

Early School Years at Gasport Elementary and Barker Central

While looking through a couple of old Roy-Hart yearbooks, I was surprised to see that no less than eight members of the Barker Class of 1983 started their school days at either Middleport or Gasport grade schools, and a couple more who at least showed up at Barker for a few years before moving on again. I was one of those who migrated over to Barker from Gasport Elementary after 1st Grade.

There is a photo of me standing at the end of the driveway of our house on Slayton Settlement Road, waiting for the school bus on my first day of Kindergarten in September 1970. My hair is slicked back, I'm holding a brand new lunch box, and I seem pretty excited. My bus driver was a kindly old gentleman who called me Smiley.

That first year of school must have been uneventful, as I remember little of it, with one terrifying exception: I was in the hallway outside my classroom when a commotion suddenly broke out further up the hall. An older boy came running headlong towards the exit, followed closely by a teacher shouting, "Stop him! Stop him!" I have no memory of how it ended, and I probably never learned what it was all about, but it frightened me terribly.

Other than that incident, only brief glimpses of Kindergarten remain: sitting in a circle on the floor passing round a Viewmaster; the scratchy army blankets we hauled out of a closet for nap time; the large presence and funny smell of our teacher Mrs Simpson. According to my report card, I was absent a whopping 22 days that year. A bout of chicken pox accounts for some of the time, and I will guess chronic anxiety and stomach ache can answer for the rest.

Moving up to 1st Grade, I found that I was classmates with a group of cheerfully homicidal boys devoted to the art of grade school warfare. They decided that the boys in the other classrooms were their sworn enemies; venturing out to the playground together was an excuse for each class to declare all out war upon the other.

The opposing armies faced each other among the swings and teeter-totters, the swaggering captains ordered their men forward, and fierce battles were pitched, small limbs flailing and grappling, dust flying. Never have I witnessed such wholesale carnage as I did upon those sunny school grounds. For a bunch of 6 year old boys they displayed a savage ferocity matched only, I suppose, by the infamous Huns and Norsemen of old. With gleeful abandon they hammered the stuffing out of each other.

I was not fond of rough and tumble playing, and have never felt the primal boyish need to prove how tough I was in physical battle. I had no interest in fighting anybody. Therefore I was not a soldier but a spectator at these mighty conflicts. I suppose I was rooting for my classroom buddies, but in the whirl and confusion of the melee it was hard to tell which side was winning, if any. I remember it only as a free-for-all of shrill yells and scuffling bodies. Heaven knows what the girls thought of it all.

I ventured too close to the action once and was hit by friendly fire: a comrade, swinging back his arm preparatory to delivering a fearsome blow in the general direction of his enemy, accidentally smacked me in the nose. But he was a good man, and had officer material in him, for he apologized with great commiseration and personally directed me to a safer vantage point before charging back into the fray.

I don't know how long the playground wars were waged, but I suspect only a day or two. I can't imagine the

teachers just stood by and allowed their young charges to inflict mass mayhem upon each other for very long. One day a phalanx of grim-faced teachers, led by the formidable Mrs Bentley, swept across the field of contest, bent upon restoring peace and discipline.

Heads were knuckle-rapped, bottoms were swatted, and the disheveled armies were scattered to the four corners of the school yard. A permanent cessation of hostilities was declared, and the diminutive captains of war found themselves suffering the humiliation of being hauled off the field of glory and sentenced to stand at attention, silent and still, until they learned to behave themselves.

I sidled in close to gaze in awe upon one of these battle-proven heroes, only to be sent scurrying by a stern: "Stay away from him!" Later, in the lunch room, it was discovered that he had earned his red badge of courage and was bearing it with admirable stoicism. The exchange of words was brief:

"Hey, your nose is bleeding."

"No, it isn't."

"Is too."

"Is not. Don't care anyways."

In the summer of 1972 my parents bought a lot on West Somerset Road in Appleton and built a new house. Since the house wasn't quite ready by the time the school year started, we stayed with my grandparents in Ransomville for a few weeks, and were driven over to West Somerset Road to catch the school bus with the Swan kids, our new neighbors. Going to a new school was an experience fraught with anxiety. I can remember at least one September morning when I waited patiently until the bus stopped, and then turned and ran back into the house, a sudden attack of nerves getting the better of me.

