

THE TOBACCO FIVE

September 26, 2005

Robert J. Watkins

I don't really remember much about my boyhood. Looking back on it, I would have to say this isn't too surprising since the life of a small town boy in the 1930's Midwest is pretty forgettable. My life, and the lives of the eight or nine guys I spent most of my time with " I'll call them my "gang" • was built on a yearly routine of nine months of school and three seemingly endless months of summer vacation. Times were hard, we heard people say, and there wasn't a lot of extra money to send kids to summer camp or to take a family motor trip to a national park. Summertime devolved into lazy, hazy days of trying to find something to do while staying out of the way of hypercritical adults. In short, we were bored.

In our search for juvenile fulfillment, we turned to baseball. Actually, to be precise, we turned to fast pitch softball, the game of choice in small-town Western Ohio at that time. This was done more or less spontaneously in the summer of 1941 when the gang members were 11 years old and had just completed the fifth grade. We had developed rudimentary skills in throwing, catching and batting a ball in gym classes and back yard sessions with our fathers. The concept of playing the game with our peers was novel, however, and we embraced it enthusiastically as soon as school was out.

A city park within walking distance for the whole gang provided ample space to lay out a diamond without danger to any nearby windows. Gathering enough players was more of a problem. The gang provided a nucleus of eight or nine players who could be counted on almost every day. They were supplemented by casual drop-ins, usually younger boys, but the total number of players never exceeded fifteen. This compelled us to play a game we called "Monkey Move Around", where the players rotated around the field to different positions each time an out was made. It was a good system for beginners since everyone got to play all positions; specialization was to come in future summers.

We played for about two hours virtually every afternoon, except on Sunday. Not all of that time was spent on the playing field. There were frequent trips to the water fountain and a primitive park "two-holer" a couple of hundred yards away. There were also occasional fights, when some of the Alpha mates in the group jockeyed for dominance of the pack; these were never long or bloody affairs and normally left no lasting animosity. On extremely hot days, we stretched out under a copse of leafy trees beyond left field and talked, although it's difficult for me to remember - or even imagine - what we would've talked about in that pre-pubertal period of our lives.

And we learned things. First, we learned a lot about baseball - not just the rules of the

game, but things like where to position yourself, how and where to throw the ball, how to gauge and catch a fly ball, and so on. We learned some of these things by sharing information acquired from fathers, older brothers and Reds radio broadcasts, but mostly we learned from watching the local men's games. We became knowledgeable about the difference between force plays and when it was necessary to tag a runner and other basic aspects of the game. More exotic refinements like the infield fly rule and who handles pop flies behind third base would have to wait for a later time.

We also began to learn the arts of forbearance, compromise and understanding which are at the heart of any team game, and, I suppose, of society itself. (As an aside, women used to complain that men in business had a built-in advantage because they had played team sports as boys. I haven't heard that lament in recent years, probably because little girls are now playing team sports, also.) It didn't take long to realize that chronic whining, complaining and throwing tantrums was unacceptable conduct in a group, and wasn't likely to make you "popular" - in quotes - as we were even then beginning to understand that concept.

Finally, we learned what it was like to chew tobacco. You have to realize that in those pre-television days our rote models in the baseball world were NOT big-leaguers, but the brawny, big-armed men who played on the local city team. We copied their swings, their pitching motions and, perhaps not surprisingly, some of their personal habits. Many of these men were farmers who spent the day with a large cud of Red Man in their jaw and they carried that over into the ball games under the tights. They swaggered around the field with great lumpy cheeks, yelling incomprehensibly at their teammates through a fine mist of tobacco spray. While at bat, they would spew brown rivulets on home plate and even spit tobacco juice on their hands to get a better grip on the bat. It was nauseating, of course, and a foul and disgusting habit. Naturally we couldn't wait to try it ourselves.

One day, one of the gang showed up for our daily game with a package of scrap chewing tobacco. I don't remember how he acquired it, but it had already been opened and was just begging to be used. Five of the gang, myself included, were brave enough - or maybe stupid enough - to take a chew. How to do so was not a mystery; for years we had watched older men load up. In short order, we had a generous wad in our mouths and were basking in the wide-eyed admiration of our less-adventurous mates. That didn't last long as our over-active saliva glands began generating a veritable freshet of sputum. Spitting was a natural reaction and, for a time, was accomplished effectively, albeit sloppily. Unfortunately, not ALL the juice was expectorated and tiny trickles slipped down the esophagus and into our stomachs. Retching, we soon discovered, was a natural reaction, also, and shortly we were all bent over - some on hands and knees - evacuating tobacco. . . and lunch. . . and last night's meatloaf dinner.

Our abstemious mates were concerned at first, but when they saw we weren't going to die they began laughing at us. After a half-hour of tying in the shade and drinking lots of water, we joined in their laughter and the whole episode soon faded from memory. So much so, in fact, that we concluded we knew what we'd done wrong the first time around and decided to try it again. This we did - with, not surprisingly, the same results, although exacerbated, in my case anyway, by a violent attack of hiccups.

That did it for the day and, as it turned out, for the rest of the summer. One of the gang's mothers smelted the stuff on his breath, and, as only mothers can, sweated a full confession out of him, including the identities of his fellow culprits. A series of telephone calls to the other mothers followed and we were busted.

My mother was furious - not so much at me but at my tobacco-chewing grandfather (whom she didn't much like anyway) for setting a bad example. My dad got an APB at work and came home with a steely look in his eye; strangely, he wasn't too tough on me, especially after I told him how sick I had been. One of the mothers contacted her neighbor, the high-school football coach, and asked him to do something to - as the phrase goes - "scare us straight". Incredibly, he dropped by the ball field a couple of days later and warned us that if we ever expected to participate in high school athletics, we'd have to abandon our dissolute behavior. I don't think his heart was in it, though, as he contemplated the abject bunch of skinny sixth-graders who stood before him.

Meanwhile, my grandfather, a great hairy-legged Celt who had never paid me much attention, suddenly showed new interest in my prospects for manhood. For sheer devilment, he would offer me a chaw from his package whenever my mother was around; I loved him for it and we were pals ever after.

When we returned to school in September for our sixth grade year, the "chawers" enjoyed celebrity status for a time. We were, in today's terminology, "Danger Men". The girls in our class cluck-clucked and pretended to be repelled by our conduct, but they didn't mean it and we gloried in their censure. Sadly, the fifteen minutes of fame for the "Tobacco Five" played out, but the memories did not. We felt we had glimpsed the hallowed place where real men dwelt and had crossed some kind of invisible line between mama's boys and men of the world. The gang stayed together all the way through high school and confronted things like Pearl Harbor, World War II, acne, organized sports, sexual awakening and other matters better left for future Club papers. We were to play lots of games together in the years to come, but none of them measured up to that wonderful summer of '41.