

## Red Grandma

“Come on, kids! We’re going to grandma’s house!”

This announcement, made by my parents, always led us kids to ask:

“Which one? White Grandma or Red Grandma?”

This was how we could tell our grandparents apart: by the color of their houses.

My father’s parents, Newt and Helen Woolson, were known collectively as “Red Grandma.” They lived in a small house in the Town of Wilson, and in the 1970s it had red siding.

Red Grandma’s house was nothing fancy. It had been bought for a couple of hundred dollars in Niagara Falls, then picked up and moved to their property on a truck. It was old and shabby, but my grandmother kept it very neat and clean.

It was a comfortable place to visit, and the kitchen was especially grandchild-friendly. A brown ceramic cookie jar on the countertop was always filled with Oreo cookies and Sugar Wafers. In summertime the freezer was well-stocked with Freeze Pops; and a box of snack crackers could be found on the lower shelf of a cabinet, conveniently in reach.

Usually a big pot of Hungarian-style cooking was simmering on the stove. It became a running joke that my grandmother would greet me each time I visited with an insistent: “Scottie! Eat something! Eat something!”

My earliest memories of my grandfather are from times when I stayed overnight. I would be sitting at the kitchen table in the early morning, eating Frosted Flakes and watching him getting ready to head off to work. It seemed strange to me that Grandpa had a job.

But my most enduring memories are of him relaxing in his easy chair in the living room, watching TV, reading the Sunday paper, or just dozing. When I walked in to see him he would practically bellow at me: “Hullo, Scotts!”

Often I would come into the house to find Grandma sitting at the kitchen table playing endless games of solitaire. Grandma said that some times when Grandpa got too quiet in the living room she’d call out to him:

“Newt! What are you doing in there?”

“Meditating with my Lord” would be the drowsy reply.

Grandma didn’t have an easy life, but she had a sense of humor about it and was always able to find the comical side of every misfortune. I can still hear her, in a voice ravaged by decades of cigarette smoking, laughing at life’s problems and making us laugh along with her.

Her parents were Hungarian immigrants who arrived in the United States, via Ellis Island, in the early 20th century. My grandmother was born in Buffalo and spent her teenage years in New Jersey. Her city background was noticeable in her slightly old-fashioned figures of speech: the refrigerator was called an ice box, the living room was the parlor, and the couch was a davenport. A bread box stood on the kitchen counter, and there was a milk box just outside the back door.

My grandfather's ancestors were pioneer farmers who arrived on the Niagara Frontier in the year 1810. He once told me that *his* grandfather had been a judge and had a long white beard. I didn't pay much attention at the time, but many years later I discovered that my great-great-grandfather Horace Woolson had indeed been a Justice of the Peace in the Town of Lewiston during the 1910s. Photographs of him show a pleasant-looking old man sporting a long white beard.

Grandpa had a small garden behind the back yard, but he wasn't an overly ambitious gardener. I think he was content to spend the evening of his life resting and serenely watching the busy world go by. His garden produced some tomatoes and peppers; but I remember it mostly for the tall weeds where tribes of huge yellow and black spiders spun their webs. These were harmless garden spiders, but they terrified us kids whenever we blundered into their domain.

Out behind the garage lived Patches. He was a shaggy little black and white dog of uncertain parentage, who spent his days in a makeshift wire enclosure at the edge of the yard. I never saw him let out to run free, but he seemed satisfied with his life. He ate well on a steady diet of table scraps and tidbits handed over the fence by doting grandkids.

Patches was always glad to see us, and would stand up against the fence with a laughing face, wagging his stubby tail. He lived a long life. My grandparents had him since the early 1970s at least; and I remember that one of the last times I saw him was well into the 1980s. He was shaggier then and a bit slower on his feet, but he was still wagging his tail with happiness at the sight of a visitor.

For several years in the early to mid-1970s the whole family would get together for a day at the Fantasy Island amusement park on Grand Island. Everyone would first meet at the picnic tables next to the Ferris wheel to grill burgers and hotdogs. Then we scattered in groups to the rides and arcades and shows. One year I made myself so sick on cotton candy that I vowed to never touch the stuff again. So far I have kept that vow.

The rides and games were fun: the Tilt-a-Whirl that Cousin Roy got sick on, the shooting arcade where you shot real pellet guns at the dummy piano player, the steam engine train ride, and the Giant Slide. I can still see us trudging up the three flights of stairs leading to the top of the slide, then sliding down on gunny sacks and getting stuck halfway down.

