

WENONAH MEMORIES: Fourth Grade

It's a sunny, crisp autumn morning. I already had a big bowl of my favorite breakfast cereal, Sugar Pops, and arrived at school early enough to play a little before we line up to go in. I would have been here even earlier except that sometimes the Safety Patrol is a little strict. They're the eighth graders who stand at the crosswalks wearing these fancy brass armbands that say, well, "Safety Patrol" on them. Big deal, but I think it sometimes goes to their heads. They do have power though. You can get a detention if you step off the curb before they say it's o.k.

Over the years I can't remember getting many detentions, but I remember the penalty vividly. You had to go to the principal's room, the eighth graders' classroom, for an hour after school. There you were greeted by Eluisius Lucretius Long, principal and eighth grade teacher. She looked like a fire plug with frizzy hair. No more than five feet tall, she was very stern. Actually, years later when she became my eighth grade teacher I learned that she had a mellow side and was a good teacher to boot. Anyway, you walk in and she gives you a long division card with ten problems. If you can finish them in less than an hour you can go home early. After a couple of visits I discovered a trick by watching her grade them. Turns out that the first to digits of the four digit answer and the last two add up to the same number. And the two digit remainder adds up to that number also. That discovery made it a lot easier to get out in less than an hour. But, I digress.

When we line up to go in, ours is the newer building on the right if you are facing the railroad tracks. On the left is the old building with the steeple where the fifth through eighth graders have their classrooms. Our fourth grade teacher, Miss Jordan, says some day they will connect these two buildings with a new building. She's a good teacher, but she's getting older and has been telling kids that for years. Think about it, it would mean taking down some very tall maple trees that line both sides of the very wide sidewalk between the two buildings. It's wide enough for two hop scotch games side by side (a girl's game) plus it's a long way from one building to the other. I would guess as wide as a football field. It just ain't gonna happen.

All the swings are taken, it's too cold to play marbles and the monkey bars aren't much fun, so I'm not upset that we start lining up.

Seems like we're always lining up, after recess, after lunch and after recess in the afternoon. Sometimes in the afternoon a big freight train goes by and a large black cloud of smoke engulfs the school yard while we are in line. Some kids don't like that coal smoke smell, but I do.

Anyway, once inside everyone hangs up their coats in the closet at the back of the room. There's lots of chatter because it seems everybody is talking about Halloween and what they're going to wear. My own perspective is that it's very important to assemble the right costume if you expect to hit a lot of houses and collect lots of loot. My favorites are candy bars, Babe Ruth, Clark Bars and Three Musketeers. The bad stuff is chewing gum, Necco waiters and life savers. The jack pot is candied apples, either caramel or sugar coated (my favorite). Once a house is identified as giving out candy apples the word spreads rapidly. If you don't hit it early, they often run out. Here's where the strategy comes in.

First, you have to have a strong bag. That does not mean big though because then it becomes too heavy to carry which slows you down. You may even have to make an early trip home to unload. Second, if your costume is not comfortable, particularly the shoes, it also slows you down. Finally, Don't hide your identity too well. That's because some folks invite you in for a cup of apple cider or hot chocolate and have you sit around while they guess who you are. Again, that takes time, especially if there are several in your group. The more time, the less loot. My choice this year is to dress up like an old lady and wear one of my mom's old dresses, a wig, some make up and a well-worn coat (warm though). Of course, I will not carry a cane because of the extra weight. I'll just hunch over.

First class this morning is math and a test. Simple multiplication tables and a few word problems. I studied so I think I did swell. Then we work on learning to write cursive, and do a little reading stuff. It should be time for recess. However, that's when Miss Jordan drops the bomb. There will be no recess. Instead she has an announcement to make. I can't even remember if, at that point she introduced a special guest to give us the nitty gritty. I was simply too stunned.

So, here's some background. In the summer every kid spends the better part of each day at Warner's Lake. Actually, it starts in the late spring. That's when the Lion's club sends members door to door to sell

light bulbs. We have a closet full of them. The proceeds are used to maintain the lake facilities. Then a day is set aside for everyone in the town, and I do mean everyone; men, women and children, to go down to the lake and help clean up. They drain the lake and fix the dam, repair the dock, set up the diving board, clean the slides, repair the fence to the baby pool etc. There is something for everyone to do. Lighter jobs like spreading beach sand or cleaning the sand pit are done by the teenagers. Kids my age do a lot of painting.

When summer comes and you're a little kid you start with swimming lessons taught by Mr. Kramer, the life guard. It can be really cold learning to do doggy paddle. Sometimes your lips turn blue. After a few years though you master breast stroke, side stroke and all the rest. Kids my age play ball tag in the water, ride the water slides doing trick water entries (you can even ride down on your knees) and diving. On shore there's basketball, horse shoes and our favorite, shuffle board. It's a full day if you bring your lunch. Of course, on days the team has a little league game the coach tells us to rest and not wear ourselves out at the lake.

Towards the end of July and early August though, when you get out of the water there's this brown slime on you. It washes off easily in the shower though, but it still makes you feel uncomfortable. I don't know if it is somehow connected to the spread of polio or not, but it always seems that about that time they close the lake. It's locked up and you can't even climb over the fence. No one would try anyway though because who wants to risk getting polio.

So, now that you understand the background the announcement will make more sense. This year we will be asked to give up our Halloween! Instead of collecting candy, we will collect dimes for "The March of Dimes" to find a cure for polio.

At that point, they put up this large poster and passed out these little cards. Both the poster and the cards show smiling kids, but some are in wheel chairs and some have braces on, even though they are all smiling. The cards have these little slots in them where a dime can fit in snugly. And, when all the slots are filled each card I think holds about a dollar. We are all stunned and silent. Looking at those kids in the pictures, however, really makes you feel sad. Of course, it doesn't take a genius to figure out

that none of them will be going out on Halloween to collect candy bars. So, where so we go from here.

I am pleased to report that by the end of the day most everyone has embraced the idea. We're even talking about a little competition to see who can get the most dime cards filled up. Everybody wants to help...it's kind of like pitching in when we all get together to clean up Warner's Lake.

So, that Halloween was very, very special. And, when Halloween finally came, we felt good about the results. It seems like every house we visited wanted to help fill up our cards. Some gave us lots of dimes AND they gave us candy too! The best news is that it wasn't too many years later the Dr. Salk came up with a cure for polio. That year was 1955. It just took a simple shot in the arm. It didn't even hurt!