

*smooth-
mouthed
dick
and
others*

I suppose it isn't at all strange that out of the many youngsters I knew at the Washington School the personalities of only a few stand out clearly against the background of time. The rest seem to have receded into something like an indistinct blur, a fog that you peer into but cannot quite penetrate. This, of course, is as much my own fault as any thing else for if I had made

a greater effort to become acquainted with everyone in my classes I should find it much easier to remember them today.

But there were some I shall never forget. There was Albert Bryant, perhaps my best friend, a splendid athlete and a top student, who was to die tragically of heart disease a few years later when we were in High School. He was a younger brother of Attorney Harvey Bryant. There was Walter Patton, a handsome young fellow who awed the rest of us by learning to chew tobacco; Orrin Bryant, an awkward gangling youth with a gift for clowning; the two Haynes boys, nicknamed Biddy and Teddy, a couple of hardy little fellows whom I admired greatly because they could play football without ever seeming to get hurt; Millard Swift, as rugged and tough as they come, but friendly to me nevertheless; John Lytle, a stout, amiable boy who could read music, so I always tried to sit with him when we had singing sessions; an unfortunate kid named Lyle, whose last name I have forgotten, and who wore a perpetually mournful look, due, so I heard, to the fact that his folks were poor and often did not have enough to eat; a girl whom we will call Agnes, for that was not her name, who was probably extra sexy for her age, for the boys said she went swimming with them, "bare-naked." Please understand this was only hearsay on my part, though I *was* curious. And there were two girls, Helen Winter and Gladys Merrill, on each of whom I had a terrific crush, though neither ever knew of it. I was so horribly bash-

ful in the presence of young ladies that I hardly had nerve enough to speak to them. To me they were gorgeous creatures, and I am sure they must have grown up to be as handsome women as they were beautiful girls.

The seventh and eighth grade classrooms at the Washington School were both on the second floor, close to the Principal's office, a terrifying place where you were sent if you had displeased your grade teacher. The rubber hose as an instrument of punishment was still in use then, and we often heard its dull thud as some poor unfortunate or stubborn youngster had it wielded over his rear. Our crack baseball catcher, Adam Herbener, was ordered to the office for "treatment" one day. He moved rather deliberately as he left our seventh grade room, so our teacher, Miss Davis, got behind him and pushed, like you would a stalled car. We speculated on whether she could maintain power enough to get him all the way, but apparently she did for the familiar sound of the hose soon echoed through the classroom. Adam was back in a few minutes, looking a bit red-eyed.

In the springtime, like the words in the song, "the livin' was easy." The sandwiches, apples and Nelson cake in my lunch no longer froze if I happened to forget and leave them at the stable beside my pony's saddle. By the way, do you know what Nelson cake is? It's a sort of pie, made with two crusts and a center of currants or raisins, a solid, substantial dessert with no foolishness about it that stood horseback riding well and tasted wonderful. My mother made some Nelson cake

every week, but nobody seems to know anything about it now — or else it's masquerading under another name. I haven't had any for 40 years.

At the noon recess we gulped our lunches as fast as we could, those of us who didn't live in town, so we could start playing "Duck-On-A-Rock," "Jump-Fer-Down" or baseball. I have completely forgotten how that first game was played, but the second one was a combination of hop, skip and jump, and leapfrog. Neither one seems to be played by the kids any more. Baseball was my dish, and I could never get enough of it. At home I was forever trying to get my brother, Roger, or my sister, Florence, to play catch, but Roger was then too small and Florence was much too busy with music lessons and practicing on the new Mehlin piano that had cost us the tremendous sum of \$400. Before settling on the Mehlin we had tried out a new player piano on which we gaily played over and over again "The Whistler and His Dog." I am inclined to think that my father and mother decided Florence was far more likely to do a consistent job of practicing if there were no player rolls about. I am certain piano lessons did Florence a lot more good than playing catch could have, for she developed great talent on the instrument.

