

STEEL RIVER TALES

John D. Boenke

DEDICATED

To Those Who Remember
The Great Depression
And Those Who Wish
To Know About It

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Since retiring, Mr. Boenke has been interested in reading and studying in the areas of Cosmology, Theoretical Physics and Philosophy. In addition, he has an interest in the origins of religions. He has privately published several short stories and some poetry.

FOREWORD

I grew up during the Great Depression. As a child, I did not realize what was going on in the country, or that I lived in the lower reaches of society. Of course, a few years later it became apparent that there were many things that others had that I did not, and I gained a better perspective on my status in the community. However, the early years were comparatively happy, since in that situation, ignorance was bliss. Therefore, I can remember many pleasant events during that time, although they may seem a little unkind, weird or unusual by today's standards. I have enjoyed mixing a little reality with a lot of fantasy in putting together this collection of stories which are related only by being of the same era, and reflecting the people and conditions of that time.

It was a difficult time, full of harsh events, poignant happenings, and unnoticed incidents, all of which shaped, developed and destroyed lives of persons great and small. With these stories I wish to share the flavor of the era as I experienced it, and try to convey to the reader my impression of one of the most disrupting events which shook society during the 20th century, and the one which influenced my childhood the most, the Great Depression.

In the name of the book, Steel River refers to the railroads which replaced waterways and horses as the major mode of transportation during the growth of the nation across the continent. Trains figured prominently in daily life during the Great Depression because they were the main method of transportation of materials, products, and people. The whole hobo culture grew up around the necessity of riding the trains, whether one could pay the fare or not. Later, of course, the railroads themselves were forced to compete with trucking companies and airlines, but during their heyday, steam engines and railroads were fascinating beyond comprehension for small boys and grown men alike. This is a fascination one does not outgrow.

John D. Boenke

<u>TABLE OF CONTENTS</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
Foreword	3
The Steel River	5
The Cat and Mouse Game	8
Cattails	12
Indian Trouble	18
Summer Fireworks	22
Sand	29
The Cigar	32
Flattened Nails	35
The Evenings Entertainment	39
The Lumber Car Fire	41
Coal Spill	45
Scene of a Minor Tragedy	47
Pigs! and the Criminal Element	51
The Bank Job	55

THE STEEL RIVER

By John D. Boenke

A Great Depression Era poem

A river flows that's made of steel,
It reaches shore to shore,
It goes right on from town to town,
And carries rich and poor,

The rich man rides the smoker car,
The poor man rides the rods,
The rich man is content to leave,
The poor man to the gods,

The brakeman keeps his eyes alert,
For riders such as me,
They want some cash to ride their train,
They say it's not for free,

But some of us don't have a buck,
And still we need to go,
If we can hide inside a car,
They never need to know,

I used to be a mining man,
They threw me out the door,
I'd work down at the smelter, but,
There isn't any ore,

I thought I'd ride the Steel to find,

A suitable new job,
That's why I'm in the jungle here,
On sidetrack, Rocky Knob,

Now let me weed your garden plot,
Or let me cut your wood,
Then, if you feel the urgin' true,
Some grub would taste right good,

My daddy was a steamboat man,
His daddy drove a raft,
I'd rather ride the railroad now,
And both think I am daft,

So let's get on this boxcar here,
And ride the Steel on down,
We'll leave this sad condition for,
To find a brand new town,

I know it's there, around the bend,
I heard a hobo say,
The folks are nice, with jobs galore,
And pretty darn good pay,

Someday I'll find a fine new job,
This trouble cannot last,
I'll settle down and build a house,
And then forget the past,

I'll live a life of joy and ease,
With wife and kids my own,
A yard, a dog, a garden plot,

And house made out of stone,

And when my days come to an end,
I'll hear the trumpets sound,
To leave this life with no regret,
With family gathered round,

In heaven there'll be a jungle hut,
Like none you've ever seen,
The bunks will all be feather beds,
The folks will not be mean,

We'll sit around the campfire ring,
With stories all night long,
Of Steel in all her glory days,
In times when life went wrong.

THE CAT AND MOUSE GAME

The slamming of the boxcars and coal cars as they were shunted onto various tracks was the first thing Roger heard as he awoke. It was not an unusual sound, in fact he slept through it most of the time. Living next to a large railroad yard all his short life had inured him to the engine and car noises which would disturb most other people. He awoke normally and gradually, first realizing he was awake before he opened his eyes. He slowly eased into the awake state, and let the day seep into him at its own pace. The awareness of his surroundings, the day of the week, the season of the year, grew fully upon him as he rolled over and sat up.

Summertime; vacation time; no school for the foreseeable future marred his perspective. His time was his own to play or read or do nothing, unless his parents coerced him into some chores. His parents were Ethyl and Frank Pratt, and there were four other children in the family, all older than Roger, so Roger mostly could slip out of doing chores because his folks did not have time to keep up with all the kids. For that reason, no jobs interfered with the play time today. He planned to spend all day on the hill in the back of the shed next to the alley. The Pratt backyard was right against the railroad. Behind the back fence the land dropped several feet, then leveled out to a cinder road alongside the railroad tracks. He could often stand in his own yard and watch the large locomotives go by only a few feet away.

Behind their fence on the short slope to the alley bordering the tracks, grew a variety of weeds, trees and nondescript bushes among the rocks. This formed Roger's private wilderness and playground. He had formed paths through the vegetation, had made secret holes and hiding places, and chosen his favorite places to sit and meditate when he wanted to be alone. The best place was right against the back of the shed. There he couldn't be seen from either the tracks or from his yard. It was almost as though it were a different world, his own world, closed to outsiders and where he was in charge and safe.

As Roger washed and got dressed, he thought about all he might do today. He wanted to remember to take the garden trowel with him behind the fence so he could hollow out his sitting place a bit better. He had to look for his ball that had rolled down the hill into some weeds yesterday just when he was called to come in to supper. He did not want to lose it and should find it right away before someone else found it and took it, or it became buried too deep to find.

Breakfast was oatmeal again. There were a lot of oatmeal breakfasts between the bacon and egg breakfasts. Roger did not understand why they could not have bacon and eggs more often, but then there were a lot of things he didn't understand. As soon as he was through eating, he slipped out of the house and off to his own pursuits. He kept busy for quite a while and it was not until late morning that he stopped to take a few minutes to just sit and do nothing. While he sat well hidden in his cozy retreat behind the shed, he became aware of someone moving cautiously along the alley in a crouched position next to the bottom of the hill.

Roger watched through the shrubs as a man came into his view. The man stopped and looked down to the end of the alley and the gravel road which crossed the tracks and continued to the yard office. For several minutes the man stayed there, and Roger studied him. He wasn't as poorly dressed as most hoboese, but he had a shabby air about him. His dark hair hid a fair face, and he had a quick manner when he moved which conveyed a feeling of urgency. The beltline tracks stretched in the direction he was looking to the trestle across the creek. Beyond that the tracks continued until they disappeared behind a low hill on the other side of the little valley. All along that way, the beltline tracks paralleled the main switching yard tracks till they narrowed down to only a dozen or so tracks a mile up the line at the first regular road crossing. The mainline, high speed tracks, were on the far side of the yards, so Roger rarely saw the passenger trains, although he could hear them. Only when the yards were empty, could he see all the way across, but it was so far, he still could not see very well.

The man continued looking down the tracks and Roger became restless until suddenly he felt the need to sneeze, and could not contain himself. The man looked up suddenly at the noise, and whispered, "Who's there?"

Roger came part way out of his hiding place and looked down at the man. "Who are you?" he replied in the same manner he had been challenged.

"Hi kid," the man greeted him, then studied him a minute before asking, "Anyone else around?" He looked furtively up and down the tracks.

"Nah," said Roger, "I'm just playing here alone. What are you doing?"

"Nothin', nothin' kid," but his unusual actions belied his words. He looked at Roger again for a few seconds, then asked, "Any guards around here? Any railroad cops?"

The rail company police were a common sight to Roger. He had seen them many times looking for hoboes on the trains, and chasing them away when they found one. It was their job to keep excess travelers off the freight trains for their own safety as much as anything else. Roger guessed the man was planning to hop a freight, and replied, "Where ya goin'?"

The man turned, and deciding to take Roger into his confidence answered, "There's a train leaving the far end of the yard at noon, and I want to get on it to go south. I got a job in Pittsburgh, if I can get there. Are there any cops around?" he asked again.

"Ya got yer ticket?" asked Roger with a grin, and the man gave him a look of anger. The glance made Roger feel a little badly at making fun of the man. The boy looked at him as he stretched to see around the bend and down the rail yard trying to decide what to do. Feeling a little sympathetic, Roger wanted to make up for his mean remark and continued, "There's only one yard Dick usually. His name's Popo, and I ain't seen him today yet."

"I got to be sure," the man responded. "If he sees me I'll never be able to get down there in time for that freight." He strained to see a minute more, then turned to Roger. "Hey kid, why don't you walk on down to the bridge, and see if you can see that cop anywhere?"

"I ain't allowed," answered Roger. His parents did not allow him down to the tracks, but he often went anyway. And especially, they would not want him walking along the tracks. He had been impressed many times about the dangers of being careless near the large engines and the horrible things that can happen if you get too close.

"Come on, kid, there's nothin' on the tracks now. You could get down there and back before anything comes along. I need to know if that cop is there." He looked pleadingly at Roger and waited for a reply.

Roger considered for a minute. It was not as though he never went down the tracks, he just knew he was not supposed to. It had been a while since he had

walked as far as the trestle, and the man was right. There was no train on the tracks now, and there was plenty of time to do it. His spirit of adventure piqued, Roger said, "OK, but if I get in trouble, I'll tell them you're here." First he looked up into his yard to make sure his mother wasn't there, then slid down the hill into the alley.

As slowly and nonchalantly as possible, he walked to the end of the alley. The tracks curved slightly to the right so he couldn't see the trestle from his yard, but at the end of the alley there was a wide open view all along the track and beyond the bridge. He crossed the gravel road and started along the beltline tracks towards the trestle. On his right was a steep hill down into the ravine where the creek ran. On his left were the beltline tracks and then an empty space and a ditch over towards the switching yard tracks. There were at least two dozen tracks in the main yard spreading out into many spurs on which the railcars were stored till they were put on trains. As he walked along, he kept looking back till his yard disappeared around the bend.

Mostly he looked to make sure his mother did not see him going where he wasn't supposed to go. When he got within a couple hundred feet of the trestle, he suddenly heard a voice call to him. "Hey kid, get the hell off da tracks."

He could just barely see into a depression on the other side of the beltline track before the bridge. There in a black hat and coat was Popo, the rail yard cop sitting on the ground. Roger didn't say anything, but turned and started running back the way he had come. After a short way he slowed to a fast walk and as he approached the shelter of his yard again he was down to his normal walking gait. The man was still there, crouched against the bank. Roger climbed back onto his hill and looked at him.

"Well?" the man asked.

"Popo's there on the other side of this track just before the trestle where the ground dips down."

The man looked annoyed. They stayed silent for a few minutes while he pondered what to do next. As they waited, there began to be heard a rumbling sound and the puffing of an engine. In a minute a string of cars appeared from the direction of the trestle coming along the spur in back of Roger's yard. The spur track led up to a plant at the other end of the alley, and the string of cars were being pushed by a small yard locomotive towards them. The man acted agitated, and looked around for a hiding place. "It's all right," said Roger. "They don't know who you are. Just wave to them like I always do. They'll think you belong here."

The train drew along side them and the noise of the puffing engine, the roaring fire, steam leaks and the banging cars made any conversation impossible. Roger waved to the fireman as he leaned out of his side of the cab and waved back. The stranger sat on a rock on the hill and waved along with Roger. The train receded up the alley and quiet returned to the two observers.

"I ain't never goin' to get down the yard to that freight," grumbled the traveler. More time passed while he struggled with deciding to try advancing, or giving up and retreating. As he watched, he suddenly ducked down further and said, "Look out." Roger stepped out into the alley and looked towards the trestle again. He saw Popo come walking along the tracks. When he reached the gravel road, Popo turned and proceeded up the road away from the rail yards.

"Whew," sighed the stranger, "I thought he was going to come down here. Now at least, maybe I can go down the track."

“Wait here a minute,” cautioned Roger, “I’ll be right back.” He climbed up into his yard and ran to the front of his house. Carefully he peeked around the corner of the house to the street in front. There were three more houses between Roger’s and the end of the street where the gravel road joined it. Looking through a bush, he could see a car parked opposite the end house.

Sneaking to the corner of the front yard from behind another bush, he could see Popo sitting in the car, and it looked like he was eating his lunch as he watched the track and the near side of the rail yards from his vantage point. Roger returned to the back yard and slid down the hill.

“He’s sittin’ in his car and eatin’ and watchin’ the track,” volunteered Roger. “He kin see all along there.”

“Dammit,” was the only response.

A morose silence settled on the traveler, and he looked down the rails gloomily, but longingly. Roger regarded him carefully, and thought to himself, “Was the guy really going for a job, or was he just another no good drifter he heard people talk about?” It was hard to tell. Hoboes had a gift of gab, and always had a good story to tell. But he did not look like the ordinary hobo. Maybe he just had not been on the road as long. Roger could not decide and gave up trying. It was not important anyway. Then an idea came to Roger. “Sure! Why not? That’ll work” he thought, then spoke out loud, “Hey mister.”

“Yeah, what?”

“I know how you kin get down there.”

The man looked at him with a look of skepticism, “Yeah, how?”

“Easy! You remember the train that went by the other way? Well it’s goin’ to be comin’ back soon with a string of empties. You hop on that and hide in a car, and it’ll take you clear across the bridge to the end of the yard. Then you can hop off and cross the yard to the freight.”

“Yeah? And who’s goin’ to let me get on this train?”

“They won’t even see you. When they come by, the brakeman, and fireman, and engineer will all be in the cab. They always are. I’ll wave to them, and while they’re lookin’ at me, you jump on.”

“They’re still going to see me here in the alley. That won’t work.”

“You go up about five houses. There’s a garage there, and you can hide next to it. When the train comes by, you wait till the engine is next to me and I wave. They’ll be lookin’ at me and won’t notice you.”

The man seemed a little unsure. He looked up the track, then down the track, but did not move. "You want to get that freight, don't you? Or ain't you jumped a train before?"

He turned angrily, "Sure I jumped trains. What do you think I am anyway?"

"Okay, so you've hopped on trains. Then you know you always try the front end of a car. That way, if you miss you hit the car and bounce off. If you grab the tail end of a car and miss, you kin go between the cars and that could be bad. Besides, they never go fast along here. The track ain't that good."

The man still stood by the hill and looked undecided. Roger wondered whether he really wanted to go. "Look," he added, "I don't care if you go or not, but you better make up your mind. I hear the train comin'."

Slowly the man walked up the alley toward the garage. Roger climbed to his favorite place on the fence and got ready to wave as he had agreed. In a few minutes, the little engine came into sight with a couple of dozen cars in tow. He waited till the locomotive was just opposite him and waved to the engineer hanging out the window. The trainmen were always friendly, and he even recognized seeing the same ones from time to time. On their part they indulged the boy with his waving and were just relieved to see him in his yard rather than down along the track where they would worry about him.

