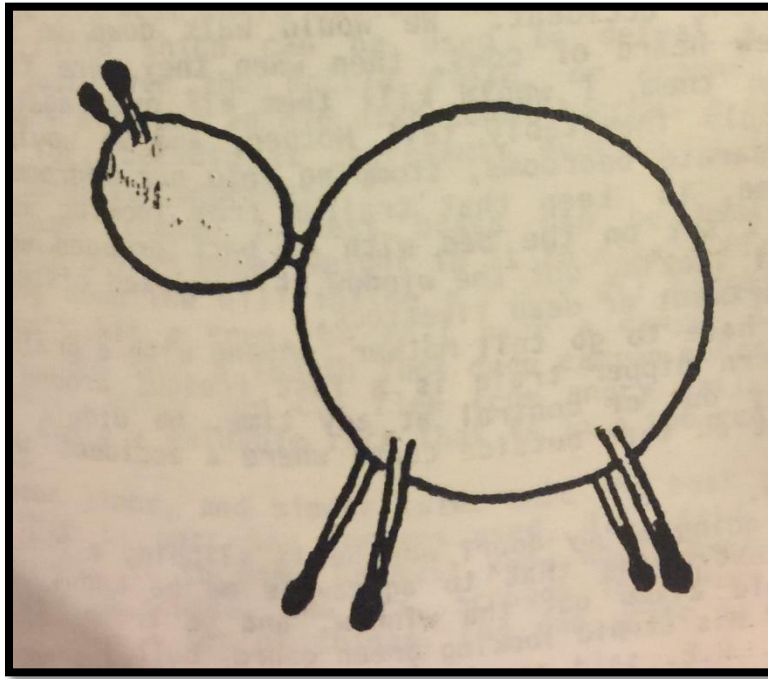


TOYS AND OBSERVATIONS OF A SMALL BOY



There was a lot of work to do around a sharecropper farm if you were going to force a living out of the land, but there was still time for two small boys to play. With little money to buy toys, a lot of play time was spent making toys from whatever we could find around the farm or over at the neighborhood trash dump. It would surprise you at all the things two small boys can find after their Mother is so exhausted from the daily excruciating experience that she must lie down to rest before her already weakened heart completely stopped.

An old ice shaver makes a wonderful bulldozer, road scraper, and dirt loader. Wooden cheese boxes become houses and barns or wagons with jar flats for wheels and truck beds that can haul large amounts of fill dirt to make roads. Small pieces of two-by-four or one-by-four boards nailed together make good cars and flatbed pickups with soda pop caps for wheels. And a string of old cistern dippers made the only train I had, but it was the best train to ever rumble down a dirt track, because it was my train, and it could haul anything I wanted to at any speed. I could imagine or wreck on any curve at any time and kill everyone in sight even R.E.'s entire herd of gourd and match stick cows. Match stick cows were wonderful toys with an endless supply of materials. On the Oklahoma prairie there is a wild gourd that only grows to about the size of a baseball, if you take a large one and a small one you can push a match stick into each to hold them together, with the body and head assembled, you take four used match sticks to make the legs with the burned ends looking like the hooves. R.E. would become very upset when I ran my cistern dipper train off the track through his farm killing all of the cows.

After the fight was over because all of his cows had been killed in a terrible accident we would walk down to the canyon to pick him a new herd of cows, then when they were fixed just the

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way he wanted them, I would kill them all over again. Out of frustration he would inevitably tell Mother and we would have to take a nap in separate bedrooms, stomping into our bedroom slamming the door behind me to keep that traitor from looking at me from Mother's bedroom, I set on the bed with my back propped up against the iron foot rail looking out the window at a wrecked cistern dipper train and an assortment of dead livestock.

(R.E. didn't have to go tell Mother. Anyone with a brain should know that a cistern dipper train is a fast freight around a rose bush and can fly out of control at any time. He didn't have to put his cows right on that outside curve where an accident was bound to happen.)

Psssst, Gary.

(What is he doing at my door? Now he is slipping a note under the door. He's just doing that to aggravate me, he knows I can't read yet. I should climb out the window and go tromp the match stick horns off of his stupid looking green gourd bull.)

"Psssst, Gary." R.E. said, opening the door wide enough to stick his head inside the bedroom. "She's asleep."

So what?

Do you want to go down to the canyon and pick some more gourds?

OK.

Slipping out of the bedroom and across the kitchen floor I started to open the door.

No! Don't. That door squeaks, let's climb out the porch window.

Sneaking around the house, R.E. stopped long enough to pull himself up to the window and peek in to make sure we had made a clean escape.

Over the hill and down in the calf pasture we started picking a bucket full of new cows, I started putting some old yellowed gourds into the bucket.

Gary. I don't want those old dead gourds.

It doesn't make any difference, because if you put your cows too close to my train they'll die anyway.

A small boy's imagination is a world all alone and two boy's imagination together is a universe without limit. They can make swords out of lath and defeat an entire armada of pirates to rescue a lady in distress that looks very much like an old pillow. An old well rope can swing you across a barn looking ship full of evil men who must be defeated at all cost, and a chicken house roof is a wonderful castle to be defended against overwhelming odds to preserve a world where good

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always wins. The ladder of a windmill tower leads up to the crow's nest of a ship of war sailing across the dusty sea.

A sawhorse and an old oil barrel make tireless horses to carry you into the Old West where outlaws never get away, and a broom handle becomes a rifle which can be used to defeat a relentless enemy somewhere just over the battle field or around the next bend of a dusty cow trail, and an old dish towel becomes a flag worth fighting or dying for because it represents everything that is good in a world too large to comprehend.

