**Grandpa Wasn’t Always a**

**Grandpa**

**by**

**Grandpa Freeman**

To all of my grandchildren, those born and raised knowing a little of me, those born but not old enough to know me, and those not yet born:

This is just a little book of stories about me to let you know that I too was once a kid, like you.

I’m glad I was a kid. I think everyone should be allowed to be a kid some time in their life, don’t you?

I was born in 1928. That is a long time ago, and we didn’t have a lot of the things we have today.

Cars did not have radios, air conditioning, tape decks or automatic drive. Most cars had to be cranked to start and very few families even had one car.

Homes didn’t have refrigerators, automatic washers or dryers or dishwashers, and most homes didn’t have telephones or radios.

We didn’t have jets, TV’s, computers, Nintendo, video, CD’s or tape decks.

So, what did we do? We went outside and we played.

The first house I remember living in was in Springfield, Massachusetts. (No, I won’t tell you where it is; you’ll have to look it up for yourself.)

This was a two-story house. We lived on the second floor, and the owner lived on the first floor. Perhaps I was four or five years old, because I wasn’t in the first grade yet, but I remember playing on the front porch. The front porch had a big railing to prevent anyone from falling down onto the sidewalk and the concrete steps to the first floor porch below. Perhaps I was playing pirates or mountain climbers because I had to climb up and over the railing and was hanging on to the rail looking down behind me at what looked like a long drop to the ground below. It didn’t seem to me that I was doing anything wrong, but at that moment, my dad came home from work and looked up at me hanging there. Suddenly, I knew I was in big trouble.

Perhaps, in the many years that have gone past since then, I have forgotten what my dad did to me, or perhaps the punishment was so bad that God, in his mercy, has removed it from my memory.

Winters in Springfield meant snow. There was a time when two big boys, who lived downstairs, shoveled a large pile of snow along the side of the garage. Then, they put up a ladder that went up to the garage roof. They would climb up the ladder and jump off the roof into the pile of snow. Boy, did that look like fun! They let me do it, too! They helped me up the ladder, over to the edge of the roof and then with one boy on each side of me, holding my hands, we three jumped into the pile of snow. This had to have been a Sunday, because we did this all afternoon.

The next day, I got out of school before the older boys who lived downstairs. After all, they were in third or fourth grade, and I was only in kindergarten. Eager with anticipation, I rushed home. Yes, the ladder was still against the garage roof. My thoughts went something like this, “I’m a big kid. I don’t need any help. I can do this all by myself.” Standing on the edge of the roof, looking down at the pile of snow, my hands at my sides, I jumped feet first – it was not the same as yesterday. Now, there was a difference. Yesterday, the older boys had held my hands and I went down, arms outspread. Since my arms were outspread, they were in a position to be used for getting out of the snow. Today, I jumped with my hands and arms at my side. Those arms and hands that helped me get out yesterday were now pinned to my sides in a pile of cold, wet, slushy snow up to my shoulders. I was no longer a big kid, but a little kid. And what do little kids do? They yell, “HELP!”

My mother, who had expected me home from school, had gone outside to look for me and heard me. Someday, when I get to heaven, I am going to look up my guardian angel, and we are going to have a laugh over this one.

While we were still in that house in Springfield, my dad bought his first car. Boy, were we proud to have a car. Not everybody had one. This was a two-door Model A Ford.

One Sunday afternoon, when my folks were taking a nap, my brother Les, a neighbor kid and I were playing driving. We got in the car, moved the shift lever, stepped on the pedals, jiggled switches and turned the steering wheel. The on thing we did not touch was the horn. That would have woken my dad and my dad, when disturbed, was not a pleasant person. The starter was a foot pedal, and not a part of the key on that car, and all the pedals got stepped on. So, when one of us stepped on it, the motor coughed. Oh, boy, was that fun. So, we stepped on it some more.

Since all the knobs and levers had been jiggled, the ignition switch had been turned on, and the transmission put into reverse. Well, just as one plus one plus one equals three, the key on, the shift in reverse, with kids stomping on the starter, the car started up and backed down the drive. I don’t remember what the other two guys did, but I split, headed for the corner of the house. The man downstairs came running out of the house, jumped in the car and stopped it before it reached the street. My dad, now awake from all the commotion, stuck his head out of his bedroom window, and accused the neighbor of taking the car.

