

Summertime

By

William A. Palmer, Jr.

“No more pencils, no more books, no more teachers’ dirty looks!” This was the mantra on the last day of school during the years when I was growing up. My friends and I literally ran home from school on those bright June days, excited about the summer that seemed to stretch endlessly before us. Although fading memory has a way of softening the contours of the past, it seems as if those summer vacations were uniformly golden. We pedaled bikes all over a neighborhood where our parents never seemed to worry about safety. We swam at the community pool. We ventured back into the elementary school long enough to satisfy our curiosity about a summer recreation program that consisted mainly of knock-hockey and making “lanyards” out of brightly colored strands of plastic. We played marbles and stick ball and, on rainy days, gathered at friends’ homes to compete at board games like Sorry and Monopoly. We scoured abandoned fields for Revolutionary War artifacts and dug for Captain Kidd’s buried pirate treasure. At the end of the day, while the adults sat outdoors and talked, stretching out the evening and delaying their return to non-air-conditioned houses, we chased lightning bugs on the lawn and waited for the jingling bell of the Good Humor man.

Somehow I managed to survive those summers without being involved in organized sports (Little League baseball was the only option), without electronic games or toys, and without a formal “enrichment” program. (The single exception was between the sixth and seventh

grades, when my parents sent me off to “Summer Band’ at the high school—an experience that served only to confirm the paucity of my musical talent.)

During those long-ago summer vacations, however, my natural curiosity was unfettered. The world around me became a classroom. My sister and I probably depleted the local butterfly population as we caught and mounted scores of specimens. Along the way we learned the names, food plants, and habits of these insects, laying a foundation for later courses in the natural sciences.

Our Long Island back yard, located on the outwash plain of the Wisconsin glacier, offered a variety of rocks and minerals to pique my interest. With a small anvil that belonged to my grandfather and his ball-peen hammer I smashed hundreds of stones to discover what might be hidden inside. All this was done without safety glasses, and it’s only by the grace of God that I made it to adulthood with two eyes. However, I learned to distinguish feldspar from quartz and marveled at tiny garnets embedded in schist.

On days too hot to play outside I lay on the cool tiles of our living room floor and pored over my mother’s stamp collection. Tracing the origins of exotic-looking postage stamps on a metal globe of the world with a big dent in the Gulf of Alaska, I unwittingly prepared myself to win the school’s geography prize two years in a row. I never thought of any of these activities as anything so boring as “education.” It always was play.

People sometimes look askance when we describe our Smart Start and Head Start preschool programs as “play-based.” Yet a recent op-ed column in the *New York Times* (January 5, 2011) lamented the vanishing culture of play in the United States: “Most of the social and intellectual skills one needs to succeed in life and work are first developed through childhood play. Children learn to control their impulses through games like Simon Says...and they learn to solve problems, negotiate, think creatively, and work as a team when they dig together in a sandbox or build a fort with sofa cushions.”

Some educators may wring their hands about what children lose during their summer vacations. I, on the other hand, continue to be excited about the kinds of things they may gain.

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