

This is a true story of adventure, accomplishment, romance and reflection of a young boy's transition from a mischievous youth to professional achievement and success. The many aspects of his life are told with humor, humility, and often touching poignancy.

Safer Times

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# **Safer Times**

**Arthur Stellmach**

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## **Part 1 – Growing Up in Melrose Park**

### **Frost Balls on the Ceiling**

Mom and Dad married in September 1929, the year the Great Depression began, and proceeded with courage to start their family with the birth of Marvin in 1931 and Christine in 1932. They lived in a small apartment in Chicago and Dad worked at the Continental Can Company located near the intersection of Grand and North Avenues, the only company he ever was to work for. He had stayed on “the farm” to help his father as long as he could stand it, but had finally left for the big city when he was 28. Being skilled in maintaining farm equipment, what little his dad had, he applied at the CCC and was hired to maintain the factory production equipment (presses, slitters, conveyor belts, etc.). He and his new bachelor friends would go the Aragon and Trianon Ballrooms on Saturday nights, where he met Mom and fell in love.

Mom had grown up and lived with her folks in Cicero, just outside of Chicago and had attended Morton High School. This of course was during the Roaring Twenties, during which Elliot Ness ran Al Capone out of Chicago. He did not go far since he and his gang settled in Cicero, and soon terrorized the local politicians and basically took over the town. Mom told the story of when she once worked at an election poll and Capone’s men hung around the voting locations holding machine guns, wishing each voter a good day and asking if they needed any advice as to who to vote for. No surprise, Capone’s “man” won.

Needless to say, Mom and Dad dreamed of building their own home further out in the suburbs, and eventually found a quarter-acre lot on the north edge of Melrose Park. Here, with the help of his many brothers-in-law, and limited by a small

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budget, he built the one-story with attic and basement, completing it sufficiently to move in by 1937. It was a small house with one bedroom, the kitchen, one bath and a dining room and living room across the front of the house. The front entrance remained unused for years until a small enclosed porch and stairs down to the front yard were built.

I was born in 1936 and as soon as I could safely walk up and down the attic stairs, slept with my brother Marv at one end of the attic. A wall and door separated the other end of the attic which belonged to Chris. Due to the continued lack of money, Dad was unable to install any insulation in the attic, so when we looked up at the “ceiling”, we were looking at the underside boards of the slanted roof. Summers were “sweating hot” up there as the shingled roof retained the mid-day heat well into the night. In winter, the moisture of our breathing would condense and freeze onto the tips of the roofing nails, so our ceiling looked like a field of small snowballs.

Mom did not worry much about this “problem” since she knew the cold, fresh air was good for us. That and the fact that we had the quilt she made for us out of old Army blankets. We did not complain. That’s the way it was until the mid-forties when Dad was finally able to insulate and install Celotex wallboard. But throughout my life, every time I got a dental x-ray and they placed that lead blanket over my chest, I was reminded of our heavy quilt and the balls of frost on the ceiling.

Historical footnote: Capone and his gang were eventually run out of Cicero. They relocated to Melrose Park, at that time a predominantly Italian town.

## **BB Guns and Rabbit Traps**

The neighborhood I grew up in consisted of a great many empty lots with an occasional house of unique self-built design.



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This area was isolated from the rest of Melrose Park by the four-lane North Avenue, Illinois 64. There were just three streets: 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> with Bloomingdale the cross street a block north of North Avenue. There was a grass covered trail which would eventually become another cross street named Armitage on the north end of the three main streets, but earlier it was just a bike path. We lived on the east side of 19<sup>th</sup> just three lots north of Bloomingdale.

I mention this only to point out that this neighborhood was a small island of civilization jutting north into farmland. The Naples and Pinacker families owned most of the land to the east of our area and had an active truck farm to raise vegetables which were sold at their Fruit Stand on North Avenue at about 9<sup>th</sup> avenue (which would not be constructed until much later). The Spandikow, Wohrman and Amlings greenhouses also lay to the east near North Avenue between 17<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>. The areas to the north and west of our enclave were usually planted in field corn.

This was a great area in which to grow up. The lots on 18<sup>th</sup> behind our house were empty for many of the early years and were the scene of many summer baseball games where the players were chosen one at a time by two self-appointed "managers" one of whom threw a bat a few feet in the air for the other to catch as close to the end lip as possible. If there was the space of two or more fingers between the catcher's grasp and the lip, the thrower got to choose first. The players were of all ages and those not chosen at first would hang around to replace any kid that got hurt or called home to eat. The bases were pieces of cardboard, the ball a 16-inch circumference, often re-stitched, softball. Few had gloves or bats, and whoever brought the ball was a guaranteed "player". The game ended when the ball owner had to go home, or when the score became so lopsided, the losing team quit for the day. In other words, this was true "sand lot" baseball with no

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uniforms, no organization, no leagues, no coaches, and most important, no parents. God it was fun.

I usually hung out with Mickey Spilatro who I got to know because our older brothers, Marv and Joe, hung out together as well. Mickey lived over on 18<sup>th</sup> half ways to North Avenue and had a tremendously tall pear tree in the empty lot behind his house. Together we built a tree house platform high in the tree, hauling old boards up one by one, and nailing them into the branches and tree trunks. We also nailed cleats here and there where the branches were too far apart to reach, along with a number of ropes we used for climbing or hauling stuff up. This was probably our Guardian Angels' first real challenge in keeping us alive for our platform was really, really high, and neither of us were very strong nor (in retrospect) very bright.