I believe that night was my first experience with my dad’s big, black belt. It was applied to my read end.

The house we lived in the longest was also in Springfield. It wasn’t the *houses* we lived in, but all the outdoors where we played, that I remember best.

This house had a lot of open lots near it. There were some woods to play in and a great, big, wonderful place called Forest Park. We moved into this house the summer between my first and second grades. Ever at that young age, I still went a half-mile to this park. In addition to the playground, zoo, tennis courts, ball fields, and a small pool where I learned to swim, it also had a large lake that froze over for ice-skating in the winter. This lake had woods or a marsh surrounding most of it, and was a favorite place to play when I was about 10 or 12. It was on this lake that I first learned about boats, rafts or anything that would float and carry something. I saw a couple of logs floating and tried to stand on one. It rolled around and I got my shoes and socks wet. Pushing two together still got me wet. Taking my belt off, I tied two logs together and with this wobbly raft, I could stand up on it. The good Lord must have had an angel whisper in my ear because I sat down straddling those two logs, and using my hands, paddled all afternoon. Yes, I got wet, my belt came apart, and by the time my clothes got dry enough to go home, it was late. But for the first time, I was the captain of my own ship.

Never being allowed to sleep late, even in the summer, right after breakfast, we were outside. If we didn’t go outside right away, we had to help with the housework. It was more fun to go outside and play.

What were some of the things we did during the not long enough summer while living in Springfield? We would play Monopoly all day long and sometimes carry a game into the next day. These Monopoly games would start with three or four kids, and as more showed up, they tried to get into the game. If all the property was already divided up, then the next kid would be the banker, the next would be assistants to the biggest property owner, and so on. If somebody had to go in for lunch, someone else took his place. We would borrow thousands of dollars from each other just to keep the game going. If there were too many bankers or assistants, we started a new game. When it got too dark to see in the evening, we carefully picked up the whole game, pieces, money, property and all, and put it, untouched, into a garage or basement and resumed the game the next morning. If it was raining the next day, we played in the basement or the garage.

My favorite property then, and still is today, was the Yellow’s, just before you land on GO TO JAIL: Atlantic, Ventnor, and Marvin Gardens.

Since there were very few cars in the neighborhood, we played a lot in the street. We played games like kick-the-can and kickball. Kick-the-can is a lot like hide-and-seek, only the person who is “it” had to retrieve a tin can that had been kicked from a designated spot and return it to that spot (now called the goal) before looking for the rest of the people who ran and hid as soon as the can was kicked.

Kickball is just like baseball with bases and everything, but if we didn’t have a baseball, bat and gloves, we played kickball. The pitcher rolled a large ball, like a basketball, toward home plate. The batter then kicked the ball and ran toward first base.

If someone had a baseball and a bat, then we played baseball. This was before Little League was invented, so it was not always fair. Two captains were chosen (usually the best and oldest players). One captain would throw the bat to the other, small end up. Where the other grabbed it became the starting point. The thrower then held the bad just above the starting point with his hand, then the other captain, and so on until one captain could not get his hand on the bat. The last guy to have his hand on the handle of the bat got first choice of player for his side. The youngest or poorest players were chosen last. Sometimes, that was me. When I got older and became a better player, I wasn’t the last one chose, but I was never the first chosen.

In the early part of the summer, the time after supper was best. It stayed light for a long time, (even after the sun went down) before it got completely dark. That was the best time for playing capture-the-flag, or hide-and-seek. Sometimes, my mother didn’t let us go out after supper, for some reason or other. That didn’t seem fair. When that happened, the neighbor kids seemed to have the most fun.

With all the open fields in our neighborhood, we had a lot of room to make miles and miles of dirt roads with straight sticks for driving our toy cars. On one lot, there was a small slope of perhaps 40 or 50 feet. This was where we made a path with a big spoon we borrowed (but not always returned) from a kitchen drawer. This track wound around curves, over little hills, through tunnels, over bridges and through loops, all the way to the bottom of the slope. We all tried to out-do each other in making the fanciest pathway. Then, the fun came when we would roll a golf ball down this tract, around each curve, tunnel, ridge and loop to the bottom. There was no prize or score, just the fun of watching that ball go through all of the maneuvers you had made.

