

# Memories Of Appleton

## Part Two

### ~~The Hapless Boy~~

Like most boys I spent a portion of my formative years playing with fire. Indeed, I probably got an earlier start than some. When I was about 5 years old I swiped my father's cigarette lighter, crawled beneath a bed and set the mattress ablaze.

A few years later, older but not appreciably wiser, I filled a coffee can with gasoline, tossed a match into it, and gave it a hearty kick across the back yard. The almighty ball of flame that erupted in my face sent me reeling and scrambling for cover; and the big patch of scorched grass informed my parents exactly what nonsense I had been up to.

And then there was the time a cousin and I touched off a hedgerow blaze that not only engulfed our makeshift clubhouse, quickly reducing it to charred ruin, but threatened to sweep across an entire field of ripe wheat. I shall never forget the terror of that day as we frantically battled the fire, beating at it with planks of wood until our hands were raw and blistered. Neither shall I forget the tremendous relief we felt when we realised that our parents, engrossed in a card game inside our grandparent's house, hadn't even noticed the billows of smoke pouring across the field.

But I'm getting away from my story. I use the subject of fire merely to introduce an Appleton boy I knew for a few years in the 1970s. I don't think I've ever met anyone more prone to mishaps than this lad. His misadventures are too good not to tell, but it is not my intention to ridicule a boyhood friend; so for the sake of this story we shall refer to him only as the Hapless Boy.

One summer day, early in our acquaintance, we smuggled a lighter and a can of engine starter fluid out to the woods across the road from my house. I carried the lighter, and the Boy had the can of fluid tucked into his jeans under his shirt.

I'm not sure what our exact plan was going to be; probably nothing more elaborate than lighting up the starter fluid and seeing what happened. The Hapless Boy held the container ready and hit the spray button as I applied the flame. With a big WOOSH! a jet of fire leaped from the bottle.

So far so good. But at some point on our journey out to the woods the starter fluid must have leaked, because the Boy's trousers also burst into flames.

He gave a yell of terror, flung the flaming can away from him, and went leaping through the trees, patting desperately at his clothes. Nightmarish visions of a well-cooked Boy flooded my brain; but some of the lessons taught to us during Fire Prevention Week at school must have filtered through my panicked thoughts. I ran after the Boy and shouted:

“Stop, drop and roll! Stop, drop and roll!”

I think the idea must have entered the Boy's mind at that same moment, for he immediately threw himself down and began thrashing about wildly.

And by golly it worked! The flames were instantly smothered, with no harm done to boy or clothing. I quickly stamped out the small leaf fire that had sprung up where the container of starter fluid had been tossed. After swearing suitable vows of secrecy to each other, we went our separate ways back home.

The following winter we were testing the ice on a local farm pond. An old wagon frame jugged out over the edge of the pond and made a convenient stepping-off platform. The Boy went first and cautiously inched his way out into the middle of the pond. I was just in the act of stepping off the wagon frame, when the ice suddenly gave way with a sickening crack, and the Hapless Boy went through.

The water was only waist deep, but everything we had ever read in Boy's Life magazine about hypothermia and frostbite, being trapped under ice, and all the various ways a person can freeze to death, came rushing into our minds. The Boy floundered back to shore, wet and cold and terrified, and set off at a run for home.

His house was just a hundred yards away across a cornfield, so the chances of him actually freezing to death were pretty slim. I realised this, and as I watched the Boy sloshing through the corn stubble, his wet snowpants sagging around his knees, I couldn't resist calling after him:

“Stop, drop and roll! Stop, drop and roll!”

It was summer time again, and the Hapless Boy and I were on one of our fishing expeditions to Keg Creek on Lake Road. In those days the creek was a popular fishing spot even in the dry summer months, and a well-worn path ran along the creek bank towards Lake Ontario.

We could ride our bikes along this path to where a plank and cable bridge had been built across the creek. The bridge didn't lead anywhere and didn't seem to serve any purpose, but it gave us a good spot to cast our lines from. I once saw a huge Northern Pike glide beneath the bridge, and spent a fruitless hour trying to entice him with a series of lures before he shot away downstream with a mighty surge of power.

On this occasion we were pedaling back towards Lake Road, trying to steer with one hand and balance a fishing pole with the other. I was in the lead, and had just passed a point where the bank rose several feet above the level of the creek.

Suddenly I heard a wavering cry behind me, a crackling of twigs and leaves, and a tremendous SPLASH! in the water below. I skidded to a halt and looked back. The Hapless Boy was nowhere to be seen. There was just a break in the bushes where his bike had careened through, a few leaves still fluttering down from the branches.

