Chapter 8

Summer

Summer at the orphanage stands in memory as a season of unbroken sunshine, a trick of recall reshaping the past to satisfy our dreams of a perfect time.

Summer, June summer, came suddenly, with the pastures green and the whole world unlocked and seething. We scarcely remembered what came before. There had never been rain, or snow, or frost; it had always been this way. The heat from plowed fields climbed up our legs and smote us in the face. The orphanage dripped in sweat not from the hot days alone, but from the human energy.

The fields and pastures lay bordered with blackberry, wild plum, and hedge blossoms. Bees scurried to hot white flowers. Birds darted everywhere. Cows lay languid in limpid pastures. Pigs snoozed, lying on hairy sides, backs to each other, legs out straight. On Saturdays and Sundays the mules and horses rolled in the dust, happy to be unhooked from the traces.

The coming of summer dominated our every action, conscripted our thoughts, ruled our games, and ordered our lives. We streamed from the cottages, we boys less restricted than the girls in our access to the

world but, nevertheless, bowed by certain rules governing how far afield we could roam.

Saturday and Sunday afternoons were special. These were the only times when we were more or less free of some form of adult supervision, a point our matrons at least tacitly acknowledged by asking only perfunctory questions about our plans. Usually our plans were vague. Boyhood was not a time of grand designs. We almost always did the same things week after week but maintained the illusion of complete liberty. Our matrons let us alone, satisfied that we were unlikely to run risks we hadn't encountered a hundred times before.

I was introduced to the orphanage woods during duty as water boy, filling and carrying to a crew working their way with hoes along the cornrows of Roses field. When they reached the shade of a huge beechnut tree and sank onto the leaves and moss and yelled, "water boy," I was there. The biggest of the crew was always first, jerking off the lid and holding it as I poured from the three gallon cooler. I poured to each boy in turn, as each drained the lidfull and passed it to the next.

But it was not until I reached age ten or eleven years that I came to know the woods as a place of comfort, where no disaster could strike and where fun was to be had, unspoiled by authority.

I embraced the woods after transferring to the Mother's building when I was ten. The class of 1938 had just departed and the annual

upward advance began; seventh graders became freshmen, freshmen became sophomores, sophomores became juniors, and so on.

I quickly found boys with whom I had much in common, Leonard Evans, David Thompson, Steve Batts, and Harry Crapps. We developed a mania for the woods, locating trails, muscadine vines, great trees with low limbs, rabbit tobacco, hickory nut trees, and sites near springs for cooking.

We spent ourselves in the woods on Saturday and Sunday afternoons. With transfer to a cottage of larger boys the pecking order was stirred. In the woods Frank and George Bailey, Doc Baldwin, Judy Woods, and other big boys were in charge. They brewed coffee over the fire at Kamp Kesler Kabin, a log structure built by the big boys. The coffee, bagged in a clean sock, was lifted from the Hutchinson Cottage pantry. It simmered in a three-gallon milk cooler, borrowed from the dairy barn. In the bottom a dozen eggs, stolen from the poultry yard, bubbled.

Middle-sized boys, Cal, Bill Sisk and Doug Procter, had a cooking site near Roses Spring. We smaller boys, Leonard, David, Harry, and I, had a site deep into the woods beyond the spring.

At other conclaves other boys sat around the fire, parching corn, baking potatoes, and cooking fudge from coca and sugar purloined from cottage pantries.

When finished we prepared for the next time, stuffing unused contraband into the milk cooler and in a hollow hid the cache or in a

secret ground recess, upending the cooler and fry pan so as not to catch ground water should it rain.

Next, we skirted the edge of the tomato patch, gathered a few ripe tomatoes, walked over to the salt lick in the cow pasture, knocked off a chunk of the salt rock and salting and eating walked toward the apple orchard where we set afire the broom sage and beat the flames furiously with soaked burlap sacks. We always quelled the threat of spreading fire, there were other things to do. We walked on toward the creek and to the swamp.

The swamp was filled with a murky dark-green water-like substance coated with slime. It bubbled with life; rumored to be cotton mouthed moccasins with death in long fangs and slimy leeches big enough to quickly drain dry the blood of a grown man. Boys with ice water in their veins waded the swamp in the hope of catching a catfish or a muskrat, reportedly worth a lot of money in the form of a tanned pelt.

