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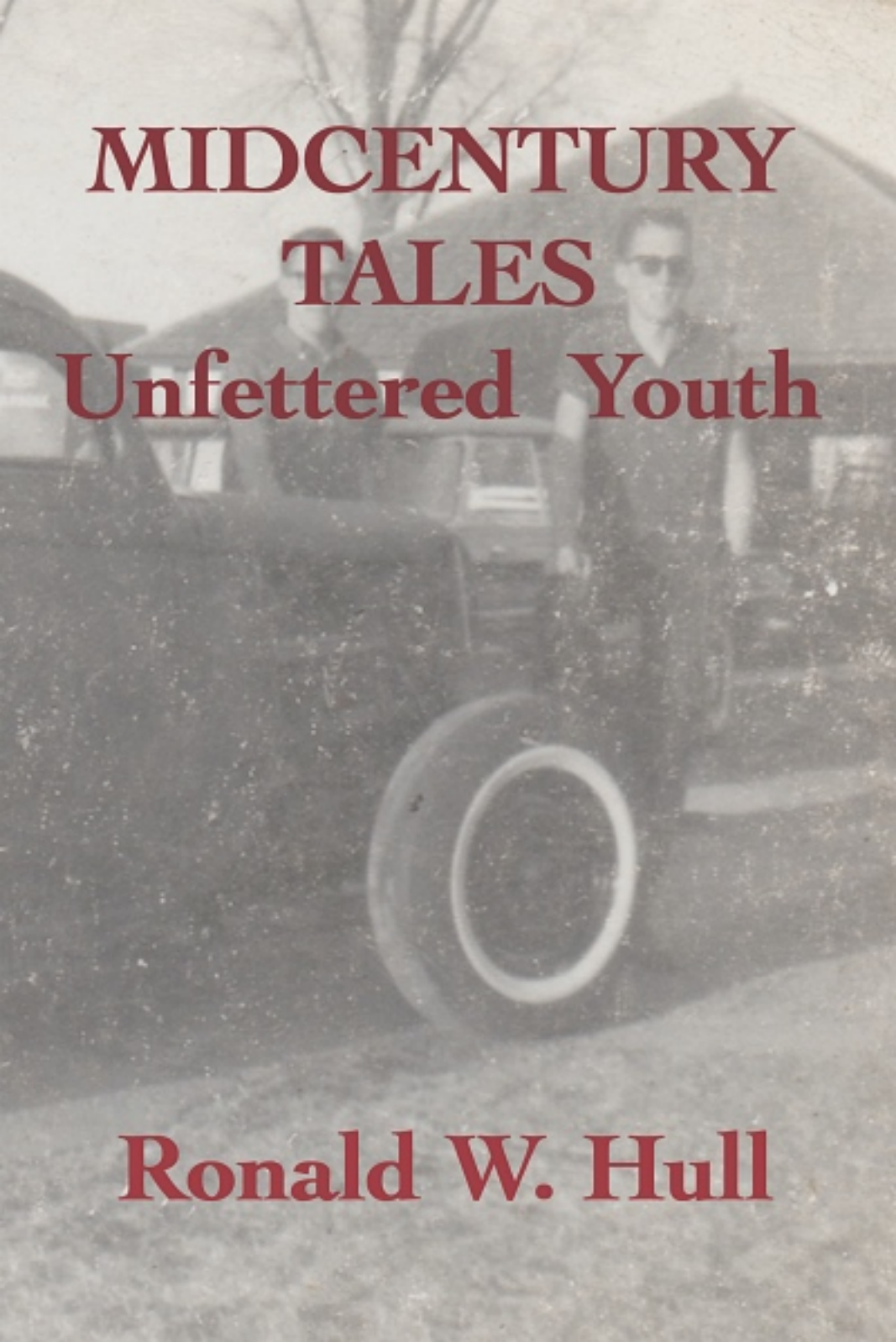
Midcentury Tales: Unfettered Youth

By Ronald W. Hull

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**MIDCENTURY
TALES**
Unfettered Youth

Ronald W. Hull

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Before Memory

My father had a lust for automobiles. When he came out of the CCC camps, prepared to go to war, he told me he would buy a Model A for \$50 and then drive it until it quit. Sell that one for \$25 and then go find another one for \$50 to drive. I don't know if that is true, because I don't remember. It was before I was born.

I know that he bought a brand-new 1939 Buick sedan. With that car he wooed my mother during her senior year in high school. He drove her to the distant city of Eau Claire to see his sister and her family and to buy my mother a huge 1/4 carat diamond engagement ring. They were married on June 1 just after mom graduated from high school.

Earlier, dad had signed up for the Army, but when he got to Milwaukee in 1941, they washed him out for having a punctured eardrum, probably from his Golden Gloves boxing, and myopia with astigmatism. Incidentally, the same problems that the very first Congressional Medal of Honor winner had but fooled the doctors. He overtook a Japanese machine gun nest at the start of the war in the Pacific.

They rented a shack from a farmer a mile out of the little town where dad was born, Owen, Wisconsin. Named after Mr. Owen, owner of the box factory where my dad's father worked and my dad's aunt was second-in-command. The shack was one room with a hole under the door. Some evenings, dad would sit on the bed and watch that hole to plink an unfortunate rat that might stick its head inside. They didn't have to eat the rats. Squirrels were a favorite food in those days. Slightly bigger and better tasting.