If we weren't playing ball or climbing trees, we were generally wandering and exploring the local area on our bikes or on foot with our BB guns. There were so many things to see and do. We would often walk the railroad tracks near 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue north to Elmwood Park, the next subdivision past the farms, shooting the glass insulators on the telephone lines. Or we could hunt arrows behind the Archery Booth next to the roller skating ring under the tent which burned down every few years. Or pick up empty 22 caliber shell casings at the Rifle Range at the same location.

We could also bring a hook, line and bobber to fish either of the two reservoirs belonging to the Amlings and Spandikow greenhouses. The Amlings reservoir was harder to get into because of the sturdy fence and closeness to their operations. If they saw us climbing in they would chase us away. Bait was either red worms or grub worms easily dug out from the piles of manure they used to fertilize the flower beds. The small blue gills we caught were thrown back in or cut up for additional bait.

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In late fall and early winter we also “went hunting” with our BB guns out in the now-harvested corn fields and grass strips around the fields where rabbits could often be found. Our guns were the old “Daisy Rifles” which were not very powerful, certainly not like the pump up pellet guns which a few kids had. In fact my BB gun had had many years of use by my brother Marv before I inherited it, and the spring was so weak I could follow the BB in the air as it left the gun. I also had to allow sufficient elevation when aiming so the BB could arc up over the top on its way to my target. Needless to say we rarely hit any rabbits and never hurt them if we did score a hit. We did use up a lot of BBs.

Our other hunting activity was building rabbit traps, usually a wooden box held up at one end by a stick with some form of device which would release the box downward when a rabbit nibbled on a carrot or cabbage leaf. At least that was the principle. We would set them up one day and return the next day to check our traps. Usually, the trap remained as it was set, sometimes with the bait gone. I honestly do not recall actually catching a rabbit in any of our traps, but trying to determine what went wrong, and making adjustments to our triggers was a major fun activity.

Another favorite activity was searching for half-burned flares at the rail yard just past the corn field to the west. The yard was used to organize and re-assemble trains so the right cars went to the right destination. This was done by slowly backing a train to the top of a small hill called “the hump” with one or more cars unhooked. As the car or cars passed the top of the hill, the train would stop and the detached cars would coast downhill to the proper open switch on one of the twenty or so parallel tracks which directed the car to a new train being formed for a particular destination. Of course the cars would collide with the stopped cars of the new train with a loud bang, but stay connected due to the open setting of the hooks. The

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yard men did a lot of signaling to each other with lit flares in this assembly process back then before walkie-talkie radios. We often found brand new flares laying around in addition to the mostly spent ones which we took to collect the yellow sulfur powder for making our own fireworks. If you ever have to stop for a freight train to pass, you will occasionally see a boxcar carrying breakable merchandise marked "Do Not Hump" which might seem funny unless you know how trains are assembled.

During summer vacations we kids would often wander our territory from mid-morning to late afternoon without checking in at home. Our only rule was to be home by suppertime. Of course, we also knew not to get into any trouble by getting caught stealing, vandalizing or causing any trouble where someone would call the police. But other than that, we had the freedom and opportunity to grow up and explore our world in what were, well, safer times.

### **The Swamp Trail**

The geography of the area of our neighborhood was generally flat mid-west farmland with rich black loam. Being mostly flat resulted in certain areas of shallow swampland where rain water would drain to and collect. These areas remained wet throughout most of the year but would usually dry up after the spring rains and stay dry until the autumn rains came again. Cat-tails and swamp grass would normally surround these low areas.

Some of these scattered swamps had a high-water outflow streamlet which allowed the drainage to flow to other areas. These outflows behaved as most streams with bends and turns to other streams or to some point where they just disappeared.

We were very fortunate to have such a swamp for ourselves on the north edge of our lot and extending half way across the

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next, then vacant, lot. This gave us a really neat ice skating area right next our house in those years when we had heavy early winter rains and a quick freeze. We could set up a hockey goal using a large cardboard box, or practice our figure skating loops, or belly flop with our sleds across the “pond” and around the bends of the outflow ditch. The ice patch was also a source of ideas for answering the annual question: “What would you like for Christmas?” Answer: Hockey sticks, pucks, hockey skates, figure skates, sleds, etc. which one of us kids would get new, or have passed on down to us as we reached the right “size”.

The ice would eventually evaporate and break up or be covered with snow, but would become a new play area with the coming of spring rains. Now we could make rubber-band powered paddle boats or see how deep we could ride our tricycles. Magically, small frogs would appear along with crayfish which we caught to show Mom and Dad, who in turn would tell us to put them back.

In the summer when the swamp dried up, it remained an area to explore, particularly when I was still very young and still rode my tricycle. I would take my tricycle down to the swamp and ride it along my “Swamp Trail”, the dried out outflow ditch, all the way to the end. At the time it seemed like a long way, but was probably no more than 50 feet or so. One summer, Marv built me a little “camping trailer” out of scrap materials with a door in the back and a converted flashlight reflector and bulb on the ceiling wired to the rest of the flashlight fastened to the wall. I remember pulling my camping trailer behind my tricycle to the end of the trail at dusk, then getting in the trailer to read a comic book with my overhead light. As the TV ads say today: “Cost to build the trailer - \$0.00. Sitting in the trailer reading a book – Priceless!!”