Old heart shaped harness brass can be heated over a small campfire with a lead wheel weight in it to make a flat fishing sinker. And rolling down the hill inside a rusty oil barrel is a great ride if you don't hit a tree or roll over a canyon bank. A hog wire fence stretched over a four foot deep canyon makes a good suspended bridge across which you can flee from angry natives from whom you have just stole a valuable rock that is in a tobacco sack tied around your neck.

Dogwood limbs and binder twine make the best bow and arrows because that is what the Indians used, R.E. said so, although you wouldn't admit it to him he must know about everything, after all he has been to school and Mrs. Scruggs is a very smart woman who has taught him a lot of things. (He can write my name and it is even longer than his.)

Mustard or mayonnaise sandwiches with hot Kool-Aid from a fruit jar make a feast when eaten in a cave dug into the top of a canyon bank and covered with boards, dirt, and grass, to hide it from the rest of the world. It is good when your brother is your best friend, even when he don't take his turn going to the house to sneak out with the sandwiches. (The next time I'll just let him starve.)

R.E. is always trying to be the boss but he isn't very good at it because I can always make him so frustrated he will throw up his hands and walk away talking to himself, but he has to try because Mother said so. I don't care. She also said I had to listen, so I listen, then do what I want to. He can't say I didn't do what she told me to do, I just didn't do what he said.

(It really isn't a crime to ignore him you know, after all he tells me to do a lot of dumb things and even dumber things that I'm not supposed to do. I just know that won't cause me to have a sty in my eye.)

Mulberry wine is pretty good, but it is difficult to get all the worms out of them and prevent the mold from forming on top while you are trying to sour the juice, it's even better if you can mix it with some of Dad's Four Roses asthma medicine.

Snake skins make good wind kites when tied to a long thread, but don't let Mother catch you with her new thread. Green gourds are good hand grenades to throw across the canyon at your enemy, but they hurt like the devil when you are hit by one. Dry gourds are better to be hit with, but nobody ever throws dry gourds at me.

The last person in the house is a rotten egg, but sometimes the first person in the house gets bawled out for slamming the door and causing Mother's cake to fall in the oven. (R.E. can be

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very tricky sometimes, he didn't even come into the house, and I'm not going to get out of the house for a long time. Just wait until he goes to sleep tonight. I'm going to pour warm water on his side of the bed again, that will make him be real quiet for two or three days.)

A short piece of plastering lath thrown against the wind makes a funny sound, but the same lath swishing through the air and hitting the seat of your pants because it broke the window makes a terrible sound.

A cave dug into the end of an ensilage pile makes a real warm place to hide in the winter, but you don't want to smoke cigarettes in there because the hounds will smell it and lead your Mother right straight to you, or was it my tracks in the snow?

A Sumac grove makes a nice shady place where you can hide, however snakes like the shade there also, and a racer snake will chase you as long as you will run, but he will run if you turn around and chase him, but who can stop to turn around?

The milk cows almost always goes home single file in the same order, and a young cow with a calf will come nearer to hurting you than the bull.

Rain water has no minerals in it, if you drink soft water without minerals in it for a long time your teeth will decay, while well water has a lot of mineral in it that is good for your teeth, but will cause your teeth to be less white and even darken them according to the amount of mineral in it.

In the spring where there is one snake, there will be another not far away. Always walk in the short grass because snakes don't like to expose themselves to bright sunlight or to Red Tailed Hawks. A Copperhead snake stinks so bad that if you ever smell one you will never forget the smell. If land terrapins and snakes are all on top of the hill there is going to be a rain within forty eight hours, and when Sea Gulls follow the plow in the fields of Western Oklahoma there is a big storm on the Texas Gulf Coast.

Raccoons will forage in a dry canyon, but they always have their den close to a constant water supply. If you start a coon chase in a dry canyon it will be a log chase. Three legged coons are the smartest about working an escape because they have already been caught once. If a coon is foraging in a dry canyon he will feed close to water where he can dip his food in water before he eats it, that is because he has an under developed saliva gland that will not allow them to eat food that is not wet. If a nocturnal animal is out in the bright daylight, it is sick, stay away from it.

Don't disturb a Scissor-tailed bird nest, because the parent birds, while protecting their nest, will chase away predator Hawks which would otherwise catch your chickens and other small farm animals.

Always keep your knife sharp, because when you need it you might not have time to sharpen it.

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Always look beyond what you are going to shoot at to see what else you might hit if you miss or the bullet goes all the way through.

If it isn't going to harm you and you're not going to eat it, DON'T SHOOT IT! God put it there for a reason that you might not understand.

The best fishing worms always live in the worst places.

Have you ever stopped to watch the lowly Tumble Bug roll a small ball of cattle manure across the ground and wonder just why he was placed here and what purpose could he possibly be to the higher order of things? Who else would God have sent to do such an insignificant task as to disassemble rich deposits of cattle manure, scattering it in small balls in every direction to become fertilizer for seed that have not yet fallen? So the next time you are fortunate enough to happen upon some out-of-the-way place that has been set array with wild blossoms, enjoy the sight, but don't forget to be thankful for the lowly Tumble Bug who caused a barren place to flower, bringing sweet pleasure to your day.

(If someone should pass you by with a can of insecticide in his hand, be kind for posterities' sake and kick the seat of his pants!)

Many times I've stood on a fallow field, watching with wonder, while dark storm clouds gather across the dusty plain, as the clouds up thrust high by the wind come dancing across the prairie on lightening legs of fire. Anxiously I wait for them to pass my way with their down pour of soothing rain leaving behind a clean and watered plain.

Compelled I watch the gathering storm display its awesome power knowing well that in its wake will come a multiplicity of prairie flowers.

The more I see the gathering storms the more I'm amazed that the most fearful aspect of prairie nature is responsible for turning a potential desert into the Fruited Plains.

In elegant array, God crowns his love with a rainbow. Blessing His People of the Dust.

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