One day, a bunch of us started to dig a big hole in some sand. The sand was soft and easy to dig. When it was finished, it may have been three feet deep, three feet long, and about three feet wide. After digging it, we laid some sticks across it and then spread some newspapers, then it was easy to sprinkle some sand on top of the paper to cover it. We all sat around waiting for somebody to come along and fall in. But nobody did. Just before I had to go in for lunch, Shay, the boy next door, came over to see what we were doing. We were all just sitting around this covered up hole, waiting for someone to fall in, but Shay just sad down in the circle waiting to find out what we were up to. I had been peeling the bark off of a twig when I got an idea. I threw it in the middle of our trap and said, “Hey, Shay, I’ll bet I can get that before you can.” Before I had finished saying that, he grabbed for it and down he went. The look on his face as he fell into the trap gave us something to laugh about all summer.

Near that spot, was a great big oak tree. To climb it, you had to shimmy up about the height of a house roof to the first branch. Then, the tree could be climbed by the branches up to about the height of three houses on top of each other. Not everybody could climb up it. If you could, you were all right. If not, you were still a sissy. It was a long time before I could do it. Shay, who was younger than I, could do it before I could. One day, after Shay called me a big sissy, I tried it by myself. I made it all the way to the top, but there was nobody around to see me. I stayed up there all afternoon hoping one of the kids would come by, but nobody did. What a disappointment.

We also played marbles and jack-knife games. To play one of these jack-knife games, two guys made a square in the dirt, a big one. The square was then divided in half so that each player had his own territory. Then, one of the guys throw the open knife so that it stuck into the opponent’s territory. The way the knife stuck was how a line was drawn through that territory. Then, the person whose territory it was got to chose which part he wanted to keep, and the other part was added to the knife thrower’s territory. This went on until either the territory was too small to stand in without your foot overlapping, which meant that that person long, or the knife thrower missed, and it was the other guy’s turn.

When I was 12, I got my only two-wheeler bike. Dad paid for half, and I had to earn the money for the other half. But, oh, boy, I had my own bike! My own wheels. It became my own car, a horse, motorcycle, or even an airplane. It meant the freedom to go wherever I wanted.

Learning to ride was just the beginning. There were things one had to know how to do and once you could do them, it made you that much better in the eyes of the other kids.

First came riding one-handed. Everybody did that. Then came riding with no hands. Just about everyone did that, too. But then came pumping (pedaling) no hands, and then standing up with no hands. Very few of us could stand up (off the seat) and pedal with no hands. One of my best tricks on the bike was to get off the seat, turn myself around and sit backwards on the handlebars and pedal. Very few could do that, but I could.

From about the first of July to the fourth was a special time. Fireworks and even firecrackers were legal. About the first day of summer vacation, each of us went looking for an old piece of pipe. It couldn’t be just any old piece of pipe, it had to be just right, with the right sound and the right size. And as soon as the fireworks went on sale, we bought as many firecrackers as we could afford. We took our special pipe and our firecrackers to a field. It had once been scraped out to build something, but nobody ever built anything. Across the level spot where the building was supposed to be, was a bank of dirt on either side. I stuck my special pipe into my side of that bank of dirt so that it angled up and toward the other side bank, because the other kids were doing it over there, too. Then, I took a firecracker, bent the wick at an angle and placed the firecracker inside my piece of pipe. When the fuse is lit, it sputters until it burns past the bent angle. Once past that, there is nothing to hold the firecracker near the end of the pipe, and it slides just a little bit into the pipe before it explodes. Being inside the pipe, the bang is louder; smoke is forced out of the end of the pipe. Just like a cannon. Of course, the other kids were doing the same thing so, for as long as your money holds out, you have a cannon war, shooting across that flat lot nobody built on, jus for us kids.

Another game we played with firecrackers was to hold one in your hand behind your ear, have someone behind light it and yell, “Now!” Then, we would see how high we could throw it before it exploded. This was done best at night.