My twin brother Roger and I may have been somewhat of a surprise, but probably not, on a cold, dark December 21, 1942. We were beset with childhood diseases and Roger had a concussion while being born. Used to kid him that I, "Kicked him out," and always dominated him. But he was a good sport and always challenged me in everything we did. I'm glad I don't remember scarlet fever and some of the other ailments we had, starting around three years old. Winter colds were constant in those days.

But Roger and I were fast starters. I was walking and talking by the time I was 10 months old. There was nothing holding us back. One day, when we were two and mom must not have been looking, Roger and I decided that it

would be a good idea to push over the beehives that the farmer had near our shack. I'm glad I don't remember, because the angry bees almost killed our little rat terrier, Rags, as he fought to defend us from those killers and their stings. Back in the shack, mom was kept busy for some time pulling stingers out of the three of us and swatting bees that were flying around inside the place, still angry. I don't know if dad had to pay the farmer any damages.

Before I could remember, our parents bought an old farmhouse on State Highway 29 on the western edge of town. We learned early not to play in the front yard close to the highway, it was too dangerous with all the traffic going by all day and night long. There was a huge woodstove where mom was queen of cooking and canning. It was always warm and smelled great in that kitchen. We were two lucky kids to have such a talented mother.



Roger and Ron at the shack

First Memories and Indiana

My first memories of that farmhouse by the highway are warm. But it was cold coming down from upstairs in the winter. Would race down after waking up and throwing on our clothes to sit down before the newfangled central oil heater in the living room that had a small fan at the bottom blowing heat our way as we put on our socks. But the kitchen was always warm. Mom had started a fire from the embers or a wood match with newspaper in the wood stove. Had a tea kettle with hot water going for coffee and was already making our breakfast.

In winter, we had hot cereal like oatmeal, malt-o-meal or cream of wheat. Or mom's homemade cinnamon rolls. She made two kinds of doughnuts: glazed ones and doughy ones. Both were delicious in their own way. There was bacon and eggs, and when she had it, ham.

Sometimes, we had fresh squeezed juice. Or juices that came in a can, like pineapple or pineapple/orange. In summer, we had all the cereals. But none were colored or sugared in those days. We put ample sugar and whole milk on everything. Or syrup, when we had pancakes, waffles made on an electric waffle maker or French toast. There were jams and jellies made from raspberries, black caps, current, blackberries, apples or whatever else like strawberries that mom had to make preserves with.

Our favorite was crackers and coffee, consisting of saltine crackers broken in a bowl, covered with coffee and condensed milk with added sugar. We didn't know that the starch in the crackers turned to sugar. We knew nothing of sugar shock. Didn't know it was all caffeine, salt and sugar. A very inexpensive depression breakfast. Lots of energy to get the day going. A lifetime hooked on coffee caffeine.

Mom would get the fat from a butchered pig and render lard in that wood stove's oven. She was baking something there all day. Most of her recipes used lard. But later, she changed to using shortening instead of lard or butter. The kitchen always smelled heavenly and there were bowls of cake or cookie mix to lick clean before the cookies, almost too hot to put in your mouth, came off the cookie sheet and were devoured.

Our father brought home condensed milk by the case. He drove truck for Western Condensery that made condensed milk for the war effort. Later, he

gathered whey from local rural cheese factories and trucked it to the plant to be made into calf feed or a foul-smelling sticky substance used as a road binder to keep the dust down on local dirt roads.

With cars driving fast up and down those gravel roads, many farm front yards were covered with dust, including the front of the houses and trees. When it rained, the dust became mud. It was hard to keep a car clean or the rocks from opening up the undercarriage to rust driving those dirt and gravel roads. Dad wouldn't buy a car that had been country road driven.

We played out back of the house with our dog, Rags. Occasionally, a kid slightly older than us from across the highway would have his cousin come from Chicago. They would come over and show us what they knew. Largely consisting of the behavior of dogs. I recall us marching through the tall grass nose to tail on our hands and knees, just like a pack of dogs. A high point of my early memory!

Our house had a big screened in porch that we didn't go out in, in winter. It may have been sealed by storm windows; I don't recall. But I recall that porch was filled with flies in summer and we couldn't go out there much. There were lots of flies everywhere because this was dairy farming country and flies were a byproduct. Every ceiling was covered with flies' specks and rolls of dead fly filled rolls of flypaper spiraled down from above.

Every midsummer evening, we welcomed the planes that flew over and sprayed that very distinctively scented and flavored DDT. It killed the flies and mosquitoes nicely but got in the milk at our grandparent's farm and couldn't be filtered out like mastitis and other impurities. The cats loved to lick the discarded milk filters and catch mice and rats in the barn.

I remember when our uncle who hauled peas to the cannery for local farmers would stop by with a bit of pea vine still on the truck. We harvested those peas. Some for mom for dinner and some for us. Always a treat to eat raw from the shell. One day, my brother came around the yard too quickly and ran directly into the corner of my uncle's truck. Gave him a very nice scar on his forehead because he didn't get a stitch in those days.

Shortly after moving into the farmhouse on State Highway 29, we took a trip with our maternal grandparents to Indiana where my grandmother had Old Order Amish cousins, aunts and uncles. We may have been going to a funeral. It was a long trip, made interesting by us taking the car ferry, *City of Midland 41*, across Lake Michigan.

I don't remember this detail, but the City of Midland was the best car ferry operating from Manitowoc, Wisconsin to Ludington, Michigan at the time. It was joined by two other car ferries, the *SS Spartan* and *SS Badger* in 1952.

