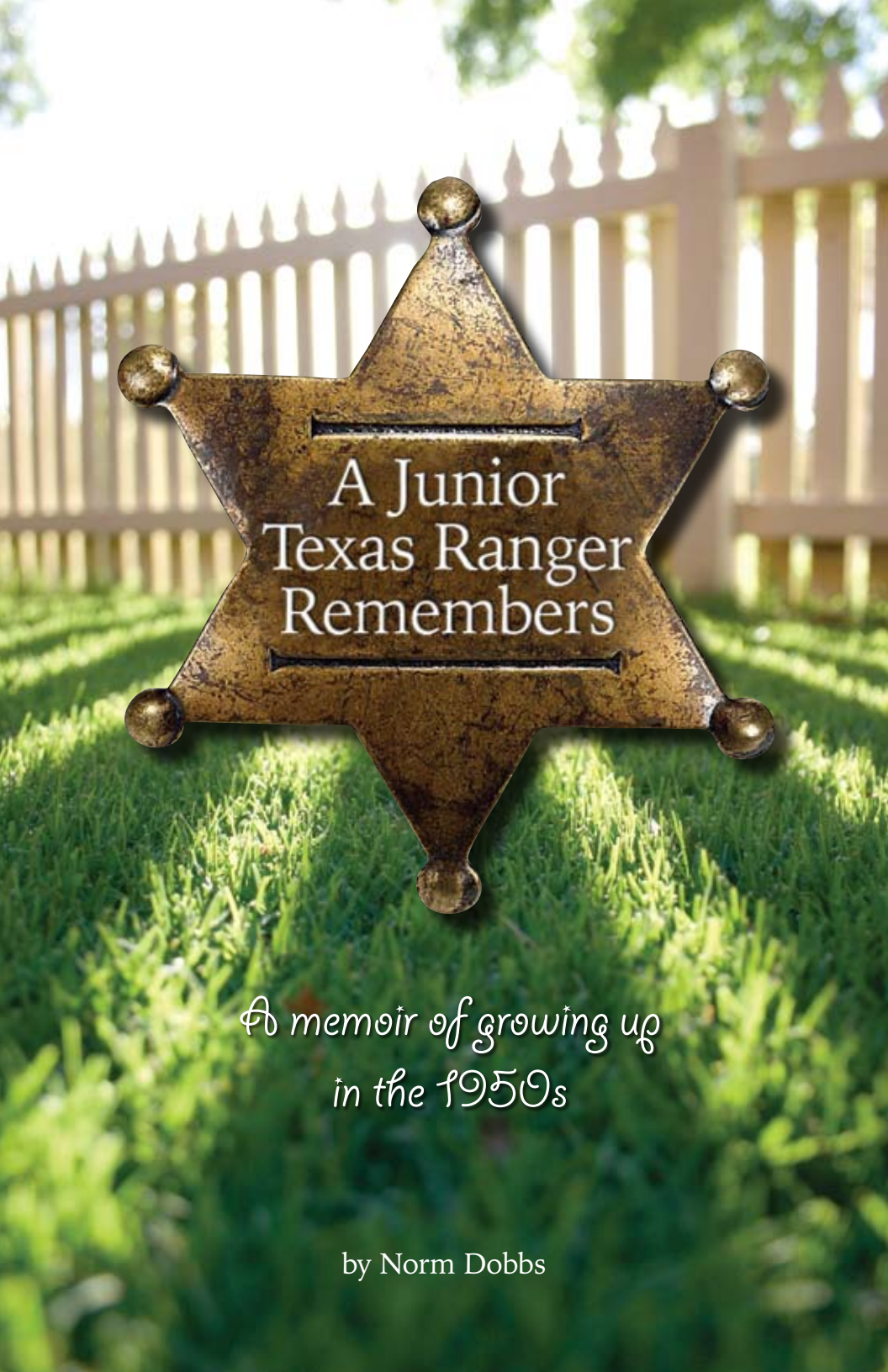
A Junior
Texas Ranger
Remembers
A memoir of growing up
in the 1950s
by Norm Dobbs

To the memory of my parents:

Raymond and Hazel Dobbs

Introduction and Acknowledgements

The inspiration for this memoir was the book *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid*, a memoir by Bill Bryson, copyrighted in 2006. Bryson's book is about growing up in Des Moines, Iowa in the 1950s. Eight years senior to the author, my early childhood memories begin in the late 1940s and include more of the early to mid-1950s time period than his. The more I read his book, the more similarities I began to remember of my own childhood in Lincoln, Illinois. Long before finishing his book, I told my wife Lee Ann that I could probably conger up some descriptions of a kid's life in the 1950s, with maybe a humorous story or two. That is how this adventure started. I began the task of pulling long forgotten memories from the depths of my brain and making notes. I honestly didn't think that this would be anything but a short essay, a couple pages at most I thought, but once positioned at the computer keyboard and after the output message reached the brain, I began writing, and writing, and writing, …; things sort of got out of hand as the scope and time duration of this project changed exponentially. I decided early on that I wanted this "book" to end in the summer of 1957—the summer between grade school and high school. The task then was to work backwards and recall as many memories worth telling. It should be noted that this exercise is another in the adventures of a recently retired person, who leaps at new opportunities and adventures with which to spend his discretionary time.

Lest anyone think that my long-term memory is as great as this memoir might suggest, let me acknowledge and thank the internet for the names of many long forgotten places, things and dates, as well as all the records and year books that my mother saved. In particular, I found the web site Mr. Lincoln, Route 66, and Other Highlights of Lincoln, Illinois researched and designed by Leigh Henson, Lincoln Community High School (LCHS) Class of 1960, to be a valuable help to this task.

No introduction of this memoir could be complete without revealing that Norm Dobbs did not exist during his childhood; that name wasn't associated with me or used by me or my friends until my college days. I was Norman or Norman Allen Dobbs in Lincoln, Illinois. My mother didn't approve of nicknames and as she said to me more than once: "Norman, if I had wanted to name you Norm, I would have, but I didn't; your name is Norman."

I must first acknowledge that the inspiration for this task was the fact that Bill Bryson's book was recommended to me by Mark Williamson from Montezuma, Indiana—my "damn good looking for a short guy" brother-in-law.

I am grateful for the helpful comments I received from Richard and Mona Raridon, who reviewed the initial draft of this product. Lee Ann is thanked and congratulated for tolerating yet another, post-retirement project and all the hours of me held up in the den, pounding away at the keyboard and rustling through boxes, papers, pictures and documents of my family history. Lee Ann also provided the grammatical and sentence structure checks, as she has with all my writings for 42 years. Finally, this effort culminated with the help of my daughter, Angie, who provided the design for the finished, printed product. Thanks to all, I couldn't have done it without your help.

Author's Foreword

If any descriptions of names or events in this memoir differ from the memories of my family and friends in Lincoln during the 1950s, I simply say sorry and accept the fact that this is how I have chosen to remember that bygone era, our childhood, our Americana of the 1950s…a half century ago. To all I say "enjoy," as I did in remembering and traveling down this memory lane.

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Chapter One

My Hometown

Lincoln, Illinois is located on I-55 (formally U.S. Route 66), between Bloomington and Springfield. Lincoln is and was a far cry from the Des Moines, Iowa of Bill Bryson's childhood. Des Moines is 5 hours and over 300 miles away in a northwesterly direction from the center of one state to another. With a population of nearly 300,000 in the 1950s to Lincoln's approximate 17,000, there can be no comparison, but we Lincolnites had the nearby "big cities" of Springfield, Decatur, Peoria and Bloomington for many of the luxuries which Bill Bryson experienced during his childhood in Des Moines. Then there were the occasional car trips to either Chicago or St. Louis; those were the really "big cities."