As the cars came by, Roger saw the stranger huddled down in the iron structure on the far side of a hopper car, being as invisible as possible. When the train had passed, Roger went down to the tracks and walked to the end of the alley. As the string of cars disappeared out of sight down the yard and behind the far hill, he knew the stranger had gotten a little closer to the freight train. He questioned whether the rather mild mannered hobo would be able to get on the freight. Roger hoped he would. As he returned to his yard and his play, he wondered about the man's chances of being able to get to his job in Pittsburgh too, wherever that was.

CATTAILS

As soon as school was out, summer spread out in front of Roger seemingly to infinity. School could be safely dismissed from one's mind indefinitely, and the serious work of enjoying the summer vacation could be pursued with the attention and intensity it deserved.

There was one particular event which demanded a certain amount of careful forethought. The 4th of July loomed in the immediate future, and the problem of getting money for firecrackers was always a difficult one.

Roger's sources of income were extremely limited, and he never had all the money he needed for fireworks. His mother and father didn't approve of the fireworks to begin with, so any amount he spent on them he had to acquire by his own effort. He could always wander the alleys and find a few bottles to return and get the deposits, but that took a lot of time and a certain amount of luck in finding them. Besides, the deposit money was only pennies, and he needed more than that.

Or he could sell rags and junk to the junk man who came around every week or so. The junk man had an old wagon pulled by a horse just as old and decrepit as

the wagon. You could hear him several blocks away blowing his tin horn. No one else had a horn like it. The raucous atonal sound uniquely identified him and alerted everyone of the junk wagon's impending arrival. The junk man wore a greasy old fur hat, and clothes as raggedy as the rags he bought, and when he weighed a bag of rags, he had the habit of tipping the hand-held spring scale, so it did not give the total true weight. Roger knew this, so he always added a few stones to the bottom of the bag in advance to compensate. Roger made regular tours of the neighborhood alleys looking for items the junk man would buy. An uncommon good find was an old car battery, or even just the lead parts from inside. Any metal was good, but especially large chunks of iron brought cash from the junk man's pocket. There were times when Roger had spotted large chunks of metal which had fallen off railroad cars.

Some pieces looked like chips from a rail car wheel, while others were just nondescript pieces of iron. Even though he was not supposed to go out by the tracks, he often sneaked out to pick up the scrap parts quickly. Then he would hide them in his secret places, so his brothers or parents would not find them and confiscate them. He kept his treasures out of sight until the junk man made his tour, and they could be converted into cash. However he saved it up, Roger managed to have a little money by the time it was needed, just before the Independence Day holiday.

Since money for firecrackers was scarce, Roger had to be very judicious in their selection. Some were simply out of the question. They were just too expensive or perhaps too dangerous, such as cherry bombs. They were ten cents a box with only four in it. They made a loud noise and could blow cans apart, but you could get a lot more for your money with Alligator or Zebra brand crackers, which were smaller but made just as much noise. At least, Roger thought so.

Then there were the lady crackers. They were very tiny firecrackers with not much more powder than was in a cap gun cap. They still made a sharp sound when they worked right and you got hundreds of them real cheap. Even if they went off in your hand it did not hurt much, and if they did not go off, they could be broken in half and lighted anyway just as fizzleers. Of course Roger had to have a cap gun and the necessary caps too, if he could afford it.

As important as firecrackers were, the method of lighting them was just as important. When Roger set off one or two, he could usually just use matches which were pilfered from the family supply in the kitchen. When there were many to be set off, a punk or other lighting device was needed. Punks burned very slowly and just glowed red hot enough to ignite the fuse on a firecracker, but they also cost money. When pennies counted, there were other ways of doing the same thing. Twigs and paper twists did not last long enough, even though they were readily available. The elegant cheap solution was to use dried cattails or bulrushes as some people called them, and they were obtained at no cost, but were available just for the taking, when you could find them.

“Roger!!”

Some calls were to be answered immediately, such as when mom called from the back door. Some calls could be ignored altogether, for instance a playmate you did not really want to play with calling from out front, and you were well hidden. But this call was in between. It was Roger's brother, Fred. Roger was in his favorite hiding place behind the shed, but Fred knew to look there.

Fred and Roger were on reasonably friendly terms at the moment, not having had a fight for two days, and Roger was not doing anything special right now, so he called back, “Fred?”.

In a moment Fred crawled through the weeds and bushes to where Roger sat. “You wanna go get some bulrushes?”

Roger hesitated not knowing whether this was a ploy or an honest invitation. “I don’t know. Where you gonna get them?”

“There’s a whole bunch on the other side of the tracks up where the road crosses at the far end of the yards. The ditch along there is filled with them.’

You crazy or somethin’? Mom ain’t gonna let us go up there. We can’t go on the tracks.”

“We don’t have to. Pete is here. (Pete was a school friend of Fred’s who lived on the road which crossed the end of the yards.) We can go around on the road and all of us cross at the crossing together.”

Roger quickly got the picture. Fred wanted him to go because both of them together were better than one alone to persuade their mother to allow it. The fact that Pete would be there too, certainly helped the case. “I don’t know——” Roger wanted some cattails for punks on the 4th of July, and this would certainly get them for him, but he never trusted Fred very much when they were together.

“Come on,” encouraged Fred, “Mom don’t even have to know we’ll be by the tracks. We just need to tell her we’ll be crossing them on the road. Pete will be with us, and we can tell her we’re goin’ to Pete’s, and he crosses the tracks all the time. The bulrushes are right near the road crossing, and we can get them easy.”

Roger still held back indecisively. “Come on,” urged Fred as he started to crawl back to the yard. “You’re a sissy if you don’t go. You want some bulrushes don’t you?”

If he did not go, Roger knew Fred would indeed call him a sissy and taunt him later. But then if he did go, he would probably get into trouble somehow. Fred did not wait for Roger to decide, but left as though he would go without him. Under pressure to make up his mind quickly and the desire for the cattails, Roger was forced to decide on going.

“Hey, wait a minute. I’m coming.”

He scurried out of the hiding place after his brother, which is exactly what Fred knew Roger would do. Fred was older and wiser and got things his way, since he was a master at manipulating his younger brother.

Fred did the negotiating with their mother. All Roger knew was that in a few minutes he, Fred, and Pete were leaving the front yard under the watchful eye of their mother heading up the road and being admonished “not to stay too long”, and “cross the tracks only at the road crossing.” Ethyl Pratt watched her two young boys set off with their friend Peter. They would have to go up several streets to get to the road to Peter’s house. Then it was back along that road to the railroad yard crossing and a little farther to where Pete lived. She had been hesitant to let them go, but the three of them together should be all right, and you can’t keep them from doing everything. Someday they have to learn to be on their own. Certainly this is harmless enough, although Fred is sometimes too adventuresome; and Roger - well, Roger will do

anything that Fred wants him to do until they fight. Then there is no telling what Roger will do. At least she will have a little respite from having them under foot to hamper her in her work. She turned and re-entered the house to do the laundry and started whistling to dispel her worries.

The boys, when out of sight of their home, slowed their pace to a more casual meandering walk. Exploring as they went, they were in no hurry to get to Pete's place, and were willing to defer the homeward trip as long as possible. Now that Fred had Roger along, he had achieved his purpose, and no longer took much interest in him, but devoted his attention to Pete. Roger was left to keep up with them as best he could and tag along. When they reached the road to Pete's house, Pete turned to go towards the highway instead of towards the tracks and his home.

"Where ya goin'?" asked Fred.

Pete gave them a superior look and answered, "Goin' to the drug store up here. I like the candy they have. C'mon, I'll buy you somethin'." There was a small store on the street corner at the highway, but it was on the other side of the main road.

"We ain't supposed to cross the highway," Fred ventured, "but I guess we can this time."

This development was news to Roger. He knew he would be in trouble if they were caught crossing the main road, but he followed along not knowing what to do. As they reached the road, he lagged behind looking fearfully as two large trucks went by. The three stood a moment as a car passed in the other direction, then Pete started off. "C'mon! Run!" and Pete and Fred started across. Roger was left a little confused and afraid to go. He could see another car way down the block, but did not know how fast it was going.

Fred turned and yelled, "C'mon, hurry up. What's the matter? You afraid?"

That is all it took to get Roger running. He put his head down and ran without looking. He did not stop till he reached the other side of the road where Pete and Fred were standing and laughing at him. Roger felt shamed and followed them sheepishly into the store. Pete did indeed buy them some candy. Then they negotiated the road again and once more headed towards Pete's house. Halfway there, the street dipped down and crossed a short bridge over the same creek that flowed from the rail yards.

As they reached the bridge, Fred suggested, "Let's climb down to the creek." Pete followed and Roger was left standing on the road. Not wanting to be left out he also started to climb down, but, being smaller, found going over the fence and down the hill more difficult. By the time he got there, Fred and Pete were through looking at the stream and the minnows, and were ready to start back up the embankment. Again Roger lagged behind, so when he reached the top, the other two were a distance down the road and yelling at him to hurry. He had to run to catch up with them.

After a few more minutes, they reached the railroad crossing. All was quiet. Some strings of cars were parked in the yards, but there were no engines moving around. The three hurried across, as they looked at the variety of rail cars all hooked together. On the other side they stopped and surveyed the scene. Pete pointed down the mainline tracks and said, "The bulrushes are down there."

“Where?” asked Roger, “I don’t see them.”

“They’re down in the ditch, dummy,” Fred offered in an exasperated tone, “They’re just past the water tower.”

Roger looked down the tracks. Several hundred feet along, there was a large water tank for filling engines with water, and he assumed the cattails were just beyond that. “I thought we weren’t gonna have to walk along the tracks. That’s a long way down there. What if the yard cops see us?”

Pete laughed, “You’re a worry wart. The cops don’t usually come up this far, and anyway, we can always run.”

“So let’s go get ’em now, while there’s no one around.”

“No,” said Fred. “We’ll get them on the way home. Let’s go on to Pete’s now.” Roger could not argue, but only follow along. However, he looked longingly down towards the water tower as they turned away.

Roger did his best to keep up with Fred and Pete playing and running around Pete’s yard. After a while he began to feel they had stayed long enough. Somehow, he could feel mom’s displeasure rising the longer they stayed, and he started pestering Fred to go home. Fred finally agreed, but by the time Roger and Fred returned to the rail crossing, significant changes had taken place. The yards were almost empty, except for one long string of boxcars on the far side of the yards. Roger held back as Fred started down the tracks to the water tower. “They’ll see us goin’ down there now,” he complained, “We shoulda gotten them before.”

“Oh, come on. Don’t be a sissy,” retorted Fred as he continued walking away. Roger followed, and they stumbled alongside the tracks where no one usually walked. After a few minutes of struggling, they reached the ditch and finally, the cattails. The two set right in trying to break off some of the reeds they could reach, and discovered they did not break easily. The boys twisted and turned the stems and cut at them with their fingernails, but the progress was slow. After many minutes, Fred had eight and Roger had only three.

Roger was tired and his hands hurt. Moreover, he was discouraged with the effort it took to get the cattails, and realized they should have brought a knife along to make the job easier. “Let’s go,” he suggested, having decided three cattails was enough.

“No not yet,” Fred insisted. The two struggled for a few more minutes. Luckily, Roger broke off three more, and they came easier than before, and Fred ended with a dozen. “Okay, now we can go,” Fred agreed.

Roger started back up the tracks toward the road crossing. Fred stood and looked a minute, then started across the tracks. Roger shouted, “Hey! Where ya goin’?”

“I’m going across the yards. It’s a lot shorter than going up to the road and around.”

“But what about the boxcars? You’ll have to go around them.”

“Naw, they ain’t goin’ nowhere. I’m goin’ under them. It’s just one string.”

Roger froze. Fred shouldn’t do that. It’s dangerous. “C”mon he called. Let’s go by the road.”

“Naw, I’m goin’ this way. I’ll beat you home.” Fred challenged. “Mom’ll wonder where you are. We’re late anyway now. Come on this way, follow me.”

Roger was confused. If he went by the road Fred would certainly get home before he did. But if he followed Fred he would have to go under the boxcars too, and that scared him. He stood undecided with his mind in turmoil. “I knew I’d get in trouble.” he thought to himself.

Fred turned and called once more, “You’re a sissy if you don’t come.” That decided Roger. In spite of his fear, he ran across the tracks towards Fred, not quite knowing what he would do. He jumped over rails and stumbled over ties and gravel to catch up. Fred was just ahead, and Roger saw him reach the string of boxcars, get down, and crawl under and out the other side. Roger redoubled his efforts and soon was next to a long red boxcar. Gritting his teeth, he got down on all fours and crawled under. It was only a second or two, but it seemed like an eternity as he made his way over the rail, along a tie and over the other rail. Then he was out. He had broken one of his cattails in crawling along, and had heard something rip along the tie, but he was on the other side and still all in one piece. He didn’t know how to describe it, but he felt very good to be out from under the car. Suddenly, it was as though he could let his breath go and was able to breathe again. He had not realized he was tense and had been holding his breath until that moment, but he was glad to be through the hard part and relaxed.

Fred continued to be ahead of him, heading for the trestle along the path next to the tracks. The end of their alley could be seen in the distance, and Roger hurried on. By the time he crossed the trestle, he had caught up with Fred, and they walked together. Fred admonished Roger, “You better not say anything about cutting across the yards. Mom’ll really get you if she finds out, and if you tell, I’ll make you wish you hadn’t.” Roger understood this. There was an unwritten rule that you didn’t tell on others, no matter what. Roger was relieved to be approaching home and having no other concerns.

Just then they heard a distant sound similar to thunder, but it came from the rail yards they had left only moments before. As they looked across the tracks, they could hear and see the string of boxcars jerk as they began to move, each one in its own time as the car ahead of it jerked away. An engine must have connected to the far end and was starting to move the string of boxcars along. When Roger saw the red one he had crawled under jump, he felt a shiver go down his back. He couldn’t describe it, but it didn’t feel good. He quickly turned away, and started running the final distance towards home. Fred yelled after him. “Go around the front way so mom doesn’t know we came down the tracks.” Roger slowed, and by the time he reached the front yard, Fred was again with him.

Besides yelling at them for being away longer than they should be, the home coming went well until Mrs. Pratt noticed Roger’s pants. “Where on earth did you rip your pants now?”

Roger looked down, and sure enough, there was a hole in the knee of his pants. “I don’t know. Maybe it was playing at Pete’s. I fell once I remember.” What he really remembered was the tearing sound he heard as he crawled under the boxcar, but he was not about to tell his mother about that incident. The pants were duly

repaired, but not without many admonitions “to be more careful in the future,” from his mother.

Everything considered, the day had gone fairly well. He had his cattails, he went out to somewhere he had not been before, Pete had bought him some candy, he did not fight with Fred, and he did not get into too much trouble. Roger figured that was enough for one day and made it reasonably successful.

INDIAN TROUBLE

Roger was not in a mood to be trifled with. He had mislaid his ball somewhere; or someone, like maybe his brother, had taken it on purpose. It was nowhere to be found, and he would be angry until he found it. To sulk, he isolated himself in his favorite hiding place behind the shed on the slope down to the railroad tracks, and sat in the warmth of the July day to let the humming of the insects and the song of the meadowlark soothe his wounded spirit. Roger often sat here in his own little retreat. He had learned that he was less likely to be asked to do a chore, if he kept out of the way. Also, his mother had enough to worry about without him being underfoot and bothering her, so it was a benefit for them both, if he just kept to himself.

