

A Car on a Tennis Court, a Nuclear Showdown, and a Peace Treaty Memories from October 1962 and a Link to September 1783

by

Dave Tolle

April 16, 2021

On a tennis court

On a sunny fall Saturday afternoon in 1962, Milton Stratos and I were 15-year-old high school sophomores, playing our beginner's brand of tennis on the courts at St. Petersburg Junior College, a mile or so from our neighborhood. I had ridden to the courts on my sister Louise's bike, because mine was broken.

Milton and I were between points, gathering stray tennis balls, when a shouted "No!" came from the parking lot and a car jumped a curb, knocked down an old man, jumped another curb, rammed through the corner of the chain link fence at one end of our court, sped across the length of the court and crashed through the fence on the other side. The tennis balls and Milton and I happened to be, at that moment, elsewhere on the court and out of the car's path. But the driver jammed it into reverse and roared backwards, and I stared intently, heart racing, wondering whether the driver was crazy and intending to run us down. He was not. He stopped. I ran to the old man who had been knocked down in the parking lot and asked if he was hurt. He pointed toward the car and said, "Is he okay? Is my father okay?" It was such a strange question from an old man that I thought he was delirious from the impact, but the driver was indeed his father. The 87-year-old father was uninjured, his 63-year-old son sitting in the parking lot had a broken shoulder and broken ribs, the car was damaged, fifty feet of 12-foot fencing was down, rubber skid marks half an inch deep marred the court, and Louise's bike was now more broken than mine.

(Now that I'm in my seventies, a 63-year-old guy doesn't seem nearly as old as he did when I was 15.)

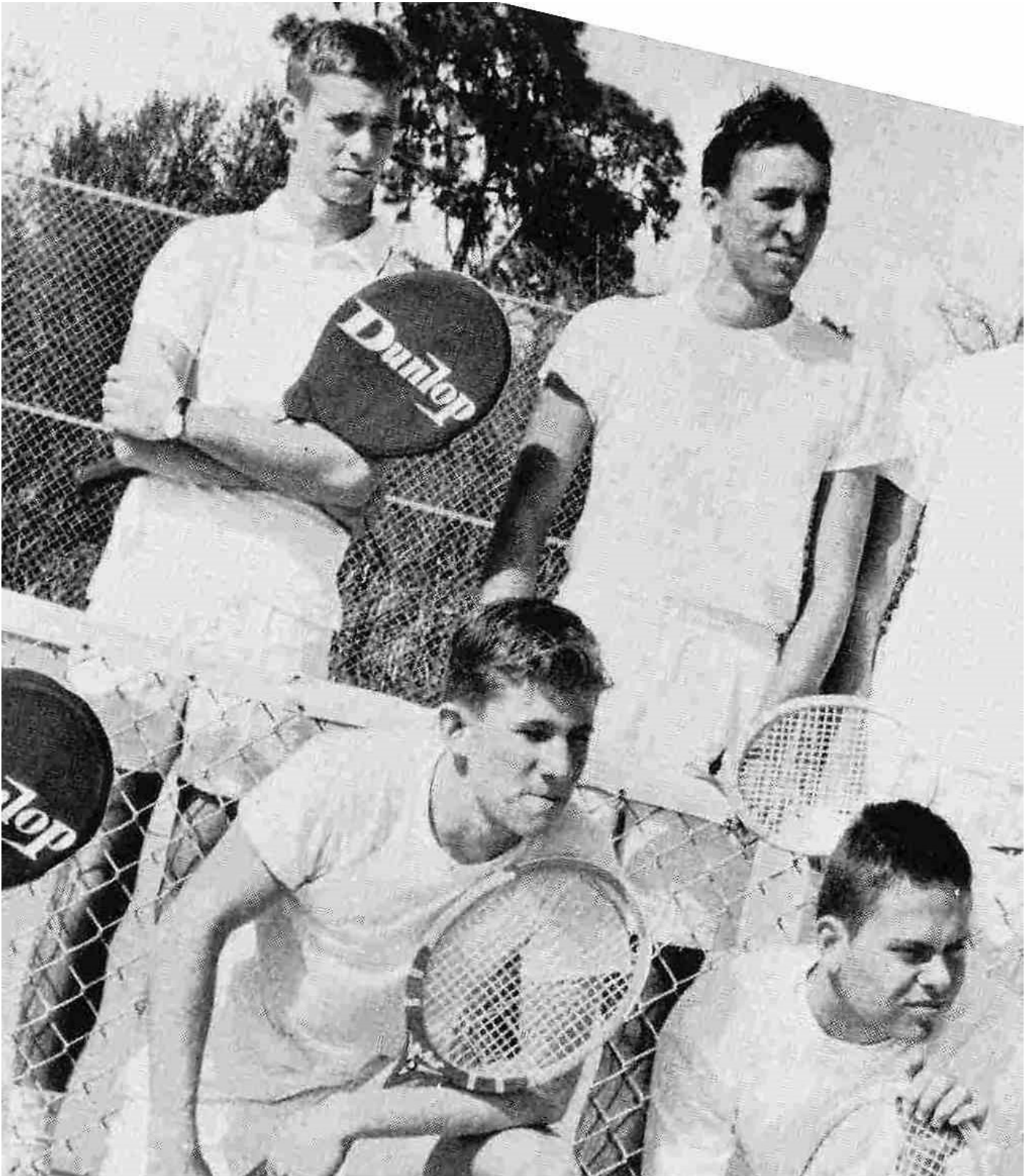
"Auto Stampedes. Credentials Above Par, But Performance Flops"