But the highlight for me was always the Wild West show. I loved the loud gunfire, and the excitement of watching the Sheriff and his deputies face off on Main Street to shoot it out with the outlaws. One of the bad guys always fell off a roof in front of us.

Back at home I would try to recreate the shootouts. It took a long stretch of imagination to transform our little backyard shed into an old western town, with the patch of grassy lawn standing in as a dusty Main Street. But I did my best, and gunned down many a desperado from the roof of the dog house.

Red Grandma had a color TV, which was a novelty to us kids. At home we only had an old Motorola black-and-white set, and didn't own a color TV until the 1980s. So we were fascinated by Grandma's color set, and amused ourselves immensely by fiddling with the knobs and turning the poor actors on the screen various shades of green and orange.

We seldom saw the upstairs floor of Grandma's house. An uncle lived up there at times, so we first listened at the stairs door, whispering to each other: "Is he up there? Can you hear anything?"

If the coast seemed clear, we stealthily crept up the dusty stairs and peeked into the two small bedrooms at the top. The unheated rooms were frigid in the winter, hot in the summer, and smelled of stale cigarette smoke. They actually held little of interest to us: a few boxes of Christmas decorations and some household odds and ends. The adventure of sneaking up there was enticement enough. But the slightest outside noise or suspicion that our uncle was pulling into the driveway sent us scuttling back downstairs like frightened rabbits.

Grandma's basement was a place I *never* saw. Once or twice I opened the cellar door a crack and gave a quick shuddering glance into the dank blackness below. But that was as far as I ever got. Who could tell what horrors might be lurking down there beneath the stairs? I never had the courage to find out.

When us kids grew tired of the color TV or the Sunday comics, we turned our attention to the main attraction of every visit to Red Grandma's: the cousins who lived in the house next door. I've always referred to them as the Ransomville Cousins, due to my childhood ignorance of what township they lived in. They were great fun and we always looked forward to seeing them.

But there was a catch. My parents didn't entirely approve of the Ransomville cousins. They were considered wild, undisciplined, prone to mischief, and a bad influence on us: none of which I will deny. I can remember being entertained by the sight of Uncle Chet chasing Cousin Butch across the back field, promising to land a size 12 shoe against the boy's backside if he ever caught him. This was, apparently, a regular occurrence in their household.

But for all their lawlessness, the cousins were some of the most creative and energetic kids I've ever known. They were forever dreaming up some new project or game. It seemed that their philosophy was to live every waking moment of life to the fullest. Whenever I visited them for a sleepover, our days were ones of nonstop activity from sunrise to nightfall, and I always went to bed utterly exhausted.

So a visit to Red Grandma's involved a bit of play-acting on the part of my sisters and I. We had to affect an air of indifference regarding the kids next door. We had to pretend that it was no matter to us whether we went over to play with them or not.

But as soon as we judged that we had spent enough time lazing around Grandma's living room, we put a secret plan into action. One of us would cross the hall to the bathroom, in full view of the kitchen where the grownups were gathered around the table.

Upon leaving the bathroom, instead of recrossing back into the living room, we would tip-toe down the short hallway, hugging the near wall to keep out of the grownups' line of sight. Once safely inside one of the back bedrooms we would peep through the curtains across the yard to the cousins' house. More

often than not a little head or two could be seen peeping back at us.

This acted as a sort of bat signal. Within minutes the telephone would ring. Can we come over to play? Our parents would sigh and give their reluctant assent, accompanied by strict instructions that we were to come straight back the instant they called us to go home.

We readily agreed, then made a show of casually putting on our coats and heading out the door. But once safely outside we broke into a gallop, past the lilac bushes and under the branches of the green apple tree. The cousins were generally waiting for us at their kitchen door.

Then the real fun began. We took over the living room and watched TV, turning down the audio and ad-libbing our own hilarious dialogue for the characters onscreen. The upstairs hallway closet was easily transformed into a haunted house with the addition of a few old clothes and Halloween masks.

We divided a bedroom into armed fortresses and fired fusillades of rubber bands at each other. At intervals in the battle a cry of "Ammo break!" would usher in a brief truce while we scrambled frantically around the carpet, scooping up handfuls of rubber bands, before retreating once again behind our barricades of cushions and pillows.