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## **You Can't Come**

As I was growing up, I tended to be quite shy and, other than Mickey, had few close friends. I was also skinny and not well coordinated physically. Oh, I knew a lot of kids my age and older whom I played with or hung out with, though in baseball I was always one of the last to be picked. This situation was evident to me and I was always conscious of the fact that I was on the outside of the inside crowd. I now know this is called having an "inferiority complex." I am not ashamed of this; it is part of who I am. But back then it bothered me quite a bit.

I remember the first time it was out in the open, not just alluded to or hinted at. Back then there was a man on 18th who lived in this large old house set back from the road. It must have been the original farm house in this area, and had a number of sheds and smaller buildings which were used as garages and such. I didn't know too much about him other than he had a camping trailer stored in one of the sheds and that he was planning a trip to Eagle River Wisconsin. He might have been involved with the Boy Scouts but I knew nothing about the Scouts since our family was too poor to have any of us kids involved and have to buy uniforms, pay dues, etc.

In any event, the word was out that this trip was being planned and I thought that would really be a great adventure; even the name "Eagle River" seemed to stir up images of a truly magical place. I wanted to go. Of course, at the time I must not have been more than 8 or 9 years old, and had no idea of such concepts as parental approval, liability, items to bring, logistics, paying for it, etc. All I knew was that five or six guys about my age were invited to go on this wonderful trip.

It must have been maybe the day before the trip was to start, and I went to where the guys were bringing their things to be put in the trailer. After standing there watching the activity, the "man" noticed me there.

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I do not remember asking if I could go, but I must have somehow indicated my wanting to come. What I do remember, very clearly, was his saying, "No, you can't come." I left to go home, but had to stop along the way. I couldn't see where I was going because of the tears in my eyes.

I found out later that the trailer broke down somehow on the way up there, and that the camping never took place. The guys must have been very disappointed. But back then I remember feeling a little better. Sometimes I wasn't a very nice kid.

### **Running In the Winter Wonderland**

Winters in Melrose in the mid-forties were some of the very best and most fun times. The snows seemed heavier, deeper and lasted longer than in most other years. The fields behind our house were transformed from All American Baseball to Arctic Battlefields on the Russian Front.

One group of kids would start it by building a snowman with the heavy, sticky snow. Someone else would knock it down. The original builders would roll the balls closer to one another and roll a few more to make a "fort," mortaring the balls together with more snow. The "enemy" who pushed over the snowman would then be pelted with snowballs from behind the protection of the fort.

You can see where this is going: more players would arrive and join one side or the other, helping to build an opposing fort, stockpiling an armory of snowballs for the next wave of battle, adding height to each fort for greater protection, and so on. This would continue for days at a time, until all the "good" snow was used up or we all got bored with "war."

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Another winter activity was “grabbing a tow” from passing cars. Remember, this was before the introduction of snow tires and salt spreading. In fact our part of town was rarely even plowed so the snow would be compressed into a layer of hard-packed snow that would later turn to ice. Eventually, afternoon thaws would soften the layer to mush, followed by night freezing so the roads would get too rough to grab a tow.

But for a few days after every snow, us kids would wait for a passing car driving slow enough for one or two guys to run up behind, squat down on our haunches, and grab a hold on the bumper. Cars back then had bumpers as opposed to the smooth, no-grip styles of today. It was also important to wear ankle-high, heavy soled shoes, and relax your ankles so your feet vibrated smoothly along the packed snow. A bonus was when the car’s exhaust came out on your side so you could inhale that hardy, pre-pollution control, perfume of the automobile.

Some drivers would get mad, stop and get out yelling at us, but most cooperated to give us a free ride for a few hundred feet or so. The best street for grabbing tows was on 18<sup>th</sup> between Bloomingdale and North Avenue which also had a slightly downhill stretch. Here is where we could also run, belly-flop with our sleds, and see who could go the farthest. The best time for this was right after school but before our fathers came driving home from work. Whether dodging an on-coming car with your sled, or coming off a tow grab, an important rule was to veer off to the right in case another car might be coming.

My original sled was only about three feet long which was fine when I was still small. But later as I began to sprout up, my head would stick out in front of the sled and my knees would be off the back end during belly-flops. However, I knew we were too poor for me to get a longer sled so that’s the way it was until that day one of my runners cracked near the front during a



belly-flop. The broken end jammed into the hard packed snow, throwing me face down across the frozen slush. Luckily Christmas was just around the corner and my next sled was about five feet long.

But all was not running, and sliding and grabbing tows. I remember one afternoon when the air was still, and the snow flakes were as big as half dollars floating down out of a dark grey sky. I had just shoveled two tire tracks in the foot-deep snow so Dad could get the car off the street and into our driveway when he got home from work. Near the street, our driveway crossed over a ditch which was filled with the snow I had shoveled. So I continued to build a hill of snow over the ditch on one side of the drive, and then hollowed it out for about three feet to make an igloo. When it was finished, I crawled inside and watched the heavy, silent snow come down until Dad came home

Truly a magic moment!

### **Ice Spray in Moon Light**

There were a lot of places for us kids to skate back then. I had my private ice in the swamp on the north edge of our lot. Then there was Veteran's Park on 17<sup>th</sup> a couple of blocks south of North Avenue where they plowed the first snow into a big circular dam a hundred feet or so in diameter, then flooded the inside of the circle with a hose from a nearby fire hydrant. It was nice, but always crowded with the Italian kids from the west side who liked to start fights, so we didn't go there very often.

