

## CHAPTER XIII

### FOURTH OF JULY

Every second or third year the Village Fathers would decide to "celebrate" the Fourth of July and then the small boys know they were in for a grand time. The celebration would start at dawn with a "salute of guns" (shot guns, since the village had no cannon). Ever since a celebration was announced, all the small boys had been earning spending money and saving it for the great day. The greater portion of these savings, which were not so large as the time involved in accumulation would indicate - probably a dollar or less - had been thoughtfully invested the day before in firecrackers, torpedoes and candy, a small amount being held in reserve for unexpected opportunity.

The firecrackers were doubtless of American make, but came in packages covered with Chinese characters. They were about as big around as a good-sized lead pencil and a couple of inches long, each with a fuse which was attached to a large central fuse. By lighting the central fuse all the firecrackers would be lighted at the same time, causing a lively succession of cracks. We boys, however, preferred to separate the bunches and shoot the firecrackers one at a time to make the fun last longer. Occasionally when a boy had a package in his back pants pocket with the main fuse sticking out, some crazy-minded kid would light the fuse, causing a variety of quick motions on the part of the victim. So many accidents occurred with firecrackers, especially when they came to be made more efficient, that laws have been passed in most states prohibiting their sale.

Torpedoes were about the size and shape of chocolate buds and

consisted of a bit of white paper enclosing some tiny pebbles and a bit of explosive so that when the torpedoes were thrown against a building or upon a sidewalk, they would explode. These were considered less dangerous than firecrackers, but a flying pebble sometimes, it was said, caused loss of eye sight.

Grandfather does not recall any injury more serious than burned fingers and shins in our village, but every morning on the fifth of July, the papers were full of serious and sometimes fatal accidents which had occurred elsewhere through use of firecrackers.

This is somewhat aside from our story of the celebration, but is that with which the small boys first amused themselves upon arising. Since they arose very early on the Fourth of July, this sport seemed to make a greater hit with the boys than with their elders, who wished to complete their morning naps as usual.

The town had been gaily decorated with bunting and flags and, numerous lemonade stands were ready to serve the thirsty public. Soon farmers with their families began to arrive from all directions, and visitors from neighboring villages, where no celebration was held, began to arrive, and by ten o'clock the village was quite overflowing with folks. Then started a formal parade led by flag bearers, a band and the Civil War veterans conducting the "speaker of the day" to a grove outside of the village, where a rude platform had been erected and decorated with flags and bunting and where an insufficient number of plank seats had been arranged.

Here there was a prayer and the man with the loudest voice

in town read in thunderous tones the Declaration of Independence, a young lady declaimed Paul Revere's Ride and "the speaker of the Day" - usually an imported attorney from Janesville or Monroe, to give added impressiveness to the occasion - orated at length on George III and British tyranny and he did not fail to pay high tribute to the members of the Grand Army of the Republic (veterans of the Civil War) who had marched in the parade before the decorated carriage in which he had ridden in state as the "speaker of the day".

To be real frank - and in this book we aim to be truthful - even if at times we appear to lack that sense of propriety which modern children have - we boys imagined we were bored by this oration and after worrying through the program to the address of the grand orator, we were wont to slip away, it embarrasses me to relate, and enjoy our firecrackers.

After the program, there was a pause for lunch and then at two o'clock came a parade which entertained us more - the "Parade of the Calathumpians" - a volunteer parade of people on horse and on foot in comic costumes, with a prize for the funniest, which was usually interpreted to mean the worst looking costume. Following the "Parade of the Calathumpians" came the "Sports", consisting of potato races, short dashes, a mule race, a greased pole and a greased pig. All of these were open to all contestants.

For the mule race, farmers brought various specimen of the mule family which they believed were the most "mulish" and stubborn of the whole mule tribe. Then they swapped mules and tried to coax or coerce or, getting off, to pull or push the other fellow's mule over the finishing tape,

being assisted in this by suggestions and laughter on the part of the lockers-on. The mule won which was the last to cross the tape.

The greased pole was a freshly cut tree trunk about the height of a telephone pole, with its bark freshly peeled off and the pole covered with liquid grease. There was a ten-dollar gold piece in a cleft in the top for whoever could climb the pole. Of course, spurs on feet and rosin on hands were prohibited. Grandfather saw many try; he cannot recall that he ever saw anyone succeed; for as the grease would be worn off by numerous contestants, liquid grease would be put on with a big brush. When the pole was freshly greased, it apparently was just impossible for anyone to hold on tight enough to keep from slipping.

For the greased pig event, a lively young pig was shaved and greased and given a head start. It then belonged to whoever could catch and hold it. This was hard on the pig, but a lot of fun for the onlookers. No, dearies, your grandfather never succeeded in catching a greased pig.

The sports lasted until about five p.m. when another break in the program occurred for supper. In the evening were the "Grand Fireworks - the greatest display ever seen in Green County", after which the tired but happy small boys retired to a somewhat sleepless night; for they must be up again at dawn to visit the scene of the fireworks and gather up the spent rockets. These rockets had long sticks which were grand for making kites and when fitted with heads and tail pieces, made good arrows and fortunate was the boy who got there first and obtained the largest collection.

Speaking of the fireworks, reminds me of a story. In the village was one colored family who lived in a shack on the outskirts of the village. This family never entered much into the consciousness of the town until a couple of cousins from Chicago came to visit them. These boys, ten and twelve respectively, were picturesque young negroes out of the city slums and soon gave the city something to talk about.

Their escapades reached a climax when at the fireworks they "swiped" a giant rocket. Next day they amused themselves by shooting it off and having no rocket trough, just laid it in the doorway of the shack and lit the fuse. The rocket went off with a bang, but not having a trough to start it straight, swung around in a circle, hit one of the boys in the leg below the knee and burned off a good bit of the flesh. The negro marmy extinguished the fire which the rocket started and, in the course of a couple of weeks, the doctor got the boy with a burned leg in condition to travel. It then seemed best to the Village Fathers that the pair should return to Chicago and the little town returned to its normal ways.

#### Ginger Snaps

Perhaps one other trivial incident merits recording, and for lack of a better place, Grandfather is going to tack it on to this chapter to which it in no wise belongs.

Grandfather and one of his boy chums, Will Hahn, were very fond of "ginger snaps" - a brittle kind of ginger cookie which your great grandmother used to make. She would go, every few days, to bake enough of these to fill a gallon jar and Will and Grandfather were always welcome

to help themselves. One day when they came home from school they found a gallon jar full of freshly baked ginger snaps still warm. My! but they did taste good - and we kept on eating and playing and eating until the cookies were beginning to get low in the jar and then the thought occurred to us that it would be fun to eat the rest of the cookies and surprise your great grandmother by telling her we had eaten the whole gallon. We thought she would be surprised and also pleased at this unusual token of our appreciation of her cookies. She was surprised all right, but was less pleased than we thought she would be.

It seemed disappointing to have the whole batch of cookies disappear so quickly. Furthermore, she thought probably we would be sick. We were not sick, but here is the point to this apparently aimless tale - neither of us has ever wanted a ginger snap again. If there is something which you greatly enjoy, be careful not to eat too much of it or you may never be able to enjoy it again.