

KIDS WAS KIDS

Chapter 3

Years later . . . years after I killed cock robin . . . Same side of the street . . . West of 15th avenue. Remember? Charlie Heinz and I went to the creek. We didn't have his BB gun. Years ago, we had gone through the built-up part of the neighborhood part of town and shot at squirrels in the trees with Charlie's BB gun until the cops came and warned us about doing stuff like that.

We were older now, and along the way we managed to create our share of enemies, especially Charlie. Maybe enemies is too harsh a word. Maybe I should just call them non-friends. Anyway, Charlie saw these non-friends first. Five of them. They were his non-friends, and he knew enough to run, and he did. I guess his non-friends couldn't understand why I didn't run. But I didn't. They weren't my non-friends. And so it took them a little while before they pounced on me, before they knocked me flat down onto the ground. But then the biggest of these kids took the thickest stick and stood over me, and swung with his mightiest might. Like a guy trying to chop a big log, he hit me square on the top of my head. Once. And then they ran. They knew that they had killed me.

When I came to, I got up, and walked home, and said, "Hi, Mom" and that was it. No blood. No lump. No headache. Nothing. To this day I haven't doubted the words of Psalm 91, where verse 11 says, "He shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways." My angel sat on my head that day, and my angel took that blow. And I have recognized the many times since, when I was aware . . . and the many times when I was not aware . . . of the dangers that confronted me . . . and again I say, "Thank you, Lord."

Money was scarce during the depression. And we were never given a formal allowance. Sometimes Mom would give us a penny as a reward for doing something, like going to the store when she really needed something. So most of the time we had some kind of a job.

Early on, I enjoyed going door-to-door in our neighborhood, and often beyond, trying my hand at selling. First it was punch boards. You probably don't even know what punch boards are. The only place I see them now is in an antique store in Denver. Punch boards were a clever form of gambling, with little kids like me being the pitch men. The card had about 100 chances on it, little circular discs which the customer punched out, and then paid the amount shown on the disc. Anywhere from one penny to 39 cents. When the

whole board was punched out, I could punch out the big winner's disc, and the winner would get the prize, and the prize was a clock. A real different kind of clock with a circular piece of metal imprinted with the 12 hours divided into quarter hour segments which went around and around (if you wound it). (Ask Uncle Roy to draw you the picture, he remembers it real good.) Anyway, this one time the winner was Charlie Heinz' folks. But that was way before we met Charlie's non-friends down by the creek west of 15th Avenue.

And the guy that sold the chances got a big prize too, just like the winner. A clock, but a real different kind of clock. Just like the clock in the picture that Uncle Roy drew, if you asked him to.

I don't have my clock anymore. But it's an antique, too. And it's worth a lot more than the antique punch boards that you can buy in Denver.

After we quit selling punch boards, I sold magazines. All the Bernard McFadden Publications. Liberty . . . Movie Mirror . . . Radio Mirror . . . Physical Culture. I'd go up to the door, and the lady would answer. And I'd go thru the Liberty magazine, page by page, and she'd be fixing dinner and by the time I got to page 23, the supper would be burning and she'd buy the mag-

azine just to get rid of me, I think. And if the husband answered the door and hollered out, "Do you want a magazine?", I knew I had a sale. But if he hollered out, "You don't want a magazine, do you?", I wouldn't even wait for the answer.

Selling magazines was my first-hand course in human psychology. And after a while I learned, if a skinny guy answered the door, I could sell him a "Physical Culture" magazine way before I got to page 23.

And after that we delivered newspapers, after we bought our bikes. First we delivered the Chicago American, an afternoon paper. Then we delivered the Herald Examiner, a morning newspaper. Then the one paper merged with the other, and we delivered the Herald American in the morning. But when something big happened, like when Dillinger was killed, we'd walk up and down the streets in the afternoon, shouting "Wuxtry! Wuxtry! Read all about it!" (We learned how to do this from what we saw in the movies.)

Me and Roy delivered the west side of Melrose Park. He had 20th Avenue to 22nd. And I had 23rd to 25th. Lots of times a customer wanted the paper put on his porch. But the porch was on the second floor, because lots of customers were just renting the upstairs rooms. And there was a railing around the porch, and flower pots on

the railing, with flowers in the pots during summer. And we couldn't very well walk up all those stairs; so we lobbed the paper over the railing, hoping it would land in the vicinity of the door.

