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Memorandum

To: Trialists

Fr: Curtis Meinert

Re: School picnics



My first six years of education was in a one room country school. District 36, Prairieville Township, Brown County, Minnesota. The school was about a mile and half from home and about a mile as the crow flies. Heat was from a coal fired furnace. The furnace was inside a round metal shell to keep from getting burned if touched.

The fire was banked at the end of the day, so getting it started the next morning only required a bucket of coal and an open damper.

Monday mornings were different. The fire had to be started from scratch. It took a couple hours on Mondays to warm up.

The school was a few hundred feet from the Chicago-Northwestern railroad line. I was always watching for black smoke coming down the line from Sleepy Eye. The best was when the smoke was from a special train (identified by white flags on the engine). "Specials" were usually long and had two engines. But even then the train had trouble making the grade past school to Cobden. Sometimes the engines sat at the crossing, blowing black smoke, and spinning their drivers.

There was no studying when that happened. Even the teacher was drawn to the window.

The big event when the year ended was the school picnic.

School picnics

Somehow they got organized, but it wasn't obvious who was in charge. They just happened as spring turned to summer.

There were lots of people. The school grounds were parked full.

Picnics started around noon. For early birds about 11:30 and for us around 12:30.

Dad was always "ready". Mother was the "problem".

My Dad would sit in the car and honk the horn. Not heavy honking. Just enough to be annoying.

The honking had no apparent effect. Mother seemed immune, save for a few sharp words on entering the car for the picnic.

(A vocabulary note. The noon meal on the farm is dinner, but it is "lunch" when sitting on the ground eating off your lap.)

The eating was fine, but what I remember most is the "ball game". It started around two. First a few of the younger kids started tossing the ball. Then came the bigger boys, always with an appropriate delay to distance themselves from their younger counterparts and to show proper disdain. After that the big guys showed up.

Once a critical mass formed, there was that awkward event of choosing sides. Somehow two people would be "nominated" to choose, usually a couple of big guns so that, at least, they would be on different teams. Then someone tossed the bat to one of them and they hand "walked" up the bat until there was nothing left to grab. The last one with bat to grab got to choose first.

Then came the choices and unless you were a power hitter, or looked like one, you had to mill around. Trying not to notice that they were getting near the bottom of the barrel and still no call. But sooner or later you went, everybody did.

The best I could hope for would to be on the team with Charlie Moldaschel. Charlie was a power hitter! When he came to bat everybody moved back, back to the road ditch by Riebel's if you were in the outfield. On more than a few occasions, even with that defensive maneuver, you had to fish the ball out of Riebel's grove. And more often than not you were still fishing after Charlie rounded the bases.

And if you were the unlucky one to do the "fishing" everyone was shouting orders, "go right", "go left", "come ahead", "go back", "hurry, hurry", all to no avail.

I don't remember the scores of any of the games. Suffice it to say they were not low scoring affairs, nor were they error free. Oh sure, the winning team had boasting rights, but it wasn't polite to boast. In any case, it was the game that mattered, not the score.

Now they all seem like squeakers and I don't recall any errors!

Before the game, usually around mid morning, Red Schueler from Sleepy Eye delivered ice cream. Two 10 gallon containers – one chocolate and the other vanilla – both in heavy insulated containers.

The first round of ice cream belonged to the ball players. No question when your turn came as to one or two dips. The amount you got was not measured in dips, but by how much the cone would support – about four dips.

It usually took two to three trips to get satisfied. There was enough for a fourth or even a fifth trip for those who could manage – few could!

Cones are for licking.

Perfecting the art is difficult when the ice cream is soft, the weather warm, and the servings big! You have to be fast and skilled. No time to talk. Just licking.

School picnics

After ice cream the picnic wound down. The women were busy divvying food and finding their dishes – a search aided by the fact that most – Mother included – marked the bottom of their dishes with tape and their name. The men just milled around, scratching their heads and talking smart.

The saddest part of the day was getting home to a house that had been empty all day and still too early to go to bed and too late to get into anything new.

It is sad that the sense of community that made school picnics social events is gone. Long gone in urban America, and gone too now in rural America.

I wonder if there was a District 36 picnic today if anyone would come and if they did would they know what to talk about?