

Fun & Games

Fun and games is perhaps a term with many meanings and innuendo. For the purpose of this narrative, it includes toys, activities, games and the like. So here we go.

Every once in a while a trip to an antique or collectibles dealer, or perhaps an item brought to the “Antiques Road Show” on PBS, will spark a memory. Toys or board games from one’s childhood are now considered “collectible” and are demanding top dollar! Especially cherished are the old cast iron or tintype toys that wind up and still operate. The original box of course is a plus.

Now tell me, just how many children get a toy and keep the box? Toys are to be played with! The current “Beanie Baby” craze is an example of “non-toys”. Buy them, but don’t play with them. Make sure you leave the tag on the ear. And if you want to keep track of your valued stuffed toy, check the Ty Company web page. Get in line early and elbow in to get there first. I don’t ever remember any toy that I wanted being that valuable. Sure we collected lead soldiers and compared them with friends’ collections, but it was simply a matter of ready cash that prevented one from having desired toys and games.

Let me tell you about those remembered toys, many of which didn’t even come in a box. Of the ones that I cherished and played with, some were cast aside or broken, some were put in a box in the toy cupboard, and some had a special place in my bedroom. A recent conversation following a rather insipid TV add about a young boy in a staged home move depicting the 40’s or 50’s wearing a sheriff’s badge and cowboy outfit jogged my memory. I remember my two badges.

One badge came in the box with “Tootsie Toy” cars and trucks. Those were the forerunners of the “Matchbox” toys. They too were die-cast and had little donut tires that could be removed from the cast rims, although I don’t think that’s what the manufacturer had in mind. Some attached

parts, like the tank of a little tanker truck were lithographed tintype. The star shaped badge proclaimed “Tootsie Toy Motor Club.” What a thrill it was to wear that badge and push those fine little vehicles around!

The other was from a radio show that I sent away for -- no doubt with the inside seal from a can of “Ovaltine.” It was well made with a true shield shape of a real detective’s badge. (For the life of me, I can’t remember the name of the show. I’ll have to look through some old photos, as a part of the deal was a picture of the radio show’s hero!)

Speaking of sending away for a toy, Captain Midnight, or any number of other radio show heroes had you send in for a “secret decoder ring.” At the end of the radio show, to make you anticipated the secret message, the announcer would give you the code so you could line up the dials on the ring properly. He then would give the numbers to you in a carefully modulated voice. You would write carefully so as not to miss a beat. Then he would then wish you good luck and then admonished his young listeners to make sure to listen next week—same time, same station! Furiously you matched up the numbers with the proper letter and slowly spelled out the message. It was typically some moral message to fight for the right, followed by the plug, “...and make sure you drink your Ovaltine!” Decoding wasn’t that much fun after a while.

Lionel trains are an American icon. Nintendo and computer games now foreshadow today’s youth from getting down on the floor and laying out the three rail tracks for another travel adventure with your favorite Lionel train. Trains were to play with, to set up under or near the Christmas tree, to be expanded to include all sorts of new tunnels, track, cars, or railroad stations and the like. Moms don’t typically like the clutter and space that a layout takes, so there was always the careful taking apart the short sections of track and putting them in a designated box. The engine and cars also had their special place. If you had the extra money to spend, the electric transformer controller was the thing to

upgrade so that precise control over engine speed and change of direction could be accomplished. There was a recessed lever on top of the engine that could be moved so that the train could move in only one direction when the train was stopped and then started again. A button on the transformer allowed you to sound the engines whistle. Some models had a little pellet that could be put in the engine and smoke would come out of the smokestack. I didn't have one of those. Some had an operating headlight that shone down the track. I didn't have one of those either; there was just a faceted piece of glass glued into the headlight, which would catch the light a bit and simulate the real thing. Trains came in handy to carry cargo or troops when one was playing an extended game involving some purpose for the train. It was good to have open cars that would allow for that sort of endeavor.

Trains played an important part in the war effort to move troops during World War II. We as kids were copying what we had heard and seen in the newsreels before the Saturday matinee. Soldiers were a real part of the world and the lead soldier figures were in abundance in the open bins at Kress's department store in downtown Honolulu. They had by far the best selection around. There was of course the typical soldier with his rifle over his shoulder in parade fashion. The best ones were the ones throwing a grenade, or poised with a Thomson sub-machine gun at the ready. Realism came into play with the corpsmen with their arms down by their sides with loops by their hands to accept the little toy stretcher mad of white painted sticks of wood with real cloth stretched between them. Two of the corpsmen could then carry the stretcher, and another soldier could be placed on it. The realism didn't go so far as show the wounded with blood stained bandages, however.