And prank phone calls were still possible in those days long before Caller ID was ever dreamed of. We spent many an entertaining evening picking random numbers out of the phone book and annoying the people on the other end of the line. Occasionally one of them would scare us with a stern "Operator, please trace this call!"

This would result in us quickly hanging up and spending a nervous half hour peering through window curtains for the dreaded sight of a police car. It was a few years before we realized that there was no such thing as "phone cops" coming to arrest us for making prank calls.

Very rarely did we restrict ourselves to any kind of conventional activity, and even then we usually added more than a touch of anarchy. We accelerated the already fast-paced game of Hungry Hungry Hippos into a mad free-for-all, with marbles flying in all directions. The frenetic clatter of Rock'em Sock'em Robots was probably the tamest we ever got.

During quiet times between games and goofing off, we had the latest issues of Marvel Comics and Mad Magazine to flip through. The girls had their own supply of Archies Comics. Even when it appeared that we weren't doing much of anything at all, there was always a great deal of joking around. At no time in my life have I laughed so much as I did during those years with the Ransomville cousins.

Our indoor activities were fun, but for the most part we were outdoors kids. In later years we ranged far afield, but in our younger days we kept to the back yards. Tricycle races were conducted around the driveway and sidewalk, even though we were already much too big to ride them. That was part of the fun.

Armies of toy soldiers were set up and bombed with dirt clods. A swing-set and playhouse could be transformed into forts or ships or anything our play-acting required. We climbed the old apple trees, and pounded the tart green apples against a branch to soften them up enough to eat.

In the early 1970s the cousins owned a pair of brown ponies. I remember them as docile little creatures, although one of them kept trying to grab a bite of my younger cousin's long blonde hair, mistaking it for a tempting wisp of hay.

We spent many a summer evening in those early years lounging on the pony shed roof. We ducked down out of sight whenever a car went by out on the road, just in case it was "the fuzz" out looking to "hassle" us. This was the early 1970s after all.

Cousin Butch and I went along with Uncle Chet and my father on the day he bought one of the ponies. We stood next to a large grey barn, the men busy talking while us boys looked around in curiosity. We wondered if the barn siding was made of wood or metal; there was only one way to find out. We each picked up a hefty rock and let loose. *CLANG!* It was metal.

A wild black pony once appeared on the scene for a few exciting days. I don't know the story behind it; where it came from or why it was there. But my father decided to try his hand at bareback riding. The rodeo that followed was thrilling but very short-lived. I have a vivid memory of a black blur galloping past me at a tremendous speed, with my father clinging desperately to its mane.

A few seconds later the pony was prancing across the field, riderless and tossing its head triumphantly. My father slowly picked himself up and walked back to us, dusty and a little wobbly on his legs. His exact words as he brushed himself off are lost to me, but they ran something along the lines of: "I don't believe I'll try that again." The mysterious black pony disappeared soon afterwards.

Behind the pony fence and the straggling old apple trees was a big farm field that stretched away back to the dark woods in the distance. A shallow grassy waterway cut diagonally across the field. This was flooded in the springtime and became a fine rushing stream for launching sticks, bits of scrap lumber, and other makeshift boats. By summer it was dried up, but in winter we could use it for skating and sliding and playing the occasional hockey game.

A few brush-piles dotted the near edges of the field, remnants of an old orchard that had been pushed out years before. The cousins told me that a Screaming Meemie lived in one of those brush piles. I didn't know what such a thing was; but in the evenings, when the shadows of dusk came creeping across the fields, and that dark brush-pile took on an ominous look, I had no trouble believing them.

The woods at the far end of the big fields always appeared black and scary, even in daylight. From the safety of the backyard swing-set we would dare each other to run all the way back there and return with a twig as proof we did the deed. None of us ever made the attempt.

No matter what we did to occupy ourselves, our primary goals were always amusement and entertainment. Cousin Butch was one of the few people I've ever known to share my absurdist sense of humor. We spent much of our time together laughing uproariously at the strangest things, while bystanders stared at us in bewilderment, unable to discover what was so funny.

Butch was always on the lookout for amusing diversions. I didn't have his creative mind, but I was certainly a willing collaborator in his various laugh-seeking schemes. Many of our exploits remain deeply ingrained in my memory, and still crack me up when I think back to them.

