

Fun

By Carl Nelson

“the pleasure of taking pains” – Frost

What makes fun? One component might be the passage of time. Harsh times are oft times fun in collegial recollection, sitting about the hearth matching tales of woe. Was it all fun? Will it all be fun, eventually? Or something you hate... Can you make fun of it? Fun seems something evanescent and it is perhaps foolish to chase it. And yet, it's like swimming – you must place more than a toe in the water to experience it.

The thing about fun is that you have to make it yourself. Even if it were delivered up on the half shell, you would still have to get off your rear and participate. The youth today in many ways have many more options, but I'm not convinced they have more fun.

The fact that real fun takes some work is what prepares youth for later life and the pleasure of effort. When I compare the activities of wealthy friends I've known with those of more modest means, the fun activities of the wealthy as youth were often centered around achieving status within their tradition while with their free time breaking the plebian strictures scot-free; that is, relishing a certain immunity from consequences. Whereas the fun created by those of modest means was invented and fashioned from the lumber ends of the modestly assembled lives of those around them. In many ways their manufactured fun broke the rules through use of their innate creativity.

For example, our mom was a lover of Pepsi Colas. And so we all drank them. The empties were kept under the sink. And when they had accumulated enough my sister and I would truck them to the store in our little red wagon. The big bottles returned

for a nickel and the regular size for three cents, if memory serves. And we were allowed to keep the money for our efforts. Oh, the pleasures of effort! The store was uphill three blocks and then three more blocks to the east where we had to cross a busy thoroughfare to finally achieve the store parking lot with its front entrance and the cashiers behind the glass doors who would pay us for the returns.

I was in the third or fourth grade. My sister was four years younger and would generally do anything I suggested. Being greedy, we would pile the wagon with more bottles than prudence might allow. While the wagon was stationary, the stack of empties were generally secure, but when moved, quivers of shaking glassware would ascend the wobbling edifice. So my sister's job was to stabilize the structure with her hands while I pulled. And of course the sidewalks had cracks and elevated edges which would send shivers through the wagon and then up through the tower of bottles. My sister, Blythe, was kept on her toes circling the teetery heap, holding here and pressing there to keep our tower of ambition from crumbling. Meanwhile, I struggled to pull the wagon gently as possible, easing it over the cracks and ledges, while yelling instructions.

The curbstones were our biggest obstacles. I would gently lift the front of the wagon from the street onto the sidewalk. Then I would walk around to urge the back of the wagon up onto the sidewalk while my sister tried to manage the tiller (wagon handle) under my direction and watch the bottles. They put the soda in pretty stout bottles in those days and we didn't break any. But it was quite a trial and quite a distance – a much harder expedition than we had imagined. But we kept our spirits up by anticipating what we might purchase with the money we made and calculating how much money that would be. I started out wanting perhaps a Snickers and a Sugar Daddy and a comic.

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torn between purchasing the comic book I had envisioned and a bottle of orange Nehi. I remember my sister has always loved Reese's Cups, so I imagine she bought several of those. I stood about so long sampling the various superhero comics that I nearly had several read before I finally decided on the Nehi. Literature would have to wait for later.

Another memory I have which is fun to recall in retrospect was of one winter while still living on our homestead in the Columbia Basin. Snow was all over and my brothers were sent out to cut the heads off some chickens. Once they had done this, they gave me the job of getting rid of the chicken heads. I was to take them across the road, and then some distance beyond, and bury them.

So I walked off pulling my small American Flyer sled with a pasteboard box of chicken heads in it. I crossed the road, up and over the canal embankment, and then off into the sagebrush beyond. In a short time I found myself at the top of this hill. It seemed easier to ride the sled down the hill than to walk, so placing the box of chicken heads on my lap I pushed off. Things went a little faster than anticipated and midway down I smacked a lump in the snow which was a small boulder. Everything went ass over tea kettle. I wound up sitting in the

snow with chicken heads all around, in mental retrospect a rather grotesque diorama, but the sort of thing which is funnier with time. The event took such a short period of time, but offered years of quiet rumination about the quiet horrors of hiding crimes.

A writer and middle-school teacher, Matthew Bates, who I follow on Quora, posted an interesting essay the other day. Someone asked, "Is there a lack of imagination in children today?"

To which Matthew answered: "The imagination is the same, but the effort used to express that imagination has plummeted."

"My students can spend hours "building" something on Minecraft, but give up quickly when building something with Legos, if they can't immediately find the piece they're looking for.

They can spend hours "drawing" something online, but won't bother looking in their book bag for their coloring supplies if they're drawing something in class. They'll just sketch some stick figures and call it done.

They will have great interactions on Roblox, playing with their friends, exploring things, having fun, etc... But, when they're with those same friends in real life, and have the opportunity to do whatever they want with them, they mostly just sit around and chat.

Similarly, when I'm on recess duty, I've noticed an increase over the years in the number of students who opt to just sit around and chat during recess, rather than actually playing anything. I've also noticed an increase in the number of students who quit playing whatever they're playing as soon as things don't go exactly as they'd planned.

The kid who just missed a catch and then decided to just be done playing for the day? After missing just one catch? Yeah...

that didn't used to happen. It happens on a regular basis now."

One of my older brothers, an electrical engineer, worked from Boeing and one of his tasks during one period was to evaluate prospective engineering candidates. In keeping a bit with what Matthew Bates noted above, my brother commented that while judging engineering projects/experiments of the aspiring engineering candidates, the majority of them chose software problems while among the remainder who chose to solve the problems with hardware, about half of those gave them up partway through and switched to software solutions. Physical reality is just too difficult. Problems emerged from everywhere.