One of the toys that would be considered too dangerous today was a casting set that allowed you to make your own toy soldiers. It was a hand-me-down from my from my brother, Bob, but was one of my

favorites. It consisted of an electrically heated pot that would hold several ounces of lead. A rod ran diagonally down to the bottom of the pot, which plugged a hole. When the lead was melted, a lever was activated and the rod would pull up and allow molten lead to pour out the bottom into the closed halves of a mold of a soldier. Another lever kept the two sides of the mold together until it was lifted up, releasing the lead soldier. The set had two molds: one with a WWI soldier with a rifle over his shoulder, and another mold with a mounted soldier. I had a whole bucket of soldiers that I played with. I had bothered to paint only a very few because of the several colors and the patience and tedious detail that it took.

Some of my more “collectable” toy soldiers, which were played with more care were British made. The set included mounted soldiers and a horse drawn caisson and cannon. There were little projectiles in the caisson, which were put into the breech loading cannon. The breech was pulled back and triggered by a lever, which would fire the little steel bullet. Really neat! Later Kress’s would have little howitzers that would fire whatever you put down the barrel. It fired by pulling back on a little rod by the breech and letting go. BB’s usually worked quite well.

Speaking of BB’s, the first gun that I had was a Red Ryder Daisy BB gun. One can’t count my Dick Tracy cap pistol that just made a bang as a result of a roll of red “caps” which contained little rounds of impact sensitive powder. (There were also disks with six rounds made for the cowboy style “six shooter.”) My Daisy rifle depended on a rather weak spring to fire those little round pellets called BB’s. Cocking the lever action reset the spring and the cylindrical magazine under the barrel held a whole tube of BB’s. We set up paper targets, marks on trees in the “pasture,” tin cans, and the like to test our prowess. One favorite game was to get in a group sitting on the ground and pretend we were an anti-aircraft battery and shoot at the darting dragonflies. More about this can be found in the chapter about “The Pasture.”

Soon the inadequacy of the spring-powered gun was not enough and I graduated the legendary Benjamin Pump. To fire the single .177 caliber pellet required pumping up enough air pressure to fire the pellet. This was a true air rifle, even though Daisy called their gun an “air rifle” too. Bob Martin next door had one. His was the older model which required pulling out a rod from the cylinder under the barrel then pushing the rod back in by finding a hard spot on the ground. It took some effort as air was being compressed. The later models had a lever action, which was much simpler and faster. The lever dropped down from the cylinder and was simply pushed back up. The compound lever system compressed the air. About eight pumps got it up to maximum capacity for the serious shooting and long distance stuff. Four or five pumps were adequate for “plinking” and target shooting.

The power difference was quite significant. It made it more accurate and it was capable of doing some harm. Because of the small size of the bullet it would pierce a street light globe without breaking it. The bulb inside would suddenly get brighter before going out. (Perhaps that belongs in the “Dastardly Deeds” chapter!)

The pellet had a round head a trailing skirt, which had a slight recess. The skirt allowed the pellet to follow the lands of the barrel and make it more accurate. We used to take the pellet and glue the cut off white tip of a kitchen match into the recess at the back of the pellet. By shooting the pellet backwards, the glued on tip hit the target first. When you fired into a hard surface, a sharp report could be heard. Kind’a like the discarded Dick Tracy cap pistol!

As long as guns are being discussed, let me tell you about two more toys that were inspired by the fascination for things military. Other than the little spring action howitzers that I mentioned, I had a neat all wood cannon. There was a metal crank, which rotated a breech assembly, alternately compressing and releasing a flat spring. The release of course

was at the open breech propelling the bullet out the barrel. A narrow “U” shaped wire loop was fitted just over the breech. Cylindrical wooden “shells” with a concentric groove to fit the wire loop served as the ammunition. The shells simply dropped into place as the previous round was fired through the wooden barrel. Really nifty! Printed paper targets fitted into slotted wooden bases came with the set, but of course other items that fit into the overall game constituted targets too.

One my other favorite shooting toys was a little wooden battle ship that fired torpedo like projectiles from its gun battery. The three-inch long “torpedoes” were pushed into the barrels of the gun battery. A little metal tip on the back end, somewhat like a spent 22 cartridge, protected it as it was pushed in. A little lever fired it. The target was what made it fun. It was another smaller wooden ship with removable pieces of the superstructure. Underneath this superstructure was a mousetrap like devise that was triggered by a disk on the side of the ship about the size of a quarter. When the trap was set and the pieces all in place, the target ship was ready. When the disk was hit, the ship effectively “blew up.” Again, really cool!