The creek bottom was a world of mud. We stamped in it, bringing it alive, dug in it, feeling for hard pebbles, drew them out and examined them in the palm of our hands. Suddenly, the pebbles cracked and put out claws. We cracked them open in search of pearls. We had it on good authority – our authority was always another orphanage boy – the crawfish contained great wealth beneath the hard shell. We found only

an occasional whitish granule but decimated the population in our endless search for riches.

Heavy rains swelled the creek sending it roaring out its banks, rushing along, carrying a flotilla of flotsam and jetsam. During such floods we jumped in near the print shop, grabbed onto boards or floating limbs and rode them like broncos, bucking the torrent past the apple orchard, over the bridge, to the sewage plant, a distance of a mile or so.

All orphanage boys learned to cut slingshot prongs from the dogwood or persimmon tee, to cut rubbers from inner tubes and pockets from shoe tongues. In the woods and at the creek we always carried them, plunking away at imaginary foes hiding behind trees or floating in the water.

When bubble gum cards began showing the Japanese bombing the Chinese, our targets in the water became Japanese. When World War II came along, we shelled Japanese and German fleets with rock missiles from carriers, destroyers, PT boats, and aircraft, at least in our minds.

Caught up in the war news I decided to blow up the bridge over Hamby Creek using a Molotov cocktail. I told no one. I drained the gas line at the tractor shed, filling an Orange Crush bottle with gasoline, looking about furtively, lest I be seen. I corked the bottle with a corncob made snug with a rag. I bored the corncob with my knife and poked in a

piece of binder twine to act as a fuse. I hid the explosive device and waited until the propitious moment.

The moment came on a Sunday after lunch. Before the other boys moved out I ran like the wind to the hiding place beneath the hay in the horse barn, grabbed the bomb, charged down the farm road, ran across the bridge and veered to the left, toward Roses Spring. Crouching in the tall grass I lit the fuse, held it, and at the right moment lobbed it in a high arc toward the bridge. My heart pounded, my ears roared, my eyes burned, awaiting the blast. On the wind there was only silence. The hot air fanned the fuse flame to extinction and the bottle burst on the rocks of the bridge foundation. With that signal failure I departed from the life of the anarchist forever.

Near the end of an afternoon in the woods and creek we headed for a grove of apple trees and picked and bit into the apples when they were still only nuggets of hard green. We went through three or four powerful bellyaches before the earliest of them was ripe. We also applied ourselves diligently to wild plums and peaches from the moment they first blushed with color.

As the day ended we crossed the pastures chewing grain, talking about no particular thing, pushing through the ragged robins, Queen Anne's Lace, and milkweed, headed for the cottage. After a peanut butter sandwich and a glass of milk, we went to church. In late July and

August a million cicadas sawed back and forth in a thunderous refrain from a thousand oak trees, their din for an unknown reason rebirthing in me a wave of loneliness. In church we dozed on hard pews as Mr. Neilson preached his heart out and at sermons' end we droned "Day is Dying in the West" before filing out.

Outside, as the moon disc rose, we stirred to another life. We sneaked through the privet hedge that shut us in from the world, loped away up the road, swallowed in shadows until we reached The Stand, an establishment that specialized in hot dogs and hamburgers. Mr. Jake, the proprietor, sold us vanilla, strawberry, and chocolate ice cream by the pint for fifteen cents. On the return we sucked gently at wooden spoons to get at the richness, drawing out the cold sweetness for as long as it lasted.

Just as we loved the woods and creek on the weekends we looked forward to Valley Nights on Tuesday and Thursday evenings. At the seven o'clock bell we converged from every direction; select boys and girls from each cottage carrying chairs for the matrons. We assembled as a great family, the five hundred of us scattering and reassembling into whatever activity enticed us; games, ambling, gawking, visiting, yearning. The matrons' chairs were positioned on the ridge near the Simmons Cottage and they sat chatting, looking out like generals over battalions flanking on

either side, not wanting to bother with rules but prepared to enforce them should infractions arise.

As a Simmons boy of the barefoot, short pants crowd, I visited with John and Cal long enough for them to know that I was still intact and then it was off to frenzied play; dodge ball, crack the whip, Red Rover, Red Rover, bum, bum, bum, or to push and pull at barefoot little girls in cotton dresses.