However, neither Des Moines nor any other city in the United States can boast that their town has the distinction of being the only town named for and by Abraham Lincoln before he became president. The history behind this distinction is worth documenting. Lincoln had a successful law practice in Springfield and central Illinois before serving in Congress and eventually becoming the 16th President of the United States in 1861. Included in the locations where Lincoln practiced were Postville and Mt. Pulaski in Logan County. In 1853, the Chicago and Alton railroad was extended northward from Springfield through Logan County to Bloomington. Lincoln was the railroad's attorney. A railroad station was slated to be constructed in Logan County, east of the community of Postville. Several individuals purchased land around the site of this station, the goal being to establish a town at that site and sell lots. Lincoln was engaged by the new town's founding fathers to handle the platting and legal requirements for the creation of this town and these individuals eventually asked if he would agree to have the town named after him. Lincoln agreed but reportedly declared that he didn't think they should do that as he never knew anyone named Lincoln who amounted to much. On August 27, 1853, Lincoln rode the train from Springfield, along with numerous prospective buyers, for the first public sale of lots in Lincoln. Lincoln christened the new town with a watermelon at ceremonies near the railroad

station at a location which eventually became the intersection of Broadway and Sangamon Streets. The Illinois state legislature had previously passed a bill authorizing the move of the Logan County seat from Mt. Pulaski to the area of the railroad station and the tract to be named Lincoln. This site was visited on two other occasions by Lincoln. President-elect Lincoln spoke here on November 21, 1860, while traveling to Chicago and Lincoln's funeral train stopped here on May 3, 1865, before completing the trip to Springfield. The principal streets of the newly created town all ran parallel or perpendicular to the railroad tracks. As Lincoln expanded it eventually met the north-south, east-west street grid of Postville at Union Street, which was adjacent to our house at the corner of Sixth and Union Street. In 1865, the towns of Lincoln and Postville were merged into the city of Lincoln, with the town of Postville becoming the Fourth Ward of Lincoln.

The early economic and social history of Lincoln was founded on agriculture and coal mining. Mines were located on all sides of the town and many of the early immigrants to Logan County worked in these mines. Much of Lincoln's growth slowed in the first decades of the 1900s. Just prior to and after World War II, new light industries came to Lincoln. Those that I remember include: Stetson China Company, Lincoln Glass Bottle Company, Lehn and Fink (cosmetics, deodorant, disinfectant), Pittsburg Plate Glass Company and the Corrugated Container factory, which we all called "the box factory."

In Flatland U.S.A., like most Midwestern towns, streets were laid out on a grid, either on the north-south, east-west compass axes or parallel to the railroad tracks. Lincoln eventually had both systems within its city boundaries. Most of the county roads were on a north-south, east-west orientation. We may not have appreciated the value of such a street or road layout scheme, growing up in the 1950s, but after over 40 years of traveling around this country and beyond, it is difficult to argue against the benefits of such a system. Lincoln, like most Midwestern towns was built around a downtown square, with the prerequisite courthouse with its cannon and monuments to the dead of at least two wars.

Before anyone asks if Lincoln had paved roads in the 1950s, let me set the record straight and say that paved streets of that era were mostly brick, with some sections of concrete. It would be decades before the present day asphalt paving techniques became standard. A bituminous road surface back then was constructed by first applying a heavy coating of hot asphalt, spreading a thin layer of small-sized stone and thoroughly rolling with a 10-ton steel roller. Freshly "paved" streets often gave up a small quantity of their oil coated stone to the fender wells and running boards of cars for weeks on end. Most of the

county roads outside the town were unpaved and gravel surfaced roads would "grow" chuck holes throughout the season, requiring regrading at least once or twice a year. Those chuck holes were the speed bumps of the 1950s.

One of the biggest construction projects I recall from the 1950s was the construction of the four-lane, Route 66 highway south to Springfield. This was a far improvement over the former two-lane highway. To the west of this highway, as with the former highway, were the ever present "snow fences" in winter. Snow fences were used to minimize the amount of snowdrift on roadways. These fences were constructed of wooden lath, stained a deep red color, wired together, and about four to five feet high. They were installed about one hundred feet from the road, on the side of the prevailing winds. Without these fences, a roadway could be buried in snow drifts in short order. Anyway, that is how it was 50-plus years ago, before global warming. One has to understand that central Illinois is flat as far as one can see. With the exception of one prominent topographic feature about eight miles south of Lincoln, Elkhart Hill, a glacial deposit—the highest point between Chicago and St. Louis—there are no natural features to break up the wind or blowing snow in central Illinois.

Like most small towns in the 1950s and before the current transient lifestyle, most everyone knew everyone in their neighborhood. Most people had lived in the same neighborhood for generations and the adults knew their neighbor's children and often the extended families of their neighbors.

Few people ever locked their doors; except I think we did since my parents had experienced a scare some years back when a wayward hobo wandered into our house. Hobos were not uncommon around our neighborhood since we were only a few blocks from the railroad. In fact, I can remember one morning my mother finding one asleep on our front porch swing.

Chapter Two

Family Roots

My father, Raymond A. Dobbs, was born on a farm west of Dix, Illinois, south of Centralia. This area of southern Illinois was on the northern boundary of an area known back then, to the locals, as "Little Egypt." There are several theories given to the origin of this nickname. One obvious theory, and more relevant to the extreme southern region of this area, is the comparison of the land near Cairo, Illinois and the confluence of the Mississippi and Ohio rivers to that of Egypt's Nile delta region. The theory that I find interesting is southern Illinois' role in supplying grain to central and northern Illinois following the "Winter of the Deep Snow" in 1830-31. Upper Illinois suffered from a long winter and late spring, so crops were not planted until June, and much of that harvest was killed by an early September frost. Southern Illinois had milder weather and produced grain, much of which was shipped north. Wagon trains came south and returned home with corn. Many saw this event as reminiscent of the Bible story of Jacob's sons going to Egypt to buy grain in order to survive a famine.

My father was one of seven children; he had two brothers, two sisters and two older, half-brothers. My father's mother, Girty, died on May 20, 1911, most likely from scarlet fever. Less than a year later, on January 2, 1912, his father, Lewis, died as a result of injuries suffered after being kicked in the chest by a mule on the family farm. On February 9, 1912, family and friends took my father (age 9), his brother Arley (age 12) and sister Ruby (age 11), younger siblings Edgar (age 6) and Mary Opal (age 4) one hundred and fifty miles north to live and to be raised at the Illinois Odd Fellows Children's Home in Lincoln. Unfortunately, due to overcrowding at the home at that time, the oldest of the Dobbs children was turned away and returned to southern Illinois. That was the last time my father and his brothers and sisters saw their older brother Arley, since he died a few years later of diphtheria. The Odd Fellows Children's Home accommodated about two hundred children and was a 156-acre working farm and included its own school, gym, boys and

girls dormitories, an administration building with a large kitchen and eating area as well as all the out-buildings and barns for the cattle and farming equipment of this self-sufficient orphanage. The administrative building, school, gymnasium and housing cottages of the orphanage were on Wyatt Ave., just north of Primm Road and the site of the new Lincoln Community High School. After high school, all of the Dobbs children returned to southern Illinois (Dix and Mt. Vernon area) and linked back up with their eldest half-brother and the father figure of the family: Alva Dobbs.