It was a Monday morning, and the train yard was alive with much activity. He looked and listened to the yard engines working the strings of box cars, and coal cars, and the wonderful variety of other kinds of rail cars. The engines huffed and puffed, back and forth, sorting them out according to where they were supposed to go. On the near tracks a little yard engine took a string of cars up the line, then headed back with them getting up as much speed as it could. As it screamed to a stop, the brakeman lifted the coupling pin on a car or two and let them coast through several switches to a particular siding. Then the engine backed up and started over to coast other cars to a different siding. The shunting operation was fascinating for Roger to watch, especially since he had such a good view of the yards. The panting of the engines in their work, the screeching of the locked car wheels and the crashing together of the battered couplers was music to Roger's ears.

Over in the main yards he could hear, more than see, a large engine pushing a string of cars in the big hump yard. The cars were pushed up and over an incline. As they reached the top, a brakeman released the coupler and a few cars at a time went coasting down through the switches to the proper siding. Roger could not actually see the hump yard through the many tracks filled with rail cars, but in his mind's eye he visualized the engine and the coasting cars as he heard the intermittent distant collisions when the cars reached their destination and connected with the others already there.

As Roger sat absorbed with enjoying his surroundings, he became vaguely aware of a distraction which snapped him out of his day-dreaming. Down on the tracks next to his backyard, he heard someone moving. As he looked, the figure of a man came into view and approached the back gate to his yard. The man wore a strange black hat with a broad flat brim. His features were dark and his hair was long and black. His nose and cheeks were sharp, accentuating his dark probing eyes.

As Roger watched, the man looked around the gate area, then smiled a satisfied smile and started to enter. Roger was moved to action, and called out, “Hey Mister! Where ya goin’?”

The man turned to see the source of the voice, and Roger felt the stranger’s penetrating dark eyes looking right through him as though to cut him apart for the purpose of discovering what was inside and whether it was a threat to be countered in some way, or merely a temporary distraction. As with the click of a switch, the probing was out off, and the man in a gentle voice answered, “I’m just looking for a meal, kid. Is your mother at home?”

Roger was familiar with hoboes looking for a little work and a lot of food. It seemed they visited his house more often than others, so he knew the routine, “My mom and the rest are in the house. You kin go knock on the back door.” The man entered the gate and went to the house as Roger came out from behind the shed and watched. Roger knew his mother was alone in the house, but that is not the sort of thing you tell strangers who come into the back yard.

Ethyl Pratt, Roger’s mother, was a stoic person. Although she worked hard to keep her little family fed and clothed and her husband content, she did not let on how she felt, usually. Times were hard. Many people were out of work and they were lucky her husband, Frank, could work even though it was part time. At least they were not on Relief. They would never do that, even though some of their friends were signed up and got things for their family that the Pratts could not have. It just was not the right thing to do, and they were better than that.

When she heard the knock on the back door, she had just finished her shopping list and checked it against her money to see if they, in any way, matched up. They were out of everything. Even the oatmeal had run out this morning, and she had to remember to add yeast to the list, too.

As soon as Ethyl opened the door and saw the man, the situation was clear to her. “Yes?” she greeted him.

“Pardon, Ma’am, but would you have a little grub in exchange for a little work. I sure could use it.”

Ethyl Pratt did not understand the times they were going through. When they first came to this country, it was difficult for a while, but after the war, things seemed better. They had a decent life for quite a few years, but then something happened and so many people are out of work. Why was there not enough work? Why did the government not do something to help all these people who were unemployed? She had been raised with high principles, and had always tried to help people in need, but not accept help herself. Everyone should do their best, and that should be enough to have a good life. What was wrong with the world, or the people, or the government? Or was it just “the times” as everyone sadly remarked when there were no other answers? She looked at the man and felt compassion. She wanted to help him, but there was only so much anyone could do. She and her husband had very little themselves, and they had given all they could over the years to the less fortunate, but was there no end?

As she stood watching and seeing his expectant look, she realized there was practically nothing in the house to give him anyway. It was Monday morning. They had eaten everything over the weekend, and she had not done her shopping yet. What could she do? What should she do? After all, didn’t her family come first? Look at Roger out there by the shed. He was skinny by anybody’s standards. If only she could afford more of the things he would eat,----if only,---her thoughts faded.

She heard herself saying, “I’m sorry. It’s Monday, and I haven’t done my shopping yet. I just don’t have anything I can give you. You’ll have to go somewhere else.”

“There ain’t anywhere else, lady. I been travelin’ two days without anything to eat, and I know you give food to other fellows who need it.”

“How did they always know that?” thought Ethyl to herself. “They say the hoboes mark the places that feed them so others will know. But where is the mark?” She herself had looked to find it, but had never found anything that would indicate any special marking. If she had, she would be tempted to remove it, or maybe put the same mark on other gates along the alley. Why must the people in need always come here? She repeated, “I give food when I can, but it’s Monday, and I just don’t have anything.”

The man’s clear dark eyes again assumed a penetrating look, and with a strange flinty voice he replied, “It’s cause I’m Injun ain’t it? You’d feed a white man who came along, wouldn’t you? I know. It’s the same everywhere. Folks stick with their own kind, and the rest be damned. Some day that’ll change. You just wait and see. There’s only so much the people who are down will take.” The anger in his voice took Mrs. Pratt by surprise. She had not been thinking of the reaction her refusal might cause, since she was so concerned trying to make her own budget work for the week.

“No! No!” she blurted out, “That’s not it at all. I told you ---“, but the man had turned abruptly and was heading down the yard back to the alley gate. Mrs. Pratt closed the door sadly.

The Indian strode out the back gate and closed it firmly behind himself. He did not slow down as he reached the alleyway, but turned and followed along the tracks to the road crossing. There was a low stone wall at the back of the yard of the end house where he threw himself down to sit and glower at the ground. “What were these people thinking of? He did not understand them. How could they refuse the basic needs of fellow human beings.” he wondered to himself. “Or are they human beings? They are the white people who have taken everything from us, and cheated us out of our lands and life in the name of their great chiefs and gods. They are different from Indians and have no respect for people or the land.”

In his own experience, white people had always been the enemy. He grew up in poverty on a reservation, and when he was old enough, he had run away to find his own destiny. It had been a difficult life; odd jobs; always traveling; no place to call home; no one to call family; and always the resentment, mistrust, and rejection in other people’s eyes. He had learned to read eyes and faces very well. It was sometimes a matter of survival to know what was going on in another man’s mind. He sat and rested and wondered what to do next as he stared at the ground. Where should he turn now?

There was only one option for him, in fact. He had to keep going. Down the line to the next place wherever that was. Always going on, never finding a decent end; no food, no cover, no rest. But he could rest here a while. At least there were no dogs chasing him away, nobody noticed him or cared whether he sat here on a stone wall in the sun, or not. The rest of the world went about its business as though he did not exist, and yet he felt hunger, he felt the hurt of being ignored, he felt the rejection of the society around him, and it ground away at his strength and inner worth.

Roger watched as the Indian came striding out of the yard and down to the tracks. Completely ignoring Roger, the man looked neither to the right or left, but purposely hastened through the gate as though to be rid of the place. Roger went far enough into the alley to see he had sat down on a wall by the road and seemed to

be consumed with his own thoughts. Unhurriedly, Roger slipped into the house. As he entered the kitchen, his mother stood up from where she had been sitting and quickly turned away from him. Her face was red, and Roger knew she had been crying, but now would not let herself cry further, since he had come in, and he would see her.

“What did the guy want?” he asked, knowing full well the only thing he would have been asking for was food.

“Food,” she answered softly, then added in a strained voice, “but all we have in the house are scraps and leftovers. I didn’t have anything to give him.” Roger sensed, more than heard, the sobs in her throat.

Roger opened the bread box. “There’s two crusts here,” he said.

“Those aren’t fit for anything but meat loaf filler,” his mother retorted. “I couldn’t give him those.”

“Maybe he’s hungry enough he don’t care.” Roger answered.

Mrs. Pratt stood still a moment, considering what Roger had said. She had been going over in her mind all the possibilities since the man had left so abruptly. Then a determined look came into her face. “Roger, go see if he is still there, and tell him to come back. Tell him what we have isn’t very good, but he can have it, if he wants.”

Roger ran out the door, down the yard, out the gate and along the tracks. He slowed up when he saw the Indian was still sitting on the wall at the end of the alley. Then cautiously, Roger approached him. “Hey, mister.” The Indian looked up to see who called him, and pierced the boy again with his sharp eyes, trying to fathom what the lad’s intent was. “Mom says she found some things if you want them. It ain’t much, but it’s better than nothin.”

The man sat without speaking. As he stared at the boy, his mind spun as in a whirlwind. Mentally, he stumbled among his emotions and feelings to find a suitable line of action, but he was hampered by hunger and anger in reaching a decision. He was inclined to let his pride stand him up and walk him away, but the gnawing on his inside told him that was not wise. Outwardly impassive, he struggled mightily inside for what seemed like several minutes as the boy looked expectantly at him. Slowly he responded, “Yes, I would like that. I will come.”

With a deliberate, proud walk he followed Roger back along the tracks and up to the back door. Mrs. Pratt was already there with a brown bag in her hand. “Here is everything we have. Two crusts of bread, a little peanut butter in the bottom of a jar, a shriveled apple, a carrot and a potato. I’m sorry they are not very good, but it is all that is left until I can go to the store. There’s also an old vinegar bottle full of water for you to take with you.

The man accepted the bag hesitantly. He looked at Mrs. Pratt as strange emotions struggled to escape his face. Stoically, they faced each other, trying to find a meeting ground from different cultures; different experiences. Centuries of pride helped the Indian to know he was a worthwhile, independent, and self-possessed person. This knowledge allowed him to take what was offered graciously, and to reply, “Thank you Ma’am. I deeply appreciate it.” He turned and was gone.

While keeping out of sight, Roger watched the man as he took the food back to his place at the wall, sit down, and begin to eat. Roger was amazed to see him eat slowly and carefully, not at all what Roger expected. He thought the man would have had it all in two bites, but the Indian sat quietly and chewed everything thoroughly, interspersed with sips of water. The Indian was wise in the ways of making the most of eating when the meals could be very widely spaced. He ate all except the apple which he put into his pocket along with the rest of the bottle of water. After putting the trash in a rubbish can nearby, he set off again down the tracks.

Roger watched him walk away and grow smaller in the distance. Then he disappeared where the tracks curved around the hill. Roger kept looking for a long time and let his thoughts roam. What kind of man was that who wanders all over, and depends on the goodness of others to survive? Where was he going? Where had he been? It was certainly not the kind of life Roger wanted to live, but then, as his father says, "It takes all kinds to make a world."

SUMMER FIREWORKS

The long awaited day finally arrived. As usual, the celebrating had begun early among those who had less parental constraint and an abundant supply of firecrackers. The noise makers could be heard going off occasionally during every day for at least the previous two weeks. Several stores in town had been selling fireworks since before school was out, or so it seemed to Roger. Possibly the merchants were hoping that advance sales would lead to advance usage, requiring the replenishment of stocks by the users and further sales by the vendors. Roger had saved most of his small hoard to be enjoyed right on the fourth of July. He wanted to be part of the official celebration and had conserved his prized fireworks. So now was the time to use them. He could light one of his cattails, and set off the firecrackers whenever he wanted to all day.

Roger started his activity by laying a small firecracker on the sidewalk in the backyard, lighting it, then running and looking back to see and hear the explosion. This process was repeated many times resulting in a cloud of smoke and scraps of firecracker strewn the sidewalk. He soon realized that method used them up too rapidly, and he wanted to get more excitement from them.

Rummaging around in the trash, he found a discarded tin can with the top off. Placing a firecracker on the bricks, he inverted the can on top of it. After propping the edge of the can up with a twig just thick enough to give the fuse of the firecracker enough room to stick out and burn, his venture was ready to begin. The smoldering cattail was carefully applied to the fuse. As it lit, he backed away, and the resulting detonation hurled the can skyward, tumbling as it rose. As the force of gravity had its way, the can slowed in its flight. Roger watched with delight as it returned with increasing speed until it crashed with a clatter onto the ground.

This was much more exciting, and gave Roger a greater feeling of power. He kept it up until he became keenly aware that his firecrackers were rapidly disappearing. He then stopped and sat down on the back steps with one of his sisters who had come out to watch the display. As they were talking, Fred came along with his friend Pete. They were both carrying their supplies of fireworks in bags.

Fred immediately took over where Roger had been playing. He had some higher powered crackers which he was showing to Pete and wanted to try out with Rogers tin can. The first one he tried, fizzled. It evidently had not been properly made. Instead of exploding, it just spewed out a shower of sparks from under the can.

Roger and his sister laughed, and Roger could not resist extolling the virtues of the smaller firecrackers he had been using prior to Fred's arrival. With determination, Fred assembled another experiment under the can. This time there was a very loud report, and the can went sailing into the air at least twice as high as Roger had been able to make it go.

"See that?" scoffed Fred, "Bet yours don't go that far. It was at least as high as the roof."

In response, Roger yelled, "No it wasn't. I saw how high it went." Thereupon he stood up and went into the house to nurse his bruised ego and to avoid having to watch further grand exploits of his brother.

Roger stayed in the house a long while. He sat in the kitchen counting his small hoard of fireworks again and again, and wishing there were more of them left. All the while he could hear explosions and cheers outside as Fred repeatedly sent the can to exciting heights. After some time he became aware of a long pause in the disturbances in the back yard. Just then his mother came into the room and angrily addressed him.

"Roger get out of here with that cattail. It is smelling up the whole place. Don't come in here again with it. You must put it out and leave it outside."

Sheepishly Roger slipped out the side door and cautiously moved towards the back to the back of the house to peek around the corner as he wanted to know what was going on. He overheard voices as he got to the corner.

It was Pete who was saying, "No, that's too big. I wouldn't do that if I were you. I'm getting' away." Pete appeared in Roger's range of view way at the back of the yard. Almost immediately there followed a very large explosion. Roger was protected by the corner of the house, but he realized it that must have been a cherry bomb which made that much noise. At almost the same instant, Roger was aware of something hitting the apple tree only five feet from where he was standing. He then looked around the corner of the house and saw a large cloud of smoke and his brother, Fred, standing in the middle of it.

Pete came running back in excitement, "Jeez! Why did you do that? Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm all right. But where is the can?" As they looked around, a shiny object came flipping down from above. It was the end of the can which had been blown completely off of the rest of the can and had spent a long while spinning up into the air then, more slowly, returning to the scene and tumbling to the ground.

"There's the top," Pete pointed in awe, "But where's the rest?"

While they were still searching, Roger came from behind the corner of the house. "Here's what's left of the thing. You ruined it. What are ya gonna to do now?"

When Pete and Fred came to where he stood, Roger pointed at the tree. The side of the can was almost completely wrapped around one of the lower branches of the tree where the blast had hurled it, and molded it to the limb.

“Jeez!” Pete repeated in amazement.

Fred said nothing but quickly started prying it loose. He began realizing that putting a cherry bomb under a tin can was not the smartest thing to do, and he had better get rid of the evidence as rapidly as possible. He had barely pried it away from the tree and thrown it into the trash when Mrs. Pratt appeared at the kitchen door.

As she looked out, she admonished them all, “Go play somewhere else now, boys. That’s enough noise here for a while. And Roger, you put out that cattail now and come into the house.”