We thought all orphanage girls were beautiful and Valley Night brought out their best; their lips full, blushing scarlet, their hair shining, wearing comely colors, and smelling of aloes, cinnamon, calamus, or whatever their frankincense and myrrh of that day were.

As big boys we arrived bathed, with slicked hair, wearing long pants and shoes, sticking out like thorns seeking to feed among the lilies. Those of us who were sick with love selected a spot away from the crowd and sat looking and talking; savoring the comely countenance and the sweet voice. Franklin Bailey sat with Bonnie West, Bill Sisk with Louise Clodfelter, Florence Breedlove with J. C. Younts. I sat with Fran. At nine o'clock the bell ended Valley Night. We couples got up from the grassy spot and headed for a secret place in the shadows out of sight of the matrons, to steal a quick kiss. Then we separated.

The valley drew us in the evenings and the woods and creek on Saturdays and Sundays but during the week it was the swimming pool. We took to the water like seals.

My first lesson as a swimmer was like that of other non-swimming new boys at the orphanage. Coach Kearns was in charge of the pool but no serious swimming instruction was offered. Thirty flogging boys, yelling, cannon-balling, belly-bursting, hurtling themselves from the high dive into blued water was alone enough sight and sound to throw me off had I been of the utmost bravery. But, to add, I had never before seen such a body of water held in concrete walls. The pool was 100 by 25 feet and ranged in depth from two to seven feet with walls 18 inches thick.

The first day I watched the others, ventured to the ladder at the shallow end, tested the water with a toe and withdrew to play in the dirt until the final minutes of the hour when my shame at such cowardice pulled me into the water. We were scheduled to swim every day and I progressed slowly to the dog paddle, float, and belly burst from the side wall, all at the shallow end. I might have got on friendlier terms with the water gradually but a couple of big boys serving as lifeguards solved the problem quickly.

They grabbed me by the arms and legs, swinging me back and forth like a sack of grain, and, giving a heave ho, landed me belly down in the cold water at the deep end. I sank like a stone, touched bottom,

fought to surface and bobbed up, spitting, sputtering, and flailing arms and legs like windmills, swallowing, gagging, choking, and thrashing about until I made the ten feet to the side.

Since I didn't drown I reasoned that I must be a swimmer and soon was going off the low diving board, but it was a year or two before I cannon-balled from the tower. The diving tower was a throw-away form the High Point pool. It towered above a row of seven dressing stalls at the deep end. The stalls were for climbing, to sit on, hide in, or dive off of but not for changing clothes. About 1939, Ada Louise Simpson fell from the tower striking her face on the concrete of the pool wall and Mr. Kearns had the tower removed.

Big boys showed off their swans, half-gainers, jackknives, somersaults, and double flips from the tower and the lower diving board. The diving board faced the width of the pool and big boys with a mighty spring split the water and grabbed the opposite wall at the same moment, a maneuver that thrilled the girls but made anxious the authorities who feared a burst head. They repositioned the diving board so that divers went off the end, headed into the length of the pool.

The water was unfiltered. Each Friday night the pool was emptied and on Saturday scrubbed, and on Sunday night refilled. On Monday morning Mr. Kearns threw in several handfuls of blue copper sulfate rock for purification. But by Wednesday the water was murky in the depths

causing more thrill to the game of tag or chase and causing more worry to Clyde Bowers who lost his glass eye into the water regularly. We all searched, coursing the bottom like U-boats. Mostly we were successful in the search but, if not, a wire screen kept the eye from washing away into the creek. Along with the eye there would often be a few pennies, marbles and an occasional snake or frog.

The big girls, so pretty and prettily bedecked for the Valley, were decreed to wear full, floppy, one-piece bathing suits that soaked up buckets of heavy water causing their form to become elongated and baggy. The boys, in passing the pool let their trucks develop a motor knock or their teams became lame or their wagons crack a wheel, creating an excuse to stop. As they fiddled with the balky mule or the malfunctioning truck the boys threw surreptitious glances at the girls who were identifiable only by color of hair, turn of chin, or shape of nose.

We boys were outfitted for swimming similarly, in long hand-me-downs that stretched from Monday to Friday at the armholes and looked black and formal as a minstrel suit. But, caught in anticipation, we raced to rip off our everyday clothes, struggled into our scratchy wool swimming togs and marched along to the pool.