My father left southern Illinois sometime shortly afterwards and returned to Lincoln in order to accept a job opportunity at the Children's home, where he eventually became their head farmer. In Lincoln he also met and eventually married by mother, Hazel M. Cooper. My father suffered a back injury while working on the Odd Fellows farm which affected him the rest of his life. In 1942, I believe, he took a job at the newly opened Lincoln Glass Bottle Company where he worked as a foreman of the final bottle inspection and packing operation during my childhood years. I always enjoyed my dad taking me on a tour of this factory, from the glass making, molding and to the final boxing of the brown color bottles for shipment to beer breweries.

My mother had a farming background as well, being born and raised on a farm with her older brother Stanley near Beason, Illinois, about eight miles east of Lincoln. My mother lost her father, Grant Cooper, early in her teenage years. He died as a result of complications from an appendectomy. She moved to Lincoln to live with her widowed grandmother, Fanny Jones, on Sixth Street and to attend high school (LCHS class of 1922) just two blocks away. After my mother and father married they lived upstairs with her mother, Marie Cooper, and grandmother living downstairs.

Chapter Three

My Childhood Home: 103 Sixth Street

Located on the corner of Sixth Street and Union Street, our white, two-story wooden house was pretty distinctive in those days. It had gingerbread cornices, a large front porch, facing Sixth street, with a wooden swing, and a screened-in back porch. We had two kitchens: the modern one with a large dining table and what we called the back kitchen, where the old cook stove, fueled by either coal or corn cobs, was located. We had a detached, one and a half car garage at the rear of the property, a large vegetable and flower garden and a large backyard. The property was bordered on the two street sides by huge elm trees. The basement was a young boy's delight. It was dark and with lots of places to explore. The basement walls and floor were brick.

Sidewalks were everywhere in our part of town. Every block had them. If they weren't concrete they were brick. The brick sidewalks were never level, having experienced the effects of years of tree root growth. Therefore, neighbors with concrete sidewalks had to endure their use by us kids on our clamp-on roller skates. Sidewalks were also where most of us rode our bikes until we finally received permission from our parents to venture out onto the streets. Every homeowner was expected to keep the sidewalks adjacent to their property shoveled in the winter, especially as an aid to the mailman who delivered mail on foot and for the safety of us kids who walked to school.

Like most homes of that era, we had a common driveway between us and our neighbor for the use of coal trucks to deliver coal through the chute into the coal bin, a separate basement room. Until my father improved our heating distribution system, heat from the furnace was sent upwards to the first floor through large ducts to two, large floor registers: one in the living room and one in the back kitchen. Heat to the second floor was through one floor register in the upstairs hallway. When my father decided to modernize our heating arrangement, he dealt with Pluth Tin Shop whose craftsmen installed ductwork to each of the first story rooms and an automatic stoker and blower

system to the coal burning furnace.

A few years later, natural gas became available in Lincoln. Gas lines were installed throughout the town and many Lincolnites, including us, converted to gas fired furnaces. We began to experience the home heating standard which many of us still use today to judge the desirability of heating options. With more Lincolnites converting to gas, winter wonderland scenes in Lincoln stayed cleaner longer, since snowfalls were no longer blackened with coal dust and soot.

Early in my grade school years, a family decision was made to upgrade our house versus moving and buying a house in the country. My father tore off and rebuilt our screened-in back porch, lowered all the ceilings in our house from ten or twelve feet to eight feet, built wooden storm windows for all our windows, had new electrical and plumbing systems installed, covered the house in white aluminum siding and tore down the old garage and built a two car garage. We never had more than one car until I got my first car during my senior year in college. Even with these improvements, the house still had only one full bathroom upstairs and until the late 1950s, there wasn't a shower fixture in the tub.

One of the more sad experiences for our homestead was when our lovely old elm tree, on the Union Street side of our property, finally succumbed to the Dutch elm disease, as did all elm trees in Lincoln and throughout the country. There were not any tree removal services back in the 1950s in Lincoln. If you needed a tree removed, you either did the task yourself or "contracted" with the electric company's maintenance chief, who just happened to be a neighbor of ours, and arranged for him and his crew to arrive on a Saturday morning to do the task. Of course, you were expected to feed them and our back porch was the place where this crew was fed a full-course dinner (in the 1950s that's the noon meal; supper is the evening meal) along with an ample supply of cold, bottled Budweisers. What made this event memorable to me was that was the first and only time I ever saw beer or liquor in our house.

As with all homes at that time, nearly all the rooms, including the ceilings, were wallpapered. Re-papering was more-or-less routine, much like re-painting is today and always to the displeasure of most husbands, I suspect. The local paint stores, where wallpaper was sold, supplied the wallpaper hangers who would arrive, spread their white, canvas drop cloths from wall to wall, set-up their portable pasting tables, and begin the process of wallpapering. This is a skill that I always admired and never perfected to the level of those artisans. No good re-papering job could occur without, first removing the existing wallpaper and that was an adventure as well. What appeared to be small steam generators were moved from room to room, positioned, filled with water, and delivered steam through a hose system to the contraptions one held against the wall.

When I got my own room, right off the living room, I was given the option of the wall covering of choice. Much to my mother's disapproval, I chose knotty pine paneling, which my father installed, and the western theme of my kid's world was brought inside the house.

Chapter Four

A Boy's Life

Life for a kid in the 1950s was outside. Having fun was a priority and we made our own fun, invented our own games and all without the benefit of the organized events and activities which seem to occupy every moment of today's youth and their parents. We played outside in our back or front yards or in the alleys from morning until dark or until we were summoned home by our mothers calling from the back steps. All mothers in the neighborhood had a secret pact it seemed, because what we couldn't hear or chose not to hear, they did, and the women of the neighborhood would relay the "time to come home" message to us, regardless of where we were or were hiding.

Our heroes were the cowboys we saw on the silver screen at the Saturday afternoon double feature movies or listened to on the radio. Leading the list of our favorites were Hopalong Cassidy, Roy Rogers and Gene Autry. But my all-time favorite was Lash LaRue, the cowboy with the bullwhip and the ability to snatch the gun out of the bad guy's hand or pull the bad guy off his horse with nothing but his bullwhip. Lash LaRue, I'm certain, could teach Indiana Jones a thing or two about the use of bullwhips. I even had my own bullwhip, purchased at the Illinois State Fair in Springfield, and I practiced constantly in our backyard. Then, just as today, being able to see one of your childhood heroes up close and in person was a treat. For me and others, we were determined to get as close as possible to Rex Allen when he performed at the Logan County Fair one night during the fair. With my in-depth knowledge of the fair's features, a few of us managed to get inside the fenced off area around the "free-acts" stage, across from the grandstand in the infield, and actually got to shake the hand of cowboy star Rex Allen. On another occasion, my dad took us to the Illinois State Fair in the hopes of getting a glimpse of Gene Autry, who was performing there. We didn't see Mr. Autry, but we visited the barn where his horse Champion was stabled and got to see Champion and the "tack room", with all of Champion's saddles, bridles, halters, leads, blankets and the painted trunks for transporting all this gear. For Dad, an avid admirer of horses, this was a treat in itself.