Fred and Pete disappeared so quickly, it was almost as though they had evaporated. Roger rubbed the smoldering cattail on a rock to knock off the ash and laid it down by the door before following his mother into the kitchen. He whined, “Why do I have to come in? I didn’t do anything. It was Fred making all the noise.”

“Never mind, I just don’t want you playing with Fred just now.”

“But I want to go out and use up some more of my firecrackers. There’s no sense keeping them till tomorrow.”

“Well, just for a while, come in and read. I know you have a good book from the library.”

“Aw Mom, I don’t want to read now. That’s not fair.”

“Now, no more. Do as I tell you.”

Reluctantly, Roger sat down and started reading. His book was absorbing, but periodically he would become aware of near and distant explosions, as others exercised the rituals of Independence Day with a variety of fireworks.

After a suitable time, He went back to his mother, “Can I go play behind the fence now? I promise not to bother Fred or hang around him.”

Mrs. Pratt relented, and sent him off with the admonition, “Don’t get into trouble or get dirty.” She realized it was fruitless to say anything, but it was a habit born of years of trying to make children behave.

Roger went directly to his hideaway behind the shed. He looked again at his very small supply of firecrackers left in the bag. While reflecting on how best to use them, a thought came to mind. With a stick, he gouged a small hole in the dirt of the hill. He then stuck a firecracker in as far as it would go. Backing off, he cautiously lit it and got out of the way. It exploded with a resounding bang, and a hollowed out area of the dirt was left in its place. Roger chuckled in amusement. The next little while was spent in digging more holes and blasting them out to form small caves. He became so involved with his project, he did not realize until it was too late, he had used up his last firecracker.

He still had his cap gun and a few caps, but after his recent fun with blasting and moving dirt, that seemed rather tame. He fired off a few random pops reflective of his desultory mood. Bored with the sudden lack of excitement, he withdrew from his hideaway and returned to the back yard. No one was around and he took up a position on the back steps in the sun, occasionally firing his cap gun.

As he sat musing, his brother appeared from the side of the house, still with his bag of fireworks.

“Hey, Roger, you wanta have some fun?” Fred was alone. Evidently Pete had left for home, and Fred was searching for some further distraction.

“What do I have to do?” Roger knew Fred’s fun never came without a price.

“Nothin’ much. Come over by the garage.” Fred headed for the side of the garage away from the house, and Roger slowly followed.

When they were out of view of the house, Fred turned, and looking at Roger’s gun explained, “I want to see what will happen if we set off a fizzle in the barrel of a cap gun. I’ll bet it shoots out just like a real one. Let’s put one in your gun and try it.”

“No!” Roger held his gun tighter and closer to himself. “I don’t want to. You might break it.”

“Come on. It’s made out of metal. It ought to be able to do that all right.”

“I don’t care. It’s mine and I don’t want to.”

“Aw, you sissy, I’ll buy you another one, if it breaks. I just want to see what happens.”

Roger was intrigued by the possibilities also, but felt some apprehension about anything Fred suggested. He thought to himself, “Somehow I’ll end up in trouble.”

Fred persisted, “Come on, It’ll be all right. Just do it once. That’ll be enough. And I’ll take care of it, if anything happens.”

Succumbing to the superior persuasion of his brother, Roger reconsidered the proposition. “You’ll get me another one, if it breaks?”

“Yeah, I will”

Basically, Roger wanted to get along well with his brother, and was inclined to do what he wished usually, but very often it seemed to lead to bad results. With eternal optimism Roger decided to try Fred’s idea.

“Okay,” instructed Fred, “stand here like this, and hold the gun out. I’ll fix the fizzle in it.” Fred took a firecracker and dug away at the fuse end to open it up. This

would cause it to simply spew out the burning powder and not explode. When it was ready, he pushed it into the barrel. “Now hold it out, and I’ll light it.”

Roger stood firm, but had some concern. Fred lit the fuse and backed away. Suddenly, shooting from the barrel, there was a shower of sparks, which lasted a few seconds then faded away.

“Hey!” exclaimed Fred, “wasn’t that great? Let’s do it again.”

By now, Roger was also excited about the new trick with the gun, “Sure, I’ll hold it again.”

Fred hurriedly fixed another firecracker. The same result produced laughter from Roger, and made the new game more fun. Several more times the gun was “loaded” and “fired”. In haste, Fred fixed one fizzle after the other. Unfortunately, in fixing one of them, he did not open it up as far as the others. Quickly he stuffed it into the gun barrel, and in doing so further closed the space around the fuse. Roger held the gun out, and Fred lit the fuse. It rapidly burned down, but then, instead of the expected sparks, a resounding explosion filled the yard next to the garage. The firecracker had blown up rather than just throwing out sparks, and the cast metal of the gun, which was never meant to withstand such pressure, gave way. One complete side of the gun barrel instantaneously disappeared and was never recovered.

Roger looked at the broken gun in his hand, and started crying, both from fright and from the loss of his current favorite toy. “Now ya done it. I’m gonna tell Mom.” He turned away to head for the house.

“No, wait dummy. You’ll get in just as much trouble as I will. I said I’d take care of it. Here! Here’s my last two quarters. You can go get another one if ya want.”

Roger looked at the money, at the gun, and back at the money. He visualized a new gun, or maybe just some more firecrackers. After only a moments indecision, he agreed. “Okay, but I never should’a done what you said. I always get in trouble.” Grudgingly he accepted the two quarters and turned toward the house.

After he had carefully hidden the broken gun, he found his mother in the kitchen and asked a favor. “Can I go to the store again? I want to get some more firecrackers.”

“Are yours all gone already?”

Roger admitted with remorse, “Yeah.”

“I thought all your money was gone, too.”

“I found some I forgot I had.”

In the spirit of the festive day, Mrs. Pratt was inclined to be a little more accommodating. “Well, all right. But only to the store and back. Don’t you dawdle

anywhere.” The corner store where the fireworks were available was only a long block and a short block away, but Mrs. Pratt did not like Roger going off on his own, and wanted to know where he was when he went out.

“Thanks,” replied Roger and disappeared out the door. When he reached the store, there were several older boys on the corner. They were sporadically setting off firecrackers of various sizes which Roger heard as he approached. Inside, by the fireworks display, Roger quickly decided on the firecrackers he wanted, and negotiated the payment. Coming back out he noticed all the bigger kids were watching him, and as he stepped out on the sidewalk, one of them lit a match and set fire to a whole pack of firecrackers, tossing it at Roger. They immediately started going off all around him, so he turned and ran away down the street towards his home. He heard sounds of laughter follow him, and he kept running till the sounds faded in the distance. Somehow, the laughter did not fade in his memory though. It strangely persisted, and he even seemed to hear it again and again over the next few days at irregular times when his mind turned back to the event.

Back in his own yard, he headed for the hill and his hideaway. He spent the rest of the day happily blowing holes in the dirt, and excavating little caves. By the time he used up the last of the firecrackers, he was satisfied with having done his share to celebrate the fourth of July.

The conversation at supper was led by his father and dealt mostly with the noise of the day, and the hope that tomorrow would be quieter. Plans were also made to walk a short way up the tracks to get a better view of the sky fireworks to be set off over in the park. Roger’s parents did not consider it worth the effort to go across town to see the display, but did make the concession of walking out to where it was possible to see the highest flares in the sky.

As it began to get dark, the family started moving to a vantage point at the end of the street at the tracks, and exchanged small talk with some of the neighbors who were planning to watch from the same place. Roger stayed behind to listen as Fred set off the last of his firecrackers. Fred had used up all the usual methods of exploding them and was resorting to new, and riskier techniques. He began holding the firecracker in his hand with his arm cocked back, lighting the fuse with the smoldering cattail, then as the sparks began, throwing the firecracker into the air over the hill. The resulting blast took place in mid-air with a visible flash in the darkening evening light.

Again and again he repeated the procedure to the delight of Roger and his own satisfaction. The firecrackers were almost gone, when on one attempt, something changed. The explosion took place right by Fred, who responded loudly, “Dammit.”

“What happened?”

“I threw the dam cattail instead of the cracker. Ow, jeez, help me.”

Roger quickly realized the firecracker had somehow gone off in Fred’s hand. He jumped up, and could see Fred holding his hand, bent over in pain.

“What should I do? Get Mom?”

No! Dummy. Help me in and wrap it up for me.” He started stumbling towards the house. Roger followed.

As they entered the kitchen, all was quiet. Everyone seemed to be outside, probably going to see the fireworks. Roger hastily turned on a light, and could see Fred's bloody hands as he ran to the sink. "Turn on the water, quick."

Roger did as requested and watched as Fred rinsed his finger under the stream.

"Get the gauze and Mercurochrome."

Again Roger obliged.

Fred rinsed the finger and grimaced in pain as he applied the antiseptic. Roger could see a loose flap of skin as Fred worked on the wound. "Now wrap me up. Tight." commanded Fred.

Roger took a strip of gauze and began putting it around the tip of the finger. "Tighter," ordered Fred, and Roger pulled a tight as he could. "Ow, dammit. Take it easy."

"I'm tryin' to do it," complained Roger.

In a few minutes, the two had managed to apply a fairly secure bandage, and the bleeding subsided. "Put the stuff away now so no one sees it."

Roger went about putting the supplies away, but replied, "Mom's gonna know anyway, she'll see your hand and the bandage."

"She doesn't have to. I'll keep it in my pocket."

Fred was successful in keeping his wound secret for three days, but then Mrs. Pratt came upon them as Roger was helping Fred to change the bandage again. "So that's where the gauze has been going." She confronted them. "Fred, what did you do to your finger?"

"Aw, I just cut it a little playing." That was all she could draw out of him. The true story became known much later after the finger was well healed, and Fred chose to share the experience with some degree of braggadocio. He seemed to enjoy telling of the risk he took, although he was admonished to be more careful. His father pointed out that risk taking sometimes turns out for the worst.

The fourth of July, the first high point of the Summer, had come and gone. Roger thought about the events many times during the rest of the Summer, and decided the happiest time he spent was in blasting his little caves. It was fun to see the explosion actually do something, even if it was just to make a hole. Somehow, it felt very satisfying and even more grown up to Roger.

SAND

The disadvantages of living next to the railroad tracks were noise, dust and dirt, contacts with transient persons who may not be of the highest character, and possible danger to those who succumbed to the lure of the nearness of the yards and were incautious when trespassing on the railroad property. Roger did not recognize any of these factors, but saw only the advantages, which were too numerous even to consider listing. When pressed for an answer, he might have admitted the major advantages were the fascination the large machinery held for him, watching the interesting process of sorting cars, making up trains, and seeing them pull out of the yards. Other benefits were perhaps more subtle, and not even recognized when they happened.

One such profitable event occurred and needed to be acted on quickly at the right time. This fortuitous happening took place one morning when a string of hopper cars full of sand was parked on the tracks behind Roger's house. Roger noticed the cars when he came out to a hot July morning and surveyed his domain. As he moved around his territory overlooking the tracks, he noticed one of the sand cars slowly losing a portion of its load. The hopper door was sprung open slightly from the rough handling and abuse the huge metal containers experienced. The gap was just big enough to allow a small flow of sand. As he watched, the sand pile which was already equivalent to about two buckets full grew larger to a three bucket size pile, and continued to flow unchecked from a seemingly infinite supply.

After studying the situation for several minutes, Roger turned determinedly towards his house. As he came into the kitchen, his mother was washing breakfast dishes and turned with a look of surprise that Roger was back in so soon. "Mom, there's a sand car leaking sand on the tracks. Kin I get some of it?"

Ethyl Pratt's reaction was as prompt as it was definite, "Certainly not. It's dangerous. You never know when the engine is coming back and the cars might move. Besides, it doesn't belong to you. It's someone else's sand."

"Aw, come on. Nobody wants it, they ain't gonna come and sweep it up. It'll just go to waste, and its real nice white sand."

Ethyl followed her own thoughts, "I cannot let him go down on the track. If he gets accustomed to doing that, then he will go without asking and not be careful. But it is true, we certainly could use the sand, and no one will miss it or even care. It would be handy in potting plants and using it for the garden. Still, it isn't ours, but with all the dirt and noise from the trains, perhaps they owe us a something. Maybe, after the cars are moved--, No, we shouldn't, but--"

"Why not mom? Why can't I get some? It'd be neat to play with."

"No! Not now! Maybe when the train is gone. Now leave me alone." Ethyl turned back to her work, and Roger slipped out the kitchen door to return to his yard.

He crawled into his favorite hiding place to sit and sulk, and to contemplate the injustices in life. Lost in thought, time passed rapidly. Suddenly, a loud crash brought him back to reality, and he realized the engine had returned to the string of cars. Quickly he jumped up to see what was happening. The little yard engine was now coupled to the sand cars, and they were moving slowly up the tracks to the factory at the far end of the alley. As the cars and engine advanced, they cut the little pile of sand in two, and shaved it off low enough to allow passage of the train.

Roger ran into the house, “Mom! The cars are gone. Kin I get the sand now?”

Mrs. Pratt had considered how useful the sand might be all the while she did the dishes. Now, as she was sitting cutting vegetables for stew, Roger again brought her thoughts back to mind. “Why not? Why not get a little something to compensate for all the noise, dirt, commotion, and danger the railroad caused them,” she thought to herself. “Still--” she turned to Roger and spoke, “Show me where it is. I want to see what you are so excited about.” She followed Roger outside and down the yard to the back fence.

Roger climbed up on the fence and pointed, “There, just past the switch on this side.”

Easily seen covering the ties and rail was a small mound of pure white sand. It was just on the other side of the switch in back of the neighbors yard. As she thought about it, she asked Roger, “Which way was the train going?”

“Up the tracks to the factory.”

“No, we can’t get it now. The engine will be coming back soon. If it’s still there after the engine is through in the yards for the day, maybe we’ll get it.”

“Aw, let me go now. I could scoop it up quick, and we kin see the engine coming easy.

“I said no! Now mind me, and don’t go begging either. We’ll wait till later and see.” Ethyl returned to the house and left Roger looking disconsolately at the pile of sand, so near and yet so far away. More than the danger of going to the tracks, Ethyl was also concerned about being seen taking something from the tracks. She knew it was illegal to be on the railroad property and even more so to take anything. She assumed that included even waste sand. Although she knew also, that none of the neighbors had any concern about walking on the tracks whenever they wanted to or picking up whatever they found. Their neighbors were different than the Pratts. Ethyl felt uncomfortable with most of them. They spoke other languages to each other all the time, and many were hard to understand when they did speak English. Mrs. Pratt felt excluded often and wondered what they were talking about when they chose to speak other than English around her. It certainly was contrasting to the society in which she grew up. There had been no foreigners then. Everyone talked the same and went to the same church and did the same things. She had many friends then. “How times change,” she sighed as she returned to her work.

For Roger the day dragged by slowly. In a little while the engine returned and did some switching in the yards. Even though they were not on the spur track that ran behind Roger’s yard, they were within sight, and might possibly return at anytime. Roger tried to occupy himself with digging around on his hill, but he could not get very interested in his play. Periodically, he went back to look over towards the sand pile to make sure it was still there. The engine was busy in the yards until lunch time.