City of Midland 41 ceased operation in 1988 and the SS Badger, refurbished, still operates today, one of the last coal-fired ships on the lake. City of Midland 41 was rebuilt into a barge tender and still operates in Ludington.

It was a memorable trip for Roger and me. I don't remember the time of year, but I was told that it was late November and the last ferryboat trip of the year.

I remember that the boat was nearly empty and it rocked, first, for a few hours front to back, and then, later in the journey, from side to side. Roger and I thought it was great fun, but our mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother were all seasick in the lounge. We were forbidden to go out on the deck with dad and Grandpa because it was too dangerous. When they came back later with foam all over their suits and coats when a wave came over the bow and hit them, we understood that it was dangerous to be out there in the wind. The bow on that car ferry was very high, maybe 30 feet. It must've been quite a wave to come over that bow!

I don't remember anything more of that trip, but we probably were treated very well because our relatives in northern Indiana were wealthy farmers. I found out that Lake Michigan was famous for strong gales and rough seas, sinking many ships, but I didn't find anything from that time period of that storm in my Internet search of historic storms.

Perhaps it was the following summer, but we drove down all the way to Indiana again in late August. I don't remember our grandparents being with us that time. Cars in those days did not have air conditioning. Dad drove us right down through Chicago, on city streets, because as a truck driver, he knew those streets. In the heat of the day, with brick buildings right down to the street and no trees for shade, a lot of people were out on the street seeking shade and whatever breeze they could find. We were driving through the "slums." Most of the people were black.

I noticed that there were a lot of shiny Cadillacs and Lincolns parked along the street and wondered about them, so I asked my dad.

Dad replied. "They make good money in the factories. But they don't own their homes and can't buy any. They can buy cars on time, so that's what they own."

I never forgot the lesson I learned that day from dad. Why poor people buy upscale cars and rent rather than buy homes. Other reasons, I learned later.

When we got to Indiana, the sky was lead gray, the water tasted bad and we couldn't sleep at night it was so hot. I thought that Indiana was a terrible

place to live compared to Wisconsin where it was much cooler and the sky was blue... The water cold and tasty.

But our Old Order Amish relatives were rich. They grew corn and soybeans. Owned Cadillacs. Had electricity, unlike the Mennonites in Wisconsin, and spent part of the winter in Florida. But they dressed old-fashioned and the men wore long beards and black clothing. The women wore white bonnets and long black skirts that reached to their homemade, high laced shoes.

In the big farmhouse they had a room devoted to a huge loom for weaving rugs and cloth. The interior was filled with hand carved decorations and hand-built furniture. The toybox was filled with hand carved trick puzzles, oddities like chains carved out of a single piece of wood, balls encased in square wood enclosures carved from a single piece of wood, and other examples of great carving skill. I remember an inlaid wall picture, a collage of an Indian paddling a birchbark canoe on a river made from many pieces of wood and bark creating a very realistic scene.

A boy in the family about our age had his own little tractor. He pulled us around in a wagon behind. Never in a million years would I dream of having such a thing to drive around. They were truly rich!

When we left on that trip, mom put ample food and water outside for our dog, Rags. When we returned over a week later, Rags somehow got locked in the house. He ate the curtains to survive. But he did and that's all that mattered.



Out with our dog. Rags

Embarrassments

Perhaps it was the anticipation of our sister, who arrived when we were five. But during that time, as a stay-at-home mom during the scarcity of World War II, she sewed a lot of our clothes using patterns she got from the Simplicity company. Along with our clothes, she made some girl's dresses. I recall her trying them on us, to my embarrassment. There was even a picture taken of the two of us, but thankfully, I was dressed as a boy and Roger had to be the girl. Whew! That was close!

At a very young age, dressed alike and blue-eyed blonde, almost everyone we met, strangers or relatives, would gush and say, "Oh, they are so cute! What are their names?" Regardless of what my mother told them, they would call us Roggie and Ronnie. At some point, I found that being called Ronald, was way too formal and to be called Ronnie was equivalent to being called a sissy. So, I insisted that everyone call me Ron. I called my brother Rog for many years, until, perhaps sometime in his professional life, he preferred being called Roger.

By first grade, our mother had paired us up with local girls in grade school, friends of the family. I can't say that I was embarrassed by being a boyfriend, but I was shy and not really interested in girls at that point. I recall later, whenever any girl that would call my brother and me "cute" I had an immediate retort. "Does that mean you want to kiss me?" I don't recall anyone that ever took me up on that offer. Kissing came much later, so that's a story for later.

About first grade, Roger and I were to become part of the Christmas show, The Nutcracker, at our church. Mom made our costumes. They were simple because we were tops. And they were complicated because they were tops. Hula hoops were yet to be invented.

One of us was blue and the other one was yellow. I remember she made us hats from cardboard Quaker Oats containers. I thought that was very creative. There was a metal hoop about 4 feet in diameter with fabric around it around our middle. The fabric, in a perfect circle, from our neck to the hoop and then from the hoop to our ankles. I'm not sure how tightly the fabric was around our ankles, because I recall that I could walk and spin in the costume.

It was embarrassing being a simple top and spinning around. There were much nicer roles that other kids played.