Playing cowboys required toy cap guns, and those with the latest and greatest models were the envy of the other kids in the neighborhood. Cap guns evolved from the single-shot model, to the double-action models including six-shot revolvers which actually had a revolving cylinder and looked and operated just like the real thing. The ammunition or "caps" for these toy guns were small discs of explosive compounds, embedded onto a red color strip of paper which produced the noise and smoke, when hit by the gun's hammer or a hard object. Caps were sold in rolls with perforated holes between each of the discs. The double-action cap gun models hinged apart and one inserted a roll of caps into the gun, placed the holes onto the gun's mechanism, and pulled the end of the cap roll up under the gun's hammer. The gun would automatically feed the cap roll upwards with each pull of the trigger. The revolver model cap guns used a circular sheet of paper, with the caps aligned on the paper to match the gun's six-shot cylinders. "War games" between opposing cowboys were won or lost on the basis of who could still be shooting his gun or guns when the other's gun jammed or was out of ammunition. I was always interested in the hidden mechanism of the latest cap gun model, and much to the chagrin of my mother, she would often find me working feverishly at our kitchen table, trying to reassemble my newest cap gun. One needed either an extra hand or two and very little fingers to get those darn springs to go back into place.

Being properly attired was also a requirement of playing cowboys. One needed, as a minimum, a cowboy hat, cap gun and holster. While two-gun holsters were nice looking I suppose, we generally observed that they were only worn by the singing cowboys we saw in the movies. We all secretly wondered if these singing cowboys were real cowboys, at all. My Aunt Ops, as we all called her, was my secret source of authentic cowboy attire. She would return from her annual visits with her sister Ruby in Tucson, Arizona with new cowboy duds or boots for her nephew.

As we grew older and perfected our cowboy playing skills, I perceived an increasing neighborhood threat from either more bad guys or invading Indians. I, therefore, decided that the solution to this threat was to establish a kid's law enforcement force. So was born the Jr. Texas Ranger Detachment, at 103 6th Street for our neighborhood's protection. I set out to create our headquarters and recruit members. One of the empty upstairs bedrooms in our house became Jr. Texas Rangers HQ. This HQ gave us an excellent lookout post for observing approaching bad guys from either north or south on Union Street or on either Kankakee or Clinton Streets.

Our detachment's personnel records were maintained on 3x5 inch cards and filed alphabetically in a file box. The essential records included a person's complete name, including one's mysterious middle name, birthday, address, telephone number and a complete set of fingerprints. We eventually took and filed mug shots of all members. Our personnel files included information on Doug (Dougie) Dutz (my neighbor), my cousins (Linda, Bob and David Cooper), Alice Schmidt (from the Schmidt family down the street), Carol Barth from across the alley and even my black and white fox terrier dog Buttons. I can assure all former Jr. Texas Rangers, honorary members and others from my old neighborhood that your personal records have been destroyed so don't try a "Freedom of Information" request to the former Captain of this detachment.

The Jr. Texas Ranger detachment soon found it necessary to have a backyard fort. Since our apple tree didn't have the limb spans sufficient for a tree house, my father built an elevated, stand alone watchtower of sorts under the apple tree. But it was our fort just the same. It satisfied our requirement and it was affixed with a hand-painted sign, visible from the street, that this was Jr. Texas Ranger territory. The detachment's treasures and secret records were safeguarded in coffee cans, buried under the apple tree, with a map of their exact location hidden back at HQ.

With the Korean War armistice in the summer of 1953, the country was flooded with surplus army and navy gear and clothing. Playing army became more realistic if one was properly clothed and equipped with such gear. An Army & Navy Store opened in Lincoln, like in most every town throughout the country, but I had the best source of all. My older cousins (much older cousins became honorary uncles back then) in southern Illinois owned and operated Army & Navy Stores. With each summer's trip to southern Illinois (Salem, Centralia, Dix and Mt. Vernon), I would go on a shopping trip to my "Uncle" Lee's store in Mt. Vernon and "Uncle" Herb's store in Centralia and return to Lincoln with new gear. My most treasured piece of equipment was my Korean War era Army entrenching tool, which I still have today. Norman's well-equipped "army" was ready to dig-in and build its lines of defense in a vacant lot in the block across the street which was used to waste the excavated soil from the construction of the new Abraham Lincoln Memorial Hospital on 8th Street.

Another favorite play area was the abandoned barn on the backside of Miss Gerard's property, across the street and on the alley, just across from the dirt piles and our army area. To the probable shock of today's parents, we played in that structure unsupervised, with all its rusty nails, sharp objects and the second story hay loft. I'm sure we planned to reinstall a rope to the hay loft

pulley system, but I can't remember if we ever pulled off that feat or not. This was "our barn", another of our secret hideouts.

Dougie Dutz and I practiced our rope climbing and rappelling techniques on the open exterior stairwell to the basement of the Zion Lutheran Church just up S. Kankakee Street from my house. That game came to a quick stop one evening when we discovered that the lack of our knot tying ability could have disastrous consequences. I was left hanging with a slip knotted rope around my waist; wind knocked out of me and scared to death. We each agreed that there wasn't time to run for help. Dougie was able to finally push and lift me enough from one of the steps that I could eventually grab the top of the stairwell and pull myself to freedom. We each ran home, never told anyone of this experience and never practiced rappelling again!

John Poloney's mom was my Cub Scout Den Mother (Pack 105) and we met over at his home on Fourth Street. One memory I have of my Boy Scout experience is the occasion when the troop participated in a Sunday afternoon "get-out-the-vote" campaign in our part of Lincoln. We went from door to door, with door knob flyers, encouraging everyone to vote in the upcoming presidential elections, along with "I like Ike" flyers. So much for political correctness; that was then and not now. I assume you can guess that Lincoln was heavily Republican. Former Illinois Governor Adlai Stevenson didn't stand a chance against the popular World War II hero General Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1952 and we Lincolnite Boy Scouts ensured that the 1956 election was no different.

Most Lincolnites were involved in the historic Lincoln Centennial Celebration events during the summer of 1953. Grand performances were staged in front of the grandstand at the fairgrounds during August and if one didn't attend at least one of these events, one was surely a participant. My mother and others from her Rebekah Lodge were part of these events, as well as most Cub and Boy Scouts, including us from Pack 105. The historic significance of this Centennial was lost on many of us, certainly to me. It was boring, it was something we were told we had to do or go to, and besides, it detracted from Jr. Texas Ranger duties and other fun things. We were no different then, I suppose, as most kids today. As a kid, the significance of history or related events is usually lost. One can only hope that in one's later life, the importance of appreciating and learning from history's events and lessons is discovered and valued.

When we were old enough to ride our bicycles on the street, the entire town of Lincoln opened up for us. I can remember riding my bike all over town and being gone the better part of a day, except to come home for dinner and supper. And all of us kids did this without the benefit of 10-speeds, water bottles, helmets, gloves, backpacks, rain gear, etc.; quite a contrast to later generations. With this means of transportation we were able to explore and perform various scientific experiments such as determining if pennies laid on a railroad track would cause a train to derail. None of our trains ever left the track as a result of our actions, but we collected our share of smashed pennies.

I made a graduated water gauge from a two-by-four and Dougie and I used our bikes to transport it for installation under a newly constructed box culvert on N. Union Street on a creek near David Alexander's home. We returned to this site after every major storm event to observe the high-water mark on our gauge. For the record, my one-speed Schwinn bicycle accompanied me to college and I logged many a mile on the bike lanes from Weston Hall, on the south end of the campus of the University of Illinois, to north of Green Street and to the Engineering buildings and beyond.