There was the time my father was driving us through the streets of Niagara Falls. He and Uncle Chet were up front, while us boys crouched in the back of the station wagon. Butch tied a paper airplane to a long length of fishing line, then paid it slowly out the back window. Soon the airplane was bouncing along the pavement a good 40 feet behind us.

This was entertaining enough in itself, but what really sent us into gales of laughter was the sight of pedestrians on the sidewalk. They would be walking along peacefully enough, then suddenly whip around to stare in astonishment at the sight of a paper airplane careening down the street, apparently under its own power.

Field mice abounded in the big grassy fields out back, and one breezy day Butch got an idea for something I will refer to as Project Mouse Aloft. He had scrounged up a plastic capsule-shaped Christmas ornament from somewhere. It was hollow and looked like a miniature cage. To catch a field mouse and pop him into this little capsule was easy work.

The mouse was probably not very happy about his enforced imprisonment, but greater indignities were in store for him that day. We tied the contraption to a kite, and sent it up into the blue sky. Far above the fields the poor mouse flew, swooping to and fro, while the absurdity of it had us doubled up in helpless laughter down below.

Not even the hallowed halls of worship were safe from my cousin's quest for hilarity. One morning, while attending a church service together at the Fillmore Chapel, he came up with another idea, one that I shall call Tether Fly. Using a strand of long blonde hair donated by his sister, he caught a housefly and tied it to one end of the hair. Holding tightly to the other end he simply released the fly.

The poor creature flew in laborious circles, round and round, buzzing loudly with the effort. The performance was highly entertaining, but it was cut short by the intervention of an indignant little old lady seated nearby. She snatched the fly away and glared at us for a solid minute. But it was too late by then; I was already in an agony of suppressed laughter that lasted through the rest of the service.

A high wooden fence once ran along the edge of my uncle's property, ending in a cluster of shrubs or small pines at the highway. I recall crouching behind these trees out of sight while Butch placed a toy dump truck on the opposite side of the road. When a car drew near, he hauled on a long string and the green metal truck went bouncing onto the asphalt, across the center line and into the path of the oncoming vehicle. A shriek of brakes and an angry voice sent us running along the fence into the back field to hide, while Uncle Chet was left to deal with the furious driver.

My grandfather was one of eleven children, so the extended Woolson tribe was pretty numerous. There was once a large family reunion at Great-Uncle Chester's house on the occasion of his birthday. I didn't know any of these distant relatives, so Butch and I spent most of our time in a back entryway of the house, making up nicknames for our little second cousins. I recall we dubbed one lad The Goonball. His younger sister was The Goony Goonball, and the littlest one became The Goony GOONY Goonball.

Maybe we were sometimes a little *too* easily amused.

Not all of our adventures went according to plan; there were plenty of minor mishaps and accidents through the years. I don't know why, but it seemed that the most ridiculous or embarrassing ones always happened to me.

Uncle Chet owned a vineyard, and I remember playing among the long rows of grape vines while my parents and other relatives worked at tying or picking the grapes. The row in which my mother and father worked together was identified by a sign tacked to the end post that said "Ray" and "Ray's Better Half."

Chet had a flatbed truck with a couple of large bins on back into which the grapes were dumped. One day I jumped from the driver's seat of the truck and slammed the door behind me—only to recoil in horror at the sound of shivering glass raining down through the door frame. I had slammed the door so hard that the window shattered. My uncle waved it off as an accident, but I was terribly embarrassed about the whole thing.

At the end of one day spent in the vineyard, Butch and I were riding on the tailgate of a pickup truck as it bumped its way along the deeply rutted lane. My father and a couple of uncles were crouching along the sides of the truck bed. We hit a particularly bad rut and—*BOING!*—us two boys were bounced right off the tailgate. We sailed through the air and landed with a thump in the dirt. The truck didn't even stop. We had to jump up and chase after it, while the men in the back shouted with laughter and slapped their knees.

Cousin Butch owned an assortment of mini-bikes and dirt bikes over the years. We spent many a Saturday afternoon zooming along the fields and down the lane past the vineyard to the woods, usually with me clinging to the back. I did take the controls now and then, but the first time I attempted to drive one of these machines was a fiasco.

I only had a general idea of how to operate the thing. While Butch looked on from a safe distance, I hopped onto the seat and squeezed the clutch handle. I tapped the pedal into gear, and let the clutch loose while giving the throttle a hefty twist. The bike immediately stood straight up in a wheelie and sent me flying backwards off the seat. I looked up just in time to see the bike tumble back down and break off one side of the handlebar. That was the end of my mini-bike riding for a while.