I spent most of my grammar school years at the Washington Street School. Nobody had school buses then, so everybody either walked or took short cuts. Short cuts were not any shorter, but you ran all the way, so you did get home quicker.

The teacher I remember the most was Miss or Mrs. O’Brien. I had her in the 3rd grade, and again in the 5th grade. One time in the 3rd grade, she was talking about arithmetic problems.

She said, “Mary had 5 apples and Billy had 4 apples. Mother said, ‘when Daddy gets home at 5 o’clock, I want you to share your apples evening with Boddy who has none.’

“Now, what we need to know is how many apples are divided between how many people. The problem tells us there are 9 apples and 3 people. 5 and 4 apples, and 3 people: Mary, Billy, and Bobby. The fact that Daddy gets home at 5 o’clock is not needed, or *bullshit*. Get rid of the *bullshit* and the problem gets easy.”

Way back then, for a teacher to say “bullshit” in a classroom really got our attention. You can also bet we remembered what she said.

One afternoon in that school, all the kids were let out on the playground all at once. Looking up, we saw the biggest machine floating through the air that anyone had ever seen in their life. It was more than 100 times bigger than any airplane and looked like a big, silver, long football with small propellers pushing its lowly through the air. Afterwards, in class, we were told that that was the newest and best way to travel and it was going to replace ocean liners and airplanes. That night, it caught fire and blew up in New Jersey.

From Washington Street School, I went to Forest Junior High School. This was a sign to me that I was growing up. Sixth grade in Washington School to seventh grade in Forest Park Junior High was only one grade, but it was the difference between a little kid’s school and a big kid’s school if you were going there. It meant knickers in winter and long pants in early fall and late spring instead of knickers and shorts. It meant going to different classrooms and teachers instead of only one teacher and one classroom. Boy, did we feel grown up in the 7th grade.

One day in a reading class, we were all supposed to read out loud when called upon, from the same book of dumb poetry. At least it was dumb to me at the time. The boys would sit in the back of the class, hide behind our books, and make faces at each other. When my turn came to read, I thought I was being funny with my reading in a singsong voice with a lot of la-de-dah’s. Some of my friends laughed, but not very loudly. Some of them snickered, but most of the class just looked at me with a closed mouth, and eyes that said, “Now you’re going to get it.”

At that moment, the bell rang. Saved by the bell? No, in those days, you did not leave the class until you were dismissed by the teacher. One second… two seconds… three seconds passed, all in dead silence. Then the teacher said, “Karl, I want to see you after school. Class dismissed.”

All the rest of that day, the kids who had been in that class reminded me of what I already knew. I was in big trouble. After school, I reported to the reading teacher. She said, “Sit down”, and then continued to grade papers for what seemed like two hours while I sat still. She then looked up at me and said, “You don’t like reading poetry, Karl, do you?” I nodded in agreement. She continued, “All right. You don’t *have* to read poetry. Some day, I hope you will want to. In the mean time, we have six weeks of school, and you *will* read three books, and write a two-page book report on each one. The books may be chosen from any one on this list. The first report is *going* to be on my desk one week from Friday. That is all, Karl.”

I picked up the list and left very quietly. Three books. Ugh! I hate reading. I’ll run away. She’ll never see me again, then she’ll be sorry. Even though I was a big kid in the seventh grade, I didn’t always think past the then-and-there moment. Looking at the list, with a heavy heard, I headed for the library.

Today, I love reading. The first book I chose from that list was *Sea Wolf* by Jack London. Students the world over suffer because they don’t make teachers like that anymore.

In one of my classes, Janice, a girl I liked, sat behind me. She was always getting me in trouble. Sometimes she would pull my hair, or poke me. When I turned around to see what she wanted, she would just shake her head, and the teacher only saw me turned around and talking. After several times like this, I thought of how to get even. One day, out of the clear blue quiet of a studious class, I grabbed a heavy geography book, turned around to Janie with this book high over my head and said out loud, “Damn you!” I then turned back toward the front of the class, exclaiming, “Oh, forget it,” and dropped this heavy book on my desk and folded my arms. Silence reigned supreme.