When the wiffleball was invented in 1953 it became an instant hit. Dougie and I logged more innings and games of wiffleball than most kids in our neighborhood. Sure, having teams was OK, but just the two of us played and perfected our pitching skills with the wiffleball on a routine basis. Our wiffleball field was in front of the Dutz house, next to our house. Home plate was just in front of their front porch concrete steps. The pitching mound was at the top of the concrete steps, coming up from the street and just north of the sidewalk. The foul lines were from home plate to one tree in front of our house and in the other direction to a tree just to the west of the Dutz house. The boundary for a single was anywhere past the pitching mound and in front of the street curb. A double was anywhere in the street. A triple was between the far street curb and the south edge of the sidewalk, across the street. A home run was anywhere past the sidewalk on the other side of the street. Unlike today, the original wiffleball bat was wooden, not plastic. Most motorists would expect kids playing "ball" in the front yard to stop when a car drove by for fear of hitting the car with the ball. We didn't; after all, wiffleballs don't do any damage, right? Well, our games got called occasionally when our parents caught us ignoring passing traffic. See, there they go again, interfering with us just having fun. Of course the biggest danger we faced with this game was as a result of our wiffleball field, itself. There was about a six foot change in elevation from the sidewalk in front of our houses and Sixth Street, the sidewalks and steps were concrete (with exposed edges), and there was a steep concrete drive from the street to the area between our houses, for the coal trucks. In other words, there were hard surfaces everywhere, nothing

to soften the fall when one drove to catch a fly ball or line drive. While our wiffleball didn't break anything, that I recall, our playing field resulted in many scrapes, cuts, bruises and torn jeans. We were encouraged to take our wiffleball games to either the backyard or the alley and we did, on occasion, but the real games were always out in front on Sixth Street.

Looking back on our "kid's world" of the 1950s, I'm sure that we should all be very thankful that we survived. I'm sure I was the exception to the rule never having suffered a broken bone as a result of our antics. In the decades to follow, those days and the opportunities of the 1950s would never be experienced again or most likely allowed by succeeding generations of parents.

Chapter Five

Home Life and Growing Up

In Lincoln or at least in the Dobbs household, television was not something we had in the early to mid-1950s. Rather, we relied upon the radio for our home entertainment. Like most others, our radio was in a large and beautiful wooden console and was most likely either a Philco or a Zenith. As with TV consoles a few years later, the radio was a fine piece of furniture and commanded a focal point in the living room. I'm sure I'm forgetting a few, but some of our favorite radio shows included the WLS Barn Dance on Saturday evenings from Chicago, the WLS Breakfast Club in the mornings, Gunsmoke, Death Valley Days, Amos & Andy, the Bob Hope Show, Father Knows Best, Evening with George Burns, Red Skelton, Edgar Bergen & Charlie McCarthy, Fibber McGee & Molly and Name That Tune with the announcer calling out "stop the music" when a contestant indicated they knew the tune. As with many of these shows, my other favorite cowboy shows on the radio, which eventually made it to TV, included Sky King and Sergeant Preston of the Yukon.

I'm certain that we were the last house in Lincoln to get a television; if not the last, then close to it. Friends of my parents, Edgar and Carmen Leonard, would invite us out to their house, on Nicholoson Road just north of Route 66, to watch evening TV shows, mostly the "snowy" reception of Channel 3 (CBS) from Champaign, 60 miles away. I remember going there in the early 1950s to watch the Lincoln High School Railsplitters when they advanced to the "Sweet 16" of the Illinois High School Basketball Tournament in the legionary Huff Gym on the campus of the University of Illinois…the Lincoln Railsplitters lost. Finally my dad relented and we got a TV. My mom visited her friend and former school mate David Hanger of Hanger's Music Shop to pick out our TV. I remember racing home from Central Grade School to see the newest addition to our home. The tower antenna which was affixed to the top of our second story hip roof, and anchored with guy wires to each corner

of the roof, seemed to reach to the sky. From the antenna, three sets of wires snaked down the roof and the side of the house, each in off-set insulators. One wire was the antenna wire; another was the ground wire and finally the control wire to the rotor motor. The RCA console model took up a focal point in our living room on the wall opposite the radio. What some may find hard to believe today, but it seemed that TVs back then took nearly five minutes to warm up, not to mention that there were only three channels (ABC, NBC and CBS) and these were not on the air 24/7. I seem to recall that their test patterns appeared on the screen until almost noon, in our area, and that most stations went off the air at 10:00 p.m., generally after the late evening news.

In Lincoln, as in most parts of the country, reception was from an exterior antenna. In rural areas and small towns like Lincoln, the antenna had to be turned in the direction of the TV station to receive the signal. The motor to turn the antenna was controlled from a "rotor box" which sat on top of the TV. In Lincoln TV stations came from Champaign to the east, Peoria to the northwest, Springfield to the south and Decatur to the southeast. TV dealers also provided a TV repair service, which included repairmen making house calls with their suitcase-sized tool boxes, full of every kind of vacuum tube they might need; everything, but a picture tube. When a picture tube blew, you needed a new TV set.

Behind us and across the alley was the Dial (& Jones) Texaco Service Station. Having a gas station this close had many advantages to the kids in the neighborhood. Soda drinks, which we called "pop", came in glass bottles and only cost five cents and either Coca-Cola or Orange Crush were the sodas of choice for me. A real treat was when a package of peanuts was emptied into the coke and sucked up and savored with the drink. However, you had to be careful when doing this that you didn't get too carried away and suck a peanut up into your nasal passage.

The gas station was also the source of popsicles, ice cream bars and sandwiches, fudge bars, candy bars and candy cigarettes; all so close and so convenient, especially during a truce or break in our cowboy or war games. The gas station became our neighborhood gathering place and our second home on weekends, after school and during the summer. It was also where we went to use their air hose to inflate our bicycle tires and basketballs. Life must have been really dull for any kid in the 1950s that didn't live close to a gas station. I can't imagine how they managed.

Each gas station back then was full-service, meaning that when one drove in for gas, the gas was pumped by an attendant, who also cleaned the windshield, and checked the oil, all for free, every time. Cars back then used a lot of oil and an oil top-off was generally required after every third or fourth gas fill-up. Therefore, gas stations always had a huge supply of empty oil cans, stored in a 55-gallon barrel out near the alley. These empty oil cans inspired a game we played in the alley called "kick the can", a version of Hide and Seek, but where the can is home base, a kickable home base.

The gas station also supplied the raw material for a unique game and toy which I contend us neighborhood kids invented. Discarded automobile or bicycle tire inner tubes were the source of our "rubber band" ammunition and hinge material for our "rubber band" guns. Crosscut pieces of the inner tubes became our "rubber bands." The size of the gun was dependent upon the size and elasticity of the "rubber band" we choose to cut from an inner tube. The body of the gun was most likely a piece of 2x4 or 1x6 or whatever scrap piece of wood we found. The trigger and hammer combination was usually a 1x2 piece of wood, attached and hinged to the gun by tightly stretched inner tube bands, forming a L- shaped gun. A short nail was affixed to the gun "barrel" to act as both the front sight and as the attachment point for the "rubber band." Then the "rubber band" was stretched backwards and held in place by the hinged trigger/hammer. To shoot or launch the "rubber band", one simply pushed the bottom of the 1x2 trigger/hammer forward, thus releasing the "rubber band." We constantly tweaked our "rubber band" weaponry designs and assembled our ammunition supply for the evening's "wars."

