

THE BELT-LINE

By

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“The ‘Board of Education’ . . .”

---A fellow student---

School Days, 1950’s :

As late as into the early-‘sixties, school punishments were much more physical than would ever be tolerated in a later era. Calm acceptance in those days would now be replaced by outraged parents calling their lawyer should an authority figure spank little Johnny at school without their consent. In those days it was taken as a matter of course that should kids (read: boys) mis-behave at school, a paddling in the principal's office was the appropriate measure, and most parents went along with the policy. If they didn’t go along with the policy, well, it was still the policy.

Some *teachers* also used paddles for in-class corporal correction, and were duly authorized to employ the Board as they deemed necessary. Our eighth-grade junior high school mathematics teacher had a paddle on his desk in plain sight at all times. We were so used to seeing it that nobody paid the paddle much attention except when he snatched it up for use. Once, during a particularly boring classroom session (*the ‘bored of education’?*), while leaning over and staring out the third-floor window at the playground below, I was suddenly startled by a loud, jolting *WHAP!* on the back of my desk chair! Whirling about in my seat, I was confronted by the snarling face of the Math Man who, at that moment, was in the act of hauling back his paddle for another swat at my perfectly-positioned posterior that he had managed to just miss on his first try. Wide-eyed, I scooted back down into my seat, as the teacher roared, "Well, either get in---or get out!" As it was a long way out the window and down three-stories to the sidewalk, I mumbled something about staying in my seat, as my classmates tittered.

Should an in-class paddling have proved ineffective, there was the *red* paddle on the principal’s desk, with holes drilled in it to inflict the maximum effect on a wayward kid’s bottom.

I never had a paddling at school, although I came awfully close on several occasions. After the eighth grade I managed to become anonymous (or clever) enough for the high school principal to miss my numerous and sometimes outrageous hi-jinks and other transgressions.

That high school principal, an authoritarian figure if there ever was one (and who was at the school for only one year), not only used his paddle liberally on boys’ behinds, but he also had other measures of punishments, some of which were quite original. For example, if he caught

two students (always boy students) fighting on campus, he dragged the culprits into the gymnasium (with assistance from some coaches, if necessary), tied on boxing gloves and gave an order: “You wanted to fight---all right, now, *fight!*” Whereupon he forced the two boys to go all-out at it with the boxing gloves until one or the other was pretty much knocked senseless. I can’t recall a parent ever objecting to such punishing tactics. (*Today, of course, the principal would be immediately arrested and hauled into court on a variety of assault charges, not to mention facing civil lawsuits by the kids’ parents.*)

There was a positive outcome to the paddlings and the other forms of punishments that today would be considered harsh---perhaps cruel, even---and that was the fact that there was *order*. Order in the school, order in the homes; even order in church. My grand-daughter once told me how today’s teachers give out “marks” for mis-behavior. Seven marks, she said, and the offending student must stay after school for a few minutes. Pretty tepid, actually, and even she thought so. In the prior times, such “marks” would have been given out as paddlings or other equally draconian punishments and the whole idea of “marks” in the first place would have brought about a round of incredulous laughter among school officials. The net result in those times was a standard of order and behavior as much as unheard of in today’s schools (and in many homes). It must be kept in mind that almost all of the parents were fully on board with those methods of keeping order, since many of them used similar punishments at home.

School gave us boys (and some girls) a stage upon which to act-out our schoolkid disdain for authority. Along the way, out of necessity we learned to rig the mayhem we created in such ways as to both confound the authorities and to usually avoid being caught.

A couple of the events we got away with in the eighth grade deserve telling. Standing in the corner in the same math classroom where the teacher had aimed at and missed my behind was a floor-to-ceiling, wooden, open-type bookcase. Over a period of several days, we boys in the area surreptitiously rigged the shelves to where they would collapse with the slightest movement. But we needed “bait” that conveniently presented itself in the form of a nearby girl’s handbag, called a “purse” in those days. One of the guys lifted the unsuspecting young female’s purse and set it *c-a-r-e-f-u-l-l-y* onto a lower shelf. At the end of the class, we boys made a quick exit in order to get as far away as possible from what was about to happen.

“Where’s my purse?” came the girl’s voice behind us as we stepped lively toward the door. Looking around, she spotted it on the shelf. When she lifted it, a second later the whole bookshelf collapsed into a roaring heap! But by that time, we guys were long-gone, stepping in a hurry down the (conveniently located nearby) stairwell as the crash took place.

The teacher never learned what we had done, and the girl, thankfully, was far enough from the bookshelf as it fell that the only jolt she felt was of surprise.

Another girl student---very popular, in fact—who was known as a fun-loving practical joker who shared a larcenous bent that made her popular with us guys, cooked-up a plot to disrupt all the classes at the same time. Her idea, that made sense to us, particularly as it was very near to the end of the school year when things were getting out of hand in any case, was for all students in all the classrooms to sweep their books off their desktops onto the floor when the bell rang at the end of the school day.

And we did, shaking the old building to its very foundations. The only problem was that somebody snitched on her and she got into serious trouble. I’m told (but can’t confirm this) that as her parents were well-off and socially prominent, she got off lightly.

The eighth grade was notable for other escapades, including the famous “baby frogs caper,” as related in the short-story, “*Teacher’s Pests*.”

