KIDS WAS KIDS

Chapter 1

The "crick". That's all we ever called it, the "crick". As in "Ma, we're goin' to the crick to catch some crabs."

The creek was what summers were made for, for seven-year-old boys. The creek was pools of muddy water with rusty tin-cans on the bottom that held all kinds of crayfish; shallow enough to walk in, or across; lined with big trees to climb; steep banks for enemy forts; just about everything.

The crick was a mile to the north of our house. In between was a big field that once in a while a farmer used to plant stuff like corn, or tomatoes, or something. You could always catch lots of "garden" snakes in the field, and sometimes toads. And once in a while, if you were lucky, you could catch a green grass snake that turned blue at sunset if you killed him just right. You had to hold him by the tail, and snap him like a whip so his neck broke, but you couldn't snap his tail off.

Sometimes in the field you thought guys were shooting at you, but mostly they were

hunting rabbits. Big guys with real guns, not sling shots like us little kids used.

The field had just about everything. But not a baseball diamond. Baseball we played in the street, in the middle of the block, so the sewer cover could be home plate. And the fire hydrant was first base, those were "givens". The other bases depended on who could find what to use. Sometimes an old tire, or a big chunk of wood, or a chalk drawing. It never really mattered much, this was our ball park and we called the rules. And when a car drove by and broke up our game by going too slow, he heard us yell, "Get a horse!"

Oh yeh! We knew what horses were. The "Rags-Ol-Iron Man" went up the alleys with a horse-drawn wagon. The ice-man and the milk-man had horses. (Sometimes the ice-man's horse even helped make second base. We didn't care.) And when the ice-man stopped to deliver the 25-pound block of ice to the house where the card in the window had the 25 in the top position, that's when both teams would scramble all over the flat-bed wagon to get the biggest pieces of ice from the ice-man's most recent chiselings.

The river was different. First off, the river had a name. The Des Plaines River. The river

ran north to south, about two miles east of us. Most of the time the river didn't even run. The word big people used to describe the river was stagnant. We used the word stinky.

But sometimes, in the spring of the year, we'd say, "Let's go to the Des Plaines River." The spring rains would fill the creek, and the big kids would make a raft, and try to get the current to carry them down to the river. And the river would get some of that current, and carry the "stink" downstream. That's when we'd call out, "Ma-we're goin' fishin' in the Des Plaines River" and Ma would say, "Be careful-have fun-don't do anything I wouldn't do." Ma hardly ever said to any of us, "No, you can't do that." But she'd always say, "Don't do anything I wouldn't do." She said that all the way up to the time when we were seniors in High School, when we'd go out on dates, we'd leave the house and Ma would say, "Be careful-have fun-don't do anything I wouldn't do." Once I looked back at her and said, "But Ma, you're married."

Ma laughed-but she hardly ever said that again.

But when we went fishin' in the Des Plains River in the spring of the year, Ma knew we'd be gone all day. So she'd pack us a real nice lunch, and put it in a crumply brown paper bag, and

she'd throw in a couple of Idaho potatoes and some kitchen matches, and she'd say, "Be careful boys, and (you know the rest)"- and we'd be on our way. A bent safety pin at the end of a piece of grocery store string, at the end of an almost-straight tree branch, with a cork from a bottle of Raleigh's Medicine for a bobber and a rusty bolt for a sinker. And a can of fresh worms.

And we'd get half-way to the crick, and we'd get so hungry from all that walking that we'd have to stop and build a fire, and put the potatoes in the fire. And when the fire had burnt the potatoes to a crusty black, we'd pull them from the fire, and pop them back and forth from left hand to right, until they cooled to the point where they almost didn't burn us, much. And then we'd break them open and eat the best baked potatoes we ever had in our whole life . . .

. . . And then we'd go home and play baseball.

The Des Plaines River (the part that we knew) went south from North Avenue about a mile or so to Lake Street, right thru the forest preserves. About the middle of the forest preserves, there was a kind of park, and a nature museum that we'd go to sometimes when we didn't go fishing. Later on, when we went bike riding, we'd sometimes go to that park. (Later

still, when we got to use a car, we went to the park lots of times, after we'd picked up our dates.)

Once we went to that park when we were in 8th grade. But first we had to go to Pusateri's Grocery - and I had to go in, because the Pusateris' knew me; and they knew I came in a lot to buy Camel cigarettes for my dad. My dad always smoked Camels, except when he felt like talking German. Then he'd buy "Altes Geld" (Old Gold) cigarettes. But most of the time he'd buy Camels. So the other guys, four of them, said, "Rich, here's my three cents. You go in and get the cigarettes." So I did. And then we went to the forest preserves and we each smoked four cigarettes, one right after the other.