The 1950s was Detroit's Golden Age. After World War II and the Korean Conflict, car companies took advantage of an abundance of steel and introduced new models, along with features such as power steering, power brakes, and automatic transmissions. That was the era when the cars were trimmed out with lots of chrome, inside and out. There were many models to choose from, many of which are no longer in production such as: the De Soto, Edsel, Hudson, Nash, Packard, Plymouth, Rambler and Studebaker to list a few which we 1950 kids will remember. With the aide of my dad's binoculars, honorary Jr. Texas Ranger Alice Schmidt could identify any car by model and year from two to four blocks away. Her father was an auto mechanic and she afforded our detachment the ability to identify any car which we pretended may contain "bad guys."

Unlike today, pickup trucks were not owned by "city folks," only farmers and utility company workers drove pickup trucks. My father always put a large galvanized tub in the trunk of our car to haul bulky things like corn cobs, gravel, top soil and even blocks of ice. I can remember blocks of ice being either bought from the ice truck, which roamed the streets of Lincoln, or brought home from the Ice Plant out on North Kickapoo Street for our

kitchen's "ice box." Like people in Des Moines, Lincolnites invited their family and friends over to marvel at new home appliances and our first electric refrigerator was no exception. Even after we got our first electric refrigerator, my mother would still admonish me about standing in front of the refrigerator with the door open.

By the mid-1950s, affluent Americans were trading in their cars at a rate of about every two or three years in order to experience the dramatic styling and engineering changes which Detroit auto makers offered, but not the Dobbs Family. My father believed that one should own and operate an automobile for at least 10 years before trading it in. I didn't know it then, but learned much later, that he and my mother would save-up to buy a new automobile with cash, no car loans for them, and it took about 10 years on his salary to save up for a new car purchase. Another requirement was that the car color was always the same: black. Our car in the 1950s was a black, 4-door Plymouth.

My mother and father's frugal habits were obviously the result of their upbringings and being newlyweds at the start of the Great Depression in 1929 and living through that era. To my knowledge, they never took out a loan for anything. They saved money and paid cash for everything or we did without. They had checking and savings accounts, but they always kept a stash of cash locked away in the cedar chest at the foot of their bed, which also contained all their important papers.

Having cash on hand in those days was important since door-to-door salesmen could arrive at any time. The Fuller Brush Man and the vacuum cleaner salesmen were common visitors. The vacuum cleaner salesman would always come in and set up the latest vacuum cleaner model, with gobs of attachments, and commence to clean the entire living room to demonstrate the newest vacuum cleaner's great features.

Getting fitted for shoes was never better than with the use of the foot X-ray machine at the Thom McCann Shoe Store. I wonder if an estimate was ever made of how much of a total radiation dose we all received from these devices.

Green River sodas were the greatest and available at Alvey's Drug Store, which had the authentic black marble soda fountain bar. For the thickest and best tasting milk shakes or malts in Lincoln, you went to Rigg's Dairy. An ice cream chocolate soda at Kresege's soda fountain was often my treat after a shopping trip downtown with my mother. Ey's Bakery was where your mother went for "store-made" coffee cakes, cookies, cakes and pies.

Lincoln didn't have escalators or revolving doors; one had to go to the "big cities" of Springfield, Decatur, Peoria or Bloomington to experience these attractions. But Lincoln had two-story department stores which had elevators and elevator attendants who always wore white gloves. Self-service elevators were a decade or more away.

Party-line telephones were also common and you learned to listen for your ring and to be patient and wait your turn to place an outgoing call. I can't recall anyone having more than one telephone in those days; ours was a wall mounted variety in a corner of the living room, with a chair and small table for a note pad and the telephone directory.

With the exception of the A&P Supermarket, I don't remember any other chain-type grocery stores in Lincoln; all the others were family owned and operated. Close to our neighborhood were both Lyons Brothers Grocery and Kerpan's Grocery. Eventually I got the job of riding my bicycle to these to pick up some things for my mother. One didn't need to have cash, especially at Lyons Brothers Grocery, because they ran a tab for most of their regular customers and you paid once a month.

Also close to home was Sieb's Hatcheries and the source of live chickens which my father brought home on Saturday to slaughter for Sunday's dinner. This was an experience which I stayed far, far away from, but since my mother, father and grandmother all had farming backgrounds this was a common practice for them. In our garage were the ceremonial stump and the old hatchet. This equipment would be brought out into the backyard and my father would sever the heads from the chickens and then let them run around and bleed out in the backyard. All the time, remember, we lived on a corner lot with four streets bringing traffic by our house. Then my mother and grandmother would take over with the cleaning, feather plucking and everything else you do to chickens to get them ready for the traditional fried chicken meal or chicken and dumplings on Sunday.

Most kids in the 1950s thought that their mother was a good cook and I was no exception. It wasn't until years later that I learned that there were more than four seasonings: salt, pepper, ketchup and mustard. Our menu was mainly of the meat and potatoes variety, and chicken and dumplings; no ethnic culinary adventures for us. We had one traditional Sunday evening meal which I don't think is in any of today's cookbooks. It was called fried mush and eaten with maple syrup. It was made from the left-over corn meal mush, which was served for breakfast.

Homemade pies, cakes and cookies were always available in our house. My favorites were cherry pie, oatmeal cookies and chocolate cake. We seldom "ate out", but when we did, the Blu-Inn Restaurant was most likely where we went, out near the road intersection known as the "Four Corners." For

some reason, we wouldn't venture across the highway to The Tropics very often. This may have been because of the cocktail lounge being just inside the entrance.

When pizza arrived in central Illinois, it didn't make its appearance in Lincoln until it was first tasted and tested in Springfield and the other "big cities." I can remember us driving to Springfield for the express purpose of tasting this new fangled thing called a pizza. Not surprisingly, it was not a hit with either my father or mother. Eventually pizza caught on in Lincoln, so much so that Guzzardo's Pizza is still there and operating today, I think.

Hamburgers, milk shakes and curb-service drive-ins are some of the food memories I have of the 1950s. Steak 'n Shake was founded in 1934 in Normal, Illinois, north of Lincoln on Rt. 66. We would drive up there to enjoy their famous steakburgers, fries and milk shakes maybe once or twice a year.In the 1950s and before the days of McDonalds, there were family owned hamburger places in every town and kids everywhere knew where to buy the best 15 cent hamburgers. My favorite was an establishment, whose name I have since forgotten, on the corner of Stringer Avenue and Fifth Street, on the former Business Route 66. The western portion of 17th Street or Woodland Road, out by the fairgrounds, became the location for Lincoln's "fast food" restaurants of the 1950s. Dairy Queen was the first, followed by Dog 'n Suds and A&W, where their Coney dogs and root beer floats were the best.

Lest I forget, medical care in the 1950s was not at all like today. For example, doctors made house calls, after their office hours if you were too sick or unable to visit their office. My memories of my times in the dentist chair are all not good. For some weird reason, my dentist (name withheld for fear of a lawsuit) didn't believe in the use of Novocain, except for tooth extractions…maybe. I'm sure my finger indentions are still present in an antique dentist chair somewhere; they were made under severe pain, I can assure you! Our dentist also didn't believe in braces. Crooked teeth would just grow back crooked and you've wasted your money was what I remember him telling my mother; therefore, I still have crooked teeth.