So said the headline of the *St. Petersburg Times* story the next day, Sunday, October 21, 1962. According to the article, the son, Ambroise Didot, had been helping his father, Henri A. N. Didot, practice driving and parking an automatic transmission car. Henri, a retired French consular official, did have credentials: driver's licenses from France, England, and Switzerland, and one issued in 1935 in California, "good until revoked." Henri had stepped on the gas instead of the brake, jumped the curb, knocked over the startled Ambroise ("No!"), and crashed through the fence and the bike and the tennis court. The investigating policeman requested that Henri be re-examined for a driver's license.

I do not know whether Henri Didot ever drove again. I hope not.

Louise's bike and mine got repaired. Life went on. Milton and I continued to play tennis all through high school and beyond. It is sobering to realize that a small difference in the timing or the path of the car could have completely changed our futures.

That weekend of October 21-22, 1962, as memorable as it still is for me, was overshadowed by more momentous events the very next day.



About 18 months later, some friends on the Boca Ciega High School tennis team:
Standing: Bob Grady and Milton Stratos
Kneeling: Dave Tolle and Mike Hunter

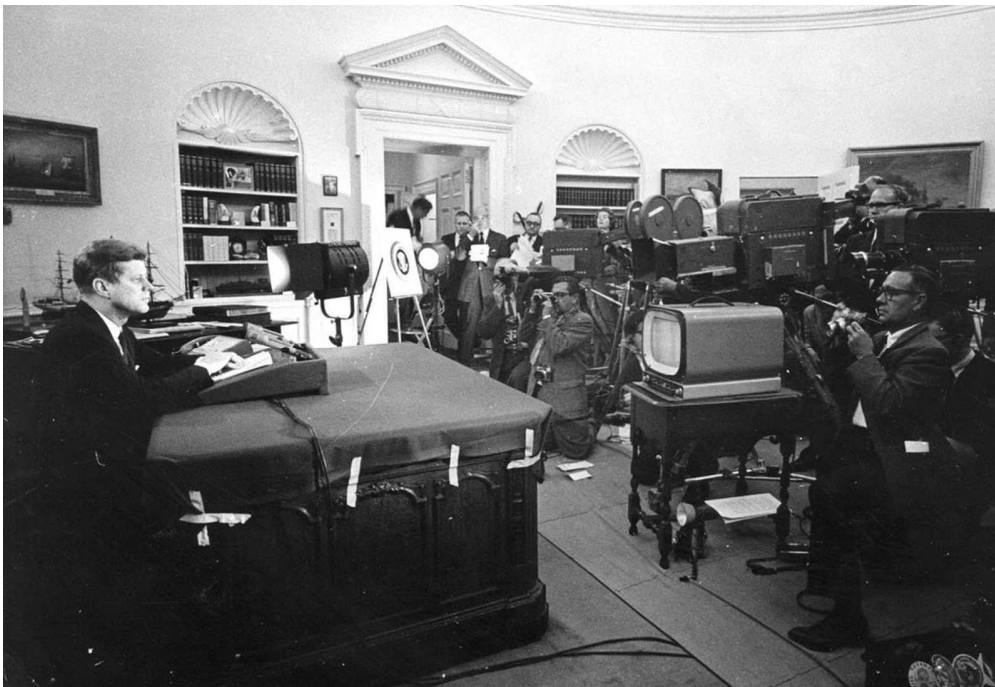
The Cuban Missile Crisis: JFK Makes an Announcement

The next day, Monday, October 22, 1962, the White House announced that President Kennedy would give a televised talk that evening “of the highest national urgency.” As a callow and politically cynical 15-year-old, I assumed the White House was exaggerating-- hyping the speech to get a bigger audience. My Dad knew better. “This is serious language; I don’t like the sound of it,” he said. “We need to listen.”