My enthusiasm for baseball was suddenly cooled, for a few days at least, after I was beamed by a wild pitch in a game of "workup" during the noon hour, and for a time I wondered if maybe I hadn't better try the piano as Florence was doing. It looked far less dangerous. But this was in the spring of 1906, and presently I was fol-

lowing, through the old Chicago *Record-Herald*, which got the red-hot news to us out on the rural routes within — just imagine — 48 hours after it happened, the inspiring fortunes of the Chicago Cubs and the Chicago White Sox. Both of these teams were to go on and win their respective league pennants that season and finally engage in a never-to-be-forgotten World Series. In more recent years I have watched on television the pitching feats of Allie Reynolds and Joe Black, and thought how in 1906 I would almost have given my right arm to have seen Big Ed Walsh or Doc White or Three-fingered Brown as they strode to the mound and mowed down opposing batters. What a pity that we cannot somehow roll back time for nearly half a century and throw on a screen "The Peerless Leader," Frank Chance of the Cubs, as he moved gracefully about first base, or Fielder Jones of the White Sox, whose name actually was Fielder, and who played center field for the club he managed, or Johnny Evers and Joe Tinker, the great double-play pair for the Cubs who played second base and shortstop respectively and were said to be not on speaking terms off the field, or Jimmy Scheckard, Johnny Kling or George Rohe. Once started I'm liable to name the whole batting order for each team, and after all that was 45 years ago, and I was telling you about playing ball at the Washington School, wasn't I?

As we youngsters who loved baseball slowly calmed down in the fall of 1906 after the White Sox, known to one and all as "The Hitless Wonders," defeated the supposedly invincible Cubs in the World Series, and the tag

end of the year gave way to the beginning of 1907, our class at the Washington School found itself transferred downtown to the red-brick building that stood just east of the old gray-stone structure known for many years as the Central School. Meredith Willson's "And There I Stood With My Piccolo" mentions this ancient institution and also the fact that the boys' toilets for both buildings were located in the heating plant that stood directly north of them. We got a nice long walk in the open air whenever we were able to persuade the teacher that we simply "had to go." If we stopped to gossip with the fireman, who was usually sitting tilted back in an old chair watching his boilers, could you blame us? After all, there was only school work to do when we got back, and it could wait.

Many new faces now appeared among us for our class was merging with the eighth graders from the Central School before going on to High School. Now it may be that some of these were at the Washington Street school. It is a risky thing to try to go back 45 years and say that this one, or that one, appeared on the scene at just such and such a time, and if, perchance, you who may be reading this know for a certainty that my memory has been faulty, please forgive me. How nice it would be to be able to name every one of them and tell the little interesting things about each that we knew so well so long ago. But that, I am afraid, is a job for someone far better equipped with recollections than I. If, however, I may name a few of those who gathered at the red-brick school, there were Raymond

Weston, Charlie Barlow, Ralston Potter, Ed Hodgkinson, Glen McEachran, George Barrett and Willard Thrams. These boys went on to become physicians, bankers, grocers, farmers and insurance men. And among the girls were such beauties as Irene Reynolds, Evelyn Marston, Ruth Storer, Dorothy McAuley, Marjorie Kuppinger and Fay Mack. Two boys who became my special friends were Leroy Shields and Leroy Calkins. Each was a rather unusual fellow. Leroy Shields was a good trombone player and first baseman, and I appreciated those useful talents of course, but what impressed me far more was his expert knowledge of judo. His father had been a professional boxer and wrestler and had taught the boy a lot of tricks. Leroy had no difficulty in depositing me on my back with his knee on my chest whenever he felt like it, but he was a nice guy and hardly ever threw me without warning. I tried hard to learn some of the judo holds but, being built somewhat on the lines of a greyhound, never made much headway at it.

Leroy Calkins was what today's youngsters would call a "brain." The toughest arithmetic problems were duck soup for him, and this, to my mind with its definite aversion to mathematics, immediately classed him as a superior personality. I hope he became an engineer or an accountant, for he certainly started out with the mental equipment for either of those professions. Of course he was somewhat more than slightly aware of his own unusual capacities, but he was not too obnoxious about it. For a time he lived on a farm west of

Mason City, on the Clear Lake road, and occasionally I went home with him to stay overnight. Once when I went to visit, the Calkins' had two rather simple-looking hired men working for them, characters whom I watched uneasily while we ate supper. After the dishes had been cleared away Leroy's father and the men sat around the table and smoked and kidded about politics, the weather, and what they would have to do the next day. Every little while Mr. Calkins pointed suddenly at one of the men or spoke sharply to him, whereupon the poor hired man would throw up his hands and nearly jump out of his chair. I was alarmed at this and whispered to Leroy, "What's the matter with him?" Leroy just laughed and said "Aw, he's goosey, that's all." Mr. Calkins thought it extremely funny when he could make the fellow jump and laughed uproariously each time. I didn't care much for the idea and got out of the room rather than watch what seemed to me a gruesome bit of entertainment.