I'm certain that every household in Lincoln and elsewhere in the 1950s had their own time-tested medical home remedies and ours was no exception. In my case, I recall two home favorites; one common and one—perhaps—not commonly practiced. Of course, Vicks was commonplace in all medicine cabinets. At the first sign of a cold, especially if it settled in the head or chest, I was given a liberal rub down of Vicks and wrapped in a tee shirt material to hold the heat in. If a sore throat persisted, and if gargling with either salt water or Listerine didn't bring relief, then the condition warranted eating a

good dose of Vicks off your mother's finger. For the unconventional treatment and as a last measure before a trip to the doctor to treat a cold which resulted in a constant coughing, a healthy swig of good old coal oil usually did the trick. Dad kept a five gallon can of coal oil in our basement to fuel the oil lamps he kept in reserve for when Reddy Kilowatt went out and, therefore, there was always a supply of this multi-use petroleum product in our house.

Living through the 1950s and not suffering any broken bones was one exception, but not having suffered appendicitis is another feat that I cannot explain. One appendicitis memory I have is after visiting my cousin David in the St. Clara hospital with my mother. Upon leaving the hospital, my mother told me that appendicitis is caused by picking one's nose and eating the buggers; "Now let that be a lesson to you young man," she said. Seriously, my parents, like all others, were paranoid over the possibility that their children would catch the dreaded polio disease.

Living half way between Chicago and St. Louis, many Lincolnites were torn between being fans for the Chicago Cubs or the St. Louis Cardinals. In the 1950s as in the years and decades prior, baseball was our national pastime and everyone followed their favorite baseball team. We bought and traded baseball cards and chewed a ton of baseball card bubble gum. As Bill Bryson described, the World Series was played, back then, during the day and for school age kids, we were forced to wait until the afternoon recess period to learn of the game's progress and for the weekends to listen to the broadcast of the entire game.

Unlike many of my friends, my favorite team was the Brooklyn Dodgers, with players Roy Campanella, Gil Hodges, Don Newcombe, Duke Snider, Jackie Robinson, Pee Wee Reese and Sandy Koufax. Both Dougie Dutz and I faithfully followed the Dodgers' progress each year. When they reached the World Series in 1952 we were really excited, only to be disappointed when they got beaten by those darn New York Yankees. Then, the same thing happens the next year…heck! But in 1955 our ship came in. The Brooklyn Dodgers beat those Yankees to win the World Series in Yankee Stadium. What a memory!

What became my very worst childhood memory occurred at Lincoln Lakes, Lincoln's manmade beach and lake, a product from the dredging of sand and gravel by the Lincoln Sand and Gravel Company. Since neither my mother nor father ever learned to swim, my learning to swim was a priority with my mother. Red Cross swim lessons at Lincoln Lakes was a routine summer event. During one exercise where we were practicing swimming on our back, back and forth, beside the first series of ropes, I stopped and stood up. Unfortunately, I was in a hole and immediately went under, swallowed a great

deal of water and panicked big-time. I'm pretty sure that I went under three times and was sure I was going to drown before being rescued by schoolmate Bill Deiss, who was the only one who saw me in distress.

That event resulted in me becoming petrified of deep water and I refused to jump into water over my head after that. Naturally I didn't get certified as a swimmer that summer, the next, or the next, and didn't experience any of the water sports enjoyed by others growing up. For the record, I finally "learned" to swim during my freshman year at the University of Illinois when I signed up for swimming and eventually was certified and graduated from that PE class by swimming the required one mile in the Old Men's Gym. However, my swimming abilities are not great and I still don't like to have my head under water, so treading water, dog paddling and swimming on my back are the extent of what I will do in the water if I must.

Chapter Six

Family Outings

Our family entertainment was somewhat limited, essentially since my father worked shift-work at the glass bottle factory and worked a second job as the grounds-keeper at the Logan County Fairgrounds. But I remember some family outings to the Bennis Auto-View, our local drive-in theater. My father would normally fall fast asleep during most any movie, as well as in church on Sundays where he sat between my mother and me, and it was our job to keep nudging him when his head started to nod.

Summer vacations were far and few between, except for our annual trips to visit the Dobbs families in southern Illinois. However, I do remember one vacation to the Ozarks, one to Wisconsin Dells, another to Washington, D.C. and Gettysburg, and trips to the zoos in Chicago and St. Louis and to a St. Louis Browns' baseball game at Sportsman Park, renamed in 1953 to Busch Stadium, and a visit to Anheuser-Busch's Grant Farm in St. Louis. We also visited the Smoky Mountains in the 1950s and experienced pan-handling bears on the road to Newfound Gap. These car trips also included the fun of experiencing the newest and latest Burma Shave signs and "See Rock City" signs painted on barn roofs, for a place in far off Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Not many people today would approve, but two things we commonly did were to chase fire trucks and tornadoes. With the sound of the fire truck sirens or news on the radio that a tornado had been sighted, we often ran to the car and headed out on our chase. I vividly remember us coming really close to one tornado, just north of town.

One advantage of being an only child is that you don't have to share the back seat of your parent's car with anyone. In my case, I would often lie down and sleep on most long-distance car trips. This often got me in trouble on two counts; first I was not paying attention to the crops as we drove along. My dad could talk endlessly about crops and cattle and he was always commenting on the condition of each farmer's livestock and crops. In the spring of each year and throughout the growing season, I would be constantly quizzed if I knew what was growing in each field, even, I swear, if the seedlings had just

sprouted. “What is that over there, Norman?” my father would ask. This question was generally answered with an “I dunno.” The expectation was that Raymond Dobbs’ son should be able to instantly recognize wheat, corn, soy beans, alfalfa, winter clover and god knows what else anytime, anywhere. Dad would always admonish me with “That’ll come in handy someday, son.” Today, some 50 years later, I’m still waiting to learn when and how this knowledge will come in handy.

Another reason to not sleep on car trips, especially to Southern Illinois, was that I was expected to remember every landmark in order to be able to drive to all of the Dobbs family locations. It’s surprising how much some of your childhood memories stick with you, without even trying. I could still drive that Lincoln to Mt. Vernon trip without a map or much attention to the road signs. The route includes Route 121 to Decatur, Route 51 through Pana and to Vandalia, and past the former Capital Building of Illinois. Then a left turn and then a right-hand turn and onward to either the Route 50 turnoff to Salem or east from Centralia to Route 37 and south to Dix or Mt. Vernon. I am also certain that I could still find the old Dobbs family homestead in Rome Township of Jefferson County as well as the Little Grove Cemetery, near Walnut Hill, south of Centralia, where most of my dad’s southern Illinois Dobbs family members are buried.

Unlike today, back in the 1950s a favorite Sunday afternoon event was to “go for a drive.” It didn’t matter where you went, you just took a drive. In our case it was usually to observe the crops and see if the corn crop that year was going to be “knee high by the fourth” (Fourth of July) or to visit friends or relatives. With gasoline prices back then at about 25 cents a gallon, the economics of automobile ownership were a far cry from today. However, I have recently read that when one considers the inflation factors over the past 50 years, the relative cost of gasoline then and now is supposedly the same. I haven’t taken the time to verify that assertion and I doubt if I will try.

In Lincoln in the 1950s there were two common forms of money raising events for every church and civic organization and these events became routine family outings. In the summer were ice cream socials, where hand-dipped ice cream was served with either homemade cake or pie. My favorite ice cream social was the one my father and mother’s Odd Fellows and Rebekah Lodges held each summer out at the Orphans’ Home. A large tent was erected in front of the Administration Building for this event. My father and mother always helped with the set-up and worked this event, and I was my father’s helper with the ice cream dipping.