Something happened between the days of my youth and those of our offspring. When I was young the best way to do something was generally seen as just to start. Try it. Outdoor adventure was a good example. Would we like to summit a mountain or take a wilderness trek? We usually decided this on the spur of finding a topographic map of an area within reach. Our gear was assembled usually from some of our more rugged working clothes plus lots of wool, and stuffed in the backpack along with a poncho, the map, matches, some trail mix and a canteen. Hi ho, off we'd go, hiking, following along the dashed lines as they wound their way through the contour lines, and interpreting our location as we stopped every so often to puzzle it out.

An adventure started a bit differently with the next generation. My nephews went about near everything they did a bit smarter. They researched. They ate healthier. They clothed themselves in layers so as to radiate the heat from their exertions better and to limit the damp. They knew a lot more about the area they were hiking. And the whole expedition usually began at a store.

Having an adventure began to get more expensive. One needed,

first of all, to get properly outfitted. Understanding the risks and being properly prepared was important. The thing is, for our generation especially, undertaking the risk was a large component of the allure. And not knowing much about what we were getting into helped to propel us along. That is, "let's find out!" Ignorance was our secret friend.

You would have had to stretch a bit to become more improperly outfitted for snow skiing than my brothers and I back in the mid 60s. My brothers were gung ho to give skiing a try. We had a new ski resort an hour's drive from town. Our dad (a hydrologist) liked the idea, and brought home some cast off cross country skis used by the Conservation Service to judge snow packs in the mountains. They were huge thick oak boards without steel edges, and much longer than needed. (In fact, one of mine was four inches longer than the other.) We also received long poles with large leather baskets and square-toed, one layer, scuffed leather boots.

We replaced the bear claw ski bindings with some new toe bindings and rear boot cables. To spruce them up a bit, we painted the tops with latex and sanded and polished the base, then applied wax. I taped and painted a racing stripe on mine figuring it made them look hot.

I wore an old leather coat and a wool sweater with scarf, a wool hat and woolen trousers and a thick pair of socks. And I purchased a cheaper ticket to use on the 'bunny' hill rope tows. These were on the modestly sloped and graded runs surrounding the lodge.

I quickly realized I needed some gloves with pigskin palms to handle the speeding one and a half inch thick icy tow rope. As one slowly clenched the rope, the tow would begin to move you forward as the rope sped through your hands until it was fully grasped and you were moving up to speed. If the skier in front failed to grip hard enough as the tow ascended the hill, they might stall, or slide backwards, in which case I would either

have to let the rope slide through my hands so as not to run over them, or stop clinging altogether and begin sliding backwards myself. In time I became proficient enough with the use of my skis to shift into a herringbone stance to halt my backward slide. But this still wouldn't stop the skier in front from plowing backwards over me. Generally the rope tow performed fairly well for all concerned, but now and then one or another skier would falter and then a collection of them would begin sliding backwards stacking up like hors d'oeuvres on a toothpick. Untangling the mash up was done somewhat like playing pick-up sticks.

We packed sandwiches of mayonnaise and lettuce with leftover turkey, maybe ham, peanut butter and jam, dropped in an orange or apple, and sometimes a pan of Rice Crispy marshmallow squares. We ate noontimes as we melted into soggy woolen figures in a warming car with fogged windows. The food oozed a bit from our frozen lips as our facial muscles warmed and began to function. And of course we also had partially frozen Pepsis. I was just getting cozy and a bit drowsy, when it was time to get up and go at it again. Sometimes it was tough getting up and out again into that sideways blowing snow. But having fun was the job and it was understood that we all had to pull our weight. No laggards.

As the years passed and our skills improved, we upgraded our equipment also.

Getting the right crowd was sometimes a task. You needed people who could ski enough to keep up; were adventurous enough to be fun; and didn't complain. Girl friends could be a headache and keep a guy trapped on the bunny hill throughout the best portion of the day, and you had to help them with this and that. But those few who could keep up or even excel with the guys were a treasure. They were like the Greek Goddess Artemis and to be admired wherever they were spotted on the ski slopes. Everyone's dream.

The best way of assembling the right crowd was to just head out and the ones who generally stayed attached were the members.

One of the problems that come with age is that you haven't the energy to have as much fun anymore. That and with injuries a lot of activities are off-limits. In fact, one of the ways older folks have fun is chatting about those younger days when they did.

I quit snow skiing due partly to balance problems. I fell over after skiing to a stop on a very gentle, nearly flat run out. I stopped fine; then just fell over. When everything is white, including most of the sky, orientation gets a bit wiggly. And then, getting up from a flat surface is difficult for the elderly, especially when wearing skis. I'd had to take them off, then stand up to put them back on. Plus, I think I cracked a rib in the fall. It hurt for weeks after. But that wasn't the real killer.

Before the fall I had become disenchanted with further skiing, as I hadn't the endurance to ski the steeper slopes, the strength and balance to zip in and out the moguls and trees, or adapt to the abrupt changes of speed. In short, I could glide gently down the novice slopes doing lazy arcs to check my speed. Pretty boring. I'd rather sit in the lodge over a beer. Sitting, as you age, grows more and more attractive. And you have to get your fun with whatever audience you might attract.

So here I sit, and here we are. But, it's been fun for me. Probably because finding the right words to express a nebulous thought so as to condense it into in a paragraph – and then to organize all of this into a clear read to share – is a fun challenge, rather like skiing the moguls.

How about you? Was it fun for you?