After lunch, Roger returned to the backyard, and immediately looked to see whether the sand was still there. To his satisfaction, it was. No one else had noticed it or taken it yet. The yard engine was just coupling to a string of cars it had rearranged. It sat idling for a few minutes, as though gathering strength for the next job. Shortly, Roger saw all the trainmen climb onto the engine, and with a burst of steam, the train set off. Roger watched until it disappeared out of sight around the hill, then quickly

ran to the house.

“Mom! The train’s gone. Kin we get the sand now?”

Ethyl Pratt had been struggling with the decision to take or not take the sand all day. Her thoughts dogged her through all her chores, “On one hand, they could put the sand to good use rather than letting it go to waste, and certainly, any of their neighbors would scoop it up in an instant, if they saw it. On the other hand, it was not quite right. It was not on the Pratt’s property, and it was basically stealing. But were they not due something?”

She studied the eager young face Roger presented to her, and finally decided she should not deny him some pleasure, when it was so simple to achieve. “Let’s go look,” she answered. Before they left the house, she asked, “Have any of the neighbors been out in their yards?”

“I ain’t seen nobody. If they were out, they would have seen the sand, too, and someone would have it by now.

“Go get the little coal shovel, and there’s a bucket by the laundry tub. You get it and bring it here.”

Roger was off like a shot and shortly returned with the desired items.

“Now you can go down and fill the bucket, but you mind, if I call you, you come running.” admonished Roger’s mother.

Roger scurried down the hill with the expertise of a nimble little boy. He was soon returning with a bucket two thirds full of bright white sand. “That’s as much as I kin carry,” he explained.

“Here,” said Mrs. Pratt, “dump it here by the shed.” Roger did as he was told.

“Kin I go again?” he asked, looking up expectantly.

Mrs. Pratt hesitated a moment, and looked both ways to see whether anyone was around. “Well, all right.” Roger again raced off, and quickly returned with another partial bucket load. As Ethyl Pratt surveyed the area nervously, Roger made several more trips to the sand pile, and sooner than she expected, had collected all that was collectable. The sand made a nice little mound next to the shed, and Roger looked down at it, beaming, his mind racing with ideas for making good use of it.

Roger knelt down to better observe his treasure of sand, and his mother took the bucket and shovel back into the house. In a few minutes Roger followed to ask, “Kin I have a spoon and the little funnel?”

“What on earth do you want them for?” Mrs. Pratt wanted to know.

“I just want something to flow the sand through.”

“Well, you can’t have a good spoon Here take this old one, and be careful with the funnel and don’t lose it. And don’t strew that sand all over the yard, or there’ll be no use to our getting it. I want some for the garden, so don’t you be wasting it.” she added firmly as he went out the door.

Roger played with the sand with the funnel and a couple of tin cans he salvaged. He enjoyed the play even when Fred came to laugh at him. “Never mind,” he retorted, “I like it and I got it all myself.” Fred left him alone when he realized Roger would not allow himself to be teased about it. Over the next few days the pile flattened a good deal, and Roger enjoyed it to the fullest. Mrs. Pratt removed some for her own use periodically, and gradually Roger lost interest in it.

Some sand remained for all the Summer, and it was a recognizable landmark of the yard. Winter’s wind and snow eroded the little pile, and dissipated the grains into the rest of the yard. Spring thaws and rains practically eliminated any remaining trace of the sand, and by the next Summer, it was forgotten. All that remained was the memory of the brief fun and the modest value of a few buckets of sand wrested from the harsh environment of the rail yards.

THE CIGAR

A solitary hobo walked along the tracks. He looked down as he followed the path, obviously absorbed in thought. He was a strong looking man, not old, but appearing to be bearing a great deal of the world’s weight on his shoulders. Visions of home and family kept pressing into his consciousness, although he tried to smother them. The dislocations in his life were too severe to contemplate and still remain functional in the requirements of day-to-day existence. Mostly he thought ahead to the next town, the next day, the next job. Would this be the one where some permanence would be found? Who could tell? But next he needed a meal. Maybe in this small town. There was a likely place. Yes! There was the mark. Perhaps he was in luck.

Everyone had finished eating except Roger. He picked at his food and was the last one at the table. Food was not high on his priority list because most things just did not taste good to him. And he always had to finish what was on his plate, whether he liked it or not. That made it twice as difficult to do. While he sat staring at his plate and deciding how to make it look like he had eaten more than he actually had, there were some noises out in the kitchen. He heard his mother talking to someone whose voice he did not recognize. After a minute the back door closed and silence followed. Roger carefully took his plate to the kitchen, while no one was around and left it by the sink. Opening the back door and looking out, he saw his mother talking to a stranger by the wood pile. As Roger watched, she turned away to come in, and the man picked up the axe and began splitting some firewood.

“Who is that guy?” Roger greeted his mother as she entered the house.

“He’s a hobo who is going to chop some wood for me in exchange for a meal. Thankfully, we’ve got enough I can give him something. Now you keep out of his way and don’t bother him.” The admonition breezed right by Roger as he went out the door. Roger approached the working man a little cautiously, but was soon squatting near him, and following his every move. Roger noted that he was not too badly dressed for a hobo, but his clothes looked rough and durable. His face was tanned, his hair uncombed, and his hairy arms seemed strong enough to make light work out of the chopping. Roger wondered why the man was there. Didn’t he have some other place to be? Did he have no family or friends? Why didn’t he have a regular job instead of wandering around the country doing odd jobs and living so haphazardly?

For his part, the hobo ignored Roger. As he worked, he continued his musing of future successes. His fantasies of new work occupied his mind, so that the thoughts of home, of his poor wife, and the joys they had shared were kept at bay. The worst thought, that he might not survive these bad times, was pushed back the furthest, and hid in the deepest recesses of his brain. It was an intolerable thought, one that must never see the light of day.

He worked slowly, but efficiently, as though he had done the same thing many times before. After a while he stopped and began picking up the split wood and piling it on the stack ready for the fire. As he finished stacking the wood, Mrs. Pratt appeared bringing a plate of food and a glass of water. She placed it on the shelf on the side of the shed, then turned to the hobo. “Thank you for splitting the wood. Here is your food. You can just leave the plate there when you’re done.” She was capable of no further communication than that. She did not want to learn more about the stranger. It would only be a sad story she did not want to hear, or could not bear hearing. So she returned to the house, and Roger was once again alone with the man. Since he was no longer busy chopping, Roger figured the hobo was now fair game for talking.

“Where ya goin’ to, mister?”

The man regarded the young Roger coolly, and took a moment to eat before he answered. He had tolerated the presence of the kid while he was busy with the wood because little boys were always part of the environment, and had to be noticed and sometimes dealt with, but they were never very important contacts for him. His life had taken him many places and he had met many people, but it was the adults who were important in getting the things he needed. “I’m going wherever I must to find some work. Do you know where I can get a job?” he asked, a little arrogantly.

“No sir, I sure don’t” replied Roger, “But where did you come from? Didn’t ya have a job there?”

Again the man waited to answer as he ate. “Yes, I had a good job once, but then they decided I wasn’t needed, and there were no more jobs there. All I could do was go looking other places for work, but a lot of men are doing the same thing and there are not enough jobs. Now what do you suggest?” Again the hobo was discourteous in his tone of voice and went on eating.

Roger was unaware of the man’s rudeness and answered as best he could. “I don’t know. I never tried for work myself. I don’t know where ya kin find it. Maybe you could work on the railroad. There seems to be a lot of trains going. What kind of work did ya do before?”

The hobo began to look at Roger a little differently. No one had shown this much interest in him in quite a while, and even though it was merely a child asking, the

attention did begin to mean something. “I used to work in a factory where we made automobile engines. I helped assemble the engines and made sure they ran right before they were built into the autos. I had a house and yard like this, and even a little boy like you.” He passed his hand across his face. “But that was long ago, almost in another world.”

Roger didn’t understand what the stranger was trying to say, but he did recognize it was difficult for him to talk about it. “I’m sorry you lost your job. I wish I could tell you something good to do.”

The tramp stared at Roger, and for a moment allowed himself the luxury of remembering a wife, a child, a better time. He was tormented by thoughts, “Did the little money he could occasionally send do any good? Were they still well? Were they looking to the time he could come back and take them away to a better life?” Suddenly, he could bear it no longer and turned away from Roger and started crying.

Roger was surprised and confused by the crying. He did not know grown men could cry, and it was a little upsetting. He wanted to help somehow, but what could he do? As he watched, the germ of an idea grew in his mind. “Hey mister, I’m goin’ into the house, but don’t go before I come back. You finish eatin’, and I’ll be back quick.”

As he entered the house, everyone seemed busy with their own little jobs. His mother was doing dishes, his sisters reading, and his father looking at the paper at the dinner table. Without being noticed, Roger went into the living room next to his father’s chair to the box on the table. Nervously, he reached in as quietly as he could and took out a cigar. Slipping it into his pocket, he unobtrusively made his way out of the house again. The stranger had regained his composure and had finished eating. He was now washing his hands at the garden hose.

“Hey, mister,” he indicated with a nod of his head that the man should follow him to the back fence. As they reached the back gate, Roger reached into his pocket and took out the cigar. Handing it to the man he spoke awkwardly, “Here, I want ya to have this.” The man stopped and looked at the cigar, then the boy, then back to the cigar in disbelief.

“Why---why?” he stammered.

“Go on, take it. Don’t ask, just take it.” Roger began to be a little uncomfortable. What if he didn’t take it, and it had to be put back? Maybe his dad would catch him and there’d be hell to pay. It was bad enough he took it in the first place. Now he had to get rid of it.

Slowly the hobo reached out and took the cigar from Roger. He looked at it carefully then slipped it into his pocket. “Thanks. Thanks a lot.”

“That’s okay. I hope you find a job.”

Roger watched as the man turned and disappeared into the alley and down the tracks into the gathering dusk. He kept looking even after there was nothing more to see. After a while he turned and went back into the house

The stranger walked along the tracks toward the hobo jungle where he knew he could spend a night and sleep well on a full belly. Several times he reached up and touched the cigar in his pocket and wondered, "What prompted that kid to give me a cigar? I'm sure his father would not have done that. I hope he doesn't get into trouble over it." He smiled. "I don't even smoke, but maybe it will buy me a favor somewhere, sometime. Who knows, this might even be the turning point. Things might even be getting better.

The whole incident kept coming back to Roger for many days, and he would remember again and again the hobo who cried. He wondered where he might be, and whether he ever found another job, or if maybe he went back to building engines for cars. Gradually, the man joined the list of other strangers who came through Roger's yard. They were seen once, then never seen again. Where did they all go?

FLATTENED NAILS

It glinted brightly in Fred's hand, but he would not let Roger get close enough to see it.

"Come on, lemme see what ya got," Roger begged. Fred was enjoying teasing his brother, a sport of which he never seemed to tire. Fred had something new and was using it to the utmost to enjoy his position of seeming to be superior and smarter than his little brother. "Where did ya get it? How did it get so shiny?"

Fred laughed and ran out the front yard where Roger could not follow without asking permission. Roger turned and went into the house with a stormy look on his face, and tears near to spilling from his eyes.

Before his mother could ask, he raged, "Fred's got something new and won't show it to me.

Mrs. Pratt was often finding herself having to get between Fred and Roger to keep the peace. "Why do they always have to be arguing?" she asked herself silently. To her son she added aloud, "Well, he doesn't have to show you everything. I suppose he can keep it to himself if he wants to. That shouldn't hurt you. Don't let it bother you. Why don't you sit down and read a book and relax."

"I don't want to read a book. I want to know what he has he won't show me." yelled Roger.

"Now, now," admonished his mother, "Don't bring your crying and hollering into the house. If you're going to be like that, go out in the back yard and play."

Roger stalked out of the kitchen door and headed for the back hill. At a time like this, there was only one place suitable for Roger to go to soothe his injured feelings. His hideaway on the back hill was his alone. Mostly, no one else wanted to crawl through the weeds, rocks and bushes necessary to reach it. Roger spent a lot of time there to escape from what he considered the injustices in his life. He began playing with the small items he kept there, a little truck, an old spoon for digging, and

bits of wood which fulfilled a variety of functions. He dug absent mindedly and listened to the trains in the main yard going about their business. After a while he calmed down enough to enjoy his quiet time alone, and became busy with constructing a new road along the hill. Not paying attention, he was suddenly surprised to see Fred crawling into his haven.

“What do you want?” Roger challenged the interloper.

Fred said nothing, but showed a brief glint of something shiny in his hand. It was obvious he wanted to tease Roger a little more. Roger turned away sullenly, and tried to ignore Fred, who finally realized his mystery was losing its effect.

“Don’tcha wanta see it?” queried Fred.

“I don’t care what ya got.” returned Roger.

Fred surrendered. “Look, I’ll show ya, see?”, and he held out a shiny bit of metal. Roger took it inquisitively and turned it over and over in his hand. It looked like a nail, but it was flattened and the sides were shiny bright as new metal.

“Where did ya get it?

“I made it.”

“Made it! How can ya make it? Did you hammer it or squeeze it?”

“Well,” drawled Fred, “sort of both.”

“Com’on tell me.” Roger responded impatiently.

“All right. I put it on the track and the train engine squeezed it when it came by. It made it flat and shiny.”

“The engine? Really?” Roger looked at the used-to-be-nail more carefully and inspected all the details.

“Yeah, it’s easy. Just lay the nails on the tracks and wait for the train to go by, then go and collect them.

“Can I have it?” asked Roger, knowing the answer in advance.

“No,” said Fred, reaching to take the nail back. “Make your own if you want them.”

Roger reluctantly returned the nail to Fred who then retreated out of Roger's hideaway, leaving Roger with his mind churning with this new information. It was mid afternoon, and most of the activity in the rail yard was over for the day, but Roger was eager to try out this new idea. He looked in the garage and around the yard, and managed to find six old rusty nails of various sizes. Slipping unseen out of the yard, he crept down to the track and placed the nails in a row on the near rail. He then retreated to his hideaway to wait. No trains happened along for a long while, and he became absorbed again in his play. Usually the engine came onto the tracks behind his house just once a day, and it was probably all done until tomorrow.

At the end of the afternoon, Roger was called in to supper and the nails faded from his mind. In the evening after supper, while sitting in the corner of the kitchen, Fred came over and flashed his trophy at Roger again.

"I put some nails on the tracks, too." he boasted to Fred.

"Yeah? How many?"

"Six."

"Six? All in one place?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"I don't know if it's safe to put that many in one place. Maybe they'll knock the train right off the track."

That possibility had never occurred to Roger, and he was suddenly concerned. Thoughts raced through his brain, "What if that happens? What if the train comes off and they find out I did it? What will they do? Dad'll really be mad then." By then it was dark outside, and Roger would not be able to look again until the next day. Roger resolved to go out first thing in the morning to take the nails off again before the engine came by and he caused any trouble. Sleeping was difficult that night. He was tormented by what Fred had said, and fearful dreams filled his head. By morning he was exhausted even though he had found some fitful sleep.

After a hurried breakfast, he left the kitchen furtively and quickly ran down to the tracks. When he looked on the rails where the nails should have been, there was nothing to be seen. Where were they?

Roger looked up and down the track, then suddenly noticed the hobo sitting on the grass of the back hill. The man returned the gaze unblinkingly from beneath the brim of a dirty brown felt hat. He was as scruffy looking as any ordinary hobo and had no outstanding features. Roger approached him and noticed he was holding something shiny in his hand. As he got closer he could see the man had his nails, but now they were shiny and flat.

"Hey, mister, those are mine."

