

Caution Kids at Play



Family Fun in the 30s, 40s, and 50s

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Celebrating the holiday season and being indoors with multiple generations as the winter cold sets in, is a good time to pass on stories and ask questions of the older generations of what they did to have fun as kids. Games children played during the Great Depression and passed down to their children, to their grandchildren, and even great-grandchildren are meant to be shared. Take every opportunity as you gather for holidays to discover who lost their marbles, who were the card sharks, and reminisce that what was fun then is outright dangerous now.

While great board games such as *Monopoly* and *Sorry* were considered Depression era games, what kids actually played was sharply different. Whether they lived in a rural area or a city, whether the family was large or small, where their ancestors were from, and even religious background could affect the games children played.

Sylvester and Mary (Walsh) Kraemer began their family on the farm of their German ancestors on Butternut Road (southeast of Plain off Highway B) in Franklin Township, Sauk County,

Wisconsin. They had sixteen¹ children. "Pubba," as Sylvester was affectionately called by his older children, "played cards EVERY night, right after dishes and evening farm chores were done," recounted Rose Mary, sixth in line from the oldest. At 84, she still balks at the mandatory nature of these nightly games and still does not like to play cards. Her next in line sister, Marcie, loved playing cards and remembers beating Rosie, and to this day makes a point of playing cards with her grandkids and great grandchildren. "Rummy" or "500," "Sheepshead," and "Euchre" were the early card games the Kraemer kids played. A sibling was added to the table as soon as they were old enough to understand the face value of the cards. For Pubba, playing cards was a great way to build math skills let alone control some of the chaos of raising fifteen² children, giving Mumma some order to prepare for bedtimes. Card playing or the names given to cards by the players can reflect time, place and even the introduction of prejudices.

Likewise, other games or rhymes of children will take on local bias. When you learned "Eenie Meenie Miney Moe," who did you catch by the toe? Was it a tiger? Did you catch fireflies or lightening bugs? Everyone in Wisconsin played "Duck, Duck, Goose" but if you grew up in Minnesota it was "Duck Duck Grey Duck." The Kraemer kids were introduced to a quieter version of this game called, "Drop the Hanky." A sibling would circle the outer perimeter of family members sitting on the floor or ground in a circle and quietly drop a hanky behind a seated child. A chase commenced when the seated child grabbed the hanky and raced the dropper to the empty space they had created. This game was quiet and many could participate, perfect for a large family indoors on a bad day. Although Pubba could play the harmonica and turning a radio on and off was a possibility, this family did not play musical chairs.

Some game differences can be explained by rural vs city locations. How long did it take Plain to get a street light? Chances are the Kraemer kids did not play "Red Light Green Light," even at school in the 30s or 40s. In communities dominated by a solo religion and only religious elementary and secondary education, game playing could take on a strictly religious overtone. "Musical Chairs" became "Marching to Jerusalem"; a game of marbles was called "Purgatory"; "Freeze Tag" became a great and noble game of "Sodom and Gomorah" when tagging people and turning them into a pillar of salt, and finally "Hide and Seek" became "Run My Good Sheep." Unfortunately for a young Cyril Kraemer, "Here Comes Doc Fowler" became his cue to hide and for his siblings to seek his hiding place, which became ever harder after many visits. Cyril had a very long and severe case of pneumonia that required a tortuous puncturing and draining of his lung. As soon as there was sighting of dust from Doc's buggy on Butternut Road, the game began until Cyril was at last found.

A very unique game was played on the Kraemer farm that may have originated in the old Franklin Township. All of the Kraemer Klan from the oldest to the youngest have played it, and the older grandchildren have witnessed them in a raucous round in the farmyard up by the flat area near the chicken coop. It was called "Piggy in the Poke" by the older set and "Pig in the Hole" by the end of the family of fifteen. The game required a tin can or pail, a squared off track of flat dirt for a playing surface, a hole dug in the middle of the square, and five sticks sized for each of five players. To play, one player, the Piggy, was in the center and defended the Poke (the hole) from the can being flung by stick-wielding siblings. If the can got in the hole, all players

¹ Adrian died infancy in 1923, making it fifteen children.

² Ibid

dropped their sticks and headed for a corner. With four corners and five players, the player without a corner became the next "Piggy in the Poke." Back in the day, school lunches were packed in tin pails or cans and totes to St. Luke's Catholic School by students. Judy, the youngest of fifteen Kraemer siblings, carried a brown bag instead. When looking at a photo of her siblings holding lunch pails, Judy realized "Piggy in the Poke was why I never got a lunch pail, every tin can on the farm was destroyed by my four older brothers!"

