

The Benefits of 'Small'

Larry Springer, LLI, Fall 2016

One thing that we lose reminiscence of when we become adults is the low height perspective we had as a child. For most adults it has been many decades since their stature was less than four feet, and it was for only a small portion of their lives.

There were many instances where being small was an advantage for me, and they produced adventures that I as an adult can no longer experience – because I can no longer fit. The standard ones that come to mind are building a bed sheet house by putting a sheet over a circle of chairs, constructing a train by tipping chairs forward and kneeling between the legs, and enjoying gliding back-and-forth on a small swing, which now as an adult the swing support rod can probably be grasped and used as a chinning bar.

One experience, which may not sound like much to you, was being able to crawl under the arch of overhanging leaves in our orange lily patch in the front yard next to the ditch that ran along the road. It had a gap in the plants a foot or so wide (well maybe not originally, but the plants 'yielded' after I'd crawled into it several times) which ran down the middle toward the front lawn. As its arching leaves were two feet or more in length, they bowed over the gap hiding it completely from above and from the lawn.

For a child, it was easy to crawl from the ditch into this tunnel unseen, slither your way to the opening, and peer through the camouflage of about one layer of leaves to spy on whatever was happening from the front yard all the way to the barn. Usually not all that exciting, but if you were playing hide-and-seek, it was a killer spot. You just had to make sure to back out into the ditch after they gave up looking, and show up somewhere else accessible from the ditch saying, "ha-ha-haha-ha, couldn't find me"! Another good reason to have a primo hiding spot is if Pa or Ma was looking for you to do a nasty job like washing the dishes, or worse yet drying them along side that sister, Lila, who got caught 'flat footed' and assigned the washing job.

But there was also a third advantage, the climate control it offered on a sweltering summer day (before the term 'climate control' was even invented). In the 1950s central Wisconsin had some extremely cold winters – like 30 to 40 degrees below zero, periods of several days where it never got above zero, and howling winds that put the wind-chill approaching 100 below (that is if they calculated wind-chill back then). In the summer unbelievably, we would have the other extreme with a fair number of days in the mid to upper 90s. As the windows in our old farmhouse were stuck shut from all the accumulated layers of paint, and even if we could open them the dense windbreak of mature trees to the west that was planted to block the bitter winter wind also blocked the cool summer wind. The lone fan we had was about 8-10 inches in diameter and maybe powerful enough to still have a detectable breeze at 10 feet. It was better at chopping up fingers as the openings of its wire fan guard only kept arms and legs from the whirling blades. So, oppressive temperatures were the order of the day 24/7 during a hot spell. Not to mention the wood-burning kitchen stove, which if used even sparingly added to the misery.

This is where the lily patch came to the rescue, at least for a refreshing cool-down now and then making the periods of heat bearable. The surface in the gap was bare dirt, densely packed after many decades of not being disturbed – a perfect heat sink sucking the BTUs out of your body into the 55 degree geothermal layer of mother earth. The shaded surface may have been 75 or 80 degrees, but that feels cool when contacting our 98.6 through light summer clothing. It was pleasant enough to lie there and fall asleep for a while. But, beware that snoring might give away your most secret hiding place.

OVER



Our farmhouse, circa 1950, when I was six. The perspective is toward the northwest. The two flowerbeds in front of the house are phlox. The orange lily patch, ditch, and gravel road were south of the house just beyond the bottom left corner of the image, and the barn was about the same distance north.