During this season and the years that followed there were a good many of us driving in from the country to attend classes in the town school. There were the Potters, Fulton, Ralston, Ruby and Anita; Ralph and Sarah Dunn; Marshall Palmer and his older sister, Blanche; Ruth Avery and her younger brothers and sisters; Art Sweet, who drove clear from Portland, and whom we called, in a reversal of his two names, "Sweet'art." We were stunned when Marshall Palmer, a rugged youngster, became a tragic victim of what we now know as polio but which then was a terrifying

monster we didn't know how to identify. And we marvelled at the courage and unselfishness of his sister, Blanche, who watched over and cared for him for many years. The Potter boys, Ralph Dunn and Art Sweet were all good football players, and I admired their ability to take the pounding of scrimmage in practice and in high school games without getting badly hurt. When I tried football, which wasn't often, and got roughed up, I seemed to hurt badly in the worst places. As Ralph Dunn once said to me, "You're too light in the rear end!" At least I think that's what he said, though he may have used slightly different words.

Two of the prettiest girls in school were the McAuley sisters, Dorothy and Mildred. They were real charmers, popular with everyone, but like the two girls I mentioned a while ago, I simply admired them "from afar off." As it happened, their home was across the alley from the barn where the Potters, the Dunns and I kept our horses. The two girls often sat after school in a large bay window that looked out on the alley where they could watch us hitching up to go home. When we saw them there, and, of course, we never failed to see them the minute they arrived at the window, we clowned for them as hard as we knew how. The girls pantomimed their appreciation, clapping their hands and smiling their approval if what we did pleased them, or holding their noses in pretended disgust if our performances were too hammy. Sometimes it took us quite a while to get hitched up. After all, there were just chores to do when we got

home, and that was not nearly as exciting as putting on an act for two girls we were anxious to please.

After the old Indian pony gave out I drove a number of other horses. For one season at least I rode behind a decrepit old candidate for the boneyard called Dick. My Dad had picked him up from some horse trader, and he was a sorry specimen of horse-flesh indeed. His age was most indefinite. He was what horsemen call "smooth-mouthed," for want of a better term to indicate that the animal is no longer young. When a horse is young his teeth have little cups or depressions on their wearing surfaces, and as he ages the teeth wear down until the cups are no longer there. Hence the term. Dick must have been smooth-mouthed for a long time before we acquired him.

Somewhere along the line in this horse's no doubt mottled past he had lost the proper locomotive powers of his hind quarters, and the flesh on his rump and upper hind legs had become shrunken. From the front Dick didn't look so bad, but viewed from the rear he made a sad, sad picture. This wasn't the worst of it. As long as he stayed on his feet he got along fairly well, but when he laid down he couldn't get up again by himself. Whenever I went out to the barn in the morning to feed, curry and harness him and found him lying down, I knew we were in for a rough time. Beating him did no good as he struggled vainly to get to his feet, for he was simply partially paralyzed. Usually we got a block and tackle on him somehow and boosted him to a standing position. Once when he

was running out on pasture in the summertime he had the poor judgment to lie down right at the edge of a little creek, and as he flopped about trying to get up, his whole rear end slid into the water. I thought he would surely drown before we could get him out of there, but my Dad quickly harnessed one of our good teams while I ran for a log chain. We threw one end of the chain around Dick's neck, hitched the team to the other end, and though I was fearful that Dick's head might part company with the rest of him, we snaked him out of the creek like you would bring a log out of the timber. The poor old horse scrambled to his tottering legs as he came up the bank and another emergency was over. Dick wasn't with us long after that.