Winter fun included making snow angels and homemade bob sleds. Pubba or the older siblings would fashion two wood runners and nailed boards between them to lay on. The younger set eventually had metal runner sleds with steering capability. With so many kids the raw materials were limited and often one kid would lay on top of another and share the bobsleds. Marcie recalls being on top and Rosie on the bottom, going down the farm hill across Butternut, "There was only one hickory nut tree in the whole field and Rosie couldn't steer. I rolled off when I could see we were gonna hit it, but Rosie hit it head-on and was knocked out. I pulled the sled down to the frozen ditch and pulled her back and forth until she could get up and walk. We knew how NOT to get in trouble. We would never tell or call for help." The same hill was used to share the one bike the family had to ride. Rosie claims she was put on the bike before she knew how to put on the brakes and was sent down the driveway. She crossed Butternut and landed in the ditch before she crashed. No one will admit this was a betting game. The family had no skates but played on the ditch ice in their boots - running and slipping and sliding. Before the snow would get too deep, a large circle was made by shuffling boots in the snow and then fashioning a large crisscross inside. An exhausting game of "Foxes in the Hen House" could then be played. The hen house was safe as was anywhere the cross intersected the circle. While the fox chased, you scrambled for a safe spot or to the center hen house before being tagged. The deeper the snow the tougher the game.

As the snow melted and the days got longer, this clan played "Anti Anti Over" as opposed to "Annie Annie Over." Same game except tossing a ball over the shed instead of the 50¢ rambler. If you did not have a strong thrower, and it rolled back to you, you yelled PIG TAILS or in some areas OOPSIE. A catch on the other side caused your team to run to the other side of the shed to safety, while the catcher tried to tag you out. The rule was to play to dark or until called in, or to a predetermined score of fifteen or twenty. "Kick the Can" was an outdoor "Hide and Seek" where a defender of a can in an open space would count to ten while the kids hid. The defender would then search for a hidden player and put his foot on the can and say "1, 2, 3, I see Harold hiding by the chicken coop." If spotted, a designated area was set aside for the prisoner. As the defender crept away from the can to spot other hidden players, someone could run from hiding and kick the can to free the prisoners and restart the game. If the still hidden players did not hear the can was kicked or the defender beat them to the can, everyone was called to restart the game. What was often used was the phrase, "Olly Olly Oxen Free" to call the players back in to restart or the game was over. Could this game have originated from German speaking immigrants, who may have called it, "Alle, Alle Auch Sind Frei"?

"Marbles," "Rocks" and "Jacks" were also favorites. Two games were played on the farm with rocks. "Duck on a Rock" was a game where a player tossed his stone onto a rock and the next player tried to knock the "sitting duck" off of the rock. Another variation of this game was "Black Snake." The first rock tosser gets on the large surface of a rock. The next player tries to

toss his stone to touch the first, then tosses a stone to touch that rock and so on forming a snake. "Marbles" could be fashioned out of anything that rolled: ball bearings, clay, glass or even pottery. Like "Jacks and Balls," it was easy to play and a way to hone a skill, and was more portable than most electronic games today. Did you play for keeps, did you collect steelies, cat's eyes or milks? The girls would carry their favorite "Hop Scotch" marker in their pocket or a string to play "Cat's Cradle" or "Cup and Saucer." Who needed Laser Tag at \$25 an hour, when you could play "Flash Light Tag" and "Spot Freeze" and "Enemy Sibling"?

All the siblings remember playing with barrel hoops, tires or tubing from tires. A narrow board with a nailed top like a T could keep a barrel hoop running all over the farmyard. The game was to see who kept it rolling the longest. Imagine, they were that close to inventing the "Hula Hoop" if they would have only put the hoop around their waist. Besides being used as a traditional sling-shot pull back, cut inner tubes could be used as sling shots by stringing the rubber on a stick (the bow) from which corn cob "arrows" were flung; and clothespins triggered "guns" that shot rubber bands. We won't even go into games with knives like "Stretch" or "Stick Frog." And with a dozen players "Bat and Ball" was a given on the farm. Throw the bat and finger up the neck to see who would bat first. So this Christmas, wrap up a box of rocks, a bag of jacks or marbles, or even tubing and clothes pins. Have the kids guess what to do with them; tell them it is portable, fits in a pocket and gives endless hours of entertainment. But add the warning, "Caution, you could lose an eye" - thankfully, no one in our family ever did.

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