It was a cold day and we had on gloves, and it was hard to light a cigarette with gloves on. And four cigarettes were a lot, and our hands got cold, cause we took our gloves off, and our stomachs hurt cause it was near lunchtime, and our stomachs were empty, even before we smoked four cigarettes.

There was a slough in the forest preserves, and it froze over real good for ice-skating, even when the river wasn't frozen over. And later on, after we started high school, we'd go there to skate; my brother and me and a buddy named Hans-(Hans Wuttke). And on one particular day,

a cold, clear, crisp, Saturday, we were skating at the slough. And the slough was real close to the river. As we skated, we heard all the commotion down by the river, so we went over.

The river was somewhat frozen, but only along the shoreline. Hans' little brother Hóiffé had somehow followed us to the forest preserves, and he'd been playing on the river ice; and he had fallen in.

Immediately, Hans went out on the ice, as far as he could, and tried to grab him. He reached out as far as he could, and got hold of his head. But Hóiffé was wearing a tousled woolen cap. And Hans had grabbed his cap. And his cap came off, in Hans' hand, and Hóiffé's head slipped out, and down. His body was found the next day, by the Lake Street bridge. (I don't think any of us has ever forgotten that day.)

We lived at 1533 North 15th Avenue, Melrose Park, Illinois (No zip code). For a long time I thought I lived there all my life. In grade school, the teachers asked where I lived, and I'd tell them, and then they'd ask where I was born, and I'd say, "Melrose Park, Illinois". Sometime after third grade, I somehow found out that I had really been born in Forest Park, at home. And that we moved to Melrose Park when I was a year-old. And after that I dreaded the day when

Mr. Deffner, my fourth grade teacher, would ask me where I was born. Should I say Melrose Park? And keep on lying? Like I lied to all those other teachers? Or should I tell the truth, and make sure all those other teachers knew I was a liar? I knew that one of those Ten Commandments said that lying was a sin, and sinners would be punished. But when Mr. Deffner asked, I took my chances and told the truth. Forest Park, I said. And from that day on I was officially born in Forest Park, Illinois.

Forest Park wasn't very far, and just about every week or so we'd go to see one of our aunts and uncles. But coming home was a lot farther. Most of the time on the way home I'd pretend to fall asleep when we got to 15th Avenue and Division. That way when we got home, Ma or Pa would have to carry me from the garage to the house. (Sometimes I'd think Ma and Pa knew what pretend sleep was, cause they'd say how heavy I was getting to be, which always made me laugh.)

For me, grade school went from 1930 to 1938. That's where most of my childhood memories come from. But I remember sometime before 1930, when I was four or five, when I got real sick with a sore throat. The doctor came to see me a lot, and I had a stocking around my throat to cover the Vick's stuff they put on it.

Pretty soon the Vick's stuff made my throat all sore on the outside. So they put something else on, without a stocking. I was sick for about four or five months, all through winter and part of spring. Lots of times Mom made me a bed in the front room, to make me feel better. It was good during the daytime, cause I got to see more kids. But at night, when all the snakes climbed up and down the walls, I'd call for lots of drinks of water.

I must have scared Ma with my sore throat, cause after that, when I didn't feel like going to school, all I had to do was kick the covers off my feet at night, and in the morning, I'd have a sore throat, and Ma would say, "Maybe you shouldn't go to school today." And I'd say, "O.K."

The 1930's were the depression years, but us kids weren't hardly ever depressed. We had lots of fun playing games, like marbles. Each kid we knew had a bagful of marbles, except when he lost them when we played "for keeps". And everybody had a pocket-knife. And we'd play mumbly-peg and stuff. But we never played knife games "for keeps".

And on warm summer nights we'd play kick-the-can, and hide in the big bushes that grew all around the big house that always looked haunted, where nobody ever yelled if we ran all

over their yard. And we got all scratched up and itchy from bug bites, and stayed out real late, 'til Ma called us in. Or else we'd ride our wooden-crate cars that we'd been making for a long time and finally got finished. Cars with roller-skate wheels and tin-cans that held candles for head-lights. You had to stay out real late when you rode your car, otherwise what good were the head-lights?

Sometimes when it rained, we played "Train" on the front porch swing. We made the swing go sideways, instead of front-to-back, and it would bang into the house and then into the porch railing and then we'd stop and holler, "All aboard for "Fran San Cisco!" And pretty soon Ma would come out and say "Boys, stop that!"

After Eleanor Janowski moved in the house across the street, we couldn't play "Train" anymore when Roy was in the swing. And he was always in the swing, looking across the street, when Eleanor Janowski was wearing shorts.

During the Depression, Dad always had a job. He was a line-man for the Public Service Company of Northern Illinois. On the stormiest of nights, summer or winter, he'd work the longest hours. Day and night, sometimes, until all the houses had electricity again. Sometimes he got hurt, like when he fell off a telephone pole and

broke his leg. Or when he didn't know that there was a small hole in one of his rubber gloves he wore so he wouldn't get a shock, when he was handling a "hot" wire. That was when he had 2,500, or 25,000, or 250,000 volts go through his body. (The voltage changed in direct proportion to his intake of beer as he'd tell the story.) But he wasn't grounded when he got shocked, which was what saved his life.