We had only two weeks of kindergarten. But we were already prepared by our mother's homeschooling with a good understanding of reading, writing and arithmetic. The kind of start that helped me all the way through school. I recall our old carved up desks that were full of petrified wads of gum. We used pencils so the inkwell, while still there, with no ink in it for pranks like dipping the girls' braids in. We used white paste for paper projects, and I recall some kids eating the stuff. Probably were starved at home and needed the starch. Everyone had their own lunch. Some kids were so poor they barely had shoes in winter, let alone healthy food like we had.

All winter long, we wore snow pants and heavy coats and boots that were lined up out in the hall where each of us had a hook because there were no lockers to hang our coats and snow pants on.

One day, spring came. It was warm and the playground was dry. We didn't wear our snow pants or boots to school. Like always, we had our recess out in the backyard. When recess was over both Roger and I were creatures of habit and rushed to our hooks. We arrived at our hooks in a hurry to get back in the classroom, hung our coats on the hook, and then, simultaneously, both pulled our pants down thinking we were pulling down our snow pants! Our teacher in the hall saw us in our underwear and quickly told us to pull our pants back up! That was probably my most embarrassing moment in my young life.

We moved to the big city, Wausau, to a drafty, huge Victorian home with a frosted etching on the window of the front door of an elk in a forest that I always admired. Gas lights that had been replaced by electricity some years before that often blew fuses. The house came with an upstairs apartment that my parents immediately rented. Our first renter was a woman with a teenage daughter who taught piano. I remember seeing dad help lift that upright piano and a refrigerator upstairs taking the whole weight at the bottom and noted how strong he was, something that he proved over and over again without getting injured.

Very soon, mom decided that we would take piano lessons. And then, along about third grade, the whole class got tonettes to play and help learn music. I never really did. Dad played the trumpet in high school... Said that he, "Learned to play by ear." Both of my grandmothers played the piano from sheet music and they both said that they were self-taught. But Roger and I were more interested in being outside playing rather than inside learning to play. Quickly forgot what we learned about music.

One time, shortly after having a few lessons, we were invited to go on an afternoon show at a local radio station. We were given a short time to perform on the air. We hadn't prepared or practiced and both botched our performances badly. I was so embarrassed that I refrained from doing anything in front of the public except sing in choruses at school after that. Public performance was not for me.

During our elementary years, we would often go visit our cousins on their farm. Keith was two years older and knowledgeable about all things, and Wesley, "Butch," was a year younger than we were. It was always fun to see what was going on in the barn, like whether it was burning because they had put up wet hay, or how they rigged the radio to play music and news on a car battery to keep the cows and milkers contented, getting up at 5 o'clock in the morning to do it.

I don't remember what it was, but we all had something exciting to tell mom in the farmhouse. We ran inside and no one was in the kitchen or downstairs. So, we all four ran upstairs quickly and into the master bedroom at the end of the hall that I had never been in before.

To our surprise and great embarrassment, mom was there with our grandmother and our aunt, talking away, probably about clothes. But our aunt, Keith and Butch's mother, was standing there, smiling and talking in only thin panties! We blurted out what we had to say to mom and scurried out of that room as fast as possible. I don't recall any of us discussing what we saw. Too embarrassed.

There was a huge chestnut tree halfway up the block from our house in Wausau. Sometimes we found chestnuts under it that the squirrels and other kids hadn't already found. We heard that you could make pipes and carve all kinds of things out of chestnuts, but I never did, just kept two or three in my possession for a while.

Two boys, one older and one younger, moved in a house near the chestnut tree and we befriended them. The older of the two boys decided to school us on the latest hip language. We learn words like sexy, sexless, sexier, and the like. I don't remember them all. And I don't remember ever telling our folks that we knew those words.

But one day when my parents had friends over and we came into the house, dad called out to me, and said, "Ron, tell them (the visitors I don't remember) those words that you know."

So, Roger and I went ahead and told them the words while they laughed. I was really embarrassed. Our secret words were no longer a secret.

Ronald W. Hull



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Cute Twinies

Accidents

Dad was an accidental car buyer. Whenever he accidentally happened on a good deal, he bought a car. Like when he bought that black 1939 Buick Special four-door sedan. I don't know whether it was new or used. Perhaps with money he received after leaving the CCC camp service. It was probably the car that he wooed my mother in and taught her how to drive.

When Roger and I accidentally showed up, mom and dad moved into a rented shack. But they were looking for a real home. For some reason, dad sold the Buick to mom's parents. Perhaps to get the money to buy the old farmhouse on Highway 29.

My first recollection of an accidental buy was a beautiful dark iridescent blue green 37 Pontiac Coupe. It was an amazing looking car when I saw it in the yard, but a few days later, it was gone. I asked dad what happened to the Pontiac. He said, "Every morning, before I could drive off to work, I had to run it for 20 minutes so that the rings would heat up enough to engage the cylinder walls and it had enough power to drive away." I've learned much later that those Pontiacs had straight 8 engines and were very fast. Dad bought a lemon.

When we were five, our cousin, Terry, was born about 40 miles away in a hospital in Stanley. I don't remember why Roger and I went with our grandmother in that 39 Buick to see him and why we left mom behind. Maybe she was working. In those days, kids like us could visit in hospitals.

I know dad was working. It was a winter day, and Highway 29 was icy in spots, so there wasn't much traffic. We had gone about 10 miles west, when suddenly, Grandma was jerking the steering wheel back and forth frantically while yelling she had lost control. We hit the ditch and the car turned over on its top in the snow.