I rode Bus #7, driven in those early years by Mrs Andrews and later by Mrs Becker. I did not like grouchy old Mrs Andrews. She made me sit in the very front seat, the seat of shame, for some minor infraction or other, and once pulled my hair...hard. I suppose nowadays she'd be arrested for that, but back then such outrages were expected and endured by us kids as typical behavior handed down from the tyrannical grown-up world.

Mrs Andrews balanced her sour demeanor with an almost malevolent impatience. She would bring the bus to a lurching halt in front of a house; and if the student wasn't already waiting by the side of the road, she'd toot the horn once and immediately close the door and drive on. More than once I found myself galloping across our front yard and leaping the ditch, lunch box swinging, terrified both of missing the bus and of facing the wrath of Mrs Andrews, who would be visibly steaming with anger at being held up.

One morning a boy on the Lake Road route wasn't quick enough out his front door. The bus pulled away, gears grinding and engine roaring, with the family dog charging along beside it on the shoulder of the road. The poor boy chased frantically after the bus, and us kids started yelling to Mrs Andrews: "He's coming! He's running after us!" Her only answer was a petulant "I don't *care*," as she sent the transmission crashing into yet another gear. The hapless lad was left standing in the road, sniffing in a cloud of exhaust. Only later did it suddenly dawn on us that she thought we were talking about the dog.

There was a stretch of houses along Lake Road that disappeared by the end of the 1970's, the land bought for the Somerset power plant and the houses moved or torn down. Eventually all that remained were crumbling foundation stones hidden among rank weeds and overgrown lilac bushes. I still remember the kids who once lived in those houses and boarded Bus #7: the cute Ackles girls, the street-tough Silversmith kids, the Hagar sisters, and the prim and pretty Whearty girl whom Dave A. and I liked to sit behind and annoy by making mooing noises at her.

Thinking of this group of kids from yesteryear brings to mind an encounter with the younger Hagar girl. I had gone to the drive-in with my parents, and ventured forth to play on the playground before the movie started. I was peacefully occupying myself on the swingset when, out of nowhere, Karen suddenly appeared. "Raymond!" she sneered and plopped herself down in the swing right next to mine. The next few minutes are unfortunately a blur in my memory. Whether she claimed the playground for her own private use and kicked me out, or whether I just thought she was too intimidating a presence for comfort and fled, I can't say; but I somehow ended up back at my parents' car and Karen had free run of the playground.

Only now, as I write these words some 40 plus years later, does the thought occur to me that maybe Karen just wanted someone to play with. Maybe she was attempting a friendly overture and I missed it, or rejected it. A sad image rises before me: a little girl playing alone in the gathering dusk, looking even smaller with the big silver screen looming behind her. I remember a day back on the bus route when her sister and some of the other older kids teased her, and went too far with it; I felt sorry for her then.

It would haunt me to know I may have also hurt her feelings all those years ago. If anybody's feelings must be hurt, I prefer they be mine, so I think I will stick to the original and more likely scenario: that Karen kicked me off the swingset, chased me out of the playground, and possibly even threw popcorn at me. Strange as it sounds, not only would that make more sense, but it is also a more comforting memory to live with.

Meanwhile, back at the start of the '72-'73 school year, I was ushered into Miss Arlington's 2nd Grade room, and got a first look at my new classmates. They were a rather rag-tag looking crew, but probably no worse than the old gang back at Gasport Elementary. I'm sure I was extremely shy and silent those first few weeks. I probably also missed my 1st Grade pals Andy and Kenny, but I think I settled into the new class without too much awkwardness or discord.