I doubled back and peered through the bushes; and there was the Hapless Boy spluttering in the depths of the creek while a nearby fisherman in hip waders stared at him in amazement. While I waited on the path, somewhat overcome with helpless laughter, the kindly fisherman assisted the waterlogged boy and his bike back onto dry land.

Not everything the Hapless Boy did was a mishap. There was one unforgettable day when his quick wits and lack of Sunday School training did me a distinctly good turn. We were returning home from yet another fishing trip to Keg Creek. On the way we made a detour and stopped to explore a certain building located on a certain piece of property. The door to this building was shut and padlocked.

I honestly don't remember who did the deed, and it may have been a joint effort. We scrounged up a piece of metal to use as a pry bar; and with a brief splintering of wood the padlock was hanging loose, the door swinging open, and we were inside.

But not for long. I had only gone about 15 feet into the building when a shadow passed by outside the window, and my heart gave a great leap of fear. We were caught.

I turned to see the son of the property owner standing in the doorway, inspecting the broken woodwork. He was only a few years older than us, but at that moment he looked big and menacing. The Hapless Boy uttered a startled, “Oh! Hi!”

“Did you do this?”

Well, here it was. My parents often expressed their conviction that I would end up in the hands of the law if I didn’t watch my ways. Now their dire prediction was going to come true.

A list of possible charges paraded through my mind: Trespassing, Breaking and Entering, Unlawful Entry, Vandalism, maybe even Fishing Without a License for good measure. Would they take me away in handcuffs? Would I spend the night in the hoosegow?

I commended my soul to God, and was just opening my mouth to confess all, when the Boy suddenly spoke up; and his words were like golden rays of sunlight bursting over my head:

“We didn’t do that. It was already broken. We were just looking inside.”

This opened up a whole new line of thought. It hadn’t occurred to me that stout denial could be an option. I wasted no time pondering the morality of the thing, but chimed in eagerly:

“Yeah, we found it that way. We didn’t do anything. We were just riding by and the door was already broken. We were just going home from fishing. We were just fishing. You know, at the creek. Fishing. That’s what we were doing.”

I pointed helpfully to where our fishing rods leaned against the outside wall, as if their mere presence proved our saint-like innocence beyond all doubt.

There was a pregnant pause. Would he believe us? Would we have to fight our way out or run for our lives? A brief vision flashed before my eyes of him chasing us round and round the building, accompanied by the sound of Benny Hill’s “Yakety Sax” theme music.

“You two better get out of here.”

I almost fainted with relief. We made a ghastly attempt at nonchalance as we picked up our fishing tackle and bikes, even attempting a friendly wave or two before we rode away. As I pedaled home with trembling limbs and pounding heart, I vowed to myself that I would never again commit such a criminal act . . . at least not in broad daylight in full view of the property owner’s house.

This incident may have been, in my eyes at least, the Hapless Boy’s most helpful deed; but his most memorable moment and greatest triumph was surely the time he ran over his own mother. In the annals of boyish blunders (and goodness knows I committed my share), this one rises to the status of an Historic Event.

It started out innocently enough. We were riding our bikes around the side yard of my house late one summer afternoon. My parents and their friends Bob and Bonnie were in the back yard, sitting in the shade of the garage. The Boy decided it was time to head on home for supper, so he pedaled around the back of the house

and down the driveway. What he didn't see was that, at this same moment, his mother was pulling into our driveway on her own bicycle.

What happened next is etched forever in my memory. For reasons known only to himself, the Hapless Boy wasn't paying attention to where he was going. With eyes focused downward onto his own front tire, a vacant smile on his lips, he pedaled confidently forward on a collision course.

His mother called out a warning, and then another one. She then realised he was lost in his own little world and wasn't going to stop. She tried to get out of the way, but it was too late. With a great clatter of handlebars and bike frames, mother and son went down in a heap.

From my vantage point in the side yard, in line with the house, it was like watching a split-screen video. From the back yard there came an exclamation of voices from the grownups, and Bob leaped to his feet. He stood tense and alert, ready to spring into action if assistance was needed. The other adults were upright in their chairs, watching the drama unfold with keen interest.

Out on the driveway the Hapless Boy lay sprawled among the entangled bicycles, staring upward in utter bewilderment. Over him stood his mother, expressing herself as only a mother pushed beyond the limits of exasperation can.

It was one of the finest bawling-outs I've ever heard. "What kind of witless . . ." and "Of all the stupid . . ." were only two of the colorful phrases that reverberated around the yard that day. Even now, forty years later, whenever I chance to walk down the driveway on a summer's afternoon, I'm almost certain I can still hear echoes of that epic dressing-down lingering in the air.