I recall rolling around in the car. I wasn't hurt. Grandma was shaken up, but not hurt. But Roger got a cut from a door handle on his chin that required stitching. Luckily, dad was driving his truck on his morning route a couple of miles behind us and stopped to see what happened. We got a ride back to Owen to a doctor to get Roger's stitch or two and dad continued on his route the other way.

The next car I remember was a 38 Plymouth four-door sedan. "Our family car." It was yellow mud-colored and very unattractive with the shape of a turtle. A far cry from the beautiful Pontiac or even grandma's black Buick, repaired.

On Memorial Day, when our sister was about nine months old, our family set off in that "new" used car for a picnic with another couple who were good friends and had a baby girl about the same age as my sister.

As we traveled northward to our destination, Mondeaux Flowage, the car started to overheat. Dad stopped by the gravel road and using a hubcap as a container, got some rainwater from the ditch. He poured it into the radiator, solving the overheating problem. While we waited, Roger and I found some wonderful yellow wildflowers we called buttercups growing in the ditch and picked them to take home for a bouquet for our mother.

We had a nice picnic at the flowage until the first accident occurred. My sister, Judy, was left on a blanket on a bank about a foot above the lake water line in the shade. At some point, a splash was heard as my sister rolled off the blanket and into the lake! Everyone rushed to the water's edge and she was retrieved, floating without any harm, just a little wet. After we finished our picnic, dad decided to take a scenic route home through the area where he worked near Perkinstown in his CCC camp days.

The crowned gravel road at that point ran through some up and down small hills created by the glaciers we called, "hedgehogs." dad was goosing it a bit as we went up and down those slopes, giving us a ride like a roller coaster. I was standing on the floorboard right behind dad enjoying the ride.

Mom was holding my sister in the front seat in the middle and her friend with her baby was next to the passenger side door. Roger was riding behind her like we always did in the same position as me in the backseat and the friend was riding in the middle.

As we came to the top of one rise achieving almost weightlessness, dad was scaring the women on purpose. But then, in the middle of the road, another car, also in the middle of the road, going just as fast, both approaching each other at a speed that may have exceeded 100 mph if both cars were going 50 mph, we were headed for a head-on collision. I watched in horror as dad turned our car sharply to the right and the other car still came straight ahead and hit my dad in his left shoulder directly in front of me behind that door pillar!

The Plymouth dove into the ditch and completely rolled over. Dust flew everywhere as all of us rolled around in the car like in a saltshaker. When the dust settled and we all crawled out of the broken car windows, only the wife

of my parents' friends broke her arm. Roger and I and the babies didn't even have a scratch. We. Gathered some wood ticks that day.

I mourned our flowers that were strewn all over and had wilted in the hot sun. The other car didn't roll but skidded down the road and then into the ditch, smashing the front end into some trees. After spending some time in a bar in a small town, our grandparents came and gave us a ride back home.

Going to our cousins' farm was always fun because they were two boys, Keith, two years older, and the other, Wes, just younger, and there was always a lot to do and see that they showed us. One time when we were there, our uncle and dad took us down to the creek on the farm and we went fishing with angle worms and grubs that we dug. It was apparently a good time to fish because we caught a lot of chubs and shiners from about 4 to 7 inches long. We never ate those "minnows," but they did make good bait for larger fish in the lakes and rivers.

Anyway, to show them off and get pictures we kept our stringers of about 30 fish and headed on back to the farmhouse up through the cow pasture between. Our path was fenced on both sides so I knew where to go.

I was very excited about showing what we caught to mom and our aunt, and felt the need to run. I could run very fast and Roger and others my age could never catch me. Without saying anything, I just took off and ran as fast as I could, uphill to the farmhouse, so that I could get there first and tell them what we caught.

I heard them yelling at me from behind, but I thought they were encouraging me to run faster... So, I did. The next thing I knew, I was being cut and shocked at the neck, feeling nearly decapitated. When we walked down, my uncle had removed a single-strand barbed wire, electrocuted fence gate across that path so that we could continue on down to the creek. I had forgotten that single wire barbed was there and, in my frenzy to run as hard as I could, didn't see that single barbed wire as it caught me right in the neck at full tilt!

Not only was my neck cut badly, but I also got several shocks from that wire that really took it out of me. They wrapped a handkerchief around my neck and I limped on home with everyone else, no longer excited about our catch. I got a lot of sympathy, mercurochrome, and bandages. But I didn't have to go get any stitches and the wounds healed with time. But I remembered the shocking for a long time after and watched my step in cow pastures after that.

When we first moved to Wausau, we went to a two-week day camp on a creek. I don't remember much about what we did, except that I got milk one

day that was sour and the camp counselor told me it wasn't until I made him taste it himself. On the last day, our parents came out. I remember running back to the car to get something to bring into the hall for them. As I closed the door on the car with my right hand, I watched the door close on the thumb of my left hand!

I felt nothing except mental shock at seeing myself doing this. I pulled and the thumb was stuck, so I pushed the button again with my right thumb and opened the door, freeing my left thumb. Luckily, cars in those days did not have tight tolerances and had large gaps between the door and the frame. My thumb throbbed for a while and was skinned, but otherwise okay. I may have lost that thumbnail later like I often did when I would hit a fingernail with a hammer while nailing something together.

Central Grade School was only a block away from our house, but we had to cross 6th Street, doubling as a highway running north one way as the only street between our house and school. Most kids from our neighborhood walked to school and crossed that street, but I don't recall crossing with others except Roger, and in those days, there were no crossing guards. We always dutifully waited until there was a break in the traffic and then we would cross.

