

Recreation Yesterday and Today

Town School

Sonny

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One day the math teacher, in a superior pose, asked his students whether anyone could tell him what a monograph might be: “Yes, Bob?” at the upraised hand.

He remembered about monoplanes and biplanes. “Well, uh, mono means one, doesn’t it?”

The teacher, visibly impressed, stared. “How did you know that?”

The object of class attention merely shrugged modestly possibly implying a deep fund of comparable scholarly knowledge. After class was dismissed, he found himself looking into the lovely hazel eyes of Carol across the aisle. She sat there with an elbow on the desktop, her peaches-and-cream face resting on her open hand, and she said in tones of unmistakable admiration: “Gee, you’re smart.” He merely shrugged again and felt himself coloring in the direct glare of her glamorous gaze as the class dispersed.

Not that girls were beginning to occupy his mind much. He was painfully aware of being only thirteen, a year younger than most classmates and still immaturely small in stature. His surreptitious survey during those first days had determined that only one boy in the whole school was shorter. A few classmates—and even some of the towns kids over in the grade-school building, younger than he—were said to be “going steady with” somebody, and a couple of the guys, bragging, hinted at even more intimate things. He did not feel ready for anything like that. He would limit himself to romantic fantasies about this or that pretty girl. Anyway, right now he was far too young to think about any girlfriend—or more, to the point, to have girls think of him as a boyfriend. As for the other, he laughed with the rest at standard dirty jokes, but doing it before you were married was wrong, wasn’t it?

No, best just to be friends with guys and girls, short or tall, farm kids and town kids. He would join with them, compete with any of them no matter where they came from, show them what he could do.

Music became a kind of equalizer. At home, singing in harmony—the old hymns taught by his aunts, Pa’s fiddle tunes, or the radio’s Hit Parade—was a frequent diversion. So he became a part of the school’s mixed chorus and felt at home in the tenor section. Slowly he became acquainted with the way music is written, though he still didn’t have the nerve to ask Miss Torgerson about the relationship between the A, D, G, or E on the sheet-music staff and the fiddle strings Pa called by those letters. In chorus performances with everyone lined up on the risers according to height, he was placed second from the end. He became friends with the even-shorter kid who had thus saved him from the ignominy of the end of the line—Dwight, nicknamed “Tubby,” a bright-eyed and witty farm boy

who lived close enough to have attended town school all his life. Tubby even played trumpet in the band, and in generous response to queries about band music, he offered to sell his old cornet for three dollars. Ma would find the money somehow, and then Bob would join in harmonic sounds with other instruments never heard up close before—clarinets, trombones, the bass horns. It was a long way from Plainview's (his country school) little rhythm band of kazoos and clacking sticks.

So many new things to sample! But some of them would just be too complicated to learn quickly. School athletics made him bump against the reality of his small size and inexperience. Before coming to town, he had heard about football from only one source—the phonograph record on which the guy sang “You gotta be a football hero to get along with the beautiful girl.” Back at Plainview they'd had a kitten ball and bat to play with, but no one had ever mentioned a football, or basketball, much less let him get his hands on one. If only he'd had an older brother in high school to learn from, to show how the games were played. But he would have to break the ground himself.

There were uncomfortable moments. One came on the first day of intramural athletics, in which everyone was expected to participate. He had passed the preliminary test admirably enough by convincing Ma that he needed an extra three dollars for the required tennis shoes, sweat socks, shorts, and athletic supporter. (What's that?” “Well, just something us guys are supposed to wear for sports.” “oh, Supporter.” He supposed it would have been even trickier to try to explain jockstrap or slingshot.) So far so good, and he appeared after school with designated others in the wonderfully smelly boys' locker room—only to discover that everybody was expected to change clothes right out in the open. He delayed removing his underwear shorts as long as possible without attracting attention, all the while sneaking glances at the others, and catching some of them doing the same thing. He began to feel slightly shocked at the sight of a dozen or so guys standing around chatting while stark naked; you couldn't help but see everything. Back in the Hidewood, boys might not always cover up their wienie when they peed, but nobody ever took off all his clothes with other people around. At home, maybe the houseful of girls had something to do with it, but when he or Pa took a bath, each did it in private.