We watched and listened that night as JFK announced that the Soviet Union had been secretly installing nuclear missiles in Cuba capable of hitting most of the major cities in the Western Hemisphere. Kennedy demanded that the missiles be withdrawn, put the U.S. military on high alert, and initiated a quarantine of all offensive military equipment heading to Cuba, with our ships intercepting Soviet ships. Thus began a tense, complex, and dangerous period in which a small misstep by either side could have triggered disaster.

On Saturday, an American reconnaissance plane was shot down over Cuba. “I thought it was the last Saturday I would ever see,” recalled Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara some years later. For weeks, the world stood on the brink. But careful diplomacy succeeded, the missiles were withdrawn, the crisis subsided, and peace prevailed.

Different decisions by either side could have led to all-out nuclear war and to a brief and bleak future for the world.



October 22, 1962: JFK reveals the Cuban missile crisis to the nation.

The Didot family and a Peace Treaty

But with war averted and relative peace attained, we are free all these years later to enjoy other, less harrowing, thoughts. Let us return briefly to the car crash on the tennis court and its remote and surprising connection to the American Revolution.

In recalling that car crash incident recently, I began to wonder about the life of the man who ran over his son and nearly ran over Milton and me in 1962. Searching newspaper archives, I found that in July, a few months

before the accident, the *St. Petersburg Times* had published an article about Henri Didot, the driver, shortly after he moved to St. Pete.



—Times Photo by George Trabant

QUITE AT HOME HERE

. . . are M. and Mme. Henri Didot and their French Poodle, Mac.

Born in 1874, Henri Didot served as a young man in the French Army, and with the Royal Canadian Dragoons in the Boer War, and with the American Army in WWI. He was posted as a consular official in neutral Sweden when Germany invaded Norway and Denmark in WWII. At other times in his 38-year career, he served as a consular official in the Channel Islands, Bulgaria, Japan, New York, and Los Angeles.

Although in July 1962 he expected to spend his remaining retirement years in St. Petersburg, he later changed his mind and ended up in England.

Henri is quoted in the July article as saying that Nice, France, where he and his wife lived before moving to St. Pete, was a very agreeable place to live, but “I must admit it is easier to drive here.” (Hah!)

At least four generations of the Didot family, I was intrigued to learn, were world famous, having been engaged in high-end publishing, printing, and typography since 1690. Henri’s great grandfather Firmin Didot and his great-great grandfather Francois-Ambroise Didot were friends with Benjamin Franklin when Franklin was the U.S. Ambassador to France during the American Revolution. Franklin so admired them that he arranged an apprenticeship for his grandson, Benjamin Franklin Bache, with the elder Didot. In 1962 a cousin of Henri’s still lived at 56 Rue Jacob in Paris where the treaty recognizing American independence was signed in 1783 by John Adams, Ben Franklin, and a representative of Great Britain.



56 Rue Jacob, Paris. In 1783, this was the Hôtel d'York, where the Treaty of Paris, ending the American Revolution, was signed. Now it carries the famous Didot name.



Firmin Didot (1764-1836), famous printer and typographer, and great-grandfather of Henri Didot

Coda

I am eternally grateful that the car missed running me over in 1962, but I also feel fortunate to have stood close one afternoon to Henri and Ambroise Didot, scions of the great Firmin Didot, the multi-talented French printer, engraver, type founder, author, translator, politician, appointee of Napoleon, and good friend of Benjamin Franklin. In honor of Henri and Ambroise and generations of their distinguished Didot ancestors, this paragraph is displayed with the Theano-Didot font, based on fonts designed by Firmin Didot.

Henri Didot, who crashed through the tennis court in 1962, died six years later, in Brighton, England, in 1968 at age 93. His son Ambroise, a linguist, who was accidentally run over by his father in 1962, recovered from his broken bones and continued to live in St. Petersburg for another third of a century, until his death in 1995 at age 96.

A puzzling aftermath

Milton Stratos and I, having survived 1962, played with modest success on the Boca Ciega High School tennis team, graduated in 1965, and went off to non-athletic careers. He is a very smart guy with a successful career in diagnostic radiology, but when I mentioned the spectacular accident to him some years later, he didn't remember it. Either he had found the incident so unmemorable that he eventually forgot it, or my own memory has tricked me, and someone else played tennis with me that day. I'm almost sure it was Milton, but the newspaper article doesn't mention him, so I suppose I will never know for sure---it will just remain one of life's little mysteries.