Lest the reader think that mayhem and violence was the sole content of my toys and play, let me assure you that there were other things amused me too. Board games were big. The Monopoly game was set up for days on end, especially during Christmas vacation and sometimes during the summer. After hours of play, the game would be abandoned, only to be taken up the next day where we left off. Family and neighbors were involved, and when we would be on a loosing streak, properties would be sold or bartered for best advantage to get the “monopoly” of properties. Park Place was of course more preferable to Baltic Avenue.

There were a host of board games at the Lanikai house. That was an evening thing or a right after lunch thing. The mandatory hour of rest before resuming swimming or water activities was the rule of the day.

One didn't want to drown because of stomach cramping! Parcheesi and Chinese Checkers were perennial favorites. Not terribly challenging, but somewhat competitive.

In this day of technology, it may be difficult to think back to the no TV no computer days. The telephone was the mainstay of communication of course. It came in black only, had a rotary dial, a cloth covered cable, and was owned by the telephone company. Spilling milk on the kitchen phone cable would promptly short out the phone and a call had to be made to the company for replacement. (A passing thought: will people forget why it is called a dial tone? Also when the family moved to Cheney, the phone book had instructions on how to use the dial on the phone. No doubt a carry-over from the hand cranked rural phones!) Now let's get back to the communication thing, and how it might relate to the theme of fun and games. As today's kids have toys than emulate adult devices, i.e. cell phones, Star Trek communicators, and the like, we had ours too: the telegraph set. One could buy just a regular one or one that had the endorsement of the Boy Scouts. A three by five inch case had the telegraph key on top and held the batteries in the case itself. Two terminals sat on top to connect the wires. By stringing a two-wire line across a distance, you could send a message by Morse code! For those who might forget those dots and dashes, the code was imprinted on top of the case. Bob Martin, who lived next door, was a couple of years older than I, but wanted to be able to send code to each other. We were both in the Scout troop and had learned the rudiments of the Morse code, usually via signal flags. He had a reel of single strand wire, so he strung it from his upstairs bedroom window, over the top of our swing set, and down to my bedroom window. To establish a complete circuit, we simply grounded the other connector to a water pipe. So we knew when to send the message or know when the other was home, we did a lot of yelling to each other across the back yard. So much for "real" communication.

Radio was the only “electronic” media at the time. And crystal radios were popular for “experimenters,” as Popular Science and Popular Mechanics magazines used to call the hobbyists. The main part of the unit which could stand alone or be embellished was the galena crystal and the “cat’s whisker” sensor, a wire on a movable rod, which served as the tuner. All you needed was a pair of earphones and a connection to a long wire antenna and one to ground. By fussing with the cat’s whisker and touching the crystal in places across its small diameter, you could receive the strongest of the local broadcast stations. In a magazine I found some plans that called for winding wire around a plastic cup with places that the wire had been cleaned of insulation and twisted together to form a tap. A little clip would be affixed to the various taps to effectively by-pass the crystal adjustment to create a more sophisticated tuner. It was akin to twisting the dial. I had no plastic cup, so Joe Martin, Bob’s father, made me a “cup” out of part of an old fence post. He shaped it and hollowed it out on his lathe. It was really slick, and added to the fun of listening. Joe Martin was the logical person to make this wooden cone, as he was quite a wood worker and had made a working model steam engine all out of wood. All you needed was a bit of compressed air and it took off running. Neat!

Not all “fun & games” were quite so creative, nor were “toys” always involved. One might say that making paper airplanes might be creative, but what about tearing strips of paper, tightly rolling them up (perhaps with a bit of spit!) and bending them over? These little paper projects were the basis for a good paper wad fight! One rubber band or two tied together looped over the thumb and index finger served as the complete slingshot, which could quickly be taken out or hidden from the teacher. If you have ever had one of these wads hit you on the back of the head or neck, you not only felt it, it incited revenge! You had to strive to make effective wads yourself and to have an adequate rubber band. I was lucky

one day to find a slingshot made of twisted and looped galvanized wire to form a little weapon about 2 or so inches across and handy enough to allow the rubber band to be pulled back at least a foot! And it fit in your pocket easily, too! This was about the third or fourth grade, and that little gem served me well. Now let's jump ahead a few years. I'm in California, not Hawaii. It's the 10th grade, not the 4th or 5th! Leather jackets were popular not only for their style and popularity, but because you could turn up your collar when you sat in the front of the classroom. It was great protection for the neck, a particularly vulnerable spot. Need I say more?