In second or third grade, Roger must've been in a hurry to get home one day and started across the street ahead of me. I saw a pickup truck coming from the right while I stayed on the curb. Roger saw it coming, too, and ran down the street to the left while it followed him for more than a few feet and then hit him, knocking him down to the pavement before stopping!

Roger was knocked out cold. The old guy driving the pickup got out of his truck and ran around in front, grabbing Roger and lifted him up, carrying him onto the lawn of the first house on the corner. By the time I got across the street, a crowd was already forming. All kinds of questions were being raised and I was yelling, "He's my brother!" But nobody seemed to notice, so I ran down the sidewalk to our house where my dad was and woke him up, sleeping because he a drove truck at night.

Dad rushed to where Roger was before the ambulance got there and rode with him to the hospital. Roger woke up in the ambulance and suffered only a concussion. There was a trial that I wasn't allowed to go to and testify. The adults all blamed my brother for darting out between parked cars in the middle of the block, getting the old guy off for failing to stop his truck in time. I was disgusted but could do nothing as a kid.

We joined Cub Scouts at a local church when we were nine. We had some recreation time in the church gym and I recall playing some silly game like Japanese sumo wrestling, where we squatted down and we tried to push our

opponent over. During one of these games, I lost my balance and stuck my left arm out to catch my fall as I rolled back and felt a sharp pain in my arm.

Swelling indicated that I had a break about 3 inches above the elbow. We went to the doctor the next day. It was only a fracture, so they gave me a metal splint to wear in a bent position held with a simple sling. It was supposed to stay on for only 20 days, but I had a habit of straightening out the splint and then, bending it back. So, they forced me to wear it another 20 days, to make sure that my arm would fully heal. I always felt my left arm was weaker because of that break.

In junior high school there was a craze for making model rockets. There were no kits in those days and the preferred solid rocket fuel was match heads. Removing them from the matches alone was highly dangerous, but we did it anyway. I heard that empty ballpoint pen cartridges made nice little rockets that flew a few feet with match head propulsion. So, I decided to make one.

That evening I was upstairs in my bedroom packing match heads into a ballpoint cartridge with a straightened wire when it blew up in my left hand! The center of the cartridge split open and cut my hand badly, while the flare gave me a pretty bad burn. Mom rushed me off to the emergency room and I got a couple of stitches to cover the hole in my hand and some burn ointment with a bandage.

The next day, we were called to assembly at school. The vice principal got up and scolded us for bringing rocket making materials to school and announced that they would be confiscated if found. He also pointed out that a student had gone to the emergency room the night before being stupid and making a ball pen rocket that blew up in his hand. I covered in my seat, thankful that he didn't mention my name. But my friend, Doug, who founded the Central Wisconsin Rocket Society and used the school's shops to help make his rockets, banned me from joining. Thankfully, he doesn't remember today. Another embarrassing moment of many in my life.

In Trouble

Roger and I weren't troublemakers. Somehow, we had a good sense of right and wrong, but we were adventurous and that got us in trouble from time to time. I was a bit more adventuresome than Roger, and I generally was described as the instigator and therefore, took most of the blame. I deserved it.

The earliest I remember us getting in trouble involved the short, quarter mile walk to school when we were in the first grade. We walked on the south side of busy Highway 29. I don't remember how we crossed over from the north side, but I don't recall our mother helping us cross. Our farmhouse was on the west edge of town. Halfway between where we lived and the school, across from where Owen's main street intersected the highway, was a mill pond on the north side with the dam and a railroad bridge in the far distance. The place where my dad learned how to swim, but at our age, we never ventured there. Probably why we walked on the south side.

Our daily walk crossed a bridge overlooking the small Brick Creek that flowed from the mill pond into the Popple River and around back behind our school. Like all young people of age 6, that creek was an attraction and I recall checking on it a time or two, but we didn't get into trouble for it, except maybe some wet shoes.

But one day, we were about halfway home, when a very nice car and a really nice well-dressed woman, with a young girl in the car, beckoned for us to ride with her. Of course, it was a very short drive home, but we got in the car anyway and rode. When we told mom that we got a ride, she scolded us and told us never to get in any car with strangers again!

But when we moved to Wausau, that's where our real troubles began. The neighborhood was changing. What had once been a prosperous, close to downtown neighborhood, had probably been affected by the Great Depression and WWII. While elderly people in nice houses still remained on the local streets, some, like the rambling Victorian our parents bought, were deteriorating and rented out. On the corner of 7th was an old cigar factory that had long shut down. Our next-door neighbor, old Mr. Brown and his wife, had worked in that factory, but now he was a custodian in the YMCA, some blocks away.

There was an alley behind our house. Across the alley to the right was the well-kempt home of a dentist. His son, John, who had failed the first grade, was in our second grade class with us, but a year older. We quickly became friends. To the left behind our house was an overgrown lot and a low-lying house with a wheelchair ramp in the front that we never saw anyone come or go from and might as well have been haunted, it was so dark at night. A stark contrast to the dentist's nicely painted and landscaped house next door. But that's the way the neighborhood was. Very mixed in terms of the condition of the houses and the lots. And the people living there.

One thing was constant though. In the fall, leaves were raked, snow was cleared from the sidewalks in winter, and the grass was mowed in summer (except for that one lot that I already mentioned and the small, wood frame, overgrown, Jewish synagogue on the corner across from the delicatessen on 6th that appeared to be abandoned.)