There were not many fat orphanage boys and girls except those genetically destined; swimming and other activities burned off excess fat. It also produced a generation with powerful lungs, developed from

swimming underwater. During World War II any one of us could have taken on an enemy submarine barehanded.

The swimming pool had been built by orphanage boys under the supervision of Mr. Peace. It was built to last. In the fifties, when a generous benefactor gave money to build a modern pool at another location; bulldozers were brought to tear down the old structure. They did their best but the walls remained undaunted after hours of pushing. Finally, dynamite was brought and charges placed at strategic spots to weaken the walls. The pool now lies under a grassy plot and we who knew it well regret that the children swimming in the Olympic size pool in clear, filtered and treated water are deprived.

Eventually came a day of lost allure. We gave up the sun and wind of the fields, the illicit cooking of stolen coca and sugar, the wet of the creek, the climbing of trees, the smoking of rabbit tobacco, and the swinging of foxgrape vines. Nature's allure was stolen by the glamour of movies.

I learned it from the likes of Chop Bradshaw and Leanard Evans; the back street route to town on Saturday afternoons to see the cowboy shows. We slinked along like criminals. In town we darted across Salem Street, plunked down our dimes, grabbed our penny change, and dashed inside, lest we be detected by a matron, whom we envisioned as

standing in any of several nearby doorways for the sole purpose of catching us.

We went upstairs to the balcony and sat on the front row, hanging over the railing. At last, lights dimmed, curtains rose, the projector ran through trailers of coming attractions, the Pathe News, a cartoon or two, a comedy short – Laurel and Hardy, Charlie Chase or Edgar Kennedy. Then, came the latest episode of whatever adventure serial was in progress: Buster Crabbe as Tarzan or Flash Gordon, Ralph Byrd as Dick Tracy, The Three Musquiteers, the original Lone Ranger, The Green Hornet. A bonus came in the form of a double feature when one serial ended and another began. The dilemmas of the hero at episode's end fired our imaginations and pulled us to return.

The other balcony inhabitants, boys from the country and girls from Amazon Mill Hill, created a heady smell of sweat mingled with Evening in Paris. The smell fired our imaginations with fantasies of amour and bravado the equal of those shown on the screen.

Movies of the A class were attended with approval. Mr. Prevo, the owner of the movie theaters, thought first of us, called Mr. Greer when a good film came to town and after they previewed it, set aside the theater for our exclusive viewing.

Bathed, in clean clothes, we marched out, cottage by cottage, the girls in front, not in lockstep but orderly, two by two. We lined out the

gate, filled the sidewalks, walked the mile to town and filed into the theater, behaving nicely, lest the matron who led and the dietician who brought up the rear threaten us with loss of the privilege of seeing the movie. Mrs. Prevo was usually at the theater and greeted us warmly. During the ensuing weeks our speech, mannerisms, and gestures reflected favorite catch phrases picked up in: Boy's Town, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, The Wizard of Oz, Gone with the Wind, Trail of the Lonesome Pine, To the Shores of Tripoli, and Guadalcanal Diary.

In a summer filled with duties, swimming, the woods, and vacation; our chief popular entertainment was movies. We read a great many books, listened to radio, read the daily paper but the movies brought a fresh, new, vivid story that we loved for its rich fantasy, vicarious adventure, romantic emotion, dreams of heroism, the destruction of evil, and the excitement of the exotic and the legendary. Movies made real everything we dreamed of.

We were entitled to one week of vacation each summer. If there were folks back home they sent either train or bus tickets or money enough for purchase. Miss Hattie saw to that. When the date was set our matrons saw to our clothes and on the great day Mr. Millsaps, the mailman, took us to the station. Upon our return he picked us up.

Special excursions out of town were arranged for those who had no place to go for vacation and for cottage outings as well. The farm truck

with its high sides was as busy with picnics as it was with hauling hay and grain. We piled in, loaded in our boxes of food and with the wind streaming went to the park at Pilot Mountain; to Morrow Mountain State Park; to Healing Springs to swim and fish and to eat at a restaurant in an old house; to the Reynolds building in Winston-Salem, to the camp owned by the Barium Springs Orphanage on the Catawba River; to Guilford Battleground; to ice cream factories; to High Rock Lake; to the peach orchards; to the WSJS radio station.