Then, in a quiet voice the teacher said, “Janice, bring your things up here in the front row and Barbara, you take Janice’s desk.

Revenge is bittersweet. True, I didn’t do anything to her, but I did get her in trouble. The enjoyment I got from being so sneaky smart didn’t last nearly as long as I thought it would. And the fact that Janice would no longer talk to me in the hallways lasted a long time.

There were a lot of things I looked forward to in growing up. One of those things was advancing from Elementary School to Junior High School. Another was when I stopped wearing short pants in early fall and late spring, and started wearing long pants. Another big milestone was when I became as tall as my mother, and then as tall as my father. After that, I couldn’t wait until I got to be bigger than my Uncle Larry, the tallest of the uncles. Another sign of growing up was to be allowed to play cards with my grandfather and uncles. That happened only once, just before we moved away. Getting my first job, a caddie at a golf course, and making money made me feel very BIG TIME. In those days, they didn’t have golf carts, so everybody walked. But if you were rich, you paid to have someone carry your golf bag for you. That’s where caddies came in. We carried those big heavy bags, handed the clubs to the player, wiped off the clubs and put them back in the bag, and walked up to his ball quickly and waited for his leisurely stroll. For four and a half to five hours in the hot sun, we got 70 cents plus possibly a 20 or 25-cent tip. But in those days, big candy bars only cost a nickel, so we thought we were doing great.

Summers were a lot of fun, but winters could be fun, too. Winter meant it got dark very early. We would play cops-and-robbers or hide-and-seek after school when it was getting dark just before supper. It meant snowball wars while walking home from school. It meant sleds, toboggans and skis. One house we lived in had a small hill behind it. It wasn’t very long but it was close by and you didn’t have to go very far to slide down, then walk back up, or go home when you were cold and wet. From the back porch, we ran about 10 feet with the sled in our hands, then threw the sled down and flopped upon it. Coming back up sometimes, we would try to jump on the kids coming down and knock them off of their sleds. If we were successful, we would pus their face in the snow. If not, we would be thrown off their back and get a collar full of snow ourselves. Naturally, people coming down the hill would steer away from those walking up, so it became a big game. One time, I knocked someone off their sled and instead of that person landing face down in the snow, they landed face up and it was a girl… Marilyn Shelton. So, I kissed her. That was my first kiss. I was about 13-years-old.

Holidays were always a lot of fun, especially when we would go to my grandmother’s house along with all the aunts, uncles, and cousins. Being the oldest cousin, I wasn’t always the ringleader, because I had an uncle just a couple of years older than me, but I was always in on whatever we did. Grandma and Grandpa had a big field next to their house, which made a great place to play softball. Some of us older kids, some of the aunts and all of the uncles played. Aunt Nora, married to my Uncle Mike, always played but was never any good. I didn’t care, and always liked to be on her team. She was a doll and I had a crush on her. Every young boy should have an ideal to look up to, and she was mine at that time in my life. For a long time, I used her as standard for girlfriends.

Another thing we did at these holiday family gatherings, was picture taking. For very large groups, they used a special camera. It did not have a wide-angle lens, but you could point the camera at the left side of the group of people, and slowly pan the camera from left to right. So, naturally, us kids always got on the very left end of the group of people and then ran over to the right side of the group of people before the camera stopped taking the picture. That way, we were in the picture twice.

How did we learn about things like this? I’ll tell you. There were always kids around, lots of us. We watched those a little older than us, and tried to do the same. In the same way, kids a little younger watched us.

We never left Grandpa Metra’s house to come home until night time and most of the time we kids would fall asleep on the back of the car. This is how it would happen: my youngest brother and little sister would really fall asleep and my next oldest brother, Les, and I would get very quiet and sit still so that Mom and Dad thought we were asleep. About three miles from our house, across the street from the Junior High School, was the best double dip ice cream parlor, and my dad loved ice cream. Now, Dad could afford the five-cent cones for Mom and himself, but could not afford 30 cents for the whole family. This was still during the Depression. Being sure all of us kids were asleep, he would quietly coast to a stop by this ice cream parlor, quietly opened the car door, where Les and I would spring awake and make known our favorite flavor.