Though it may seem cruel to do so, we shall leave the Hapless Boy at this point, safely in the grip of an enraged parent. But don't worry about him. He survived this and other mishaps, attained adulthood relatively unscathed; and to the best of my knowledge is now a respectable and upstanding citizen, his hapless days far behind him.

The garage that provided shade for the grownups on that fateful day has an interesting little story of its own. It was given to us by our friend and neighbor George Staples. Out behind his house stood a few sheds and other buildings, including an old one-car garage that apparently wasn't being used for much of anything. One day in 1977 he just casually asked my father: "Do you want a garage?"

It wasn't a question my father was faced with every day, but he handled it well:

"Do I want a *what?* A *garage?* Ah . . . well, sure, I guess so."

So George backed his little yellow loader tractor inside the garage, lifted up both ends on hydraulic forks, and simply drove the entire building down the road to our house. He plopped it down at the back end of our driveway, we painted it white to match the house, and it fit right in.

Of course, it blew over in a wind storm four years later, but it was a nifty garage while it lasted. I don't recall that anybody ever parked a car in it, but us kids had a lot of fun swinging from the rafters.

## ~~Bob & Rusty~~

Bob and Bonnie were old friends of my parents, and we saw quite a lot of them during the 1970s. They had three daughters close in age to my two sisters, so playtime activities tended to be rather girl-centric. Luckily one of the daughters was a bit of a tomboy, with an imagination similar to mine, so I wasn't entirely excluded. I do remember though that I seemed to always end up playing the role of the bad guy in our flights of fancy.

Bob fascinated me. He was small and wiry, but possessed a deep and powerful voice. I liked to sit nearby and listen when he and my father were swapping stories, even though Bob had a habit of looking directly at me with an intensity that made me shrink in my chair with embarrassment.

Bob received a measure of respect and obedience from his children that my own parents could only dream of. When visiting at our house the grownups usually sat around a dining room table littered with coffee cups and ashtrays, laughing and shouting in friendly arguments, while us kids played down in the basement.

When it was time to leave, Bob had only to stand at the top of the stairs and rap out one single word: "GIRLS!" All toys were instantly dropped, and with a breathless "Bye!" the daughters scampered off like little rabbits. In contrast, whenever my parents took me visiting anywhere, they usually had to holler for a good half hour with increasing severity before I finally came slouching into view.

Bob and my father shared several interests and hobbies over the years. They both kept multiple aquariums at one time. My father's "fish room" was a simple bare-bones array of plain tanks, but Bob had lights and plants adorning his aquariums. Although my memory is fuzzy on the actual number of fish tanks Bob had, I still vividly recall the fantasy-like atmosphere of that cozy little back room: the rows of tanks with their colorful fish, the bubbling air pumps and warm humid air, and the greenish light and dancing reflections of water on the walls.

Both men took up woodcarving for a while, and their workshops were littered with shavings and drawers full of knives and chisels. My father specialized in carving hunting dogs. These tended to get played with as toys, and sadly most of them ended up being broken. But one of Bob's pieces still sits on a shelf at my parent's house, with his name and the year "1975" etched on the back.

I even tried my hand at it, and attempted to carve an owl out of a block of wood. Proud of my work, I showed it to my sister for her appraisal.

"It looks like a cat."

"It's an owl."

"Being eaten by a cat?"

"No, it's just an owl."

"It looks like a cat."

This ended my woodcarving career.

My father raised rabbits for a year or so, building an extension behind our backyard shed and filling it with cages of New Zealand Whites. Bob didn't go the rabbit route, but he did keep a flock of pigeons. I still cringe with shame when I remember the day Bob was showing us his pigeon coop, and I stepped on a nest and broke the eggs mere seconds after my father cautioned me not to step on the eggs.

Bob and Bonnie had a little neurotic Chihuahua who apparently considered every visitor to the house an unwelcome intruder, to be routed with snarling fangs and dreadful claws. He took this job seriously, but was frustrated in the performance of his duties by his diminutive size. Being only a few inches high, he had to settle for scuttling anxiously from room to room on bandy legs, glaring sidelong from his big pop-eyes, and muttering resentful imprecations under his breath.

I tried to be friends with him, and almost succeeded on a few occasions. Unfortunately my next visit might be several months later, by which time the little dog had entirely forgotten my friendly overtures and once more regarded me as a terrible threat to the peace and security of his household.