Now more stolen peeks told him that the town kids obviously were relaxed about this. They've probably been bare-assed together ever since the first grade, he thought, and they can laugh and joke with each other while sliding out of their shorts just as easy as muscular James Koppman takes off his shirt to get a tan at threshing time. Then came the worst part; some of the snickering going on among the older town kids seemed louder after they looked over at him. And his further visual inspection revealed that nearly all the boys had some kind of fuzz growing down there; no wonder they want to stand around and show off what men they had become. Painful awareness of his own inadequacy made him turn to face the wall, his back to the others, as he clawed to pull the new jockstrap on right, first getting it backwards and having to tug its clinging elastic down over his feet and then yank it on again. His desperate act of modesty was to little avail; it was too late for concealing secrets. A voice deep enough to belong to one of the larger, overdeveloped athletes floated over the conversational din: “Guess some of us leave it grow, and some of us shave it clean every morning.” Titters and snorts around the room. He privately cursed the day he'd been allowed to start country school at only five years old, which made him end up with boys a year or more older. But he caught himself: to hell with it. He was not going to let it bother him. When he turned to face the others

again, new shorts in place, only one or two of them paid even passing attention to him, and what he showed to anybody looking new was, he hoped, a good-natured grin of shared, comradely humor.

If school team sports were to be beyond his grasp, he could sample athletics informally after hours when—luxury of luxuries—the time was his to spend as he wished. Weeks went by before he got over feeling guilty and giddy about not having to do chores before supper. He found it delicious to be out until dark learning to play touch football in the streets or empty lots of the Kallemeyn neighborhood. Many of the boys had bicycles, and five or six would cycle around town. One evening he spotted among them the familiar figure of a lightly younger boy who used to come out to stay at his uncle George Roecker's Hidewood farm.

“Hey, Pete!”

The boy stood on his pedals to speed over, then swerved and braked to a gravel-crunching stop. “Howya doin’, Robert, I heard you was in town.”

“Say, howd’ya do that?” Envy consumed him.

“Ah, just lean it and skid, I guess.”

“I mean, balancing and everything—how do you ride a bicycle, anyway?”

“You ain’t never rode a bike?”

“Well, you know, not many around the farm out there. How about showing me how?”

“Okay.” Pete lifted a scrawny leg over the worn leather seat and offered the handlebars. “Main thing is, you have to turn the direction you’re startin’ to fall.”

So he learned about bicycles, too, and began dreaming about the day he would have his own.

One night Henry (his friend from the Hidewood) introduced him to the delights of shooting pool in the back of Slough-foot’s, where odors of stale smoke and unflushed urinals provided atmosphere for the clack of ivory against ivory on three green illuminated table. Technically, it was illegal even to be in there, but as Henry said, “Ol’ Slough lets us play pool, but he wouldn’t letcha drink beer even if we had the money.” A game of rotation cost only a nickel, and Bob usually had fifteen cents or more to spend each week. “And if you get good enough to win, you won’t hafta pay a-tall.” Henry advised him, sighting along his jabbing cue. Bob immediately loved the game. He blew the entire fifteen cents that night, and later, before falling asleep, he saw visions of colored balls on a field of green. He tended to spend more time there than he should have and felt vaguely guilty for not paying more attention to classroom homework. But he couldn’t stop soaking up new experiences.

Schoolwork did, however, direct him to discover the town library—all those books under one roof. The assignment had to do with looking ups works of Shakespeare and Sinclair Lewis. On his first visit he ran across a Zane Grey shelf that offered not only Riders of

the Purple Sage, the book at home that he'd read five or six times, but a dozen more he hadn't known about. Sorry, Shakespeare, old boy, I guess you lose, he thought as he took the orange-covered volume over to the librarian. Miss Kathryn Kreger regarded him over her pince-nez spectacles, and after what seemed an eternity, she finally stabbed at the borrowing card with her pencil and clamp-on stamp. He had almost expected her to scold him with something like, "Why do you want to read these cheap westerns when we have so many good books in this library?" His uncle Ber used to ride him that way for reading Wild West Weekly stories. Now he thought he'd have to answer to the library lady that Zane Grey's characters, like Lassiter and Jane, had become such good friends that he wanted to meet some more like them, and in a way that was true. He figured that with all the chore-free time for himself, he could get the necessary homework done and read Zane Grey, too.

Time for himself. Freedom from those daily farm chores. The ease of town living, with electricity and running water. Plus all the new and really interesting people around, every day. Such a variety of experiences, trying things out, learning how things work, discovering his own abilities. At times, as the weeks and months of fall and winter rolled by, he felt himself in the middle of what seemed almost a miracle; he had become a vital, living part of scenes and events never even dreamed about before starting school in town.

He began to wish he did not have to face Friday afternoons, [when he had to go home] when this world of miracles would be suspended until the following Monday morning, like a Jack Armstrong radio serial whose images are shattered with a click of the dial, signaling time to get at the milking.

From Robert Amerson, *From the Hidewood: Memories of a Dakota Neighborhood* (copyright by the Minnesota Historical Society, 1996.)