

Chapter 6 - Junior High School

Chapter 6 spans my Junior High years. Having completed the sixth grade at Gilbert Elementary, I entered Junior High School, 7-8th grades, today it would have been middle school, 6-8th grades.

Appleby Junior High School was a large two story brick building, formally a high school. Located a mile or more from our home on Lewis Avenue, I walked to and from school. There are memories of walking with other kids from my neighborhood. I have no recollection of school busses or of parents dropping off or picking up their children after school. I would describe my JH years as the "becoming cool phase" of my teens. Specifically, I remember having penny loafers with shiny pennies inserted. Heel taps were also in vogue. A trip to the local shoe repair shop was required to have taps installed on the heels. There were several options for taps. It was important to select correctly to have the desired sound as you walked. It was during this time that fashion became important. As expected for teens, fitting in was crucial and clothes were a measure of your standing. I remember boat-neck shirts, blue jeans with rolled cuffs, popular colors were pink and charcoal for sport coats dress shirts.

JH was my first experience with dancing. Dancing, part of physical education class, was usually square dancing and participation was required. I could have asked for a religious exemption, but fitting in was more important than my eternal destiny.

Here some discrete experiences in no particular order which I recall:

- PhysED teacher "Snuffy" Smith's wood paddle used to administer discipline on rear ends, always with delight and with force that bordered on assault.
- Girls basketball. Played on two half courts, with teams divided into offense and defense players. each confined to their respective half court. All in deference to the weaker sex so they wouldn't have run full court.
- There was a brief fad of holding your breath until you passed out. Not sure why but many did it.
- There was the teacher who whacked me across the knuckles with a wooden ruler, not nearly as painful as Snuffy's paddle but more embarrassing.
- An encounter with a playground bully that did not end well for me but taught me a valuable lesson.

Beyond Appleby Junior High School, in those years and beyond, my neighborhood was very formative. Living on Lewis Avenue proved to be a village experience. Numerous kids, boys and girls lived nearby. There were lots of games and adventures. Hide and seek, kick the can and other popular games in the evenings. Richard Carr who lived across the street became my closest friend. Tag football in front yards, exploring the railroad tracks nearby, smoking grapevines and gathering muscadines were regular experiences. Dad built a treehouse in our backyard and put up a basketball goal. Camping out in the treehouse and lots of games of horse are good memories.

It was during the Junior High years that I played Little League baseball and PeeWee football, my first organized sports. Little League baseball was great fun. I chose catcher as my position because you were always involved in every play. Dad was an enthusiastic volunteer, helping to build bleachers and never missed a game.

Our Little League coach was Press Robbins, a math teacher and grouch. He was a tyrant, a perfect fit for both kids and parents. Running the league with an iron fist, our games were fun and great learning experiences. It was not unusual for Coach Robbins to stop a game, descend from the press box from where he coached with a booming voice over a PA system, go out on to the field and give much needed personal instruction to a player. He was unlikely looking coach, thin with horn-rimmed glasses and severe limp from an injured leg. I never felt shamed by him despite his gruff demeanor. I came to love him as a coach and teacher. Later, in high school his prowess as a pitcher in former days was regularly demonstrated when he hurled pieces of chalk at the head of disruptive students.

The highlight of my LL career came as a twelve year old when I was selected as an All Star and our team competed in the year end tournaments. We did not progress far, but I did hit a home run in one game. Baseball became my favorite sport, enjoying it through my high school and college years.

PeeWee Football was my first experience with organized tackle football. Our team played local teams in our league and we were very successful, undefeated for the season. We had nice uniforms and helmets and looked like champions. At the end of the season, we received an invitation to play Rogersville, mom and dad's hometown where numerous relatives lived. Florence was considered a big

city and Rogersville was country. It was a big deal for them to play a team from Florence. We did not see it that way, we were champions and expected to win handily. As the teams took the field for warmups, the contrast was obvious, Rogersville's uniforms were faded and used and their helmets did not match. Many players were wearing very uncool hightop cleats. We, of course, had matching uniforms and helmets with low-cut cleats.

As I recall, it was on their first play from scrimmage that our delusions of greatness were crushed, literally. Their running back, wearing hightop cleats and his mismatched helmet, crashed through our defensive line, bowling over those foolish enough to attempt a tackle. I had never experienced anything like it. He was playing a game unfamiliar to us. We were humiliated and our matching uniforms and helmets were revealed to be a mirage. My relatives were delighted.

I only have fond memories of my Junior High School years, there surely were some occasions of difficulty but they left no lasting impression. It was during those years that church became an important part of my life and shaped several life changing decisions that would come in my high school years.

Chapter 7 - High School years follows.