But sometimes the paper hit the flower pot--which fell and broke. And sometimes the paper hit the window, and the window broke. That's when my brother Ray made his money, fixing broken windows. Sometimes he'd make more money fixing windows than we did delivering papers.

The west side of Melrose Park, from 20th to 25th Avenue, was called "Little Italy", because so many Italians lived there. And Italians appreciated it when their papers were always delivered on time and stuff. So they sometimes gave us tips. But nobody had lots of money for tips during the depression. Italians also liked to drink lots of wine, especially with dinner. "Dago Red" they called it. And their kids drank it for supper, too. Around Christmas time we got the most tips, when we collected the money for the papers we delivered. And we usually collected around supper-time. And the people that didn't have the money to tip us would invite us into their house, and they would give us a big glass of "Dago Red". It's a good thing Christmas came in winter, when it was real cold outside. 'Cause that

"Dago Red" really warmed us up fast, (one time it warmed us up so much that we were still warm, when we went to the Christmas Eve services up at church).

Christmas was always something special (it still is), but there's one Christmas I especially remember. One by one, each of us kids was getting sick with chicken pox, so that the house would have to be quarantined. So this guy (Mom said he was from the Dept. of Health) came by, and nailed these red signs onto our front and back doors. The sign meant that nobody could leave the house until the quarantine was lifted. So it also meant nobody should come in, unless he wanted to stay awhile. It meant, pure and simple, "Keep away from this house".

We started getting the chicken pox early in December. So we should have all gotten over it, and gotten out of quarantine, way before Christmas, except . . . except for Roy. Roy didn't get the chicken pox. He ended up getting scarlet fever.

Anyway, when we got quarantined, my Dad went to live with Aunt Clara, so he could still go to work, and not be locked up in our house with us. And then, when Roy got scarlet fever, we knew we would still be quarantined at Christmas time.

Roy was in the front bedroom, the one with the window that looked out onto the porch. The rest of us kids were in the other bedroom, so we wouldn't catch Roy's scarlet fever. (Otherwise, all us kids slept in the other bedroom; and Mom and Dad had the front bedroom.)

Just after dark (so it must have been about six o'clock) on Christmas Eve, Roy heard this rap-tap-tap on his window. And Ma went "flying", with all us kids right after her! And she opened the window, and there was Dad. It was cold outside, and snowing. And Dad was wearing his heavy coat, and his hat with the ear-muffs. And we were all shivery, until Ma said for us to get our jackets. And we all talked to Daddy a long time, and it was just like Christmas.

Sometimes birthdays were like Christmas. One time my birthday fell on Easter, so I got a birthday present, in addition to my Easter basket. A pair of roller skates, which is what I really, really wanted, cause I could go real fast. Besides, when they wore out, I'd have the roller-skate wheels to make a wooden-crate car with tin-cans that held candles for head-lights, like the big kids.

Lots of times New Year's Eve was like the Fourth of July. Uncle Fred had a big, double-barreled shot-gun, and our folks would invite him and Aunt Helen over to celebrate New Year's Eve,

and he'd bring his shot-gun. And when it got close to midnight, he'd go outside . . . him and my Dad. Us kids couldn't go outside, cause he'd load his shotgun; and exactly at 12 o'clock midnight, he'd shoot his gun into the ground.

I think that was the only time in her life that Ma ever let anybody bring a gun into our house. She didn't like guns, just as much as she didn't like cats and dogs. But she didn't mind snakes, or frogs, or lizards and fish and stuff like that. And she didn't mind fireworks, either.

Right next to Pusateri's Corner Store there was a vacant lot. Actually, the whole block was vacant, except for the Corner Store, which was on the southeast corner of 15th Avenue and Division Street. The vacant lot was almost always vacant, except around the Fourth of July. That was when a big tent was moved onto the land, and every kid in the neighborhood waited around for it to open up, cause they sold fireworks in the tent.