As I said, the ice cream parlor was just across the street from the Junior High School. By the time I got to that school, Mom could afford to give me 4 cents a day for milk to go with my lunch. Well, five days a week at 4 cents a day was 20 cents, and four double dip cones at 5 cents each was 20 cents. I got my milk through ice cream. I wasn’t stupid. I just had to do without my milk one day a week.

My other Grandparents lived far away, in another state, and it would take all day to drive there. We didn’t see them very often. We would drive up about half way, while they came the other half way, and we all had a picnic, then returned home. Dad’s driving on a long trip kept him busy, but what do kids do on a long trip? One time, I remember, we brought some toy guns, and shot every car, house, barn, cow, horse, or tree. Ordinarily, my dad would be in a good mood on those trips because wee were going to see his folks. But on this trip, with my place in the car just behind his, and my “BANG! BANG! BANG!” at every tree, car, truck, or building, it took all of one and a half hours before he lost his temper – and he really lost it. I was made to sit on the other side of the car, sit down, sit still, and be quiet. What a dull trip that was.

Another game we would play while on a trip was called, “I Get That”. Whoever saw a house, store, truck, bridge, or whatever first, would say, “I get that car,” etc. Sometimes, it was “I get all the cows in that field.” We never tired of that game.

One year, I got to spend two weeks with my grandmother all by myself, no siblings. In the house, lived my grandmother, grandfather, a single aunt and a single uncle. Boy, was I spoiled. But I didn’t think so, then. I was just having a good time with ice cream cones two or three times a day, pocket change, trips to the park, etc. In the evening, my aunt taught me how to play my first card game.

One evening, my grandmother came into the bedroom and said that we were going out for pie and coffee. I looked at her with very wide eyes. She had her nightgown on and my aunt and I were in bed, but we got up, put a sweater or coat over our pajamas and got into the car and went out to a restaurant for dessert. That was my grandmother, an impulsive spirit. A lot of fun.

Across the street from one of the houses in which we lived, lived my best friend, Jeff Tabor. We did a lot of things together, and talked a lot. We even had our own private telephones. This was made with two tin cans and a string. It works! You take two tin cans, wash them and take off the paper wrapper. Then, poke a small hole in the bottom of each can. Pass a string through this hole and tie a knot so it can’t be pulled out. Now, stretch the string tight and either use the tin can as a mouthpiece, or as the ear phone. So long as the string is tight, you can hear each other. We had one tin can in my room and he had the other in his room across the street. Of course, we had to yell back and forth to get the other one to pick up his private phone, but we had a lot of fun using it.

The Tabor’s had a garage with a loft in it on the back of their property. On the property just behind them, the people had a big apple tree with the best green apples. Green apples need salt, so every once in a while, when we felt like eating green apples, Jeff would go into his kitchen and I would go into my kitchen and get saltshakers. Then, we climbed up into the garage loft, and through a back door, reached out and grabbed all the green apples we thought we could eat. We never were able to eat as many as we thought we could eat, so we used the extra apples in the summer the same way we used snowballs in the winter.

After living in this house for a while, I was sent to my room right after supper one early summer evening. I remember feeling it wasn’t fair. I don’t even remember what the problem had been, but to my room I went, sulking all the way. In this particular house, we lived upstairs on the second floor. My brother Les and I slept in a back corner room with a polished linoleum floor, but a prison is still a prison, especially when it is still very light outside and all your friends are outside calling, “Karl, Les, come on out.”

Whether it was a book I read or a movie I saw that gave me the idea, I’m not sure, but I was going to escape. Stripping the bed, I tied the sheets and cover into a long rope. I tied one end onto the bed and threw the rest out the window. To the encouraging cries of support from the gang outside, I went out the window. Part way down this emergency rope, the bed started to slide across the polished floor. I couldn’t see what was happening, all I knew was my rope was slipping and I still had a long way down to the ground. Holding tight, I started to yell for help. All was quiet. Looking down, I saw, not the kids in the gang, but my father, looking up at me with a look of impatience. Looking up, I saw my mother, framed in the open window. What’s the expression, “Caught between a hammer and an anvil”?

I still don’t remember why I was sent to my room in the first place, but I know why I spent a whole week confined to my room after the evening of my great escape.