The vineyard lane ran along a hedgerow where a few wild cherry trees grew. These were covered in a thick tangle of wild grape vines, strong enough for kids to climb up, and the cousins had made a sort of nest in the top. One afternoon a few of us climbed up the vines and hunkered down in the nest. We were amusing ourselves by mimicking the jingle for Charms Blow Pops ("they last so long"), when the grape vines beneath me suddenly gave way—and down I went.

It wasn't a free fall, as there were too many branches and vines in my path. I just slid helplessly down through the obstructions for what seemed like a long time. I finally landed at the base of the tree amid a shower of twigs and leaves. When I crawled out from under the tree and looked up, there was a row of faces peering down at me from far above. I'd like to say they were full of concern; but the truth is each face was sporting a big happy grin, and the air was filled with merry shouts.

Playing with fire was one of my favorite boyhood pastimes, but it was not without its moments of drama. I've written elsewhere about my pyrotechnic disasters at home, but there was also the time that Cousin Butch and I touched off a memorable blaze of our own:

One day we were spotted by our younger sisters sneaking off along the hedgerow with a bottle of golden liquid. They probably thought we were heading out to Butch's makeshift clubhouse to swig an illicit bottle of beer, and so they followed us at a discreet distance. But the liquid in the bottle was gasoline, and our plan was to set off a Molotov cocktail.

Upon reaching the clubhouse, Butch applied a lighter to a rag stuffed into the mouth of the bottle, and heaved it at a large rock. The massive sheet of flame that erupted not only engulfed the clubhouse, quickly reducing it to a charred ruin, but threatened to sweep across an entire field of dry wheat stubble and straw.

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. Our sisters came to our aid, and ran back and forth between the fire and a shallow ditch nearby, scooping up cups of water to toss onto the flames. The image of a fierce holocaust raging across the wheat field spurred our efforts, and we managed to extinguish the blaze before it got into the field.

Afterwards, grimy, exhausted and smelling of smoke, we timorously made our way back to Grandma's house, not sure what kind of reception would be awaiting us. Our relief was immense when we realized that the grownups had been engrossed in a card game the whole time we were fighting the blaze. They had barely even noticed the billows of smoke pouring across the field, and weren't the least bit concerned about it. No questions were ever asked, and we kept mum about the entire affair for years afterwards.

A branch of the Twelve Mile Creek flowed through the woods and fields out behind my grandparents' house. Butch and I were fishing along the creek one day, and took a break to visit a nearby Mulberry tree. The tree was heavy with berries and we helped ourselves. On our way back, instead of following the farm lane that curved around and down to the creek bank, we thought we'd take a short cut by simply leaping over the bank. This would have been fine, if not for the large patch of stinging nettles that we landed in. We instantly lost all interest in fishing, at least for a while.

Deeply ingrained in my memory is the infamous episode of the Manure Pile. Something like this could only happen to Cousin Butch and I. A local dairy farmer had, for some reason, emptied his manure spreader in a big pile next to the vineyard lane. We kept an eye on it for weeks as it dried and baked in the summer heat.

One day, while riding our bicycles along the lane, we judged it had dried enough to support our weight. It was just the right size and shape to make a perfect bike ramp, so we tested it first by walking across it. It was firm and hard. We backed up a ways, pedaled like mad to get up a good head of steam, and hit that manure pile at full speed.

*SPLAT!!!*

Our bicycles tires effortlessly broke through the dry outer crust and plunged us into the foulest smelling greenish-black nightmare imaginable. It was up to our knees, and had splattered all over us. Getting back out onto dry land was a horrible ordeal. Stunned and a bit shell-shocked about what had happened to us, we glumly plodded back across the fields to Uncle Chet's house.

We were a sorry sight. We turned the garden hose on ourselves and our bikes for a long time, but even then my aunt refused to let us into the house. She put new clothes out on the patio for us and we changed in the garage.

In the earliest years there were six of us cousins that generally played together, but the two oldest girls gradually dropped out. They tended to go off on their own to listen to music, read Tiger Beat Magazine, and engage in girl talk. They were only sporadically involved in our later escapades. Cousin Butch, being the second-oldest, became the natural ringleader in our activities. Under his direction we organized and played backyard games that were the stuff of legend.