“Yeah? How can you tell?”

“I know. I left them out here yesterday.”

“I bet they weren’t shiny like this when you left them, were they?”

“Well-”

“You left them on the track, didn’t you?”

“Well -” Roger felt embarrassed and a little unsure of himself. What was the hobo going to do?

“You left them on the track so the train would flatten them. Right?”

Roger could find nothing to say except, “Yeah.”

The hobo laughed, and tossed the nails at Roger. “That’s a pretty good trick kid. I’ll have to try it some time.”

The tramp’s sudden change to a more pleasant attitude relieved Roger as he hurried to pick up his treasure. When they were all picked up he turned with a smile, “Thanks, I gotta go show these to my brother. They’re better than his. I was afraid they might have caused something to the train though.”

The man laughed again, “Not likely, they’re too small to cause any trouble. The torpedoes they put on tracks to explode to warn of trouble ahead as a train goes over them, are bigger than your nails. Don’t try putting a rail spike on though. That might really cause a problem.

Roger turned and scrambled up to his back yard with his booty, and left the hobo grinning on the hill. Roger could not avoid being magnanimous. He really wanted to get along with Fred, but sometimes it was too difficult. He found Fred coming out the back door and eagerly showed him his booty.

For a change, Fred was really impressed with Roger’s results. They looked the nails over together, and marveled at the tremendous force the engine must exert to squeeze the nails out so pretty. It turned out to be a good day for Roger. He did not get into trouble once and avoided fighting with Fred also.

The novelty of the nails quickly wore off, and before the end of the Summer, they were either lost or thrown out with the trash. They had served their purpose however, in adding a few more facts and experiences to Roger’s continuing education. Who knows what useful end the knowledge of flattened nails may aid?

THE EVENING'S ENTERTAINMENT

During the Great Depression, many men accustomed to working, had nothing to do. Time dragged by for them, and some of the smallest activities became very important and almost a reason for existing. Small diversions helped make the time go a little faster and the hope lived in the men's hearts that the present ill times would be over that much sooner. Living near the rail yards were many such people, and one of the activities they found to do and to serve as a distraction from more serious matters, was watching the hoboes on a summer evening.

All day the yard engines moved cars around and positioned them to form up trains ready to leave in the evening for various destinations. Hoboes needing to hitch a ride to the next town or a better place, hid out during the day in hobo jungles or in the woods and land next to the yards. As night began to fall, they made their way to the edges of the yards to spot a likely train and to plan a way to get on it.

On a hot, sultry, August evening, no one wanted to be inside airless, cracker box houses, particularly the men. They wandered the streets and alleys, and visited with neighbors on their porches until the call of laboring, roaring, engines signaled the beginning of the night's entertainment. Slowly the citizens drifted in twos and threes to the end of the street where there was plenty of room to stand at the edge of the small valley eaten out of the landscape by a sluggish and often stinking creek. Roger, when he asked, was permitted to go to the end of the street and stand with the others until it got dark.

When a long freight train started to move, it was usually a laborious task. Fully backed up, to get as much slack as possible in the couplers, the engine would begin a forward rush. As each coupler yanked taut and started moving the car, the load on the engine increased until, if the engineer was not careful, the driving wheels lost traction and began to spin. Quickly, the steam was cut back to stop the drivers, then just as quickly advanced to pickup speed again without losing momentum. The loss of traction usually happened many times before a train got moving and picked up enough speed to exit the yards.

The average hobo could hop on the slowest moving trains. A mile an hour, or two miles an hour was barely moving; almost like standing still. But after a critical speed, the engine began to keep traction more easily, and the snakelike monster more rapidly increased in speed to five, ten, fifteen miles an hour, until it became reckless and dangerous to try hopping on, even for an experienced and agile person. During this interval of time, when the train was moving slowly and was vulnerable, the hoboes made a dash to the side of the rolling cars and attempted to board. It was also the time the yard detectives were the most active in trying to prevent their boarding.

Naturally, the closer to a train a hobo could hide, the quicker and easier he could make it to the cars when they started. One favorite place to hide was in the tunnel where the meandering creek was forced under the rows of tracks. The entrance to the tunnel was not visible from the tracks above, and the occupants were safe from detection, although they were completely in the open as far as the observers on the hill on the opposite side of the little valley were concerned.

A certain intuitive camaraderie sprang up between the hoboes and the observers, who in some way identified with the hoboes and wanted to see them successfully catch their train. It was one way the men could safely thumb their noses at a society which had apparently abandoned them. Through hand signals, the nightly watchers kept the hoboes informed of the situation above; when to hide because the yard detectives were around, when to wait, when trains were starting, when

to hurry to get up to the tracks, and anything else which they could convey to them to help them on their way.

Roger watched all these activities with fascination. Mostly he liked the large engines and enjoyed the roar, hiss, and clangs of their movements. He felt intense anxiety when a particularly long train had trouble getting started. Often the trains had two engines coupled together on the front, which added to the complexity of developing and maintaining traction, since the single engines operated independently of each other. On some occasions, a pusher engine was attached to the rear of the train to boost it along until there was sufficient speed for the front engine to pull the load. Roger stood or sat on the edge of the hill and watched as long as he was allowed to stay.

On one such evening, a rather clean cut hobo was waiting down in the tunnel entrance in the gathering dusk and was evidently hoping to catch the first evening freight. As the would-be-traveler edged out of the tunnel, Popo, the yard detective, climbed over a boxcar, dropped to the ground, and began walking along the tracks above him. Several of the watchers, holding their hands waist high, waved them back and forth to signal the hobo to hide again, and he quickly ducked back into the tunnel.

Popo noticed the men, and apparently thought they were waving to him, so he raised his arm high and waved back. The rest of the group of watchers saw what was happening, and joined in the waving, but in a manner with their arms held high to let Popo think they were waving at him. Popo stopped and smiled, then pointed below and shrugged his shoulders, as though asking, "Is anyone down there?"

The observers responded by shaking their heads "no", and again waving both hands waist high as though to convey the idea, "The space is empty." Popo smiled and waved again as he turned and walked up the tracks. In several minutes, he had disappeared into the gathering gloom. The hobo, who had been watching from below was then signaled, "Hurry up! Hurry up! That way. That way." He scurried up the embankment to the tracks. The engines had been huffing and puffing for many minutes already, and the drivers were slipping less often. The man was obviously experienced and very agile. He quickly went up and over the stationary cars on the outside track, but before he dropped out of sight on the other side where the freight was pulling out, he turned and waved again to the watchers as a way of saying, "Thank you."

Roger overheard a kid younger than himself turn and ask an older person, "Why did the man go over the boxcar? Why didn't he just go underneath, cause it would be quicker?"

The older person answered condescendingly, "It's safer to go over the top. You never know when a long string of cars like that might start moving, and you could get caught under them or, if you're climbing between them, get knocked off. But it's best if you never cross them at all. If I ever catch you doing that, you'll get a licking."

In a few more minutes, the freight had picked up a lot of speed and was shortly out of the yard. As the sounds of it disappeared in the distance Roger turned towards home, since it was already dark. Other people drifted away, but some waited to hear and see the second freight train pull away. It was blowing its whistle to communicate with the brakemen and would soon be struggling mightily to get its cars rolling also.

Later that night, Popo, the yard detective, reported into the yard office before quitting his shift. The yardmaster nodded in greeting, "Hi Popo. How's it going?"

“Notta bad. I tink we got one bum on da first freight, but none on da secunt. I donno about da tird and fort. It was too dam dark to see.”

The yardmaster scanned through his reports absent mindedly and replied, “Well, I hope he doesn’t fall off. That’s all we would need, is more bad publicity.

“Goodnight Popo.”

“Night, see ya tomarra.”

THE LUMBER CAR FIRE

It was a boring day. Roger was tired of playing in his yard, and there was nowhere to go to have fun. It was mid summer, and all the good things to do had been done. The fourth of July was long gone, and the prospect of school in the hazy future was beginning to be a reality. He had even read all the books he could find at the library which were half way interesting.

Roger was playing by himself in his private area on the hill behind the shed where he could overlook the tracks. Even the train yards were quiet as though exhausted with just the prospect of another long, hot August day of noise and dirt. Fred and Roger had not played together for a while. Not since their last squabble two days ago, when their mother had to separate them. Roger scratched in the dirt with a stick, and let his mind rove through his experiences hoping to get some inspiration for action towards an interesting activity.

As he mused, he gradually became aware of a distant noise. A wailing sound grew gradually louder, then came to a stop. It seemed it was right in front of his house, and he scrambled out of his den to find the source of the disturbance. When he reached the front yard, he could see a small crowd collecting at the end of the street. Without stopping to ask permission, he ran out of the yard to the corner to investigate.

A fire engine from the volunteer force stood rumbling and flashing at the end of the road, just where it crossed over the beltline tracks and became a dirt road into the beltline yards. He could see Popo, the yard detective, talking with the firemen and waving his arms excitedly.

As he approached, Roger also noticed Fred was in the small crowd and he tried to avoid him. He heard the fire chief yell, “Where is it exactly, Popo?”

“It’s inna middle da dam yard. In a string about four sidings in from da udder side a da ditch.”

“How we gonna reach it then? We sure as hell can’t squirt all the way from here. What do you want us to do?”

“I don’ know. I don’ know. Day breakin’ da string now an gonna isolate da dam ting. Den we can move it somewhere you can get it.”

“You got any water near it anywhere?”

“Only water in da middle da dam yard is in da engine tender. Could you use dat?”

“Well, we have a portable pump, but I don’t know if it’s big enough. We’ll try. Move the car down this way as close as you can, and we’ll haul the pump over there to the engine.

Roger could see over in the main yards a small wisp of smoke rising over the tops of the strings of railcars. He turned to Fred, who had moved next to him to hear the conversation between the men, and asked in a manner intended to be friendly, “What’s burning?”

“A railroad car, Dummy.”

“I know that, but what kind? What’s in it?”

Fred looked nonplused. “How should I know? Ain’t nobody seen it yet. Wait till they get out in the open, then I’ll tell ya.”

Roger stood and watched. The problem for the fire fighters was that the beltline tracks and a ditch were between them and the main yards where the fire was. There was no access by road to that part of the main rail yards, so the fire engine with its pumper and tank of water did them no good. He followed the actions of the firemen, as they dragged out a portable pump. Four of them grabbed the handles on each corner and started hauling it towards the spot to which they believed the burning car would be moved.

While they were engrossed in that part of the operation, Popo returned to the yards, and the crowd on the corner could hear, more than see, the yard engines quickly moving strings of cars and shunting them onto other tracks. After what seemed a very long time a lone engine came puffing up the track just on the other side of the ditch pushing a large red boxcar trailing a plume of smoke. The one-car train moved up to a position where the waiting firemen would be able to reach it with their pump. The engine and car screeched to a stop, and the men started swarming over the smoldering hulk to put into action their plan for conquering the demon which was bent on destroying the boxcar and its load. Roger had expected to see roaring flames coming from the car, and was surprised to see only billowing smoke. The word started circulating in the little group of observers that the load in the car must be wood.

Someone who evidently knew, said that kind of car always carried lumber. As they watched, the firemen hauled the pump next to the tender of the engine and threw a hose into the water tank. A water hose was extended to the boxcar, and after a few false starts, the pump was made to run. When the stream of water hit the car, water vapor rose in a cloud. The men chopped some holes in the top of the car and directed the water inside. For a while it was not possible to see what was transpiring on the car as the pump continued to run, and water poured into the car fire in the middle of a great cloud of smoke and steam.

Gradually the air cleared, and it was apparent the fire had been subdued. Then not much more occurred for a while. The firemen stood around waiting to be sure the fire was all out, and slowly the little crowd lost interest and dispersed, picking up the rest of the day's activities from where they had been dropped.

Roger did not much want to hang around with Fred, so he returned home to tell his mother all the news. Fred stayed and watched, even though it seemed apparent nothing more was going to happen.

Mrs. Pratt listened attentively to the tale, but then put Roger to work weeding in the garden to compensate for leaving the yard without asking permission. He fussed and fumed to himself thinking, "I should have stayed with Fred. Maybe I wouldn't get stuck with this work then. Why does Fred get away with leaving without asking? I'm just as careful as he is, even if he is older."

Roger became so absorbed in his work and ill feelings, he was only barely aware of the sound of another siren nearby, and did not stop to investigate it. The noise was in the same direction as the fire engine but had a different wail to warn of its coming. When Roger finished the weeding, he went back to his hideaway and sulked for a long while.

As he sat in silence, Roger became aware of someone approaching. In a few seconds Fred came crawling through the weeds to where Roger sat.

Fred grinned at him in a way that Roger knew his brother had something which made him feel superior and which he intended to use to tease Roger. "Hi," he started, then paused before continuing, "You left too soon. There was more excitement afterward." Fred stopped and waited for Roger to ask.

"Why? What happened?"

"You shoulda stayed." Fred added briefly, stringing out the suspense.

"C'mon tell me. What happened?"

"They called the ambulance, too."

"The ambulance! Why? Did one of the firemen get hurt?"

"Naw."

"Then what happened? C'mon tell me," begged Roger.

Fred had finished having fun with Roger, and began telling what he had trouble holding back anyway. "When the fire was all out, they went into the car to see the damage. Not much of the wood was burned, but they found this guy. He was a hobo who had been in the car. They figured he fell asleep with a smokin' cigarette."

“A guy!” exclaimed Roger, “Was he burned? Did you see him? What happened?”

“Yeah, I seen him. He wasn’t burned much, but he was dead. Popo said the smoke killed him.”

Roger sat in stunned silence for a moment. He had come home to carry the news to his mother and had missed the most important part. Fred got to see it, but he, Roger, had come back home, as he should, and was made to weed the garden while Fred got to see more than he did. It wasn’t fair.

“You shoulda seen Popo. He was mad as hell.” Fred continued, laughing, “He was yelling, ‘Dis hobo was gettin’ a free ride, an den he burned up a good car a wood.’ He was jumping around and talked on and on, swearing about it. Then they carried the guy on a stretcher to the ambulance, but they wasn’t in any hurry. Ain’t no use to run with a dead man. He ain’t goin’ anywhere.”

Fred was enjoying telling Roger, but Roger was not appreciating hearing about all that happened which he did not see. Roger felt unjustly treated, not being there for the rest of the adventure. And he had to weed the garden, besides. It wasn’t fair.

“Then the ambulance, and the fire truck left.” Fred went on. “And I watched while they pulled the lumber car back to the other tracks. I heard them say it was headed for the salvage yard, whatever that is.”

When Fred got tired of talking about the fire and Popo and all the rest, he withdrew, leaving Roger in the worst possible mood. Roger was left alone with the vision of Fred grinning and feeling superior all during his recitation. He just sat sulking in his hideout till dinner time. Even the little yard engine coming by his back yard with a train of coal cars did not gain his interest or attention.

The event of the day was the subject of dinner table conversation. Fred told all about it, and in the process, Roger got admonished again not to leave the yard without asking. Roger suffered in silence, but inwardly rekindled his bad feelings of unfair treatment. He was only three years younger than Fred, and he was usually more careful than Fred was, too. He did not understand why he had to be so careful in telling what he was doing and where he was going all the time. “It’s just cause I’m the youngest,” he thought to himself. “If there was another kid, then they’d worry about it and forget about me.”

