would think of the changes in Pittsburgh. My walk to work Monday,

across the Allegheny from the North Side, oddly echoed Rip's trek into his village after too long away.

I've noted before the irony of our Iron City outlook: Nothing ever changes but everything was somehow better before. Yet any fair look around shows quite a different city than the one we knew in 1990.

In the story, Rip got himself into a fix with the villagers when he declared himself "a loyal subject of the King, God bless him!" He'd slept through the Revolutionary War.

A modern Van Winkle awakening after a two-decade snooze would be surprised that a son of the president we had in 1990 served two terms as president himself before giving way to the nation's first black president, but that might be the least of his surprises.

He'd emerge in a world where about every third person is yapping into a tiny device held at the ear. Some, with hidden earpieces, even seem to be talking loudly to themselves, an activity that was the exclusive province of nutbags in 1990.

I think the thing he'd really notice, though, as he walked across the Fort Duquesne Bridge, is how our riversides have built up and opened up. Had he awakened a month or three ago, he'd have seen hundreds of joggers, cyclists, walkers, scullers and kayakers, as common a summer sight today as they were scarce a generation ago.

I began to wonder what new memories this is creating for young Pittsburghers. Might this be opening our children to leisure activities more like their grandparents' than their parents'?

Here's why I say that. About a month ago, I got a nice letter from a man in Butler who shared boyhood memories of taking the trolley to see ballgames and movies

in the Pittsburgh of his youth.

Most parents don't allow children such freedom to roam anymore. In part, that's because most modern suburbs strictly separate the residential from the commercial, and so walking or biking on The Big Road is a non-starter. We're also a society steeped in such casual bloodfests as "CSI" and "Law & Order," entertaining us straight into the belief that the world is more dangerous than it really is.

That's too bad, because the city's network of bike paths, nonexistent in 1990, can give a new generation freedoms that the previous couldn't know.

A few weeks ago, on a gorgeous Sunday afternoon, I gave our seventh-grader permission to bicycle with her classmate from our North Side home to see a movie at SouthSide Works. This would be not unlike my own boyhood journeys -- except that she kept checking in via cell phone along the way.

My daughter and her friend had to stop only for a handful of traffic lights on the quiet streets between the stadiums. The bike paths were filled with Pittsburghers enjoying the day.

It should be confessed that, after the movie, the girls didn't want to bike a second five miles in the sun, and so my daughter's friend called her father to pick them up and drive them home.

The only thing that could have made this any more of a throwback would be SouthSide Works having a ninepins alley. Maybe next summer.