A very nice place to skate was the duck pond at Amlings just east of their parking lot. This pond had a low wooden fence around it that we used to sit on to put on our skates. The greenhouse people would place a 55 gallon steel barrel next to

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it along with scrap wood to make a fire and warm up. They would also shovel off any snow to keep the ice clear, particularly just before Christmas, so the kids could skate while their parents shopped in the Amling's showroom.

The duck pond was also safe because the pond was only a few feet deep. Mickey and I liked to come here because we also knew a couple of greenhouse doors that were seldom locked. We would change out of our skates and go inside to the warm, moist, sweet smelling flower beds. If no one saw us, we also would visit an area of the south greenhouse where a small concrete pond had been built to raise alligators; probably a hobby of one of the bosses.

But the best place to skate was Spandikow's reservoir. This was about 300 feet long by maybe 60 feet wide; with the water level about ten feet lower than the surrounding land. This blocked out most of the wind and made for smoother ice. Some kids would sled down the steep sloping sides to then speed across the ice, but that's a different story.

One year the weather turned frigid for almost a month before the snows began, so the ice froze extremely smooth and thick enough to skate on by mid-December. Mickey and I had been keeping track of the ice every few days and had finally determined that it was thick enough one afternoon.

That night after supper, I walked to Mickey's house with my skates around my neck and called him out. We then hiked the two blocks along the north side of Spandikow's greenhouse to the reservoir. Sitting on an old log on one shore, we changed into our skates and began to enjoy the beautifully smooth ice. It was wonderful. There was a full moon and it was almost like skating in daylight. We liked to get up to speed, and then slide sideways to a stop so that our blades would throw up a spray of fine ice crystals.

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We then got a bit competitive to see who could make a larger spray of ice which glittered brightly in the moon light. Away we skated side by side and then slid to a stop to watch the glittering spray. On one of our runs we raced farther and faster, determined to make the biggest spray. Mickey finally slid to a stop but I continued to go even faster.

When I finally slid to a stop, the spray of ice crystals was absolutely beautiful and the very best of the night. As I stood there admiring the last of the crystals floating down, the silence was broken by a loud "Quack Quack" from just behind me.

"Oh My God!" I breathed. I had forgotten that the Spandikows kept ducks on that end of the reservoir, and kept some water open by breaking out the ice. There I stood not more than three feet from the edge of the over ten feet deep icy water.

Mickey and I called it a night after that and walked home. Caulk another one up for my Guardian Angel.

### **Spring Floods**

By March of each year, our winter activities would come to an end as the old piles of dirty snow melted into the earth. This was a generally awkward time: too muddy to play outside, too boring to stay inside and play board games.

This was my time to build log cabin bird houses on Dad's basement work bench. I would collect fallen tree branches in the yard that were about one inch in diameter, and cut them as needed to make a bird house about ten inches wide, six inches deep and 6 inches high. I would shave the pieces with a rasp so that the top and bottoms would be flat and nail them together with Dad's small rusty finishing nails. Scrap plywood would be used for the bottom and roof which I slanted to the back. I would proudly mount them on one of Mom's clothesline

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posts where they would last for two or three years before I would replace them with new houses.

Another spring activity was to set up my lead soldiers in the basement against the back wall. Our basement originally had a concrete floor that would unfortunately flood each spring due to a high water table. Dad tried many cures to patch the cracks to keep the water out but nothing worked. He finally decided to fill the basement with dirt and rocks up to a higher level a bit above the water table. This resulted in a lower ceiling but gave us a drier basement. He later poured new concrete over the fill, but for a few years the floor remained dirt and rocks.

This was the “battlefield” on which I set up my lead soldiers. The game was to partially hide each soldier behind little hills or rocks, or dig trenches to protect them from the enemy. In this case the enemy was my cousin Ray and I, who would take turns shooting my BB gun at each other’s platoon. We would each get five shots from across the basement, and then count up our score. A BB hole was a “kill.” Just knocking one over counted as “wounded”. After each round, we would write down the score, and then re-set the soldiers for the next battle. I usually won since I knew how high to aim my old gun for the BB to arc over the top to the target. What I did not know was how very valuable vintage (undamaged) lead soldiers would become in later years!

We did our best, but these were still boring weeks to get through each year. So you can understand the excitement of the annual spring floods that usually happened around early April. The reason the flooding occurred was that at some point in time, the Village of Melrose Park installed two parallel pipes, each about three feet in diameter, from where Silver Creek crossed under North Avenue near 21<sup>st</sup> (the streets were in on the south side of North Avenue but there were just farm fields on the north side), east to just past 17th. By putting the creek

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underground, it would have allowed another house or two on each of the in-between streets; more houses, more taxes.

The problem, however, was that floating tree-branches and other debris would get stuck at the entrance of the two pipes to form a dam. Spring rains draining off the farm fields to the west would then overflow the area of the pipes. The water would never get deeper than two or three feet, and because the water was spread out for an eighth of a mile or so, the current was not very fast. So we kids would ride our bikes through the flood staying near the center of the paved streets. Our only worry was the possibility of a manhole cover being dislodged and us falling in a deep sewer. And we never rode off the streets near where the underground pipes were buried since sometimes the flood waters found a path through the over-soil to a hole in the pipes, and a whirlpool would form that could suck you down.