I have a fuzzy memory from the pony shed days of a game that I think we played with the family dog. I believe it went something like this: From our position on the pony shed roof one of us would toss a stick for the dog to fetch. With the animal momentarily diverted, we would leap off the roof and race madly to the nearest apple tree.

This got the attention of the dog who would come tearing after us. The object was to swing up into a branch of the tree before the dog caught up with us. I might have my details mixed up: but I do clearly remember charging across the space from the shed to the tree and clambering up into the branches.

When I was about seven or eight we invented a notorious game that we called variously "Poo Girl" or "Poo Sticks." Alas, it bore no resemblance to the charming "Pooh Sticks" played by Winnie-the-Pooh and his friends in the Hundred Acre Wood.

This alleged "game" consisted merely of Butch and I scrounging around the green apple tree until we found a couple of sticks a few feet long. Then we made a short visit to the back of the yard where the family dog was tied. Finally, brandishing our loaded sticks before us, we chased our shrieking and terrified younger sisters around the yard.

"Poo Sticks" had no real object; it simply continued until interrupted by a furious parent—who put an immediate stop to this nonsense and sent me to go sit in the car until it was time to go home.

Less idiotic maybe, but more dangerous, was The Snowmobile Game. This was played when I was about twelve or thirteen. The cousins had two old blue snowmobiles that we raced wildly around the yards and fields. Eventually somebody came up with the idea for the Snowmobile Game. We were careful to play this in a section of field next to our grandparents' house where their garage conveniently blocked the view from the kitchen window.

The game started by tying a plastic bread bag to the grab bar on the back of a snowmobile. One person, the Driver, drove the snowmobile slowly around in a circle, while the Chaser ran to intersect the path of the machine and grab onto the back. Once the Chaser caught hold, the Driver gunned the engine and went around in wide sweeping circles at high speed.

The Chaser was then dragged behind the snowmobile, inches from the spinning tracks, holding on with one hand while desperately trying to untie the bread bag with the other, getting blasted in the face by snow and ice spray all the while. Eventually the Chaser either lost his hold and tumbled end over end or he got the bag untied. Then it was his turn to be the Driver.

I've heard it said that Providence keeps a special watch over fools and children. We definitely qualified for extra care from on high, being both children and fools. I can think of no other theory to explain the fact that no one was ever injured while playing the Snowmobile Game.

Sometimes we would find ourselves temporarily out of fun ideas. Then we'd sit around and conduct that age old exchange:

“Whaddya wanna do?”

“I dunno. Whadda YOU wanna do?”

“I dunno, whadda YOU wanna do?”

Eventually this catchphrase itself became a source of amusement, as we stretched the last word out as long as possible:

“Whaddya-wanna-*dooooooo*?”

“I-dunno-whadda-YOU-wanna . . . *dooooooooooo*.”

“I-dunno-I'm-just-sitting-here-on-the-green-grass-looking-up-at-the-blue-sky-and wondering-to-myself-whaddya-wanna . . . *dooooooooooooo*.”

When enough cousins were on hand we conducted sprawling games of Hide-and-Seek across the two backyards. To the musical cry of “Gather round! Gather round!” all the available cousins would plop down in a circle. To choose who would be It, Cousin Butch would count around the circle, usually to some variation of

“One potato, two potato, three potato, four”

or

“My mother and your mother were hanging out clothes,  
my mother punched your mother right in the nose . . .”

We generally played fair when choosing someone to be It, but somehow it was always one of the younger kids. Butch was in charge of the count, and as his faithful sidekick I never doubted his honesty; but still . . . he and I were never It. Never.

But nature had a way of keeping things in balance. Once, during a wild game of Hide-and-Seek after dark, Butch and I went leaping over a flower bed and threw ourselves on the ground behind it. To our horror we landed in something soft and squishy, and a ghastly stench rose up around us.

We feared the worst, and made a panicked dash to the back patio light. But when we inspected our clothes under the light all we found were the crushed remains of some mushrooms. The smell and our fear of embarrassment led us to unobtrusively quit the game and disappear into the house for a change of clothes. We learned later that we had landed in a patch of stinkhorn mushrooms. They certainly lived up to their name.