I don't know that the kids I met that first year at Barker stood out to me in any notably weird or entertaining way, but some early impressions remain in my memory. There was a girl who was afraid of Santa Claus, and a talented boy who could sit on a thumb tack without apparent injury. And there was thoughtful Ralph, who took the trouble to thoroughly clean and wash my thermos at the classroom sink, after I had dropped it and smashed the inner glass. I'm not sure why he did this, because we just ended up throwing the thermos away, but it was thoughtful. There was comical Alfonso, who insisted on being called Bobo. He rode the school bus with me, and I can still recite a little ditty he once told me:

"Are you coming to my party?
We're gonna have cake and pie and a sock in the eye
Tooty and Fruity and a kick in the booty."

And there was rambunctious Bob, who drew me into his mischievous world that year. Pretty Ann lived in a house I thought unusual: the living quarters were on the second floor, with the garage directly below. Good natured Dan was clumsy. Tiny Tina was tiny. Stoutish Tom seemed a bit snooty. I remember him scornfully correcting a classmate's innocent mispronunciation of the word "manure." I might have felt a touch of self-satisfaction hearing that; as a country boy I was well-versed in the world of cows and manure. I even held the honor of being banished from a dairy farm back in the old neighborhood on Slayton Settlement Road for dropping hay on the farmer's head through a trap door in his barn.

This new group of Barker boys seemed perhaps a bit less barbaric than the old bloodthirsty bunch at Gasport. There were no sprawling playground wars that I knew of, no brawls or bloody noses; just an occasional minor skirmish over possession of the seat of honor at the top of the monkey bars. But they were lively enough, and

their unorganized playground games were rowdy, exhausting affairs. I sometimes took part in these exuberant skylarks, as long as they didn't get too aggressive or devolve into rough play-fighting. In accordance with my quiet, bookish nature, I felt more at home among the cloistered library shelves than upon the sporting field; nevertheless I still heard and answered often enough the primal call to run and yell and throw things.

I remember Miss Arlington as a sweet and smiling young lady, with a sing-songy "And who would like to be my little helper today?" sort of voice. I'm sure she was perfectly adept in dealing with the young and fractious on a small scale, but I often wondered if she could have quelled any outbreaks of grade school mayhem like those I had witnessed back at Gasport Elementary. Miss Arlington was no iron-willed disciplinarian like Mrs Bentley. She was as gentle and timid as a deer. One time I was lounging against a pile of winter coats and straightened up suddenly. Poor Miss Arlington, standing nearby, jumped a mile and exclaimed, "My goodness! I didn't see you there!"

I have a clear memory of her as she was on another occasion, standing at the head of the class, still smiling, but a bit nonplussed and slightly shocked by some earthy remark carelessly uttered by one of her more worldly-wise charges. She seemed too nice to be daily immersed in the coarse and grubby world of school children. But I now know that just a few years later, after Miss Arlington married and became Mrs Snyder, she moved up to teach the notoriously hard-bitten 4th Graders. She must have been tougher than she appeared, that warm and friendly gaze capable of taking on a steely glint when required.

"I didn't see you there" could be an accurate epithet of my school life. I was an observer more than a participant, quietly watching the dramas unfold from an unobtrusive point on the sidelines. My rare appearances in the spotlight were accidental and unwelcome, like the time I somehow got my hand caught in the bleachers of the old gym and the entire class had to gather round for a good look before freeing me. A minor event in the annals of public school life, but traumatic enough for a confirmed wallflower.

Anxiety and its attendant stomach-ache dogged me throughout my school years. I didn't realise the connection between the two at the time, or that my frequent bouts of queasiness always seemed to coincide with some dreaded school activity: typically an exam or oral report of some kind, anything that taxed my mental powers or made me the center of attention. I only understood that the best way to deal with these unwanted events was to avoid them altogether; and a touch of upset stomach on the day seemed like a gracious act of providence to me. All I needed was parental permission to stay home.

This meant remaining under the covers on school mornings until my non-appearance at the breakfast table brought forth inquiries, then going into my "feeling bad and can't possibly go to school" routine. Some skill was required to convince the Powers That Be that my illness was authentic; as indeed it was to a certain degree. But I had shammed sickness once too often in the past, and any new declaration was received with deep suspicion, and subjected to close interrogation. Well-rehearsed answers in a feeble voice, coupled with a faint sheen of sweat on the brow, the genuine result of nervousness, usually satisfied the demands of skepticism and granted a leave of absence.