But most years, the only whirlpools were right at the inlets of the pipes. One year a man ran off the road in his car near the inlets, and got sucked down when he got out of his car trying to get to safety.

The floods would only last a day or two after a heavy rain, but could occur two or three times during the month. Us kids would hang out there watching the traffic back up as cars stalled out and needed to be towed. Eventually, the Village removed the pipes to open up the creek and built new bridges at 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>. That ended our "Spring Floods," but for my pre- and early-teen years, it was all very exciting and interesting.

### **Dad's Rebuke**

Starting a family during the Great Depression, my parents practiced frugality in spending money. For us kids, it was that classic situation where you knew your folks did not have much money, but we did not think we were poor.

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But whenever there was a choice of spending versus not spending, our choice was most generally not to spend. This affected us in many ways. For example, Sacred Heart grade school did not have a cafeteria, but on Thursdays a few mothers would volunteer to sell hot dogs in the church basement for 25 cents. The Stellmach kids were among the few who stayed in our classrooms and ate our normal bag lunch.

On summer car trips to Minnesota to visit Dad's relatives which took two days of travel at 45 miles per hour, our motel night always involved Dad stopping, going inside to check the price of a room, and Mom insisting we should keep driving to find a cheaper price.

When Dad needed a new tire for the car, there was always a big argument over buying versus patching the old one. Dad finally solved that problem by not "reporting" the occasional bonus or pay raise so he could hide away some money for new tires when they were needed. No more discussion or arguments!

There were many other examples over the years: Boy Scouts – No, too expensive; New clothes or shoes – No, here use Marv's used stuff; Saturday matinee movies – OK, but no popcorn.

And when it was time for my first two-wheel bike, Marv wasn't ready to give up his. So, big discussion: Dad: "We need to get Art a bike." Mom: "Can't he wait another year?" Holy Compromise! Dad bought me a used bike, but gave it new tires and a paint job before giving it to me. How I treasured that bike! It was one of my greatest gifts ever. I could now join the other guys in roaming our territory. I could ride to the corner grocery to buy that item or two that Mom needed for dinner. And yes, I could now ride the Spring Floods as well.

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One day we guys thought up a new game. How close could we come to someone without hitting them, by slamming on our brakes and skidding to them from a normal riding speed? We played this game on the gravel road out in front of my house. Of course, we each had to take a turn being the stationary target for the other 4 or 5 guys. After a while we actually got quite good at getting close.

On my last turn I skidded right up to my target so that my front tire just barely “kissed” his bike. Unfortunately, Dad had come outside just in time to see me do it. He called me over and very firmly told me how I could hurt someone doing that – and besides, why did I want to wear out my new tires!! But he spoke to me very quietly - he never yelled.

### **Dad’s Victory Garden**

World War II was different from this country’s other wars which occurred later. It was a massive war that included all the world’s major countries for one thing, but it was also a war that involved our whole nation. Almost every family had one or more relatives in uniform, young fathers, uncles, brothers or cousins. And every family was part of the “Home Front” and expected to share in the effort to win. Gas was rationed, meat and butter were rationed, and sugar was rationed. Each family received a book of ration stamps for the month; so to buy a rationed item, you had to hand over the right number of the proper coupons. If you ran out of coupons, you could not buy any more of those items until the next month when you got the next month’s coupon book.

The war was a part of daily life. There were War Bond sale drives with ads in newspapers and on the radio with Hollywood stars making the pitch to help pay for the war expense. There were collection points where you could take metal cans, old bed springs, and other metals for recycling. Schools held

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paper drives and we kids would go house to house to collect old newspapers, tie them in bundles and bring them to the school basement with our wagons for later collection by big trucks.

And of course, every young man was subject to being drafted into one of the service branches. You had to register for the draft at age seventeen as I recall, but they generally would not call you up until you reached eighteen and graduated from high school. With written parental permission, you could volunteer to join up at age seventeen, and many did. You could request a deferment if you were married and had children, but you could still be called.

When the war started for the United States in 1941, Dad was already 38 years old and considered too old to draft, so we were fortunate that he could stay home. Most of our uncles were likewise too old, but some of our older cousins did serve during or just after the war. Donald Starr, son of Dad's sister Helen, was killed in an Army training accident.

I remember our family car during the war was a 1936 Ford. Our cars were always four or five years old when Dad bought them. Cars were also simpler then and most maintenance was done in the side yard, not only new spark plugs and points, but major overhauls to install new piston rings, valves and gaskets as well. Dad finally sold it and bought a 1941 Buick four-door sedan after the war ended. For the duration of the war, there were no new cars manufactured since all the factories had been converted into making tanks, army trucks, airplanes and other war products.

Another war-time activity which many families got involved with was Victory Gardens. No matter how big your lot was, you were expected to grow your own vegetables so that the farmers could devote their production to supplying food to Army depots



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for processing and shipment to the many Army and Navy bases in the US, and for shipment to overseas units.