Neighbors sometimes cleared the sidewalks for older people who couldn't. Still, the neighborhood contained an element that was low class, if not criminal. We generally stayed away from those kids. But once in a while we did run across some. Mostly on the playground at school. Bullies.

For example, there was one kid I befriended one summer who was younger. I don't remember his name or even what we did together. But we were standing side-by-side one day when he pulled out a jackknife and stabbed it at my belly. I don't know what made him angry, but my survival instinct had me sucking in my gut to the point where his thrust stopped, tickling my shirt. I immediately backed away from him and he no longer was my friend. That was trouble I was glad not to get into. If I had not moved quickly, he would've buried that knife in my midsection.

When we were seven, the summer after second grade, we roamed the neighborhood freely looking for rhubarb and carrots to pull from gardens like the Browns' next door, plums ripening on unattended trees like at the synagogue, and other pursuits, mostly with John or a corner classmate, Kenny, living with his divorced mother and sister. By that time, I was regularly buying cigarettes for my father by the pack at the local delicatessen on the corner of 6th Street and Scott. Just a block away.

Anyway, we loved playing with matches and someone got the idea to smoke butts. Everyone smoked in those days and there were a lot of cigarette butts on the ground to pick up. We quickly got tired of butts, so we pooled our change and I bought a 25¢ pack of cigarettes. We wanted to hide from being observed by neighbors and parents, so we found a space between

buildings halfway up the block off the alley that was secluded enough so we could smoke without being observed.

But soon, we were running out of matches, so we decided to start a little fire to light our cigarettes on. That worked well, and we were puffing away, when all of a sudden, we noticed that the building next to the fire was smoking. We immediately pushed the fire away and started digging away at the rotten wood under the building that was smoldering. We even peed on it, but it just kept smoldering and wouldn't go out.

We started to panic, but John said that he knew the woman that lived at that house and he would go tell her. I was glad that he did because I didn't have the courage. It wasn't long before the fire trucks came and there was a lot of noise and the fireman got the smoldering out. I remember staying away so as not to be seen anywhere near, but I think John even went up and talked to the firemen. He was dumb like that.

A week later, a car drove up to where we were playing, and a woman called out to us from the car. She called us by name and said she was a policewoman and that we should get in the car. She also picked up John and we rode uptown to the police department. We sat on a couch and I clearly remember a big board on the wall that was covered with confiscated blackjacks, switchblade knives, brass knuckles and other weapons that thugs and bad kids carried for protection and mayhem. I didn't want any part of it. Although I had seen some older kids show us their switch blades. Some really nice knives they used for protection with pearl handles.

The policewoman came and gave us a lecture about smoking “filthy, nasty” cigarette butts and smoking in general. She made a lot of sense. Convinced me never to smoke again. It also told me not to venture into things that were dangerous to my health or well-being. It just wasn't smart or worth it. A very good lesson learned that I practiced all my life after that.

John's father called our father and us over to their house that evening. He was very upset. The dentist said, “Who put my son up to this? My son would never do a thing like that. He's a good kid.”

Dad told him, “It was probably my boys. They're troublemakers.” So, I admitted that I was the instigator just to get the talking over with. Luckily, the whole incident blew over quite quickly except for one thing...

The next weekend when we went to my grandfather's farm. My grandfather came out to greet us with, “Where are the firebugs? Are you them?” I was really embarrassed over that. Grandpa Hull's brother was the Fire Chief of Sheboygan. He hated firebugs and arsonists.

But there was one more trouble we really didn't get in trouble for. There was a bad girl in the house next to the old cigar factory. She was younger than us, maybe 5 or 6. We ended up in the empty garage by her house. We asked her if she would pull down her panties and show us. Without hesitation, she did. And then, she asked and one of us, not me, obliged. All curiosities were met and we left happy that we had seen it for the first time. My younger sister at two in the bathtub didn't count.

One morning I was out back of the house batting rocks in the driveway that made little dents in our half sized bat for kids. I was a bit frustrated because the rocks seemed to spin and only fly about 4 or 5 feet. But then, I hit one and it disappeared from sight. I was amazed and grabbed another rock to hit. Then, I heard a crash in the distance, but didn't think anything of it. I recall looking at the dentist's new Nash after hearing the crash and thinking that its rear window was frosted over, stupidly.

Later that day or the next, dad came home from work and told us, "Doc told me that the back window of his Nash was broken today. You guys know anything about that?"

I admitted, "I was batting rocks this morning, but none of them went anywhere." Then, I remembered hearing the crash and knew that I had hit a bad homerun.

We went over to see the car and talk to Doc. The curved rear window on the back of the car was clearly shattered in tiny pieces, but intact. They talked about something like \$27 to get it replaced and I was shocked thinking how much I would have to work to pay that off. But Doc eased our minds when he said, "Insurance will take care of it."

I learned the value of insurance even if one is an idiot. After that, I always made sure I had insured everything that might get damaged by others or my own stupidity.

When we were 9 and picking beans, we encountered some cute, but rather tough, girls that accompanied us out in the fields. One day, I suggested that a pair of the girls accompany Roger and me during our lunch period where we could do a little mischief. We found a bank in the woods and sat down with the girl that I asked on my left and Roger with another girl a little bit from us on the left. The word got out and almost everyone there joined us in the woods. So much for hanky-panky.

We just started opening our lunch when someone came to sit down on my right side and yelled, "Snake!"