Time dragged by slowly until bed time, and when Roger finally laid down for the night, he could only think of tomorrow. He had no plans, and he would probably be bored. “You can’t have excitement every day, and they had used up a week’s worth today,” he thought. Then for some reason, he thought of school. “It’s only a few weeks away now. If I’m gonna have fun, it better happen now or else it’ll be too late.”

OBITUARIES:

Jiminez, Casper; Wednesday, of complications from smoke, address unknown, about 30 years, no known relatives, interred in Parkside Cemetery, public area.

COAL SPILL

There ought to be compensation for living next to railroad yards. At least, Ethyl Pratt thought so. The soot from the smoky engines made cleaning a joke. There was not enough time, nor could she afford enough soap to keep up with the continual onslaught of smut and fumes from the yards. Although she generally did not take anything which was not hers, and was as generous as possible with others, there was a nagging feeling that the situation with the railroad was not fair. She felt the railroad owed her something for all the work and worry she put into trying to keep her little family looking presentable. But what could she do? There was no way to fight the railroad. She would be laughed at, if she tried to get anything out of THEM. If only there was some way she could make them pay for the damage the trains visited on her life, she would welcome it.

Ethyl realized, to a degree, that she did not have the courage to go to anyone to complain, but that was something she did not want to admit, even to herself. Nevertheless, the thought nagged at her dimly through her busy days. It was just one more aspect of her life that left much to be desired. It was one more worry to add to stretching their money to cover food, clothes, coal, water, and all the other needs of the children, her husband and herself. For her, it was easier to suffer in silence or to whistle peevishly, which she found herself doing very often as she worked at her household chores.

As she heated water on the oil stove, Roger came down to breakfast. Roger was the youngest of her children, but in some ways, the most troublesome. He was always complaining of being mistreated, especially by his older brother, Fred. She knew it was true that Fred was enough bigger and smarter to be able to take advantage of Roger, but was it really always his fault? The daily skirmishes between the two and the resulting disciplines, were often the last straw that brought the rest of her not-too-elegant life crashing down into the humdrum subsistence it seemed to be unable to escape. "Lord knows, I try, but-" her silent thoughts trailed off into vague impressions and memories of other times; other places; happier situations. She found herself wondering, "How would life be changed today, if she had made wiser, or at least other, choices earlier? How can we know what direction events will take and what is the best thing to do? Ah well, I don't have time to dwell on that. It seems I have little time for anything except the family these days."

Turning to Roger in the present time, she inquired, "Do you want oatmeal? It's hot in the pot on the stove, and I have hot water for cocoa, too."

Roger grudgingly acquiesced to having a little of each and silently ate and drank as Ethyl went about her business. It was a cool day, but it was sunny and looked pleasant outside. Since it was Saturday, there was no school, and the children would be around the house all day. So much the better that the weather was pleasant. Perhaps the boys would find things to do outdoors, and avoid getting underfoot in the house. After breakfast, Roger disappeared, and Ethyl saw no more of him till mid-morning.

As she was trying to decide how best to stretch the hamburger to cover two meals, Roger came bursting into the kitchen.

"There's a broken coal car out back, and it's dumping coal all over the place," he hastily blurted out. "We gotta get some of it."

“Now, calm down,” his mother soothed, “It’s not our coal whether it’s in the car or not. Now just relax.” Actually she was thinking, “Maybe this is providence looking out for us, but I certainly do not want Roger thinking we can just take whatever we want. I wonder though if we might be able to fetch some of it.”

“Aw Mom, I could get down there and get some before anyone knew. Come look and see.” Roger was eager to start out with rescuing the coal without any further thought, and tugged at his mother’s sleeve.

As Ethyl and her son approached the back fence, she could see a string of coal cars standing on the siding behind their house. One of them tipped at an unusual angle, because it had apparently jumped the track. She could see immediately that there was no opportunity to take coal from the pile on the ground even if she could have induced herself to do it. The train crew was busy around the car trying to settle on how to proceed. There was nothing they were able to do without other equipment, so the brakeman was sent off to the yard office to get help. The fireman and engineer sat down on the ground and settled in to await the necessary reinforcements. People from the neighborhood wandered down to observe, but could not, in the light of day and within the view of the train crew, be so bold as to try to remove the spilled coal.

It had turned into a very eventful day for Roger. His interest was consumed for hours as he watched a repair train crew arrive with a crane and other equipment. The procedure for fixing the car and getting it back on the track was fascinating for him. He could barely tolerate leaving the scene for a few minutes at lunch, but his mother insisted.

By mid-afternoon, temporary repairs were done, and the string of cars was moved on to its destination. Immediately a clean up crew started in to pick up as much of the salvageable coal as possible. As Roger watched, the bounty of free coal gradually disappeared with the efforts of the railroad men. Mrs. Pratt came out to observe several times also, but had little to say about the situation. By dinner time the men were finished, and the tracks were left vacant. There was still some coal left scattered around the ties, but the bulk of it had been removed.

Roger waxed eloquent at the evening meal describing all the details of the spilled coal, and how the car was repaired and put back on the track. It had been an exciting experience. Ethyl Pratt sadly thought of all the coal that had been on the ground, but was now gone and may as well be forgotten.

After the supper dishes were done, in the first shadows of dusk, Ethyl took the pail by the kitchen sink and slipped out the back door. No one noticed her leave, and she quietly walked down to the back fence. She believed that before it got dark, if she were careful, she could probably pick up a pail full of coal from the litter left from the coal spill. Silently, but with pounding pulse, she approached the fence and looked over it. She had been careful to note whether the neighbors were around when she first entered the backyard, and was relieved not to see any of them. Now, as she peered into the darkening alley, her heart sank. In the fading light, ghostly forms could be seen scurrying over the tracks, bending and stooping, searching and picking, and she knew that the last vestiges of free coal were rapidly disappearing below.

Sadly, she leaned against the fence, for it supplied the only support she could find. Crestfallen and alone, the final realization came to her that whatever benefit there might have been from a coal spill in back of her house had vanished and would not be hers.

Ethyl Pratt suddenly felt very tired and weak, and the strength of the fence was her only sustaining force and salvation. It was so unfair. Life was so difficult. Why did it have to be this way? What was wrong with the world these days? Would there ever be good times again? There were only questions and no available answers. The darkness took root in the familiar objects of the yard and gave them a hostile character which only enhanced the alienation she felt as she returned to the house with her empty pail and vanquished hopes.

SCENE OF A MINOR TRAGEDY

Jimbo hated the job. Why did he always have to go after the coal? Lester could do it too, but Lester was always off somewhere, and Jimbo was there and available.

It was not fair. Jimbo was only twelve, but he was smart for his age. He had to be smart, or he would not survive the indignities visited on him. They were poor, and ever since his daddy died in an accident at the factory, they had only just got by on relief. Mama did not have any other family to help her, so they were stuck where they were. Jimbo lived with his mama and brother, Lester, in a run down shack on the edge of the little village.

It was early March. Jimbo had not been to school this week, because he had some illness. He did not know what it was. He just felt bad all the time, and sometimes he had the fever. Going to the doctor was out of the question. They did not have enough money for food and coal, much less a doctor. Besides, he would get better sooner or later. Jimbo was just as glad not to go to school. He did not fit in there. He never seemed to understand what was going on in class, and the other kids never asked him to join in their games. The teachers did not seem to have much use for him either. When he asked a question to try and learn something, he always felt like they looked down on him. He thought it was because of his shabby clothes, but they were the best he had, and there was no way to get any others.

Lester had been gone for two days, but mama still had relief money, so they could get a little coal. Mama did not get out too much. She had trouble walking, and going to the grocery once a week was all she could do. At least, that's what she said.

Now the coal was gone, and the little space heater was cold. Mama knew it would get very cold outside tonight, and they had to have some heat, so Jimbo had to go for coal. Maybe the end of the month they would not have money for the coal, or maybe it would get warm and they would not need it, but right now the coal was a necessity.

They could not afford to get much coal at once. If they had lots of money, they could get a ton delivered like everyone else did, but being on relief, they never had enough for that. So Jimbo had to take the wagon and go to the coal yard to get as much as would fit in the wagon and drag it home. It was not too far, down a block to the dirt road by the factory, then along to where it comes out at the highway, and across the highway (That's the part Jimbo did not like. The cars and trucks came fast and the wagon wouldn't always go easily), one more block along the sidewalk brought him to the coal yard next to the tracks.

But then there was the coal yard man to deal with. Jimbo guessed he was nice enough, but he always seemed mad at Jimbo, and made him feel uncomfortable.

Maybe it was just because he didn't like to fool around with the small amount of coal Jimbo wanted, and the little money it brought in. Jimbo thought out loud, "Maybe it's not worth it to him for all the work he has to do." Jimbo reflected and visualized the man having to shovel the coal and weigh it by hand. It was not like loading a truck where you could just drive it under the chute and let the coal slide in. There was no use putting it off. Mama wanted him to get coal, so he better do it.

Jim Lynch looked out of the grimy window of his little office. It was impossible to keep a coal office clean. Coal dust was always blowing in no matter how much he watered the coal. The dirt just went with the business, so he gave up trying to keep it out. Business had been slow. The weather was warmer than usual, and people were not using as much coal as the year before. His regular customers did not get as much as they normally would either. Everyone was careful with a dollar these days. Although, they were saying times seemed to be getting better.

His mind wandered as he gazed out on the highway which ran past his office. He smiled. Everyone called it "the highway", but it was just a two lane cement road that ran through the middle of their little village. It had a state route number though, and he supposed that was what made it a highway. His place of business was located at the end of town in a string of rundown stores next to the tracks. He had to be where he was, so the coal cars could run in on his spur track for unloading. The other stores in the row had either closed to quit, or to move to a better location. Some stayed and struggled along.

"God knows how long this is going to last," he blurted out, then looked around to make sure he was alone. It did not seem to him though that the government programs were doing much to help. Still, who can tell? The country has never been in a mess like this before. How can they be sure that the things they do will help? When will these bad times end?

He remembered when he first started out. His business grew rapidly. Then it maintained a good level and he made a reasonable living for quite a few years. Suddenly, all hell broke loose, and it had been a struggle ever since. Between low sales and little profit, to bad debts and stealing of coal from the yard, sometimes he felt there was very little use to continue in business.

As he watched the occasional car go by, he noticed a boy and with a small wagon emerge from the alley on the other side of the road. "Damn!" he muttered, "Here comes that kid again." He watched as Jimbo carefully dragged the wagon across the street quickly after a car had passed. Jim knew the kid would be there soon and want fifty pounds of coal. It was messy weighing out that much, but better to have the sale than not have it. At least, he paid cash. Jim went out to the side yard as the kid came in the gate with his wagon.

"I wanta get fifty pounds. Here's the money." was all Jimbo said. They had been through this ritual enough times that each knew his role well.

"Bring your wagon over here," Jim answered as he pocketed the cash.

Jim shoveled some coal into the metal hopper on a small balance next to the building. He moved the fifty pound weight into position, then added a bit more coal to make it just balance. "Okay, hold your wagon." Jim dumped the hopper into the wagon, but did not notice a large chunk of the coal which tumbled out and rolled a short

distance away.

When the coal was in the wagon, Jimbo walked to where the errant chunk of coal lay on the ground and picked it up.

“What’cha doin kid? That’s not yours.”

“Yes it is,” Jimbo responded defiantly, “It fell out when you dumped the rest.”

“I don’t think so.”

“IT DID!” The boy moved towards the wagon.

“You put that back! It’s not yours,” the coal man insisted, and reached to try to take the lump. As the boy pulled away, he stumbled and fell against the wagon.

Time suddenly changed its tempo and practically stopped. Like a bug trying to crawl out of molasses, all the normal motions slowed to an imperceptible drift. The wagon moved in slow motion. However, it inexorably tilted and overturned. The coal flowed out onto the ground with the boy descending in a heap on top of the pile.

Roger hardly ever rode in a car. Not many people had them, and he never had to go anywhere very far away either. But then his oldest brother, Roy, bought one. He called it a model Tee, and it was an old car which did not even run when it was towed into the yard. Roy had gotten a part time job, and with the money saved from that, he had been able to get the car. Several weeks of fiddling and working on the vehicle, combined with some cleaning and a few parts from the junk yard produced a real running automobile. The fact that it was rusted and rattled a lot, and the motor ran rather unevenly, mattered not at all. It was a car, and could go along the road as well as any other gas buggy of the time.

On this particular day, Roy, with their mother, had picked up all the children right after school to drive to town to buy some necessary clothes. Roger found himself squeezed down in the back seat next to a window as they rolled along the main street to head for the city.

It was a twenty minute drive, but they would be there soon enough to do the necessary shopping before the stores closed. Just before they crossed the tracks by the factory, the row of businesses ended, the coal yard being the last one. As Roger looked out at the passing scene, he could see into the coal yard through the large gates the trucks used. In the brief instant the coal yard filled his field of vision, he saw a man and a boy and a wagon of coal. The boy was falling onto the tipping wagon as the man reached out. Then the scene was gone, and other rapidly changing vistas filled his view as they rolled along.

The scene lived in Roger’s mind. He thought he recognized the boy, but he could not be sure. Roger wondered how the boy happened to be there. Roger thought the boy’s name was Jimbo, but he was not in Roger’s class, and Roger did not know him at all. It seemed he never associated much with Roger’s friends, and no one

knew much about him. Why would he be getting coal like that? Where did he live anyway? Roger thought on it a few moments, but then the excitement of the trip to town quickly erased the little event from Roger's mind. It was of no importance, probably.

Jim Lynch was immediately full of remorse for his action. "What the hell," he thought, "What's one piece of coal more or less." He reached down and helped the kid to his feet, but the kid pushed him away not wanting his help. "Here, let me help you pick up the coal," he heard himself saying.

"NO! I'll do it." was the rebellious answer.

The two struggled with the pile of coal and dust to get it back into the wagon. Jim did what he could, and Jimbo resisted the help. Jimbo picked at all the little pieces to salvage as much as possible. Jim brought another piece from the bin and insisted putting it on the wagon, even though Jimbo pushed it away. After several minutes of scraping and picking, most of the coal was reloaded, and Jimbo pulled the wagon out of the yard.

Jim Lynch watched him go. The kid dragged the wagon across the road, and a car had to slow down for him because he couldn't move the wagon fast enough. He progressed slowly and finally disappeared around a corner of the alley. Jim returned to his musing. "How the hell did we get where we are? Why is business so rotten? Why are there people like that kid, who have nothing, and no hope of ever having anything? What's wrong with the damn world anyway?"

It was a long way home for Jimbo with the loaded wagon. It did not roll easily now. The weight of the coal always made it hard, but he could see a wheel was bent also. It wobbled as he pulled the wagon along, and it did not roll as well as it used to. When he reached home, Lester was there, but he did not help Jimbo unload the wagon. Jimbo brought it in with a small bucket and made several trips. When he was through, his hands and clothes were as thoroughly dirty as only coal dust can make them.

Mama was pleased to have the coal, but she was more pleased to have Lester back home. Jimbo learned Lester had brought some money with him, and mama kept trying to find out how he got it. All Lester would answer was, "You don't wanta know. Just be glad we got it. Now the money won't run out at the end of the month like it usually does.

After it was empty, Jimbo looked at the wagon. The wheel was bent and he could not straighten it. It did not run right. Jimbo did not know whether he could use it again to get coal. "What would he do?" he wondered. "Well he'd just have to wait and see. Maybe something would happen before the next time. Maybe he would not have to get coal again. It wasn't fair anyway."