One might think that somehow, there is a lack of spirited, healthy, outdoor play in the narrative thus far. There was some outdoor play, but I will have to admit that my athletic prowess was and is still lacking. Team sports were not my thing, although I did play some football as a guard on a 6 man Pop Warner type of league. Punahou School set up its own league of a number of small teams. Our team was lucky enough to have a fellow named Buzzy Thompson as quarterback and all around backfield player, and did win quite a few games.

The neighborhood kids used the Halford's large backyard to play all of the typical kid's games. Red Rover, Stop & Go where the blindfolded person who was "it" tried to detect the others as they tried to sneak by, and baseball were the typical games. The baseball game was not the regular one with bases, but rather one batter would bat to a field of outfielders. Whoever caught the ball was the next batter. If the ball was a grounder, the person stopping the ball would roll the ball to the bat lying on the ground. When the ball hit the bat, it popped up in the air a short distance and the current batter had to catch it to remain at bat.

Other outside activities including using cardboard or wooden sleds to slide down the grassy slopes up on Rocky Hill near the "Pasture." (See the "Pasture section.) It was akin to the touted ti leaf sliding known in

Hawaii. Ti leaves are wide flat leaves and are cut off in bunches from the plant. They work great where the plants grow—up in the rainy mountain areas where the hillsides are lush and soft from the wetness of the rain. Muddy grooves form as a result of a day of sliding.

Our neighborhood sledding did not depend on vegetation for a sled nor the wetness of the ground. Unfortunately the sleds and cardboard did scrub the long grass down to the dirt, so we had to keep changing the route down the hill. Every once in a while a knee would get scuffed on the ground or gouged from a loose nail on a poorly constructed sled.

Now vegetation did play a part in some of the “fun & games.” When my family returned with me after a 30-year absence from Hawaii, we went up to the Bird Park in Monoa Valley. There they had an abundance of bird of paradise and ginger plants all blooming. If you took the stiff bill shaped blossoms of the bird of paradise and moved the halves back and forth on itself, it would squeak. I quickly went over to a plant and demonstrated. It all came back to me!

The large poinciana trees in our front yard produced beautiful red flowers. When the flowers are still buds, the very top of the bud can be carefully removed revealing the red underneath. The short stem then is inserted from the side and into the bottom of the large bud. The result is a tiny green “pipe” which is lighted, as evidenced by the bright red glow!

In the “gross small boy” category, another plant was always fun. It was a wild vine on which there were little pods that looked like little tiny red pumpkins. (I don’t ever remember calling the plant by name.) When the little “pumpkin” was opened, inside there was a little cluster of seeds that were covered with a soft wet gray like covering. It was great fun to take some of the seeds and place them directly under one’s nostril then wait for a reaction especially from an unsuspecting adult. Mother was grossed out any number of times from this artificial “snot!”

Let's go back inside for another typical "boy thing." In the back of my Popular Mechanics magazine there was a host of ads, many of them suggesting something free! One day I got a stack of penny post cards, and they were a penny then. I stuck every ad that said free on them and carefully wrote my name. There must have been forty or so. Salesmen began calling the house. A hearing aid dealer had contacted Dad. All of this attention was not appreciated. One thing that was sent I found quite interesting. It was from some patent outfit. They sent a brochure depicting just about every conceivable way gears, levers, cams, and the like could be configured to operate the contraption that you might submit for a patent. Cool! I wish I would have kept it! Also what I found interesting in getting all of the mail was the fact that people on the mainland had little concept of where Honolulu was before Pearl Harbor was bombed. One of the envelopes I received was marked "foreign mail!"

There were always were some other play activities. When my mother would buy shredded wheat (it's been around forever!) there were cardboard separators between the layers of cereal. On these pieces of cardboard roughly 5 by 7 inches, were mazes, puzzles, and word games. Like the little trinket in Cracker Jack's, all the cereal had to be dumped out to get the prize! Other cardboard goodies could be found on the small piece on which bias tape was wrapped. Mother spent a lot of time sewing, so had a number of cards of tape. She would not let me unwrap them, however! On the cards were animal fronts and backs. You were to cut these out and paste them to each end of an empty spool of thread. After a while you had a whole zoo!

As one grows older let's hope there is still the spark to enjoy fun and games. The fun is deep and enduring and should be shared with one's family and friends. The games are long lasting and add vitality to the spirit—and cost a lot more than boyhood days!