There was some discussion about what kind of snake it was and I thought it was a baby fox snake that we often saw in the woods and didn't think much

of it. I took a stick and poked it. Immediately, its head came up. And then, its tail came up and started rattling. I was sitting right next to a rattlesnake that I could have sat on earlier! Of course, everybody got up and ran from the woods. But a much older, retarded guy went back in the woods and killed it, bringing the dead snake out into the field to show to our farmer employers.

The farmers told us that timber and massasauga rattlesnakes were common in those lowlands near the Wisconsin River. The timber rattlers brought \$0.50 a rattle bounty and the smaller massasauga rattlers \$0.25. In all my years in the woods after that, I never saw another rattlesnake. Some hunted them for the bounty though.

I wasn't through with those girls, though. We heard that the Caine Mutiny was playing at the main theater downtown. But there was another theater nearby that showed sexy, sleazy B movies.

That Saturday, we told mom that we were going to see the Caine Mutiny during the matinee. Mom approved and gave us money to go see it.

We went to the other theater and caught up with the girls. There was some dumb movie playing that didn't have anything sexy in it and the girls didn't like the movie either.

Two days later, I was in the kitchen helping mom with the dishes when she suddenly asked, "How was the Caine Mutiny?"

At that point I didn't even know that Marlon Brando was in the movie, and I thought a bit before I answered, saying something like, "Oh, it was a good movie."

Knowing mom, she knew we didn't go. She always knew when we lied to her. She had a sixth sense about things like that. Disciplined us fairly by withholding privileges. I remember being confined to our yard once for a week, but I don't remember what for, probably for setting fire to that building.

If it was serious, dad would crack the belt when she asked him. But I vaguely remember being hit with that belt, only once or twice. And those were probably for fighting with Roger and nothing more.

We also got in trouble with our bikes, but I'll leave that to the tale, Bicycles.

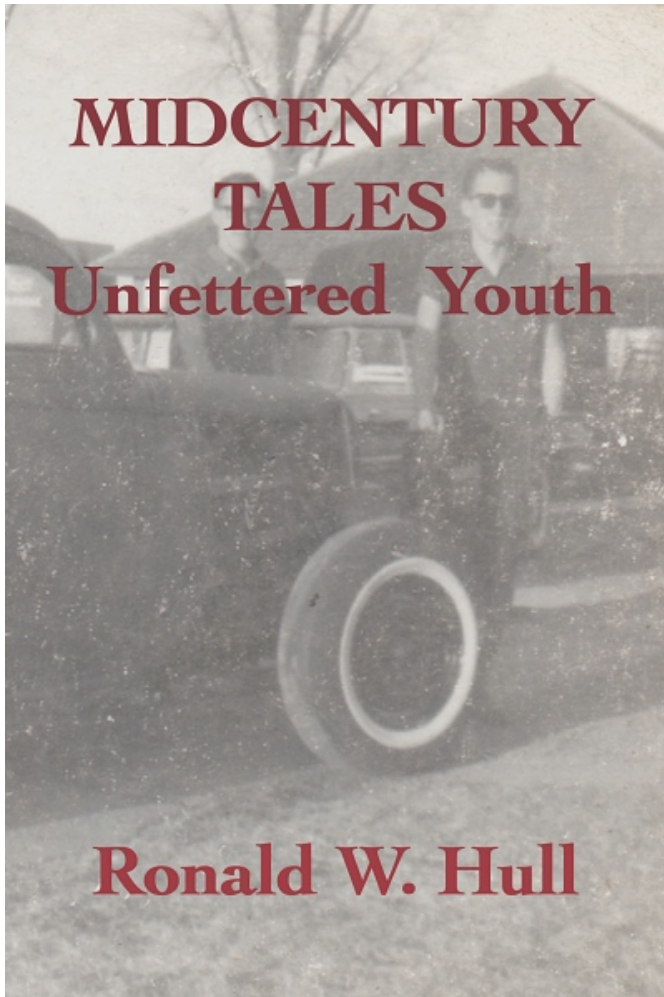
About the Author

Ronald W. Hull is an engineer, educator, and author. Fascinated with history and technological development, he likes to incorporate both in his novels. Paralyzed at twenty in a surgical accident, Ron walked away from the hospital, and, with a special hand splint, began writing again and typing with one finger. After his master's degree, Ron started his career in the telecommunication industry. For thirty-nine years, after earning his doctorate, Dr. Hull worked in higher education as a professor of technology and management, and as a university administrator until retiring at 69.

Ron Hull has written poetry all his life. He now posts a poem a week on his website, <http://ronhullauthor.com>. Ron has traveled widely and experienced many cultures. Starting with his autobiography, he incorporates his many experiences into his books. His topics are wide-ranging and global. Ron's first book, *The Kaleidoscope Effect* was a science fiction first contact novel that spanned thousands of years. *Alone?* the mirror of *Kaleidoscope*, is in its second edition. *War's End* was Dr. Hull's first venture into the action thriller novel genre. Based on the catastrophic premise of *War's End*, the *American Mole* trilogy is Ron's first attempt at a continuing story bridging several books: *The Vespers*, *MS-13* and *Aryan Nation*. Ron has packaged his many short stories into three short storybooks.

Relying on an electric wheelchair and specially equipped van because of the effects of aging on his severe spinal injury, Ron uses computer technology to write and research his books. He resides in Houston Texas with his longtime partner, companion, and assistant, Beh.





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