PIGS AND THE CRIMINAL ELEMENT

Farmer Brown was as far from looking like a policeman as you could get, yet that is what he was. At least, he could claim to be. In this part of the country there were few enough people, that everyone had to be involved, and he was part of the volunteer force. When the sheriff needed help, farmer Brown was on call. He did not get called very often though. The sheriff kept things under control reasonably well. Brown had been around long enough though that he was a senior member of the volunteers. They had even elected him Posse Leader to be prepared whenever they might need a posse. Of course, that had not happened for fifteen years or so. That was when that young kid had held up the bank in town, and tried to get away on a mule. He did fairly well for a while, but then the mule got tired.

Farmer Brown was a lot younger then, but he and two others had joined the sheriff in the chase as soon as they learned about it. They followed the mule tracks on their Harley Davidson motorcycles and caught up with the kid before sundown. That was the most excitement they had up to that time.

Now to look at farmer Brown, you would not say he was a policeman. You would say he looked more like a pig farmer, which is what he was in fact. He was not a very big pig farmer either. More like the wiry type of pig farmer who never would quite fill out his overalls. He had dark hair though and a dark complexion which was convenient for a pig farmer. It sort of covered up some of the natural dirt one always found around a pig farm. That is not to say he had a dirty farm though. He kept the pens well fenced and the sties clean using the most modern methods of pig farming. Still there is always a certain aura about a pig farm that is hard to ignore.

Now getting back to farmer Brown the policeman. Over the years there had been some interesting happenings, and that is what I would like to tell you about. But first I have to tell you about the pigs. Farmer Brown had a real good relationship with his pigs. Pigs naturally are very realistic animals. They live their lives as best they can with the handicaps nature gave them. Their philosophy was, "If you have to wallow in the mud, you may as well enjoy it". And their mental attitude was great also. They realized we are all here in various capacities for only a limited period of time. When it was time to go, you went. They accepted fate or destiny or whatever it was. They knew that periodically farmer Brown had to take some of them off to market, and they were prepared for that as the natural end to a productive life when it came. Until then though they enjoyed living, and most of all they enjoyed watching people and the funny things they do. Sometimes the pigs could see a situation better than people and had more sense about fixing it.

For instance, one night old Rooter could not sleep and wandered around the pen in the moonlight. It was quiet and dark and a very pleasant night. Suddenly though, old Rooter heard a car in the distance coming up the road. As it approached he noticed the lights were not on, and it was going as slow and quiet as possible. When it reached farmer Brown's drive it turned in and headed to the equipment shed. Now old Rooter knew there was something fishy about that. Silently, he went over to the pen gate, and cautiously poked the latch open with his nose. He knew his way around the farmyard from all the times he had been out before. Farmer Brown was very patient with him when he found him out of the pen and shooed him back in. Sometimes he had gotten back without being discovered though, and then he laughed at his little secret.

He slowly walked over to the shed to see what was going on. In the moonlight he saw the shadows of three men looking at Farmer Brown's tractor. Moving slowly and with no noise he moved closer, and heard one of the men say, "This'll be easy. We'll have this tractor gone before they know it."

Now Rooter recognized a real emergency when it came his way. Quickly returning to the pen, he ran around to all the sties, and with a few cautious grunts mobilized all the pigs. In less than a minute they were all poised to do their best to stop the theft about to take place. Soundlessly, as only massive animals can move, the pig crowd raced to the shed. They surprised the men in the middle of trying to start the tractor and fell upon them. They bumped them, they nosed them, squealed at them, and knocked them over. When they had them down they crowded for positions to be the ones to sit on the men. By now the men were screaming bloody murder, but they could not escape. The pigs, who were of course experienced mud wrestlers, had them pinned to the ground. The resulting squeals, yells, grunts, screams and general turmoil had roused farmer Brown who came running out to see what in tarnation was going on.

When he saw what the pigs had done, he naturally went back and called the sheriff to come get the thieves. After the men were in custody, the pigs let farmer Brown shoo them back to their pens and sties for the rest of the night. The following day though their food tasted a little sweeter, and there was a little more of it. Such are the rewards of doing good deeds.

Then there was the Fiasco of Free Hill. Free Hill is a little burg, not even a town, near the center of the county, but there is a good size warehouse there. It has the unique name of the Free Hill Supply Company, and handles all the usual commodities. Located right next to the train station, it is a great convenience in these parts for most all the farmers, who know Bobbie Joe, the owner, right well.

It seems early on a Sunday morning some thieves who had liquor making on their minds, broke into the warehouse and loaded their pickup truck with cornmeal and sugar. They would have made a clean getaway except Willie, the town drunk, was on his way home from a night of celebrating and he wobbled along in front of the warehouse just as the thieves came roaring out. Well he raised his arms and yelled and waved at them as they came by, but that didn't seem to stop them. It did confuse them though, and in the dim light they turned the wrong way and got on the country road going past farmer Brown's place rather than the state road out of town.

As soon as Willie saw the open doors on the warehouse he naturally went off the tell Bobbie Joe, which was a little difficult since Bobbie Joe is a sound sleeper, and even when Willie got him awake there seemed to be a slight communication problem. Willie's coherence leaves a little to be desired even when sober and not excited. With the combination of whiskey and Willie's urgent wish to participate in correcting a social ill, it took a little yelling and arm waving to get the message across. Bobbie Joe called the sheriff as soon as he got the facts straight, and the sheriff got on the party line to farmer Brown.

Now as it happens that Saturday night was one that Rooter chose to slip out of the sty and sleep in the flower bed under farmer Brown's bedroom window. He heard the phone ringing before farmer Brown did, so he was full awake when farmer Brown got on the line. Rooter naturally didn't hear all the conversation, but he picked up farmer Brown repeating such things as "robbers; heading our way; pickup truck; and got to stop them."

Rooter had a lot of respect for farmer Brown, but you have to admit one puny little man, even with a repeater pistol, isn't a lot of deterrence to a fast truck. Rooter took the situation in hand immediately. Off to the sty he ran to rally his forces. When the pigs heard what was happening, they eagerly ran out of their pens and over to the road. They took positions on both sides of the road and several blocked the center, so there was no way through. Farmer Brown was running around trying to shoo the pigs back to their pens, but they ignored him and lay in wait. Presently, the sound of a motor came to their ears, and in a short while the pickup came into view. The pigs set up an oinking and crowded together in the road expectantly.

The thieves were coming fast and in the early morning light didn't see the pigs till they got quite close. They slammed on the brakes and came rolling to a stop just in front of them. Now those of you who are accustomed to hitting animals know, but those of you who aren't, I'll tell. Hitting some animals is all right, but the animal you most don't want to hit is a pig. More than likely you'll demolish your car, and the pig will just get up squealing and run away because they are built with they equivalent of bricks and steel.

Immediately, the pigs surrounded the truck and started pushing and bumping it. The thieves couldn't go forward and they couldn't reverse, and they sure didn't want to demount into a sea of angry pigs. So they just sat there while farmer Brown waved his pistol, and the pigs had a great time raising all kinds of commotion.

While they sat there waiting for the sheriff to arrive and enjoying the moment, old Rooter noticed what was on the truck. Now I wouldn't say it was on purpose, but perhaps more than inadvertently, the truck got rocked enough to knock some of the bags of meal and sugar off. They naturally, accidentally broke as they hit the ground, and the pigs didn't mind sampling the contents. Needless to say it made quite a mess on the narrow roadway.

After the thieves were hauled off and the pigs returned to their pen and the road cleaned, there was some discussion of farmer Brown's pigs for a while. There were those who wanted to give them a gold medal, and those who thought pigs should be better penned up so they couldn't block roads. After all, there were good law abiding citizens who used those roads most of the time, and what were they to do if suddenly they were surrounded by a crowd of pigs. The talk went on a couple of weeks, and the newspaper had a great time with it, but then the tornado happened that year and blew the pigs off the front page of the paper. Afterwards everyone just seemed to forget about farmer Brown's pigs again.

Mostly the pigs were good at just being pigs, and that's what they usually did, but they enjoyed a bit of excitement every time it came their way. Like when the Waverly boy got lost. The Waverlys lived near the edge of town along the railroad track, and there were several girls and boys in the brood of all shapes and sizes. But one of them, I don't recollect if it was the youngest one or not, but he wasn't very old, well he always seemed to getting into trouble. When anyone said "the Waverly boy" why you just naturally knew which one they meant. Now the Waverly boy was a good kid, but he was the type that needed a good deal of help with most everything, if you know what I mean. It's not that he was stupid, just a little behind where he ought to be for his age and size.

It happened one day as he was playing out in their wood lot that he got twisted around when it started getting cold and dark, and instead of heading home, he evidently headed smack dab away from it.

Now, away from the Waverly place takes you into only two directions. One is into the cornfields, and the other is deeper into the woods. The Waverly boy, in his lack of wisdom, chose the woods, since that was where he was anyway. Needless to say he was soon completely lost and with every turn got further from home. When he got through with thinking of what to do, he just sat down and did nothing, which was the smartest thing he did that night. Staying in one place made it easier to find him and snuggling down into the undergrowth kept him warmer than he would be up running around, but I'm getting ahead of my story.

As soon as it was apparent to the Waverlys that it was good and dark and the boy wasn't coming home, they naturally called the sheriff to get help. The sheriff wasn't very receptive to going out in the dark woods to find a kid who shouldn't be there, but he had little choice. The weather promised to be cold that night, so the sheriff mobilized all his forces to begin the search.

He called farmer Brown first, because he was the elected Posse leader and the sheriff felt this was close enough in that category to put Brown in charge. Besides, the Waverlys were on the side of town towards Brown's farm anyway.

While farmer Brown was running back and forth to his truck with equipment, and yelling at his wife to find things and bring them out, and generally attempting to get organized; he caught the attention of old Rooter who, by piecing together the staccato barks of information from Brown to his wife, learned of the desperate situation the Waverly boy was in. Old Rooter was nothing, if he wasn't a lover of small boys who managed to upset the establishment with their haphazard approach to living their lives. He was also smart enough to know that any number of men crashing around the woods at night would not be sufficient to find the boy and only end up injuring themselves or others in the process.

Rooter decided there was only one thing to do. He consulted with the rest of the pigs, and as soon as farmer Brown pulled out of the yard in his truck, they were close behind. Although it was farther to go than they wished, they headed for the woods running up the road in the direction of the Waverly farm. It was no place they had been before, but pigs have a natural gift to find their way, if they want to. Their grunts and squeals kept them in comfortable contact with each other, and they soon approached the spot on the road where the posse was collecting to start the search. Resorting to silence, the pigs circumvented the crowd of noisy men and ran quietly in single file into the woods.

When they were far enough from the road, old Rooter spaced the pigs abreast in a long line and started a sweep towards the Waverly place. The pigs moved slowly and quietly, sniffing the air and keeping their senses tuned to the slightest clue of the trail of the boy.

After only a half hour or so, young Snorter spotted the trail and called the other pigs with a few well chosen grunts. When the pigs came upon the boy he was at first surprised to see so many pigs wandering around the woods, but, being a farm kid, wasn't too put out. Old Rooter and the rest urged the kid along in the direction of the road, and as they pressed through the brush the Waverly boy even climbed on the back of old Rooter and rode in the middle of the pack.

Well, you can imagine the surprise the posse received as they were advancing into the woods, to find the herd of pigs coming out towards them carrying the object of their search. You could just hear the collective sigh of relief from the men when they realized the search was over and they could return to their warm houses in peace. Farmer Brown didn't know whether to cuss at the pigs for being out or to give them extra feed for finding the boy. By the time he drove them home, following behind them in the truck on the road, he had decided to forget it and do neither. After all, they were just pigs.

The Waverly boy must have gotten a real good lecture when he got home, leastwise he never managed to get lost like that again. And the pigs went back to being just pigs. Although it was a little dull, it didn't require any effort. It was a long while before the pigs got involved with the law again, but that's another story.

THE BANK JOB

A hair fell from her old gray head,
And landed on the floor,
Her husband and her friends were gone,
The cold blew in the door,

The wood was gone, the candle too,
She had not any food,
And yet within herself she felt,
That life could still be good,

She went down to the market place,
To see what she could find,
To rob the bank and take the cash,
Was furthest from her mind,

When walking past the general store,
She saw a man ahead,
It shocked her to her very core,
Since she had thought him dead,

He stopped and turned, she caught her breath,
It was her son for sure,
He had been sick, and doomed to death,
But must have found a cure,

It was so many years ago,
It faded in her mind,
Her letters all had been returned,
Good news she could not find,

She had not traveled to his side,
It was a distant town,
With money none to make the trip,
She felt she let him down,

And now he's here, she hurried on,
Although her gait was slow,
The joy to see her face again,
She wanted him to know,

But what she got when by his side,
Was just a vacant stare,
"My son", she said and met his glance,
With tears to show her care,

His look then turned to ire and hate,
It came from deep inside,
It showed his feelings and his soul,
It showed his wounded pride,

"Goodbye old hag, I know you not",
Was all she heard him say,
With heavy heart, and burning eyes,
She sadly turned away,

She sat down in the park and wept,
She knew not what to do,
The winter wind cut through her coat,
And snow fell on her, too,

This was too much, she lost her hope,
Of ever finding peace,
No comfort, friends or coin had she,
Would sorrow never cease?

No longer did she think life good,
No longer did she care,
But she must do all that she could,
To try to get her share,

She walked again along the street,
And came upon the bank,
She went inside to warm herself,
And by the heater sank,

They noticed not her sorry state,
Nor gave her second glance,
Who cares for one old lonely soul,
Who never had a chance?

She looked around; surveyed the scene,
Her eyes espied the cash,
The way to solve her problems all,
Came on her in a flash,

For when she saw the bills and coin,
She had today not dined,
And what she wanted most of all,
Was food of any kind,

The bank guard with his back was turned,
Ignoring her sad plight,
Relaxing at his lofty post,
Protecting law and right,

She slipped behind him and in haste,
Relieved him of his gun,
Surprised, he grabbed his holster bare,
Amazed what she had done,

Now all at once there came a hush,
Their eyes were all on her,
She calmly turned to face the clerk,
Who cowered as a cur,

“Please put some bills into a bag,
And hand it here to me”,
She kept the pistol held up high,
So none could fail to see,

The clerk then followed her command,
He hurried at the job,
She took the bag and turned to scan,
The bank she came to rob,

She waved the gun to let them know,
She had the upper hand,
“Now you stay here, and I will go,
I hope you understand”,

She nodded as she left the bank,
With her small hoard of cash,
And knew she had to hurry off,
And make a homeward dash,

Directly then she took her leave,
With bag and gun in hand,
And when she exited the door,
She ran to beat the band,

Down alleys which she knew so well,
Cross vacant lots and yards,
She hurried with her precious load,
Eluding clerks and guards,

But as she reached near to her house,
She felt an awful pain,
A problem old within her chest,
Came on her once again,

She knew now what would have to be,
She felt the pain before,
She held her hand against her heart,
And stumbled through the door,

Then in the stove, a match to light,
Her precious bag of cash,
Her last few breaths on earth were warm,
As paper turned to ash,

In death they found her sitting there,
A smile upon her face,
A palace in her dreams she had,
And not this tacky place.

John D. Boenke