Since we had a quarter acre lot, we had a lot of room for growing vegetables and we did. Dad's garden included just about everything including sweet corn, tomatoes, potatoes, green beans, turnips, onions, peppers, kohlrabi, cabbage, lettuce and strawberries. But it took him weeks to spade up the soil and prepare it for planting. Then there was the hoeing and pulling of weeds and applying certain pesticides to keep the bugs in control. Dad also grew Concord grapes which Mom used to make jam and grape juice, and which he used to make wine. While much that the garden produced was used as it ripened, a lot of it was "put up" in Mason jars to be used throughout the following fall and winter, particularly the canned tomatoes, green beans, various jams and jellies, and freestone peaches which were purchased in bushel baskets specifically for canning. Dad had built a sizeable set of shelves in the cool basement to store this annual treasure.

This was the time that Dad also raised chickens on the north east corner of the lot. Along one side inside the chicken coop were about eight nesting boxes with cushions of hay that the hens took turns using. In addition to the daily production of eggs which was my chore to collect, the chickens also provided our family with fresh meat for our Sunday dinner, for which we did not need a ration coupon. I think all us children helped with the garden and the chickens although I was too young to do much. An interesting sidelight to raising chickens was that the 50 pound feed sacks during the war were made from cloth of various patterns and colors. Mom used these to make items of clothes for us kids as well as quilts for the beds.

In addition to the garden at home, Dad had another little plot to tend along the east side of 25<sup>th</sup> where Continental Can Company leased a number of acres so that its employees

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could participate in this program. At least there, a farmer plowed the area and broke up the dirt clods, so all the employees had to do was plant, water and weed. Although quite small, the individual plots gave everyone the opportunity to contribute to this patriotic effort.

After the war was over, Dad continued to garden for most of the rest of his life, but our Victory Garden shrunk to a more manageable size. And the Village later passed an ordinance outlawing all farm animals in residential areas so that was the end of our chicken ranch.

### **The Second Time I Almost Drowned**

The war was over and the economy was expanding. Jobs were plentiful as American factories switched back to making consumer products which were in great demand after years of rationing and shortages. The future was bright and promising for the Stellmach family and the nation.

In addition to a new (used) car, Mom and Dad also invested in a small lot on a canal leading into Island Lake. This was a small lake with modest weekend and vacation cabins that had been built mostly in the twenties before the Great Depression. Our lot was within walking distance of one of the private beaches available to land owners in the community. Although Mom and Dad had intended to someday build a little cabin on this 30 foot wide lot, by the time they could afford to do so, the county ordinance had changed requiring a wider lot, so the cabin never got built and they eventually sold the lot to one of the neighbors.

But for a number of years, our summer vacations would start with a trip to Island Lake to do the spring cleanup of the weeds and brush which accumulated. Mom would typically bring a picnic lunch of potato salad, fried chicken and large bottles of

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Kool-Aid which she wrapped in big towels to keep the ice cubes from melting. And it was usually around lunch time by the time the lot was cleaned up.

There was an old crab apple tree with low hanging branches in the middle of the lot on which we would hang old sheets or blankets to form a “changing room.” Of course, we couldn’t go swimming for an hour after lunch, so we also would try our luck with a fishing pole off the back of our lot.

I learned how to swim at that little beach down the road, just the breast stroke and dog paddle to stay afloat. But it was enough to keep from drowning. We would go to our little lake three or four times during the summer, and to some of the other lakes in northern Illinois as well. Cedar Lake and Round Lake were two of my favorites since they had sandy bottoms and were usually pretty clear. We would also go to the lakes with Uncle Otto and Aunt Rose and my cousins Ronnie and Ray, but those times were mainly for fishing at Petite Lake and Pistake Bay.

On one of our trips to Cedar Lake, Ray and I had swum out to a raft that was anchored off shore in about 15 feet of water. That day we had our “diving masks” with us so we could see under water. At one point we decided to try to swim down to the bottom to touch the anchor. As bad a swimmer as I was, I was still better than Ray who was over a year younger than me, so he never got very deep.

On my last try I finally succeeded and was able to swim to the bottom, but I was at the end of my breath when I got back near the surface. As I was about to break clear, my head hit the bottom of the steel barrels that the raft floated on. At that moment of complete panic, I almost lost it and took a breath – which would have been a breath of water!! Since I am still here writing about it, you can assume I was successful in finally

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swimming to the side of the raft and getting that desperately needed breath of air, but it was truly a close call. Remind me again to thank my Guardian Angel when we meet.

### **Fire Crackers, Tin Cans and Cannons**

There may be some small towns in the foothills of the Appalachians where kids can still have fun with fireworks, but in most areas today it is against the law to have or shoot off anything other than simple sparklers, small fountains, or small pinwheels.

But back when I was a kid, the 4<sup>th</sup> of July was one of the best holidays ever. Usually by the first of June, fireworks stands would spring up every mile or so along the highways. There you could buy firecrackers of all sizes from the tiny “lady fingers” which gave a loud “pop,” to the standard inch and a half long bangers, to “cherry bombs” with the fuse sticking out one side half way down the thick length, to even larger, scarier bombs that even us kids were afraid to light.

The Lady Fingers were fun because they were so small they couldn't hurt anyone so you could light them and throw them at people and nobody ever got hurt. Sometimes if the fuse was loose and they didn't go off, you could break them in two and light where the powder was spilling out, and they would shoot off like a small rocket.

But the favorite of most of us guys were the standard firecrackers that came with about thirty in a pack, fifteen on each side of where the fuses were twined together. We would carefully unwind the fuses so we could use one firecracker at a time off the pack. Occasionally someone would light the end fuses on a whole pack and throw them out and away, but as the fuses were lighting, an exploding one would scatter them in all directions. That was a dangerous thing to do; I saw one

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land right on a kid's forearm and explode, opening up about a one-inch hole in his arm.