Summer was also the time for other things, especially fresh food in abundance. Ripe peaches by the truck load were sent from the sandhills. Those cottages without their own ice cream freezers borrowed from their more fortunate brothers and sisters. One Sunday after church in July 1936, we Simmons boys swapped cottages with the Durham boys. We won in the deal. They had an ice cream freezer and a fresh load of peaches had just come in. We made the most of the swap.

We smothered our faces in the rind of iced watermelons on long tables in the valley. After eating we threw the remains into the air, creating harmless missiles that smacked to earth and on occasion to head. This practice was never judged likely to cause serious damage and was allowed.

Near the pig pens we searched out hornet and wasp nests, taunting the inhabitants with tree limbs. When the winged horde, murder

in their eyes, sought to avenge we raced in ninety directions, flailing about our heads using the boughs like terrible swift swords.

Cal experimented with the science of flight by pitching a goose outfitted with a cloth parachute from the tallest silo. He honestly thought that the goose's own appendages would prove air worthy. The parachute was a fail-safe. The unfortunate caught his wings in the strings of his saving device and plummeted to a fatal end in a free fall, a fact Cal regretted as he buried him.

We enjoyed melons grown elsewhere, either donated by farmers with large acreage who grew to sell or foraged from the fields of Carp Conrad, our neighbor to the south. This practice of foraging ended abruptly when Mr. Conrad came out waving a 12 gauge and siccing a snarling German police dog on our retreating forms. Mr. McKoin came down the farm road in his truck, catching every hard puffing guilty boy. We followed en masse as he drove slowly, lest the dust cover our deep shame at having been caught.

On hot evenings we abandoned the church building and, crowded together, sat on the grass in a little vale between the infirmary and the sewing room as Mr. Neilson conducted vespers.

We Simmons boys picked the bloom and leaves of a plant known to us as sourgrass (oxalis), stuffed it into quart jars, added water, churned it with a poking stick, capped the jars and stuck them into secret recesses in

the valley drain ditch. The practice, no doubt a permutation of the art of homebrewing, was intended to produce an intoxicating beverage should we allow it to proceed to the full limit of fermentation but we hardly ever let it go beyond three or four days. We hoped for Captain Marvel strength from it, but if it ever had virtue beyond a vile taste I cannot now recall.

Occasionally during the summer we gave up our beds to church groups staying overnight. We were never given directions as to what to do and would have paid only the slightest heed anyhow. We knew what to do. Double charged as we were we used up the light to its last violet drop, and even then couldn't go to sleep.

As darkness fell and the huge moon rose we went calling along the horseshoe road, padding softly lest we raise up Bob Harmon, the night watchman. We became his quarry, him a faceless hulk of a man in a long woolen coat of World War I and a five cell flashlight that flicked its way into dark corners. Across his shoulder a leather strap tethered a time clock bandoleer fashion. He punched punctiliously at a dozen stations as would a sentry cry out that all was well.

With vision twice brilliant and hearing twice sharp we played Bob Harmon games in the moon. Games of pursuit and capture. Games the night demanded. Best of all, hide and seek, go where you like, and the whole of the orphanage to hunt through and Bob Harmon to evade in the

bargain. Two dozen boys loped away through the trees and were immediately swallowed in shadow. We gave them five minutes then set out after them. They had farmyard, barns, grainery, cottages, schoolyard, churchyard and woods to run to.

We ran under the stars, through oak woods, between darkened cottages, following the scent by the game's one rule, the answer cry. Every so often, panting for breath, we paused to check on our quarry, to listen, heads lifted, teeth shining in the moon. From the distance came a faint whistle or Indian cry, a cry on two notes, prolonged. We were off again then, changing directions. Bob Harmon heard too and came thundering, the clock slapping his thigh. But, his duties pulled him to the sites of the key boxes which we had stuffed with cow manure to slow him down. We sometimes led him falsely along a trail strung with clothesline head high but he was wary of this trickery after avoiding decapitation by only a slim margin several times.

In the meantime we were off again, through the waking night, among sleepless squirrels, while our quarry slipped off into another corner and would not be found for hours.

Round about midnight we ran them to earth, exhausted in the valley. Until then we had chased them through all our world, through our jungles, swamps, and tundras, across pampas, plains, and steppes of

wheat while stars shot to earth and the white moon climbed, raising visions of night and summer that move there even yet.