My driving horse the following year was a much different animal. He was young, long-legged, strongly-built, and "high-lifed," which meant he was unusually nervous. He was always dancing when he should be walking, and he was scared of his own shadow, and most certainly scared of such things as locomotives, streetcars, and the occasional automobile that came along the road. To make matters worse, he was a "tongue-loller." This is a disagreeable habit often indulged in by high-strung horses. Instead of keeping his long pink tongue in his mouth where it belonged, this horse permitted it to flop madly out of one side of his mouth as we drove along. It seems when a horse does this it means he has taken an intense dislike to his bit. He constantly tries to get rid of it by working it over with his tongue. As the bit is steel and securely

fastened in his mouth, the tongue flops around in its attempts to pry the bit loose, with no success whatever. It gives a horse a messy appearance. I believe there are bits on the market now that are supposed to prevent or cure this distressing habit, but we didn't have any then. This colt would gladly have run away with me any day of the week, so I always kept a tight hold on the lines and had my feet firmly braced against the dashboard. Later on we sold him to a horse dealer who liked his rather explosive disposition, and then I got to drive the good black horse, Romeo, of which I have spoken before. He and I got along fine, and I was proud of his well-fed, snappy appearance.

Once in a while during the years in High School that followed I was permitted to stay in town for supper and for a basketball game or a school entertainment in the evening. These were momentous occasions for me, and I proceeded to enjoy them to the utmost for I knew that I was not expected home until late and someone else was taking care of bedding down the horses, throwing down hay from the dim and shadowy corners of the cavernous haymow and milking the two or three cows that seemed determined to step in the pail or to kick viciously. There were four entrancing places in town to be visited after school was out, not hurriedly you understand, but rather savored slowly and made to last, as you would with a measure of mellow old wine. There was Miss Remley's book store to be looked into first, where one could browse leisurely among a musty collection of books, some new,

some old; where you could peer into a page here and a page there of a book and speculate upon what the entire story was about. Sometimes Miss Remley, a kindly old lady who had a funny little chin whisker, came to wait on you at once and sometimes she let you look for a long time for she often seemed to be cooking or eating something in the tiny little apartment at the back of the store. It was hard to leave a spot like that, but there were other wonderful places to be visited and time went swiftly in the late winter afternoon.

The public library was only about a block from Miss Remley's store, and with one's appetite just nicely whetted for reading, it was a matter of only a moment or two to skip down the sidewalk past the Central School and up the flight of cement steps to the quiet and subdued place where a hoarse whisper was like a shout and the endless bookshelves reached far into enticing distances. It was like sitting down to a feast then — one hardly knew what to enjoy first. To be sure, there was always the prim librarian to help but it was far more fun to explore alone the dim corridors of learning, picking up a volume here or a worn edition there before finally settling down with the main course which might be any one of so many different things. An hour or two with Henty, Horatio Alger, or Hamlin Garland, or even Homer as he sang of the adventures of Ulysses, and the sun had been long gone below the western horizon, the street lights had winked on and it was time to tramp over to Main Street and see what Mr. Vermilya had for supper.

It didn't make much difference to me what specials were offered the customers at this delightful cafe for I knew long beforehand just what I was going to eat — a hot roast beef sandwich with potatoes and gravy, and coffee. I couldn't have coffee at home, you may remember, and besides there was the little matter of finances. The whole business cost me twenty cents. The coffee would be golden and steaming in its thick white mug, the bread and meat would be swimming in rich brown gravy, and nobody cared if you wanted to order an extra slice of bread to dunk in your coffee — and I was young and it had been a long time since that cold sandwich at noon. There were enticing desserts to be had at Vermilya's after the last of the gravy had been carefully sopped up, but there was still another stop to be made before it was time to go back to the school for the evening's entertainment.

If you were around Mason City at all during the early years of this century you will remember Skondras' Olympia Candy Kitchen, a never-never land to a rather lonely kid from Lime Creek Township, and which, to steal a phrase from the famous Guy Lombardo's Royal Canadians, might have been called "The sweetest spot this side of heaven." It was to this place of soft lights and sparkling glass I repaired for a leisurely contemplation of the double chocolate sundae or the more elaborate eye-filling and palate-tantalizing banana split. Sometimes Mr. Skondras himself, tall, dark, distinguished-looking, and immaculate in his white coat, came to take my order. I dawdled here as long as I dared, and often

it was no trouble at all to put away two banana splits at one sitting, for they were wonderful. A few weeks ago I ordered one just to see if they still tasted as they did at the Candy Kitchen. I couldn't even finish the thing. Have they forgotten how to make 'em? Or was it me?