Sometimes Dad came home in the middle of the day 'cause he was in the neighborhood, and he'd have the company truck, which was really like a car with metal where the back windows should have been. Inside were just two bucket seats in the front. In the back, on each side, were big cabinets all the way to the ceiling, full of all kinds of tools we couldn't play with. In summer, though, we could sit in front, if we were real careful, and we could pretend to drive his car. When we pretend drove, nobody hollered, "Get a horse", cause we pretend drove really fast.

Sometimes, when nobody felt much like doing anything, we'd sit on the curb and "own" all the cars going by. We'd lay separate claim to all the cars coming from a certain direction, or cars of a certain color, or certain makes of cars. And we'd play games, trying to name all makes of cars alphabetically, without repeating any names. But best of all was when Dad had to work on his own

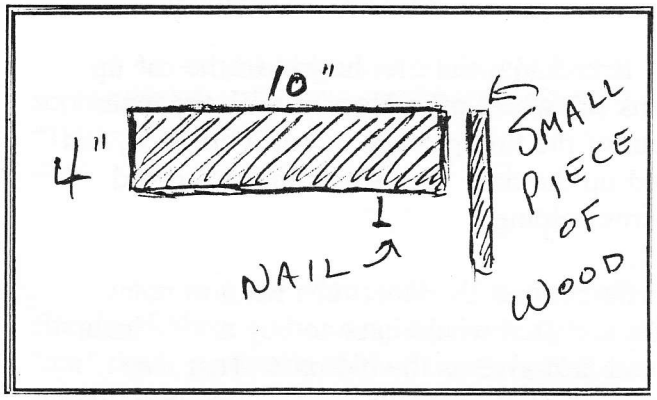
car. And best of all, then, was when he had to fix a tire.

If he had a flat tire, he jacked the car up and took the wheel off. Then he took the inner tube out of the tire, patched it, put it all back, and pumped up the tire. And sometimes we could take turns helping.

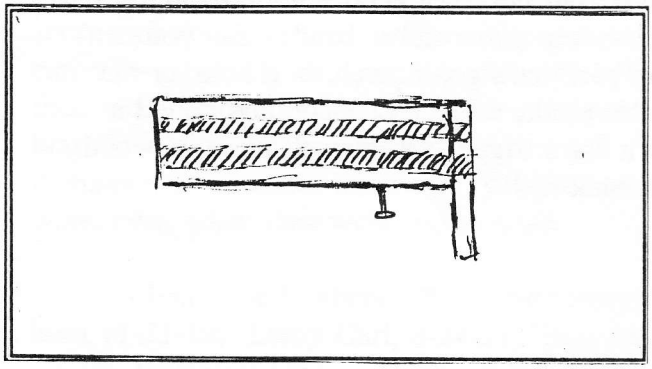
Sometimes the inner tube had too many patches, and Dad would have to buy a new inner tube, and he'd give us the old one! That was almost like Christmas! We cut the inner tube into four parts and we each got one part. Man alive! What a deal!

First thing was: make a rubber gun! Take a scissors (but not Ma's good scissors) and cut the inner-tube into giant rubber bands. But you can't use any part that's got a patch, or a hole, or the stem. Now take a block of wood and pound a nail in it for a trigger and a small piece of wood for the back end.

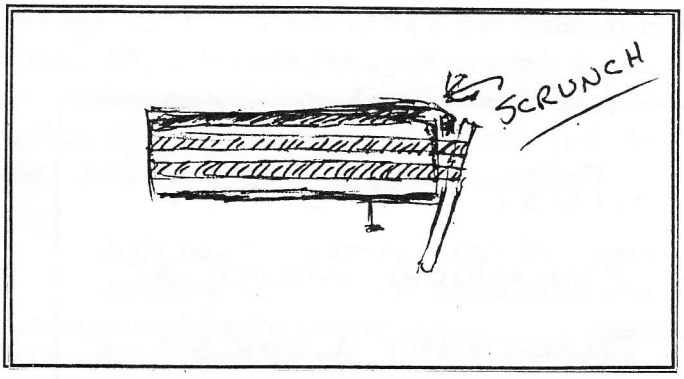
Here - let me draw you a picture:



Next, take two or three giant rubber bands and put them around all the wood to hold the gun together. Like this:



