

# Whatever Happened to Good, Clean Fun?

By

Catherine Telford

Time takes its toll – even on fun. In our small town there was no Girls’ Club, Boys’ Club, YMCA, YWCA, or any other organized play group. We were on our own. Why then did we have so much fun? Maybe it was because we were oblivious to any type of play except creative fun; and believe me, we could be creative! Our imaginations took over. There was no playground, but that did not stop us. Our playground was any space of a few feet – dusty, muddy, rocky, or whatever. Where two or more were gathered together, there was fun play!

Our small town was built around the courthouse square, and this square was a favorite place for us to congregate. We were told that four times around the square made a mile. There was a sidewalk on the four sides of the square. The four corners contained small buildings, and these buildings made blind corners. The square was outlined with a fence of a sort. There were four-foot granite posts about every ten feet, and there was a parallel metal pole across the top of the posts and another across the lower part of the posts. The owners of the corner buildings agreed to keep the poles in good repair as part of their privilege for this location.

What a blessing for the children! Little did the property owners realize that they were providing equipment for the training of many near-professional circus performers. We spent hours of practice walking the poles. In spite of all of the leg bruises and head knots, the ultimate goal was to walk the poles around the square without falling off. We did have to get off to walk around the corner buildings and then get on again. This feat provided excellent training in coordination and balance, but we were not conscious of that because we were having so much fun.

Not only did the poles produce superb tight-rope walkers, but they turned out some good trapeze artists as well. If you were short of stature, you could place your hands on the poles and flip over or, in other lingo, “skin the cat.” One had to use wisdom in this feat, however, because if you were too tall, you would “see stars” after one good contact on the lower pole with your head. After perfecting these skills, you could hang upside down by your legs on the poles and view the town. The townspeople could recognize the children upside down as well as right side up. We could have taught the monkeys a lot of tricks!

The sidewalks of the square also provided a great racetrack for roller skaters and bicyclists. One of my favorite times of the year was Christmas Day. All the boys and girls who had received skates or bicycles from Santa Claus headed for the square. Those who had already been treated with such luxuries got out their old equipment and joined the group. Then the excitement began. Those with bicycles were the “cops,” the skaters were the “speeders,” and the town pedestrians on the sidewalks were the “victims.” I was usually a skater, since I liked the excitement of the chase. The skaters would muster up nerve and take off – fast! If spotted by a cyclist, the chase was on. When a speeder was caught, he was put in “jail” for a certain length of time. Once out of jail, the temptation overwhelmed you again; and off you would go with a cyclist on your heels.

Skaters had a small advantage. If you were skilled, you could throw your cop off by vaulting the poles and running across the grass. Of course, it was too difficult to get the bike across the poles, so you had out-witted the cop. Then the cop would give up on you and start after another speeder. There was one small hang-up in this maneuver, and I do mean “hang up.” Unless you were blessed with unusual strength, it was sometimes difficult to lift those heavy skates across the poles as you attempted a vault. It only took one time of getting your feet caught on the poles with a big sprawl to discourage this trick unless you were in good vaulting shape. You then were easy prey for the cops and went to jail, to add insult to injury. At least it gave a little break for the pain to subside. If the wounds were not too severe, there was the challenge of “breaking out of jail” when the “jail-keeper” was not looking. Then the fun started all over again.

It seems that I spent half of my childhood walking stiffed-legged because of all the skinned places on my knees from those falls which a skater is bound to get. Of course, those cracked sidewalks did not help too much for staying on your feet. We were lucky, though, to have only bruises and no broken bones. Two sides of the square sidewalks were slightly downhill. In our bid to see how fast we could skate, it was impossible to turn around the corner of a building. So we would have to jump the two-step curb into the street. Try that in a big city and see what happens!

We were lucky in our town. On the left side of the courthouse was a large paved area, and did it ever make a wonderful hockey field! Who needed shin guards or any other equipment! You secured a stick, salvaged a rock for a puck, chose sides, and the battle was on. Is it any wonder our shins looked like piano keyboards with all those black bruises up and down our white legs? Even with the knotty heads and piano-looking shins, we had fun, fun, fun!

Believe it or not, we did share the courthouse square with the citizens of the town. When court week rolled around, the square became a little bit too crowded for us; so we would abandon our playground and move to the schoolhouse hill to skate. But that was no problem. The school was located only one block from the square and was situated on a fairly steep hill. What a challenge! The fun started when you gathered several skaters at the top of the hill who squatted down one behind the other holding onto the one in front of him. With a “ready, get set, go!” from the leader, the train of skaters commenced down the hill. Of course, once the train gained full speed, there was no way to stop without separating and breaking up the train. But who wanted to be a spoiler? So we suffered the consequences through the laws of motion and gravity. Even with

experienced skaters the train ride had its “pit falls,” and I do mean pit falls. One day as the bullet train started its thrilling run down the hill with a line of skaters, it happened. The lead skater hit an acorn. You have never seen such a derailment! After several rolls, we all landed in a nearby ditch. The only surviving evidence of our once-mobile train was the skate-covered legs sticking straight up in the air. Bodies were scattered everywhere, but who cared? We were having fun!

There were optional ways of entertaining ourselves other than skating. In the summertime the neighborhood children would gather in the street after supper – about twilight time. A favorite game was “knock the can.” The needed equipment was a tin can and a stick – preferably a broom stick. The can was placed on the ground, and a selected person would knock the can with the stick as far as he could. “It” had to run to get the can and bring it back to its original place. While “it” was pursuing the can, everyone else ran off to find a secure hiding place. “It” set out to find the hidiers, but with caution. You see, if “it” did not keep his eyes on the can, someone could come out of hiding and knock the can; and “it” would have to go after the can again. This would go on until it was too dark to see where we could hide. But by that time we were exhausted, and the can was beat up. It is just as well that we did not have television then; we were too tired to sit up and watch it.

Then there was Jerry. On days when we were nursing our skinned knees and piano legs, there was ever-faithful Jerry, ready to provide us with an entertaining diversion from our normal activities. Jerry was the town pet – a beautiful white and yellow collie dog that lived next door to us. Jerry was smarter than a lot of people we knew, and he definitely was lots more fun! Every day Jerry would walk down town and around the square, pausing in front of all the stores where he would get a kind acknowledgement, a pat on the head, and sometimes a bite to eat. But best of all, that collie loved children. Living next door to Jerry gave us a little more access to him, and we loved to play with him. It only took two or three people for this entertainment. One person would put an arm around Jerry and one hand over his eyes while others ran to hide. After everyone felt securely hidden, the holder would say, “Go, Jerry.” No one was secure anymore. Jerry could find everyone anywhere – even those in hard-to-find places. He was the best “hide and seek” player anywhere around. Then one day Jerry died. We lost our best friend and playmate. I sure loved that dog; I wish everyone knew a Jerry. But our grief soon subsided. After a few days of mourning, the square beckoned us; and once again we found ourselves in the middle of a full-speed cop chase to enjoy the carefree days of yesteryear.

Such was life in our small town. Flourishing with creativity, abounding with the energy of childhood, and permitted by loving parents and townspeople to enjoy those blessings to the utmost, we had plenty of good, clean, old-fashioned fun. I suppose our daily escapades might seem rather dull and unexciting when compared to many of today’s pastimes, but to those of us who were the players, it was the best time of our lives!