There was just time enough then to rush back to the school gymnasium for the noise and excitement of the basketball game, often an exciting contest involving Mason City High School and perhaps Charles City, or Hampton, or Algona or Blue Earth, Minnesota. It was hard indeed to hold in check the intense envy I felt for the lucky fellows who got to play on the High School or even the class teams. I felt like a sissy because I wasn't out on the floor, but the little matter of chores on the farm seemed always to interfere with the practice sessions necessary to make the squad. I was to get my thrills many years later when my two sons were on both the High School football and basketball teams, with Dean captain of the basketball team.

After the game, or whatever event for which I had stayed in town, came the lonely drive home. As I have said before, the roads were often bad. In the winter drifts piled high in many places on the regular roadway, and this meant driving out through the fields. Farmers thought nothing of taking down a neighbor's barbwire fence and driving over it if it was the only way to get to town. Our road had originally been laid out along a particularly bad sidehill, and this stretch never failed to drift full of snow. Another part of our road ran across low, swampy ground where clumps of willows

grew close to the road, even overhanging it in some places, and here there were dark, menacing shadows that were especially disagreeable to drive through at night. Sometimes my horse would jump, startled by a rabbit or some other small animal whose midnight nap we had disturbed. Of course I would jump too, and with a sharp prickling up and down my spine, urge the horse to clear out of there, always with the fear that my cutter or buggy might be upset on the spot, leaving me to cope alone with the unidentified terrors of the night.

In another dark hollow there was an old wooden bridge that spanned the creek which came wandering down through our pasture, and here too the swaying branches of the roadside trees reached out overhead like the tentacles of some shadowy monster. Many a dark night Dick or Romeo and I thundered over that bridge at a fast trot, with the loose planks clattering under the horse's feet as we made a dash for the clay hill just beyond that led to open country again. After I had read Washington Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," with its shuddery tale of the headless horseman, I could not help sneaking a look over my shoulder now and then on a particularly gloomy night — just to be on the safe side you understand. I am a little bit sorry now that I cannot honestly report that I was ever chased by a mysterious rider or by a wolf pack. I knew just what to do though if the wolves ever did chase me. I would lash the horse into a gallop. Then I would throw out my fur robe for the wolves to worry over while we drew away from them; then my fur mittens and my over-

coat, and by that time my horse and I would be nearing the friendly shelter of a lonely farmhouse where we would be saved just as the furious pack nipped at my shoulder blades. Oh, I was quite sure I could handle a pack of wolves.

In a few minutes we were swinging in through the gate to our barnyard, with my horse finding his way unerringly even though it might be so dark that I could scarcely see where the gateposts were. The horse had to be unhitched, unharnessed and tied in his stall, always in the dark. Even with no light I knew just where the barn doors were and how many steps it took to get to the right stall. I would speak quietly to the other horses so they would not be startled. Usually one or two of them nickered softly in reply. In a minute or two the harness was hanging on its peg, and my horse was eating his belated supper of hay. My cutter or buggy always had to be pulled into its shed for my father was particular about not leaving these vehicles out overnight. Then a quick run to the house, the kerosene lamp lighted, the stairs climbed, "and so to bed."

IMAGINATION

Can you feature dusty hoboos
Playing saxophones and oboos
As they plod along a lonesome country pike,
Scaring farmers and their spouses
Till they hide within their houses
And declare they never hope to see the like?

Can you picture cows and piglets
Doing solemn, stately jiglets
While the windmill tries to whistle "Mary Lou?"
When the colts and horses canter
Has their silly neighing banter
Ever meant a single bit of sense to you?

When the Leghorns and their cousins
Lay their countless daily dozens
In the henhouse down beyond the pile of wood,
Have you ever heard them mutter
As they scratch and fuss and flutter
"We would fly away to Egypt if we could?"

Have you seen your late potatoes
Wink their eyes at the tomatoes
In the garden of an early Sunday morn?
Do your radishes and lettuce
Seem to say "Please come and pet us,"
To the pumpkin vines that hide beneath the corn?

If you suffer these delusions,
These distortions, these confusions,
If you have them oftener than once a day,
Then I fear imagination
Has become hallucination,
And you'd better see a doctor right away!

Courtesy THE CEDAR RAPIDS GAZETTE