Another dangerous trick was to light a firecracker while holding it, then throwing it up or out before it exploded. The problem was that some fuses were wrapped around too much powder, and would burn very fast. Again, I saw a kid try that and have it explode before he could throw it; seriously damaging his thumb and forefinger.

Mickey and I were a lot more careful having watched and been taught by our older brothers, Marv and Joe. In fact, they would buy our firecrackers for us if the people in the fireworks stands thought we were too young. Some years Marv would even send off for an assortment of fireworks advertised in magazines. Neither of us was ever injured playing with fireworks for all the years that we used them.

One of our favorite games was to set a can over a firecracker with its fuse sticking out on one side, light it and see how high we could blow the can. The best combination was a standard firecracker and an empty tomato paste can, the little cans about an inch and a half diameter by about 3 inches tall. Those would get up way above the roof.

Another game we played was "mining engineer." There were a few piles of dirt just off the end of Bloomingdale east of 17<sup>th</sup> near where Amlings dumped their flower trash, cut stems, leaves, etc. We would make a hole into the side of the hill the diameter of our firecracker, shove in the "stick of dynamite" and light it. Into the hole we just blew, we would again push in another "stick" and blow the tunnel a little deeper. We could get almost an arm's length into the hill using this "mining technique."

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One of my toys back then was a toy cannon with cast iron red wheels made to shoot a cork using a firecracker as the charge. This lasted for awhile until we tried using a larger firecracker. It sure blew the cork a long way, but it also blew out the side of the barrel.

But our very best game was using a homemade cannon to shoot marbles at Spandikows greenhouse. Have I mentioned yet that sometimes we were not very nice kids? After my toy cannon was destroyed, I built a cannon using a piece of galvanized metal pipe about 14 inches long and a half inch inside diameter, just big enough for a marble to fit inside. On one end was a screw-on end cap with a small hole drilled in so we could insert a firecracker with its fuse sticking out the small hole, screw the cap onto the pipe, and load a marble on top of the firecracker.

We played this game near nightfall when things got quiet. We would take our cannon over to those dirt piles near Amling's dump and set the cannon on top one of the piles adjusted to shoot up about 45 degrees toward the greenhouse about a half a block away. We would light the fuse, and after the explosion, listen to hear the marble break through a glass pane.

Now I must admit we knew what we were doing was wrong as evidenced by our waiting to near nightfall, and having our bikes with us to make a quick getaway if someone came out to catch whoever threw a stone (they thought), and our not bragging about what we did. But I guess we thought it was just payback for them chasing us out of their greenhouses all the time. They didn't like us much, though we never quite figured out why.

## **A Drunk in a Ditch**

Mary's Tavern stood on the northeast corner of 18<sup>th</sup> and North Avenue. It was a two-story brick building with glass-block

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windows and living quarters on the second floor. Originally, Mary's Tavern was a pretty dilapidated structure located on the south side of North Avenue east of 17<sup>th</sup> but that building burned to the ground. As I recall, Mary's Tavern was a small, friendly neighborhood bar that seldom had any fights or problems, but remember I was just a kid, not a patron, and I never went inside until I'd go in to use their payphone when I started dating in high school.

Normally we kids paid no attention to anything going on at Mary's Tavern or to anyone who went there, although from time to time someone would have too much to drink and end up walking home rather than risk driving. On occasion, Officer DuPrau of the Franklin Park Police Force, who lived near the north end of 18<sup>th</sup>, would get involved to keep the peace.

In the late forties, our two by three block area of Melrose Park finally received city water and sewers, and while the trenches were opened up, natural gas lines as well. This was a real mess since the contractors would open up one whole street at a time, not only cutting trenches for the main lines running under the street, but digging the lateral trenches to each house as well. So when your block was being done, no one could drive to their houses and would have to park on the next street over.

One evening as it was nearing dusk, the guys were playing war in the trenches, throwing mud clods at the "enemy" in the next set of trenches. Every so often, the whole force on one side would coordinate their throws and advance to the next trench before the counter-attack. It was a lot of fun and no one was getting hurt, and the trenches were only three or four feet deep in most areas.

As dusk fell and kids were being called home, we noticed a man making his way down the street, muttering and swearing

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to himself. It became apparent that his problem was that he was drunk and could not understand where all the ditches had come from.

We would see a head pop up, then a body crawl out of a trench, then watch him climb the dirt piled next to the next trench, then disappear down into it. Another burst of shouting and profanity, and the process would begin again, and I guess he was pliable enough in his stupor, that he wasn't hurting himself, because he just kept going and going, climbing and disappearing, shouting and swearing, over and over.

We laughed so hard I think we all peed in our pants.

Footnote: A few years after this, Officer DuPrau was accidentally killed at his house while cleaning his revolver. His family then moved away.

### **Uncle-In-One**

My cousin Ray Douglas and I were probably closer to each other than any of us cousins on my mother's side of the family. Even though we lived in towns about 45 minutes apart, we played together every Saturday night at Grandma Sedivy's where Mom and most of her sisters gathered to visit their parents. All the aunts would sit around and gossip upstairs in the living room until it was time to serve "coffee and", usually scrumptious Bohemian bakery that each aunt would bring. The uncles would sit around a large round table in the basement, drink beer out of brown quart bottles, smoke and play "Dudda," an old Bohemian card game. We cousins would be playing tag, teasing the girls, playing catch, or walking to a local deli to buy candy. With one brother and seven sisters, including Mom, there were twenty six cousins to romp around with when everyone showed up.