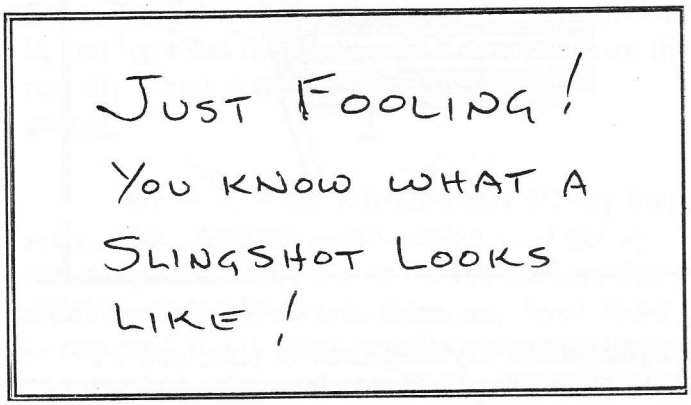
Next you take a giant rubber band for a bullet, and you load the gun. First you scrunch a piece of this giant rubber band into the top part of the gun and you hold it there while you stretch the other part to the front. Let me draw you another picture:



Then you push everything back in place and it's loaded. (Just ask your daddy if you need help.) Then you aim it and squeeze the trigger.

Rubber guns were always a lot more fun than cap guns, when you played "Cops and Robbers". When you got real good, you could load the gun from the bottom, too, but you had to be extra careful, cause the gun could blow up in your face and put your eye out. Besides, somebody could shoot you while you were fixing your gun.

The left-over pieces of the inner tube, the parts with the patches, is what we used for slingshots. Just cut two pieces the same length and attach one end of each part to a piece of leather to make a pocket to hold a stone. The other end you attached to a piece of a branch that you cut from a tree with your jack-knife. Here, let me draw you another picture:



I got pretty good at shooting stones with my slingshot. So good that I felt bad, sometimes, from what I shot. Once in a while we saw a hummingbird in our yard, and sometimes we saw something called a hummingbird hawkmoth. (Years later I learned that the two weren't at all related: that the hawkmoth is the adult stage of the tomato hookworm, which is a big enemy of tomato plants). Well, I was in a part of the field where somebody planted tomatoes in, and this

thing was flying around so fast, I couldn't even tell what it was. Especially since it was already getting dark, and kinda hard to see. So I just aimed my sling-shot and fired. And I sliced him right smack-dab into two parts. (No, I won't draw anymore pictures.) It turned out to be a hawkmoth, which Ma put in the same category as sparrows, so I didn't even get hollered at. But at first I felt kind of bad, thinking it was like a hummingbird.

Like I said, one of the things Ma didn't like was sparrows. She called them "Sputzies" and she said she didn't like them cause they were "dirty" birds. I knew what she meant by dirty! Once, when I was little, we took a trip to Iowa like we took every summer, and I had to use the out-house. (Most farmers didn't have regular bathrooms in those days.) Well, I saw this sparrow in the out-house. And when I got through, I tried to catch him. And it was my real lucky day, cause I caught him right away. And I brought him into the house, and everybody was sitting around the kitchen table, eating lunch. And I brought him to the table, and everybody yelled, "Get that thing out of here!" Except Ma. Ma said for me to get that "Sputzie" out of here. So I took him outside and let him go. And all my good luck flew away with him. I went back in and sat down at the table, and I began to feel itchy. And pretty soon I saw a little bug crawling

on my arm. And one jumped onto the table, and Ma saw him. And I learned why she called Sputzies "dirty" birds.

Because sparrows were so bad, it was ok to kill them. After all, wasn't it the sparrow, with his bow and arrow, that killed cock robin?

It was now another summer, and I had a new sling-shot cause Dad had a new inner-tube. And I had to try out my new sling-shot. So this time, all by myself, I went to the creek. Only this time I crossed 15th Avenue and went west. There was a great big tree, probably a poplar, about half a block up the creek. And birds were all around. Small birds. Sparrows! Sputzies!!

So I loaded my sling-shot with a small, shiny stone. A slick, shiny stone stuck in my sleek sling-shot to slay a stinkin' Sputzie. (My dad used to like Fibber McGee and Molly on the radio, and every time Fibber McGee would go into his routine like this, my Dad would laugh.) And that's what I did, I shot the Sputzie. And when I went to inspect my trophy, I was sick. Sicker than any kid who had just smoked four cigarettes. Cause it wasn't a sparrow-it was a robin. It was a robin that I had killed. Who killed cock robin? I, said Richard Cohrs, I killed cock robin. And so I buried this dead, little bird. But I sure didn't bury my sling-shot. I was

getting to be a real good shot. Maybe next time I'd have a better target.

"Maybe next time" was going to be some five years later. And it was going to be this same spot where I buried the robin. And it was going to be a much bigger target. But the target was going to be me. And I would know what a sputzie felt like, when he got a blow to the head. And after that I would hardly ever go west, past 15th Avenue, down by the creek, again.

But first I should stop and tell you why I'm writing all of this stuff . . .