In 1973 my father bought a pedigree coon hound named Rusty. I remember the winter day he arrived. My father and my uncle Gary carried the big shipping crate down into our basement and let the dog out. He carefully padded around the room, sniffing at the unfamiliar surroundings and trembling a little with nervousness, while the men attempted to figure out what his name was. They both tried out a series of possible names, while my father flipped through the paperwork:

“Here Red! C'mon boy, here Tracker! Here Towser! Come here, uh, . . . I don't know, c'mere Champ! Here Big Chief! Haven't you found that pedigree yet?”

“I'm looking, I'm looking. It's got to be here somewhere. Try out some more names.”

“Come here, Buddy! Here, Bugle! Come on old, um . . . ah, come on old Cornmeal!”

“*Cornmeal?* What kind of name is that?”

“I dunno. Maybe they just called him Dog.”

“They're not going to give a pure-blooded hunting hound the name Dog! He's got a proper name, I just can't find it in all this stuff.”

“Why don't you ask him?”

“Ask who, the *dog*?!”

Rusty settled in quickly and became a welcome part of the family. I remember him as a friendly good-natured hound who spent his days dozing in the sunshine. But at night he was a hunting machine. His prowess at tracking and treeing raccoons became legendary, and the local coon population trembled at the sound of his mighty voice echoing through the woods. I have photos showing impressive lines of coon pelts stretching across the front of the shed, with Rusty standing nearby yawning lazily. It was all in a night's work to him.

Stories of Rusty's exploits verged on the incredible. There was the time a raccoon climbed far out on a tree limb overhanging Keg Creek. Rusty guessed what his game was and silently slipped into the cold water, swam across, and was waiting for the coon when it leaped from the limb onto the opposite shore.

And there was the time he beat the infamous Railroad Coon at his own game. This wily old boar coon would lead trailing hounds along corn fields and fence rows to the Hojack line and run the iron rails, where his scent was difficult to follow. He left many a hound snuffling in confusion and disappointment while he made his escape a good 100 yards away.

But Rusty figured out the trick and actually learned to run on the rails himself. He kept his nose in the air so the creosoted wooden ties and metal rails wouldn't interfere with the scent. He detected where the Railroad Coon sprang from the tracks into a tangle of wild grape vines, and treed him easily on top of an old snag.

In 1974 the strain of raising four children apparently got the better of my parents, so they abandoned their family and fled to Texas for a Christmas vacation. Us kids were packed off to spend the holidays with local relatives, while Rusty went to stay with Bob and Bonnie. Upon my parents' return home, it's notable that my father's first priority was to call Bob and make plans to retrieve his prize hound. The kids could wait another day or two.

So I was unfortunately not a witness to the conversation that took place between Bob and my father, but it would amuse me to think that it went something along these lines:

“Hello, Bob! I'm home from Texas.”

“Oh no . . . I mean, oh wow, that's great.”

“I can't wait to take Rusty out hunting. How is he?”

“H-how is he? Well . . . he's . . . he's at rest.”

“That's good to hear. So he didn't give you any trouble?”

“No, no trouble, no trouble at all . . . at least, not any more.”

“Great! I'll be right over to pick him up.”

“Yes, yes, pick him up. Uh . . . it's funny you should put it that way. Because . . . well, you see . . .”

But Bob always struck me as a pretty straightforward guy, and no doubt my conjecture here is entirely wrong. More than likely the exchange was simple, direct and honest:

“How's the dog?”

“Dead.”

It must have been an awkward moment, no matter how the actual conversation ran. But by no means was Bob or anyone else to blame for the untimely demise of Rusty. It was discovered that he had a diseased heart and would have died no matter where he was. It was a shame to lose such a majestic hound, but my father took it in stride. He had a new hound within a few months, and went on to own several hunting dogs over the next 15 years or so. Some of them were very fine hounds, but none ever quite reached the heights of Rusty.

I don't recall that Bob was much of an outdoorsman, though I know he and my father went hunting together a few times. There was, of course, absolutely no ill feeling between them over Rusty; but it does seem a strange coincidence that, no matter how often they went coon hunting afterward, it was somehow always Bob's turn to shin up the trees and shake out the furious snarling animals.

This, at least, was the tale I heard. I was not present on these hunts, and the information came to me second-hand. But I have no reason to doubt it. Every coon hunter I ever knew was a sportsman and a gentleman, dedicated to the purity of the hunt and to truth and honesty in relating the adventure. It's been my observation over the years that any minor deviation from this strict adherence to sober fact was done with the greatest reluctance, and only because it interfered excessively with the requirements of a good story.