

Moving Up Day

It has been 40 years since I attended my last Moving Up Day. I started to write my memories of this annual Elementary School event, only to quickly realize I could scarcely remember the thing at all. No matter how I wracked my brain, only vague and uncertain images arose. I found I had to fall back on speculation and conjecture and just plain making things up. Its *possible* I got a few details wrong.

The Moving Up Day ceremony was usually held in the high school gym, on a sweltering day in June. Students marched into the gym and were grouped by grades among the bleachers, with parents seated on rows of chairs in the middle. Or maybe it was the other way around; I seem to remember both arrangements.

This was the only time during the entire year when we remembered that we had class colors. The school colors were maroon and white, but each grade also had their own colors. My class colors were orange and white. Or maybe gold and white. I don't know. We were each given ribbons to pin to our shirts for the day, after which they were probably discarded and entirely forgotten until the next year.

After my final Moving Up Day in 1977, my orange and white ribbon ended up down in our basement on a shelf above the washing machine. There it stayed, quietly moldering away year after year, until it finally vanished sometime in the late 1980s.

Moving Up Day was an opportunity to show off our musical progress for the parents, so a sweating and slightly desperate-looking Mr Hauser directed the training band as it squawked its way through a medley of patriotic songs; and Mrs Wolfe led the chorus in off-key renditions of such classics as "You Are Old Father William" and "He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother." When the young and hip Miss Schroder became our music teacher we also heard a Beatles song or two.

I was spared participating in these ordeals: I played no band instruments in school, and I only joined the chorus for a couple of weeks somewhere around 4th Grade. I rapidly decided that getting up an hour early every day to go sing "Would You Like To Swing On A Star" did not fit my idea of a rollicking good time.

Awards were handed out for things like perfect attendance and exemplary riding skills during Bike Rodeo; and I suppose at some point somebody got up and made a speech, probably the Elementary School Principal. In my day that was Mr Casadonte, an imposing person I only saw on rare occasions; and therefore viewed with awe as a sort of Supreme Deity, ruling unseen from an office hidden away behind a protective barrier of secretaries.

There must have been some sort of actual "moving up" ceremony. I imagine it took the form of each grade taking the place of the grade above it, with the Sixth Graders being booted out the door into the glaring sunlight to prepare them for the eye-opening terrors of high school. The Kindergarten section would be left ominously empty, in readiness for a fresh group of young victims now innocently napping at home, unaware of the sword of doom hanging over them.

Note: Since writing this piece I've learned that the 6th Graders "moved up" to the platform in front of the audience where the chorus had stood to sing. I've also learned that, in earlier years, the event was held in the high school auditorium and included 7th through 12th grades; and the highlight being, to quote alumni Juanita Haight Erwin: "the culminating ceremony that consisted of weaving in and out of every row in the center section of the whole auditorium, while singing "Where, Oh Where Are the Kindergarteners?" [repeat twice] "Safe now in the Firrrrrst Grade!" [repeat for every grade until absolutely exhausted].

The whole lumbering affair concluded bravely with a ragged but heartwarming singalong of the Alma Mater, our raised voices becoming more uncertain and hesitant with each verse:

“Though we’ll leave old Barker Central
With it’s something clear — I mean dear
All it’s — all our something mumbled something or others
Will be — will still mumble something here — uh, near!”*

And finally, an attempt at an orderly exit was made, but it didn’t stand a chance against a mob of students and parents and faculty, all gasping for breath in the stifling gym, rushing towards the doors and fresh air. A kind of happy, relieved chaos reigned, perhaps the most fitting way to conclude and celebrate another successful year at Pratt Elementary.

* here are the actual lyrics to the Barker Alma Mater, written by Alice C. Brown, class of 1927:

*Just outside our little village
With its buildings tall;
Stands our noble Alma Mater,
Known and loved by all.*

*Raise your voices, Seniors, Juniors,
Each and every one;
Help to praise old Baker Central
For the victories won.*

*Our strong ties can ne’er be broken
Formed in B.C.S.
So we’ll love and honor Barker
Far above the rest.*

*Raise your voices, Seniors, Juniors,
Help us to express
All our love for Barker Central,
Dear old B.C.S.*

*Though we’ll leave old Barker Central
With its memories dear;
All our joys and all our sorrows
Will still linger near.*

*Raise your voices, Seniors, Juniors,
Loud her praises tell;
Hail to thee our Alma Mater,
B.C.S. all hail!*

“See You Next Year!”

During my final years of Elementary school and first few years of Junior High, it became a tradition to ride my bicycle to school on the last day before summer vacation. I usually teamed up with a neighborhood friend for this adventure. Biking to school was not as straightforward as it would seem.

In those pre-BMX years, we rode cheap 20 inch Schwinn Stingray knockoff bikes in various degrees of falling-apart. Wheels wobbled and tires went flat, chains fell off on a regular basis, and handlebars had a tendency to suddenly twist sideways at the worst possible moments. For replacement parts we visited a mysterious Mr Fogg

in Appleton who had a barn full of bike parts for sale.

I practically grew up on a bicycle. I survived those years with no broken bones or other major injuries, but I was not without my mishaps. Most notable for me is the time I came zooming along West Somerset Road and popped a magnificent wheelie — at the height of which the front tire fell right off the bike. I had no choice but to go over the handlebars and hit the asphalt chin first.

I would have been content to stay there for a while until I felt a little less stunned, but a voice in the back of my mind reminded me that I was lying face-down in the middle of a public highway. I started to untangle myself from the bike and was interested to see that the front tire was still rolling merrily down the road, straight and true. I thought it unfair that the tire had never performed that well when actually attached to the bicycle.

