

My Adventurous Childhood

Contributed by Mary Ann Bracewell

My Adventurous Childhood

My three brothers and I, all under the age of 12, were a fearless foursome. Exploring the outdoors near our home in Huntsville, Texas, and pulling the occasional prank was exciting, though not without consequences. My brothers Ronnie and Donnie are twins. Ronnie had a gap between his front teeth, and both had red curly hair and freckles. Barefoot and in their overalls, they were Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn reincarnated.

I wasn't a bothersome tagalong. I was part of the pack, and often the leader. I could gig a frog, bait a fishhook and catch snakes with as much precision as my brothers. I was a tomboy personified, and proud of it.

A sycamore tree graced the yard of our small home in the late 1940s. That tree provided many hours of entertainment and, on one occasion, disaster. One summer day I was chasing Donnie up the tree for calling me a nickname that I detested. He almost made it to the top before he slipped on a limb. He fell all the way to the ground, nearly dragging me with him, and broke his arm. I was heartbroken for my little brother. Through his wails, however, I heard, "I'll get you! Just wait, I'll get you!" And while his arm was healing, he often repeated, "I owe you one, sister." But I wasn't worried. He couldn't possibly scare me. We were the fearless foursome … or so I thought.

After supper I enjoyed swinging in the porch swing—alone, if I were lucky enough to get it. This particular day I had it all to myself. I was happy as a lark, swinging as I sang, "How much is that doggie in the window? Arf! Arf! The one with the waggly tail." All of a sudden, a tarantula spider was thrust into my lap. I screamed, I cried, I kicked—and the chase was on. Donnie had definitely evened the score.

Daddy made slingshots for us. We lined up cans along the fence posts, taking turns knocking them down. Shooting at birds was a cardinal sin. We also had kites made from newspapers and sticks. Daddy was creative, much to Mama's delight.

The wisteria vine that draped our porch railing attracted bumblebees by the droves. We caught them in glass Mason jars, taking care to capture only the males—the ones with a white spot on the top of their heads. Sometimes we tied strings around their heads to make "insect kites."

Catching snakes was a risky challenge. Daddy showed us how to catch the nonpoisonous grass snakes. In our devilish demeanor, we approached Mama with our harmless reptile. She was terror-stricken. "Oh! Lord!" she screamed, then called for Daddy. "Emmett, come get these little heathens out of here!" When she grabbed a broom, we were out of there with the speed of lightning.

One game we played that lasted longer than our tempers was "rock school." The players sit on the bottom step of a porch or stairway. The leader clenches both fists, hiding a rock in one, and crosses his arms. The first player taps the hand he thinks holds the rock. If he guesses correctly, he moves up a step. If not, he stays put. The first player to make it up the steps and back down wins.

From the kitchen Mama could hear us yell, "You cheated, you skipped a step!" and "That's not fair, you hid the rock in your back pocket!"

When Mama was angry, she moved briskly with short, heavy steps, the wood floors creaking beneath her. We knew to settle our differences quickly or we would suffer the wrath of an old tree switch, her favorite tool for punishing us. It didn't matter who had started the fight; we all had to pay the price. She tried to make us feel better by saying "Children, this hurts me more than it does you." We never could figure that one out. In Mama's defense, God rest her soul, we didn't get nearly as many swats as we deserved.

At night I looked for the Little Dipper among the stars. Fireflies fascinated me as they moved about, lights blinking as they searched for their mates. Trying to catch them was no small feat.

One creature I wasn't fond of was the June bug. In the evening they bombarded the porch. In their clumsy movements they hit the windows and doors with the force of a summer hailstorm. During the day they returned to the soil. "You've got your days and nights mixed up, you dirty June bugs," I fumed as I swept the porch for the hundredth time.

My favorite sights and sounds are crickets chirping, frogs croaking and a star-lit sky filled with fireflies. Once again I am taken back to my adventurous childhood.

When my brothers and I get together, we talk of the Good Old Days when our only concern was who could catch the most bumblebees. They still think they can outrun me—which is debatable—and I'm still called that dreadful nickname, although today it has a sweeter ring to it. Maturity has a way of appreciating what is most important: the enduring love of three brothers.

Today's youngsters are entertained by the Internet, cell phones, Nintendos and shopping malls. Would I trade places with them? Not in a million years!