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In addition to the Saturday night get-togethers, my Uncle Otto, Aunt Rose, Cousins Ronnie and Ray would often also come to our house on Sunday afternoons. I would also be invited to go with them on one to two week vacations to one of the lakes in northern Illinois or up into Wisconsin during the summer. So Ray and I got to be real buddies over the years.

One Sunday at our house in Melrose Park, Ray and I were playing Archery Golf in our yard. The yard was pretty large, a quarter-acre lot with a number of fruit trees, shade trees and garden. I think the chickens were gone by this time, so we had a big area to lay out our golf "holes," actually just a few bushel baskets. The game was to shoot an arrow high in the sky and see who could get closest to the basket. We had one basket on the north edge of the front yard, and the other in a small clearing between the two cheery trees and the strawberry patch in the back yard.

We had shoot our arrows a couple of times from one "hole" back to the other and had not noticed that Dad and Uncle Otto had come outside to walk around the yard. I had just released an arrow into the sky toward the back yard, and we were running there to see how close it would come to the basket when I saw them standing not more than ten feet away from my target. A pang of panic went through me as I saw the arrow coming down right towards them. "My God, it's going to hit Uncle Otto," I thought as I ran toward him. If I yelled to warn him, he might look up and catch it right in the eye. The arrow was falling straight toward his head. Just before it hit him, I swatted it away and into the strawberry patch but had to almost run into them to do so. Luckily for me, neither of them noticed the arrow, and just thought I recklessly ran too close while playing tag. "Stop running around," Dad yelled. Ray and I walked guiltily back to the front yard to put away our bow and arrows. We never did tell them how close Uncle Otto had come to being a "hole-in-one."

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## **Brains in a Hat**

North Avenue had been expanded from a typical two-lane road to a modern, for its time, divided four-lane highway with a unique center barrier consisting of a grassed, rounded berm about eight feet wide and three feet tall in the center. The center berm not only kept the oncoming traffic apart, but gave our stretch of the highway a certain beauty well before later highway beautification projects.

As additional housing was built in Melrose and in the other suburbs to the west, traffic on North Avenue grew heavier and heavier. Industrial development to the west of 25<sup>th</sup> Avenue created many jobs and further increased traffic.

So it was inevitable that the number of accidents along this area also increased. Most were simple fender benders with no injuries that nevertheless snarled traffic. But once in awhile a serious accident would occur and the number of sirens from responding police cars and ambulances would alert us of that fact.

One evening when I was about twelve, I was playing with Mickey in our tree house behind his house when the sirens started. From the number of sirens, and the sounds of sirens shutting down, we could tell that the accident was fairly close so we decided to ride our bikes over to see what had happened.

As we approached the scene of the accident near the entrance to Amlings, traffic had stopped in both directions with cars pulled off on the shoulders to allow the emergency vehicles to get through. Because of the congestion, we left our bikes behind some bushes, and walked down the grassed barrier to get closer. The police were busy at the scene assisting the injured and didn't notice us or chase us away.

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There were pieces of the damaged cars scattered all over along with broken glass and other debris. We were almost up to the wrecks when I spotted a man's hat, a Fedora kind of hat that men wore back then, lying right side up on the side of the berm. I can't remember what I intended to do with it, but when I reached down and picked it up, the top of a head fell out on the ground.

We both almost gagged at that point. I quickly dropped the hat, and we ran back to our bikes and rode home.

While writing up this incident, I debated whether or not to include it with the other stories. It certainly left a strong impression on me as it was the first time I saw an example of death first hand. In today's world of war, bombings, drive-by shootings and other violence which occur so frequently and are reported ad nausea on TV and the daily papers, both as real-life events and as "entertainment," we have become numb and immune to any feelings of shock. But back in my "Safer Times" this was an event which you could not forget.

### **Trick or Potatoes**

It was getting time to grow up. My buddies and I knew it. We were soon to graduate from grade school and knew that some of the things we did were things we would no longer be able to do.

We all looked forward to Halloween and many of us had gone "trick or treating" together over the years. Except for taking our younger siblings out and watching over them, this was probably the last time for us older kids.

In fact, before going out, we had decided as a group that we no longer wanted the "sissy" candy we had treasured in years past. This year we wanted to get together down at the "dump"

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for a bonfire after we took our younger sisters or brothers home. So after yelling "Trick or Treat" and having the youngsters get their candy, us older guys would ask if instead of candy, did they have a potato, or aluminum foil, or some butter.

So after making the rounds of the houses in our neighborhood, we gathered at Amlings dump and built a fire from scrap wood at the center of one of the dried up ponds. The weather was clear but slightly chilly and the fire felt good. When the coals were glowing red, we placed our potatoes wrapped in foil under the coals and recounted the responses we had received and who gave us what. When the potatoes were cooked, we dragged them out, let them cool a bit, then slit them open with our jack knives and added the butter. One of us had brought a salt shaker from home to top off our memorable treat. It was one of our best Halloweens ever.

This is a true story of adventure, accomplishment, romance and reflection of a young boy's transition from a mischievous youth to professional achievement and success. The many aspects of his life are told with humor, humility, and often touching poignancy.

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