

The Thrills I Found on Blueberry Hill

Steve Sorensen © 2004
Times Observer Columnist

By the way...

When I was a kid, Scandia was the most exciting place in the world. My haunts ranged from the old school (where I was a sixth-grader on the day President Kennedy was shot) to the golf course (where we once sneaked onto the fairway to play under the full moon).

Some would think there isn't much for a kid to do in a place like Scandia. Don't be fooled. Our ventures weren't always safe, but we stuffed plenty of fun into those years.

In winter, after the road crew heaped Himalayan-size snowbanks along the road, we dug deep caves and spent hours inside those snowy mountains. Had they collapsed, we would have been buried until spring. We also loved cascading down a steep hill on a cut-off car roof, careening from one spikey hawthorn bush to another, often being catapulted off, but somehow avoiding the jagged edges where the roof had been cut from its pillars.

Ice storms provided the greatest sledding conditions. On heavily crusted snow we raced our Flexible Flyers down the hill next to Plowright Playhouse at night. Our way was lit with kerosene lamps we found in an ancient Diamond Reo school bus that someone had abandoned on our property long before we lived there.

In the summertime, we'd speed around the fields in Dad's old '55 Chevy Bel Aire, me usually fighting my brother for the steering wheel. Surely some angel stood guard over us as we bucked along on the bronco of youth.

Not all pleasures were so reckless. On Sundays Aunt Evelyn came for dinner. She gave us piano lessons and copies of *Mad* magazine. Mom believed one was good for us, but had doubts about the other.

A highlight of summer was the cowboy-theme vacation Bible school at Scandia Covenant Church. We got shiny sheriff badges and learned that the township wasn't big enough for both Jesus and sin — and neither were our hearts. That may be why stealing a round of golf was one of our few temptations less wholesome than what Opie ever faced in Mayberry.

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Life also included work, and we discovered that work was fun. In the fall, we shoveled coal to feed the furnace I helped Dad install, and found that wood is not the only fuel that heats you twice. Soon after we finished shoveling black stuff, we began shoveling white stuff, which was often higher than my adolescent waist.

In the spring and summer my brother and I worked our large family garden, raising a variety of vegetables for Mom to put up. Dad paid us for our labors with new sleeping bags, and we learned how to camp. Sometimes, after watching "Twilight Zone" and "The Outer Limits" on a snowy black and white TV, we'd camp in our woods and tell ghost stories.

One summer our well dried up, and Dad hired a water witch to

march around our yard with his willow divining rod. We stared at him with puzzlement until he stopped about 10 yards from our old well. We drilled there, but for six weeks we hauled water in 10-gallon milk cans from artesian wells on Priest Hollow Road and Cobham Park.

Twice, summer excitement boiled over as we fought grass fires, and once we caught a 37-inch garter snake when our missionary-kid cousins were home from Japan. It gave Mom a fright, second only to the time my sister was bopped on the head with an unabridged dictionary, getting a nosebleed so bad that blood came out her eyes.

Caring for animals was a big part of our lives. Among them were the rabbits and Bantam chickens that provided table fare, and my tribe of white mice that were unwelcome at dinner.

"The Duke of Blueberry Hill," our faithful German shepherd, and Mike, our agreeable Dalmatian, both shepherded us through many of our capers. Along the way I raised Mitzy, my temperamental rabbit-sniffing beagle. Max, the fat mutt puppy, never did get raised. He met his fate on the edge of the road and was bathed in my sister's tears.

Our neighbors were great, and we helped (or maybe hindered) them whenever we could. I can't name them all, so I'll limit myself to one. We were on duty the day Pat Ferrie hauled a big chicken coop on a flatbed from Russell to Scandia. From Pat's perspective we may not have been much use, but he was kind enough to let us hang around.



The year I finally turned 12, Dad took me hunting and I haven't had enough of it yet. Even before I was old enough to hunt, the *Pennsylvania Game News* (with those old Ned Smith covers) was the highlight of my month and I read it ragged. How I wish I had those worn out copies today! They were a fountain of information and made me believe that one day I might be able to get someone to publish what I would write.

Life on Blueberry Hill was plenty full and I could go on for pages, but it's a simple lesson that Scandia taught me. A boy growing up in the country with a little freedom and imagination can have an immensely enjoyable childhood without expensive gadgets, a schedule overpacked with organized fun, or a huge crowd of friends. I've enjoyed urban life too — in Boston, Kansas City, and Washington D.C. — but for me, the city wouldn't have offered anything better than the thrills I found on Blueberry Hill.

Steve Sorensen lives in Russell with his wife and Greta. He has been a puppet, a pauper, a preacher, a poet, a pawn, and he knows a king. He pounds on the keyboard because he thinks that a word is worth a thousand pictures. He's seen it done, but hasn't yet succeeded in writing that word himself. Maybe next time. Greta, by the way, is a miniature dachshund, just to clear up the pictures that word created.