And these were real fireworks! I don't remember many of the names, but I think there were like Cannon Crackers and Cherry Bombs and some sissy things like Ladyfingers. The only thing good about Ladyfingers was Ma didn't holler when we held a package of them in our hand, and lit them, and let them explode while we held them. The big kids held big fireworks in their

hands and let them explode while holding them.
(I think they were the Cannon Crackers.)
Sometimes they held them too long, and this one
kid that lived across the alley from us once lost
two fingers holding them too long.

But we could buy the big firecrackers, and
we used to get rusty old tin-cans that didn't have
the labels anymore, and we used to put a
firecracker on the ground and put the tin-can over
it, and light the firecracker, and watch the can fly
real high; higher than the roof of my Dad's
garage.

We used to shoot firecrackers all day long,
seems like. And the next morning we'd get up
real early, and look all over for firecrackers that
didn't explode. We'd take them, and break them
in two, and knock some powder out and light it,
and watch the firecracker spin all over.

At night, on the 4th of July, my Mom and
Dad would take us to a park in Forest Park. We'd
get to the park before dark, so that we could get a
good place to put our blanket and sit around
forever, until it got dark plus one-half hour, and
then we'd watch the real big fireworks show, and
then we'd go home and have some ice cream.

We had lots of fun on Hallowe'en, too.
We never had anything like "Trick or Treat", so

all we ever did was trick. Most of the time, when we were real little, we just got dressed up like cowboys. We had on our overalls, and we put on our "hightops" and our belt with two holsters and a red bandanna. Then Ma would give each of us a bar of soap, and we'd go up and down the street, soaping the windows of any cars parked out in the street. (Pa would always park his car in the garage on Hallowe'en.) Then we'd go to the Corner Store and soap Pusateri's windows 'til we ran out of soap. Then we'd go home and get some of Ma's wax that she used when she made jelly, for when she put the jelly in the jar, and we'd go out and wax all the windows of the cars that we had soaped. And all the people got mad, cause we used wax, which is why Dad put his car in the garage.

Later on we did some worse things, like taking Mrs. Hildebrandt's garbage can and hoisting it onto her garage roof and dumping it upside down. Nobody had plastic garbage bags in those days. You just had a big 55-gallon drum in the alley. And Ma would have a paper bag in the house that she dumped all the garbage in. Then she'd call us kids to take out the garbage. And so we held the garbage bag with one hand, and our nose with the other. When we got to the alley, we'd turn the bag upside down, and dump all the garbage stuff into the big drum.

And that's the kind of mess we left on Mrs. Hildebrandt's garage roof.

As we got older, our tricks got more sophisticated. Which is why the kids today have "Trick or Treat".

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As we grew older, a lot of rumors were circulated about some company building a zoo in "our" field, eastwards to the Des Plaines River. But the field belonged to Farmer Schmidt, and when he died, his will was in probate for such a long time that the zoo-builders went south and built the zoo in Brookfield. The zoo was already built by the time we got into high school, and Hans Wuttke and I used to ride our bikes to the zoo, to photograph the animals with our new cameras, especially the giraffes, and especially their faces when they ate the leaves off the tree branches. But our cameras took such small pictures that we could hardly tell what the pictures were, even when they were pretty good.

I had three brothers. Raymond Henry, born 11-21-19; Leroy Carl, 8-24-21; then me, 3-27-24; then Paul Otto, 1-21-27. If you look at those dates again, you'll notice that the birth-day of each one of us equals the birth-year (last two digits) of the next born. (Which all ended when

Paul was born, cause Ray had already used that date.)

Our middle names were taken from our sponsors, usually uncles, except for Paul, his sponsor was Otto Cohrs, a cousin whose folks, Will and Bertha, lived in Bensenville, Ill. Uncle Will was Dad's oldest brother.

Anyway, when Paul was in about 6th grade at St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran School, 11th Avenue and Lake Street (which is where we all went to grade school), and when I was about a freshman at Proviso Township High School, 5th Avenue and Madison, Maywood (which is where we all went to High School), Paul and I decided to take a bike ride. We would have gone to visit Uncle Fred, my sponsor, but he lived in Forest Park, and that was too close for an all-day bike ride. So we went to Bensenville, because Paul's middle name was Otto.