Once successful in persuading the parental authorities that I really was sick, I could then enjoy a peaceful if monotonous morning in bed. I would listen through my door to the soap operas and telephone gossip; then venture forth at noon, wrapped in a blanket, offering the opinion that I was feeling a little better and could probably keep down a grilled cheese sandwich. This would be followed by an hour or two watching some mystifying children's shows on French-Canadian TV.

I generally waited until mid-afternoon before deeming it safe enough to effect a full recovery and the freedom it offered. In poor weather I turned to my Matchbox cars and army men and conducted thrilling races and

desperate battles; on sunny days it was outdoors to the bicycle. Thinking myself in the clear, all illness forgotten, I was soon a pedaling madman, racing wildly round the backyard, exulting in my miraculous return to health with wheelies and motorcycle noises.

But often my carefree gambols would be brought to a screeching halt by a slammed porch door and the Voice of Authority booming out across the yard: “What on earth do you think you’re doing? Get off that bicycle! If you’re too sick for school you’re too sick to play outside. Now you march yourself right back into this house and straight to your room and you stay there until I say you can get up.”

On the mornings when I failed to overcome the parental front and was sent trudging to school, a last minute reprieve might still be gained by a stealthy visit to the nurse’s office. An hour of quiet repose among the thermometers and cotton swabs would be just the thing to ease the butterflies of apprehension in my stomach. But the nurse was wise in the ways of children and their many illnesses, and she could usually see through to the truth of the matter. Our conversations generally went something like this:

Me: “I don’t feel good. My stomach hurts.”

Nurse: “Now Raymond, we’ve been through this before, haven’t we? Do you have a Math test today?”

Me: “Yes.”

Nurse: “Go to class.”

And so I went, trailing dejectedly down the hall to whatever doom awaited me.

Outside of school, a large part of a country boy’s life is spent in the search for and accumulation of treasure. I thoroughly explored all of the old junk piles in the neighborhood, and carted home a goodly collection of rubbish: old bottles, broken toys, chrome bits off abandoned cars, worn-out farm tools. I even devoted two afternoons to laboriously rolling a large metal Esso gasoline sign home across the cornfields. I don’t know why; it only languished for years in a corner of the back yard until my father finally incorporated it into one of his handyman projects.

Another of these dubious treasures was a small black ball. It was really just the battered inner core of a ball; the outer cover having long since vanished. It was made of hard black rubber, and looked like a dog had spent a long summer day chewing on it. I don’t know where it originally came from, but it made its way to school and was our most prized plaything for a few days. We tossed it back and forth, squabbled over it, hit each other with it, and bounced it endlessly off the school wall.

Inevitably the ball got bounced too high and disappeared onto the roof. A cry of dismay went up and nearby teachers were appealed to. After much pleading a rescue party in the shape of a custodian was summoned and sent aloft. Us boys waited anxiously down below. A few minutes later the tall figure appeared at the edge of the roof, and an incredulous voice called down to us:

“Is *this* it?”

“YEAH!”

“You gotta be kidding me.”

Then there was the time someone brought in a homemade wooden toy pistol. It was a marvel, coveted by all. During the course of the morning some wheeling and dealing must have been done, a trading of trinkets took place, and the pistol changed ownership. Boys being what they are, the original owner soon changed his mind and wanted his gun back. The other party demurred. Uncivil words were exchanged, and within seconds an almighty battle of vocal chords had erupted. Volleys of oaths and insults were lofted back and forth; claims of

ownership and threats of retribution filled the air.

The rest of us boys followed the debate closely, joining in as a sort of Greek chorus, taking both sides at once and expressing our interest with a string of enthusiastic, if uneloquent, comments. "You're a big fat liar" was one of them I recall. So engrossed were we that none of us noticed when the rest of the class became ominously quiet. Doom was at hand. The dispute had reached a fever pitch and the main adversaries were on the verge of physical combat; when a sudden crash of thunder split the air, a bolt of lightning flashed across the room, and the wrath of Miss Stein descended upon us.