Sometime in my twelfth year, I joined the Boy Scouts. There were eight of us boys in the Horse Patrol, and we met every week. Once a month, we had a troop meeting in the church hall. It was our patrol that did most of the scouting. We went on hikes, campouts, and passed tests. I remember the time I passed my cooking test. Our patrol leader said that he didn’t want just hot dogs, but I was to *really* cook, instead. At the time, I was the youngest scout in our patrol, and the last to pass my cooking test. I brought two pork chops from home and a couple of potatoes. While I was cooking the chops, I washed my potatoes and sliced them thin. While I was busy doing this, the rest of the scouts all stood around (unnoticed by me), and sharpened some sticks. When the potatoes were sliced, I put them in the hot pork grease and started to finish cooking the chops. While the potatoes were browning, the rest of the patrol started spearing my potatoes with their pointed sticks, claiming that they had to make sure I was really passing my cooking test. Then, when they finished all of my potatoes, they speared my two chops, cut them into bite-sized pieces and the seven of them sampled what was left of my lunch. I didn’t get one bit, but they did say that I passed the 2nd class cooking. Big deal.

It was in scouting that I learned how to go on a Snipe Hunt, and joined the ‘Royal Order of Siam’.

It was on my first overnight camping trip they took me out for a Snipe Hunt. After dark, we all went out into the woods. I was to be the catcher, and the others, the chasers. All I had to do was to be very still and hold this burlap sack open along this path. All seven of them would go out and chase a snipe down the path and into the open sack I was quietly holding. After about an hour, I got cold, tired and a little bit scared out there by myself, so I went back to camp. The others didn’t go chase any snipes, they were already back at camp and had been since they left me holding the bag.

Those of us wanting to be initiated into the ‘Royal Order of Siam’ had to line up in a row facing east. Then, we had to kneel down, bend at the waist with our arms outstretched and our faces down while chanting, “*Ohwa-Taoo-Saim”* over and over, faster and faster, until we discovered the ancient truths of the Far East.

My mother was the one who raised us, mostly because my dad worked full time. There were times, though, when he did a lot for my upbringing. My dad loved baseball, and showed me how to love the game by taking me to the game on Sunday afternoons and just being with me. He taught me how to play checkers, and in time, chess. He taught me how to play many card games, games we continued to play up until the year he died. Together, we bought my bike. In time, he taught me how to drive, how to change a flat tire on a car, and because I was the oldest and the biggest of the kids, he depended on me to do more grown-up jobs.

We didn’t go to Catholic schools since my folks didn’t have the tuition money, but we all went to religious classes on Saturday mornings. When I was seven, I made my First Communion, and had to wait until just before my 14th birthday to be confirmed. By then, I was feeling too big for my own good, and played hooky more Saturday classes than I attended. About two months before I was supposed to be confirmed, my attendance record caught up with me by way of a note mailed to my folks from the good sisters and an explanation of why I would not be confirmed. That was the end of my hooky playing. What I was supposed to learn in three years of Saturday classes, I learned in two months. The last day of class was a test. TEST? They didn’t say anything about a test. A priest went into the cloakroom and, one by one, he asked each kid a couple of questions out of the book. If you answered correctly, you had it made, if not, you went back into the classroom for a second chance. One by one, they were called into the cloakroom, all except me. He wasn’t going to call me. What was I going to tell my mother? What was she going to tell my father? The priest went back over the kids who had not passed and called them back into the room. Again, they were asked two or three questions each. Then, when everyone else had left, the priest called me into the test chamber. He asked me one question, then another, a third, a fourth… eight questions in all! By the grace of God, prayers and my mother’s tireless tutoring, I answered each question correctly. I must have sweated off fifteen pounds, but I passed!

Because I had played around when I should have been in school, I nearly lost out on something very important to me and to my mother and father, the people who meant the most to me. Never mind growing taller, or wearing long pants, I grew up a lot that Saturday morning.

On June 16th, 1942, I was confirmed. On the 24th, I turned 14 years old, and the next day, we moved to New York City.

I left Springfield, left open fields, left Junior High School and started high school.

I grew up.