But that was not all, by any means. One day in the middle of the school year, (it was a rainy Friday, as I recall), in the first period, somebody broke wind in a wall-shaking event. Everyone in the class tittered, which angered the matronly teacher; a stuffy-type. Looking around, she spotted me laughing (*everybody* in the class was laughing) and pointed her finger at me and Andy, who sat across the aisle from me. “Let’s go!” she fairly shouted, “to the principal’s office!”

And so, Andy and I spent the entire day sitting in the Big Man’s office, glancing sideways every now and then at the big red paddle with the holes in it on his desk, dreading what might happen. But the official seemed to be busy, and as it turned out, we didn’t get the latest installment of the Board of Education as applied by the principal. But the two of us had no lunch, and like criminals in custody, we were allowed all that day only one visit to the boy’s room.

In the afternoon, just before the school day was over, the principal came back into his office. As we sat there waiting for the inevitable, I guess he decided Andy and I were merely juvenile delinquents who needed correcting and set onto a proper path in life. The man leaned back in his big desk chair and looked down his nose at first Andy and then at me. “John, what do you want to do with your life?”

At that moment, a woman with an enormous wrap-around head of hair stepped past the open door to the hallway, catching my attention. “I believe I want to be a hairdresser!” I said.

The look of surprise on the man’s face was classic, and I have always wondered what he would have said in reply, but at that moment, the final bell of the day rang, bringing an end to the inquisition.

There was one happening in that event-filled school year of the eighth grade that formed a strong opinion that I still have. In the cafeteria was an ice-cream cooler where an attendant sold popsicles and other frozen concoctions. All along, many students who bought the ten-cent dessert would look down into the cooler, make a selection, pull it out and pay the clerk. On that day, I did it for probably the hundredth time that year, as had the several guys in front of me, and, presumably, what the people behind me in the line would also do. It was such a routine that nobody thought anything of it.

Until that day. When I stuck my hand down into the cooler to retrieve my popsicle, the attendant grabbed my shirt collar and jerked me up. “Stealing, huh?”

“Who me?” *What was this?*

“You’re stealing! Let’s go!” The fellow hauled me out of line in front of my gawking schoolmates. “You’re going to the principal!”

In the office, The Authority listened, nodding, as the cafeteria clerk told how I was trying to “steal” a popsicle. When I tried to speak, the Headmaster told me to shut up and thanked the ice-cream guy for a job well-done. Then followed a sneering lecture that I had to endure without being offered a chance to explain that it was what we always did and, besides, I had my dime already out to pay for it.

I spent the rest of the school day in the principal’s office and further, had to stay after school for an hour. The school’s secretary called my parents about it, prompting *another* lecture when I got home.

The episode soured me forever on those who think---for whatever reasons---that they are

somehow “better” and seek to impose their notions on others. For the ice-cream attendant had cultivated a “do-gooder” image that I guess he thought needed bolstering, and at my expense. To this day, I do an instant turn-off whenever I see someone who thinks they are “better” or more “moral” than others try to exert unfair power over someone else, such as what happened at the ice-cream cooler. And I’ve seen it happen many times. I’m not a fan of “do-gooders.” In particular, *fake* “do-gooders.” I can take deserved criticism. But spare me the other kind.

As stated, compared to today’s society, some of the activities in which we indulged in the nineteen-fifties would now be looked upon as violent behavior. Sometimes the “violence” was an initiation rite not looked upon as violence. Such were the “belt-lines” in Cub Scouts. On those occasions, during a regular Cub Scout weekly meeting in a parent’s backyard, we would do the “belt-line.” We boys would take off our Scout uniform’s belt and form two parallel lines. One after another in turn, we ran down the row between the lines while the boys with the belts swung as hard as they could at the bottom of the runner. The belt-wielding scouts were supposed to use the plain end of the belt, but sometimes a wise-guy kid would hit the runner with the buckled end. While it hurt like crazy, a successful slapping, mauling transit down the line was viewed as a rite of passage that was fully approved by the adults who were on hand. Applying today’s standards, what these “belt-lines” amounted to were sanctioned beatings administered by the boys upon each that sometimes came close to actual physical assault. But, again, those were different times during which corporal punishment was the norm. We boys (and the parents on hand) looked upon the “belt-lines” as good, clean, fun and recreation.

So the question remains: are things, overall, really better, today, than they were back then? In certain cases, yes, particularly with medical advances. Remember that in the mid-‘fifties, polio was a great fear of everyone and would not be conquered until some years later. No one connected cigarette smoking with cancer; heart disease was a mystery; even stomach ulcers killed many people. Today, all those conditions have been identified and largely corrected through medical science. Automobiles are far safer today with seat belts and elaborate restraint systems such as airbags all around, along with anti-skid brakes and the like. All these greatly enhance a motorist’s chances of survival in an accident compared to the vehicles of yesteryear with their projecting knobs and switches that are now padded and otherwise made safer. Even automobile bumpers are improved. In those respects, we are much better off.

But as to discipline and order, paddling kept things very much in line in those days. Today, in schools, with laws handcuffing The Authorities preventing such measures as paddling from being enforced, the students pretty much run things *and they know it*. I can state with complete confidence that the orderly, disciplined schools and society in general of the nineteen-fifties was better than now as there were real consequences for behavior. Not so much so, these days, and not likely to return.

But, as we said, those were different times.