A word about Miss Stein. She was my 3rd Grade teacher, one of three elementary teachers whose names struck fear in the hearts of all prospective students; the other two being Mr Kennedy and Mr Bertha. We had heard the tales of horror handed down from older kids, and lived in dread of landing in one of the classrooms of this Terrible Trio. Every August, when the new schedules were mailed out, you could hear the anguished howls echoing across the countryside.

"Who do I got this year? Don't let it be Miss Stein! Please don't let it be Miss Stein!"

"Your homeroom teacher? Let's see...here it is. You have Miss Stein."

"NOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!"

I never encountered Mr Kennedy, and Mr Bertha turned out to be a big softie...if you stayed on his good side. Admittedly his good side was sometimes difficult to find. But I can't say whether Miss Stein lived up to her reputation as a tyrant or not. To be honest I have no memory of her beyond this one episode. For all I know she may have been the nicest teacher in the school. That we called her Miss Frankenstein behind her back was no reflection of her character; for what schoolboy could resist the temptation offered by the name Stein? We would have given our own dear grandmothers that nickname if presented with the opportunity.

The quality of Miss Stein's voice when raised in fury has also been the matter of debate. Those who survived the terrors of her class, and gathered in after years to recount them in hushed whispers, differed in opinion: some said it roared like some monstrous beast, while others likened it to the wild shrieking of a whirlwind. I don't remember myself; I know only that it was highly effective on this occasion. When she burst in upon our little diversion, voicing her disapproval, the entire class, even the blameless girls, cowered like rabbits.

Miss Stein cleared a path down the aisle, breathing flames and tossing aside chairs and students alike; and bearing, I thought, a remarkable resemblance to Godzilla stomping through Tokyo. With no weapons other than her voice and formidable presence she effortlessly she broke up the battle, reducing the combatants to mere quivering blobs of groveling remorse and scattering the rest of us like leaves in the wind. The object of dispute itself, the little wooden gun, was confiscated, snatched away in an instant, never to be seen again by mortal eyes.

Eventually the disciplinary bomb blasts died down and the smoke began to clear. Miss Stein swept the room once more with her death-ray eyes, barked a few final words of command, and left us all trembling in the stunned silence that follows a classroom reprimand.

I, sitting up front and being a fool, couldn't resist turning and gawking at the chastised parties, whether in sympathy or smug satisfaction I don't recall. Suddenly a strong hand clamped my head in its vise-like grip, and I found myself swiveled inexorably around in my chair, with the words "And YOU mind your own business and keep your eyes forward!" ringing in my ears.

I kept my eyes forward, but I burned with the injustice of it all. What was she picking on me for? I didn't do

anything. I wasn't fighting over the gun. I didn't even want the stupid thing. Okay, maybe I did, but so what? I didn't do anything. I was just sitting there. Why was she yelling at me? All I did was look around. Jeez, I can't even look around the room? I sat there glowering and sullen, determined to despise her for the rest of the year.

But no boy can wallow in indignation or hold a grudge for very long. For one thing it requires too much effort; and every boy has a built-in aversion to work that doesn't involve building tree houses or couch-cushion fortresses. For another thing, his attention span is too short. Within a few minutes other items of interest swim into view and dispel any lingering clouds of resentment. A buzzing housefly landing on his desk, the drone of a lawn mower out the window, a tempting pigtail hanging over the chair in front of him...

In this case, a furtive glance at the clock instantly erased all grievances from my head. It was almost lunch time! Soon the cafetorium would be filled with the raucous cacophony of kids yelling and laughing and chattering and stuffing themselves with a wild assortment of junk food.

This was one facet of school life in which I was no diffident observer. Here I was bold and forthright, a man of action, with no hesitation about taking a lead role in the general stampede lunchwards. I knew there was a peanut butter and jelly sandwich waiting for me today. And better than that, I had enough change in my pocket for a Nutty Buddy! Maybe even enough to go halves with my new pal Thane on a box of Fiddle-Faddle!

Everything else was forgotten. I readied myself and eyed the clock.