So when it was time for our annual ride to school, we made sure our machines were ready for the trip. Chains were oiled, tires filled with air, and all nuts and bolts were tightened and double-tightened, in the hope that they might stay on long enough to get us there and back.

It was a four mile ride from my house, and we tended to overestimate the time needed to bike into Barker. We always arrived far too early, tired and sweaty from fast pedaling, and had nothing to do but loiter outside or walk the halls until the buses started showing up.

The last day of school was one of the few I actually enjoyed. There was an atmosphere of excitement in the air. Many of us were already in full summer mode, breezing through the halls in shorts, hats and sunglasses. Teachers and students alike seemed happier and friendlier towards each other, even if they had been sworn enemies the rest of the year.

In Grade school we had the Moving Up Day ceremony, but I don't recall that we did much of anything in Junior High. Exams were all finished, each column of circles dutifully filled in with No. #2 pencils. Final report cards had been cautiously glanced through, followed by huge sighs of relief that we had managed to squeak through another year. Desks and lockers were cleaned out. Text books had been handed in and their brown paper covers tossed away, my tattered book covers elaborately illustrated with a year's worth of doodles.

There was nothing left to do. We joked around, signed each other's yearbooks, and yelled our goodbyes across classrooms and hallways: "See you! Have a good summer! See you next year!"

When the final bell rang, and the student body erupted from every exit, us riders met at the bike rack and took our bikes out to the sidewalk to watch the buses leave. That final bus ride was a rowdy one. The drivers were a little more tolerant of noise and mayhem on this day. Squirt guns that had escaped classroom confiscation were pulled out and put to good use, and leftover sheets of note paper fluttered from the windows like confetti. There was no lack of riotous catcalls and laughter. Eventually someone took up that old traditional chant, and soon every kid on board was shouting at the top of their lungs:

"No more pencils! No more books!
No more teachers' dirty looks!"

You know the rest.

After the last bus had pulled away, we joined the groups of town kids heading into the Barker village for refreshments and revelry. Some of them stopped at Okie's, or went down Main Street to the Village Store; but we usually ended up at Mesmer's Dairy, where we sat on the newspaper box out front, drinking Pepsi and

watching the last of the school traffic go by. After we finished our bottles of pop there was nothing left but to head for home down West Somerset Road. We met a few empty buses coming back from their routes, and gave the drivers a wave. It was their last day, too.

As we pedaled out of town the festive carnival-like atmosphere faded away, and soon we were just a couple of kids biking along a quiet country road on a summer afternoon. The school year was officially over when one or the other of us turned into our own driveway, and we parted company with a final “See you!”

And then summer vacation really began: endless days of total freedom stretching out for weeks and months. I never had to suffer the purgatory of summer school, and my parents weren’t overly concerned to fill my days with structured activities. They sent me to Bible Camp for a week every other year or so to keep me on the straight and narrow, but otherwise I was left to prowl around Appleton like a regular heathen. I had basically nothing to do and all summer to do it.

Most of my days were taken up with swimming, bike riding, and long lazy afternoons just sitting around reading. My summer adventures tended to be solitary, but I did spend time hanging out with Dave R. or Jim B. There were fishing expeditions to Keg Creek or down the lane to Stodolka’s farm pond, exploration trips to the gravel pits off Phillips Road, and frequent visits to Strong’s Store for soda pop and candy bars.

I spent a lot of time sitting on Strong’s front steps. It was the logical gathering place for Appleton kids, from both Barker and Newfane school districts. A local teenage hoodlum named Harold once demonstrated how to get free bottles of pop from the machine in front of the store, but I never had the nerve to try it myself. A more achievable act of bravery was to ride my bike up onto the steps of the empty storefront across the street, and continue going back and forth until old Mr Hall, who lived in the attached house, would come out to chase me away with an annoyed: “Get out of here!”

Mrs Myers operated Strong’s Store during those years. I don’t know if she liked having a bunch of kids hanging about all day, but I’m sure she didn’t enjoy cleaning up after us. One summer Dave and I were locked in a long-running competition to see who could snag the last lemon snack pie. My moment of ultimate victory was when Dave actually got the last pie, carried it aloft in triumph outside, only to have it slip from his hand and splatter all over the front steps of the store. Those were glorious days.

Not until the last weeks of August, when class schedules began arriving in the mail and new packs of notepaper and pens appeared on the living room desk, that I got that queasy feeling in my stomach: vacation was running out and September was fast approaching. And suddenly, far too soon, it was “next year,” and the bus was pulling up out front, and it was time to begin it all again.

Postscript

As I type these words, sitting alone in a second-floor apartment while the rain pours down outside my window, it is the final day of the school year at Barker, but I don’t feel anything special about it. The promise and excitement of summer vacation has become for me only a memory from the distant past. July and August are now just two more months that race by too quickly.

There is no “next year” anymore, for September merely serves as a reminder that another winter is fast approaching and I’m once again not quite ready for it. As I slide unwillingly into the wrong side of middle-age, the passing years blur together, with no real sense of progression or achievement, only an awareness that something of meaning has gone out of the world.

Sadder than this to me is the knowledge that those I once knew as boyhood friends have long ago become strangers again. It was perhaps an inevitable part of growing up, but for various reasons they went their separate ways one by one. My Senior High years were a miserable mess; and the last few friends who stuck with me to the end were left behind on Graduation Day, when I slammed shut the door on an unhappy chapter of my life and never looked back.

Although no amount of earthly treasure could induce me to relive my school days, I wish I could feel once more that “last day of school” excitement, when we walked the halls in high spirits and filled the air with carefree chatter; and we waved goodbye and shouted to our friends:

“See you! See you next year!”

with all the youthful confidence that we would indeed see them again, if not this summer, then surely next year, and we would still be friends.