Home Base was always the picnic table in my grandparents' back yard. If the grownups were outside, the women formed a gossip circle of lawn chairs over behind the garage, while the men occupied the picnic table to share their hunting and fishing stories. They often joined in the spirit of our games, shouting encouragement to the kids running across the lawn to Home Base, or helping out the smaller fry if it seemed like they weren't getting a fair shake.

Those of us who made it safe to Home Base would collapse on the grass around the picnic table to catch our breath and listen to the talk.

The men in my grandfather's family all had a speech mannerism that my brother and I found especially amusing. Whenever they got together to swap tall tales, and if the latest story was particularly sensational or crossed the threshold of plausibility, someone would utter an incredulous "Yaw!"

Us boys planted ourselves at the edge of the conversation, and waited in anticipation.

"Did Chet tell you about the doe last fall? He was sitting against a tree watching that trail along the creek, when this little doe came along. Well, he didn't have a doe permit, but you know Chet. He raised his shotgun and was just about squeeze off a shot, when a voice behind him said, 'Don't shoot that doe.'"

"No! Get out of here!"

"I'm telling you! Chet turned around, and there was a game warden crouching in the bushes right behind him! He just sat there and said, 'Don't shoot that doe.'"

"Yaw!"

At this point my brother and I would have to turn our backs to hide our giggles.

In 1977 my oldest cousin Darlyn got married, and a couple of years later moved into the house next to her parents' place. We now had three adjacent properties to run wild over. Our games of Hide-and-Seek attained truly epic proportions which left us all exhausted.

But this period was short-lived. Us older kids were teenagers now; we sometimes snuck off on our own, the way teens do, leaving the younger ones to continue their search in vain, unaware that we had abandoned the game.

In the winter of 1980 my father was busy helping Uncle Gary build a new house. On weekends and holidays I went along with him, to be dropped off at my grandparents' house for the day. In the evening

he would pick me up again, or I sometimes rode on the back of a snowmobile cross-country to Gary's house.

It was during those winter days that Butch and I devised our most memorable game. We called it "Animal Ball" and played it in Cousin Darlyn's home. The wooden floors and wrap-around staircase suited our purpose admirably. The game started in a second-floor bedroom, ostensibly as a game of Foosball. But this was no ordinary Foosball game. The idea was to play so violently and whack the ball so hard that it would fly out of the Foosball table and go careening over the hardwood floors.

Then the game of Animal Ball really began. Butch and I would scramble furiously after it, often on all fours, batting it violently from one room to another, sending it ricocheting off walls and furniture, but always directing it in the general direction of the staircase.

That was our intention all along, to send the ball bouncing wildly down the stairs so we could tumble head-first after it. The noise was incredible. By the time we reached the bottom of the stairs, the family cat was hiding in the basement, the dog was whining and scratching at the back door, and Cousin Darlyn was trying to talk on the phone with both hands over her ears.

Once we finally had the ball cornered somewhere on the first floor, we swooped it up and ran it back up the stairs for another exhilarating round. The whole spurious "game" was just an excuse for us to fill the house from top to bottom with noise and mayhem.

Animal Ball was our last game. Our childhood was over, and as time moved into the 1980s the families drifted apart and we all gradually went our separate ways. A handful of us cousins did stay in close touch for a few more years, going to concerts and parties together in our late teens and early twenties. But adulthood and differing lifestyles finally brought it all to an end. Throughout the long stretch of years since then I have seen my cousins only on the rarest of occasions.

But the memories that I have related here, and many more besides, remain dear to me and keep those long-ago days fresh and alive in my mind. It wasn't all perfect, of course. There were times of argument and disagreement, petty bickering and selfish behavior. But these are common to all children. Faults can be overlooked and wrongs can be forgiven. Looking back on it all now, I don't think I would trade those years of my boyhood for any other.

There is one particular image in my memory that most strongly represents that era for me. I cannot pinpoint it to any specific time, but I can see it so clearly:

Three or four of us are trekking across one of the big fields in the lingering daylight of a long summer's evening. We are following the course of the shallow waterway that cuts across the fields. Off in the distance we can hear the muted rumble of stock cars racing around the dirt track at the Ransomville Speedway. A warm breeze out of the west tosses our hair and sends waves rippling across the wide field of grass. Our shadows stretch out long before us.

We are not in any hurry, and we are joking and laughing as we walk along. The sky overhead is a wide expanse of deep blue . . . and we are golden in the last rays of light from the setting sun.