

IN MY OPINION

Caroline Porter

Hazy, lazy days of summers gone by



Summers don't seem to be relaxing for most of us these days, especially children. I can't help but reminisce about my summers as a child — they were fun and so "old-fashioned." There was no air-conditioning, television, computers or a myriad of organized sports activity.

The first day the snow receded and the temperature rose above 50 degrees, I gathered all my spring and summer game equipment and ran outside to do it all. That equipment consisted of jacks, (not for cars — remember the little metal or plastic, four dimensional stars and small rubber ball?), chalk and plastic chains for hopscotch, roller skates, (we just clipped them onto our shoes), marbles, baseball bat and softball. Out came the bicycles with thick tires, one speed and a nice fat, soft seat that not only fit the contour of a human rear end but was longer than our waist, where it belonged. To brake we had to reverse our pedals, quickly.

Days after school and vacation days were spent playing. If I could go outside, I was there. If it was raining, we were in a neighbor's basement or barn and played cards, an old player piano or monopoly. My older brother once organized a seance in our darkened dining room, with a motley collection of neighborhood kids, wide-eyed and following his every direction and idea.

One summer a group of us organized a

talent show and presented it to our friends and family in an attic that must have been 100 degrees. We served peanut butter sandwiches and lemonade.

There was a drainage ditch about a block away that I was not supposed to go near, but I had a special place in the tunnel under the street, no less, where I sat and ate Ritz crackers. It was a lovely, cool spot.

The whole neighborhood in Kewanee was out every night of nice weather and we played kick-the-can, hide and seek and had the time of our lives. Because there was no air conditioning, outside was more comfortable than inside. On terribly hot nights families slept in their yards or on porches or just slept in the park. I always liked the hot nights because I could stay up later. My bedroom faced North and in the summer I pushed my bed by the window to get the slightest breeze and frankly, there was none.

The air conditioning in Block and Kuhl's and J.C. Penneys was a real luxury so it was a treat to walk downtown. My father's law office didn't have air-conditioning either, as

June 6, 2002

THE ZEPHYR

June 6, 2002

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I recall. Perish the thought that my grandfather, uncle and father would spend money so foolishly in their law office, which was made of cement block walls and glass block windows with linoleum on the floors. That same office is now much fancier and occupied by Barash and Everett law firm.

One reason the office was so solid and spartan is that it formerly was on the second floor of the Odd Fellows Building across the street, which came close to being demolished in the great Kewanee fire of 1941. Practically the whole downtown burned down, but the law offices, housed in that ancient and wooden building, were barely spared.

As a five-year-old, I was awakened that night so I could look at the red sky from my window.

When I was in fourth grade I received a 35¢ a week allowance, just enough to walk every day to the A&W in Tomah, Wisc. (Camp McCoy) and buy a small root beer for a nickel. Some weeks I would sacrifice a few root beers and splurge on a "black cow," a root beer float, which cost about 15¢.

Swimming was also a daily occurrence. It cost almost nothing and was a great relief from the heat. I don't remember having any

organized summer activities except piano lessons until I was old enough to attend Girl Scout camp or church camp for a week. Camp life was fun for me and in Girl Scout camp I earned every ribbon there was except one for good behavior. Go figure. I just couldn't get through the day without making some small mistake and things haven't changed much. At church camp I heard my first dirty jokes.

At age 15 I started to work at the library, which was way too quiet for me, but I loved it. I wanted to work at the A & W Drive-In — so much more glamorous — but was not allowed to. We still laugh about the proliferation of drive-in entertainment in the early 1950s. On dates we would go to the A&W, then to the drive-in movie and maybe "park" afterwards, and never get out of the car the entire evening.

It makes me sad that I can walk outside in my neighborhood on a hot summer night and there isn't a soul there. I know times have changed, so I'm grateful for my old-fashioned summers.

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