We got to Elmhurst, and we were getting thirsty, cause it was getting hot, and I was riding Paulie (which is what we called him) on the bar of my bike. So we swiped a chunk of ice from an ice truck in Elmhurst, and then kept on going. And when we got to Aunt Bertha's house, she made us a hot cup of Postum, which was like a cup of coffee without the coffee. And then we went home. Round trip, it was 2,412 miles.

One time, maybe the next year after Bensenville, Roy and I rode our bikes to Diamond Lake, which is about 30 miles north of where we lived. Roy asked the bartender in the tavern if we could camp overnight in his yard, and the bartender said OK. Then Roy asked if we could build a campfire and he said OK. So Roy got out his shiny new hatchet and wham! cut a gash an inch long and half an inch deep in his ankle. Then we ate and went to bed and got up and went home.

Roy says it didn't happen that way. He says he chopped his ankle when him and me and Paulie went on a fishing trip to Wisconsin in his '34 Dodge. We went fishing for muskies, mostly. And we used 5" minnows for bait, and fished in a creek you could jump across. And we didn't catch anything. But we had fun. And on the way home, Roy had to coast down all the hills he could, 'cause the gas gauge said empty. And we didn't have any more money.

So, if Roy really cut his ankle on the bicycle trip, I'll bet he was at least wishing he had a '34 Dodge!

When I was, like, a sophomore or junior in High School, Ray had a new 1940 Chevrolet which he bought cause he needed it for work (and cause back then girls liked guys that had new

cars). So this one time he asked Roy if they should go on a trip, and Roy said yes. And then they said should they take Richie? And they must have said yes, cause I went along, cause Ma hardly ever said no.

I didn't have to do much to get ready for the trip. We were going down to Lookout Mountain, Tenn.(destination) and Ma would see to it that all our clothes were ready, but I had to get my own cigarettes. But I didn't have a lot of money saved for cigarettes, so I bought a cigarette-making machine. And then I made a cigar-box full of cigarettes. And by the time I smoked the last one, I was almost ready to quit smoking for good.

After a while me and Al Neukuckatz got to be best buddies in high school. And this one time he showed me 3 one-hundred dollar bills his Dad gave him to buy the first car their family ever had. And the next thing I knew he came by and we went for a ride in his '37 Dodge.

He was the only one in his family that drove a car. So he got to use it, when we wanted to go someplace. So we used to go out to Elmhurst and Villa Park and date these girls out there. World War II was just getting started, and the speed limit was 35 MPH. On the old cars, there used to be a throttle, and a choke. So, lots

of times, when we left our house and got to North Avenue, Al just pulled out the choke 'til we got to 35 MPH, and he never touched the gas pedal again, until we got to Elmhurst.

We used to have a lot of fun, double-dating. And a lot of times we all acted like a bunch of kids. This one time we were driving along North Avenue at night, and we saw a dead cat in the road. Then somebody said we should stop and pick it up and we did. And then we shoved it into some farmer's mail-box, because somebody else said that was the proper thing to do.

Traffic was never real heavy, even on North Avenue. This one time we were coming home from Elmhurst, and we heard that some gangster, like Baby-Face Nelson, had been seen in the Chicago area, and that the police were setting up road-blocks. So we pulled over to the side of the road, got out of the car, and motioned all the cars behind us to pull over to the side of the road, "Road-block!" we said. And they did. Then we got in our car and drove away.

It was about this time that there was a fire in our neighborhood. Not a big fire, or anything like that. But the field in the block north of us had caught fire, and I walked over to see what was going on. At the same time there was this

new girl in the neighborhood that lived a block north of us on the other side of the street, and she walked over to see the fire, too. And so we said "hello".

Me and Neuk kept going to Elmhurst and stuff, but lots of times I'd kind of wish for another field fire. And then we got drafted.

When I came home on furlough, my Dad let me use his car. And I got some gas ration stamps from the National Tea Store manager I used to work for. So I started dating the girl I met at the fire.

When my furlough was over, I was waiting at home with my folks for my ride to take me to the train station. Then I heard a knock at the door, and there was this girl from up the street. And she came in and just sat there until my ride came. And then we said "Good-bye". But what we really said was "Hello" to the rest of our life. 'Cause this girl was G'ma Margie.

But that's another story . . .