The other fundraiser events I remember were the chili suppers, with the cake and pie desserts. Everyone had them in the winter and if one wanted one could most likely attend a chili or oyster soup supper once a week.

Chapter Seven

Family Traditions

We had one tradition not shared by many. Each Labor Day weekend, many of the children who had been raised at the Illinois Odd Fellows Children's Home would return for their Sons and Daughters Reunion at the Orphans Home on Wyatt Avenue. My Uncle Ed and Aunt Opal would usually arrive on Saturday morning and would stay with us. The "sons and daughters" would arrive by car and train from all over the state of Illinois and as far away as California. Since my father had worked at the Home for over a decade as their head farmer, he knew the boys who had worked with him on the farm, in addition to the children who had been raised there when he was a kid. Another attendee at this event each year was my Lincolnite schoolmate Jim Shoemaker since his father Bill had been raised at the Home.

On Sunday evening a large dinner was served for all these people, their families and many of the Home's former teachers, dormitory staff, and employees. This was a huge "family reunion" affair, followed by songs and the usual barbershop quartet sing-along enthusiastically led by Ray Auler with help from his good friend and "partner in crime": my Uncle Ed. After the sing-alongs and before their business meeting got underway, we kids were excused to play outside and roam around. Ray Auler's son, Bob, was several years older than me, but took a Jr. Texas Ranger under his care as we explored the buildings and hideouts with our flashlights. I met up with Bob Auler many years later at the University of Illinois when he was the late night disc jockey for the University's radio station in the basement of my residence hall, Weston Hall. Bob went on to become a prominent attorney in Urbana, Illinois.

For breakfast on Labor Day morning before everyone started home, bacon and eggs were cooked on the Home's brick outdoor grill behind the Administration Building. My Uncle Ed was always the chief cook for this event. My Uncle Ed was President of this Sons and Daughters organization in 1954-55.

Every family has their Christmas traditions and most are fairly similar I'm

sure. In our household, everything happened on Christmas morning: Santa had arrived and it was only then that the wrapped presents could be opened. Upon learning that other families opened their presents on Christmas Eve, I always thought that I was being unjustly punished. And, for the record, I always, always wanted a Lionel train set. I asked for and begged for a Lionel train set every year, but never got one. I always thought that I would buy one for myself someday, but then the reality of where would I set it up sank in and I reluctantly realized that my parents most likely had the same concerns. Parents are always right, it seems. Our house was not blessed with a fireplace or a chimney big enough for Santa, so it was decided early on that Santa would be encouraged to come through the side door of our house, and that door was always left unlocked on Christmas Eve, after his milk and cookies were placed on our family desk in the living room. I'm sure my dad partook of this evening snack when he got home from his second shift. On Christmas day, my mother's brother, my Uncle Stanley, and his family—my Aunt Alma and Cousins Linda, Bob and David—would join my mom, dad and my grandmother, Nanny, for Christmas dinner. Because of my father's shift work at the glass bottle factory, he would only be present for this meal once about every three years. For those years when he worked, my mom would pack up a complete Christmas dinner and we would take it out to him. After dinner, Linda, Bob, David and I would go off to play with my new toys, go upstairs to Jr. Texas Ranger HQ for some ranger work, or get bundled up in our winter clothes and go play outside to play in the snow. Of course, getting into trouble and getting yelled at—even on Christmas Day—was something which couldn't be avoided. For some strange reason, we weren't supposed to chase each other up and down the stairs or slide down the banister. Then, the worst transgression of all and what normally ended our escapades for awhile was when the boys were perceived as "picking on Linda." It wasn't fair; either Linda would rat us out or Nanny would come to her rescue and then the moms would get into the act and everyone knows how this is going to turn out, right? Boys always lose, girls always win! But in spite of all the trouble we caused or got ourselves into, these Christmas Days and other visits by my Cousins Linda, Bob and David to our home resulted in many good times and memories for all of us.

Chapter Eight

Gone Fishing (or Hunting)

My father tried to convey to me the skills of fishing and hunting, but this was one kid who never passed the grade nor became proficient at either, much less acquired the desire to perfect those skills. First let's talk about fishing. My first fishing adventures were with a cane pole. Dad and I would take up a place on a creek bank, usually around the abandoned bridges on Salt Creek, just beyond Holly Cross and Old Union cemeteries. Each of us would cast our line, with hook and sinker, into the water. Oh yes, I almost forgot, first one had to attach a worm onto the hook. That was a task I didn't relish and eventually Dad would have to perform that chore. Then you wait, you wait, you wait and in our case or my case, nothing happens. Well something did happen during these fishing trips. Unlike my father, I was blond with fair skin which didn't tan but instead got beet red, and my blood has a special additive that attracts mosquitoes from miles around. If fun means baiting a hook with a live worm, sitting on some damn creek bank, getting a third degree sunburn, eaten alive by mosquitoes, and not catching a single fish all day, then that's fun for someone else, but not me! Nor did standing next to running water have a Zen quality for me that I'm told all who fly fish understand. Nope, Salt Creek and our other fishing creeks did not give me any feelings of peace. The only buzz I ever experienced was the constant buzzing and blood sucking of a thousand mosquitoes.

Finally it was determined that my trouble was all with the equipment and so I acquired a rod and reel, like all the real fishermen, and I was now ready and equipped to begin to enjoy the thrill of fishing. It was to be so easy, simply cast the line far out into the creek and slowly reel it in; the fish always bite moving bait. Sounds like a plan, you say, but first I had to cast and there's another skill my father and Cousin Bob could do in their sleep, but not I. While Cousin Bob would cast away as the perfect fisherman and a catch enough to feed a large family, I experienced the frustrations of line backlash

and spent every fishing trip either untangling my line or getting it out of the tree roots along side the bank or from debris in the creek. Fishing, as you may guess, did not become my sport of choice.

Let's move on to hunting, another thrilling outdoor experience for dads and sons. First you have to perfect your marksmanship abilities and I excelled at that with my father's 22 cal. Remington single-shot rifle. One of my more frequent places to target practice was on a farm east of Mt. Pulaski where my mother's cousin and her family lived. Whenever we would visit, I would take my dad's rifle, ammunition and a supply of targets: tin cans. After awhile, I was allowed to go outside and practice my shooting skills versus staying inside and listening to discussions about the price of corn, wheat, soy beans, hogs, politics and all that other grown up stuff.

I got very good at shooting and eventually plugged a quarter (coin) out at about one mile. Maybe it wasn't exactly one mile, but it was pretty far away, trust me. Confirmation of the mastery of my marksmanship skills was confirmed years later with the attainment of sharpshooter status at Boy Scout Summer Camp in Bloomington, Illinois and Army ROTC Summer Camp at Fort Riley, Kansas.

With my rifle marksmanship perfected, I was finally ready for some real hunting. First my dad and I tried my luck at squirrel hunting. Has anyone ever shot a squirrel in a tree with a 22-cal. rifle? It's damn difficult if not impossible; where's a shotgun when you need one? Well, we moved on and tracked rabbits in the snow and finally on one winter hunting trip I bagged a rabbit. Then the total hunting experience really began. In our basement, with me holding the legs of the rabbit, my dad demonstrated the process of skinning and cleaning the game. Now, that's fun to some folks, but not something I wanted to repeat. Needless to say and even with the culinary expertise of my mother and grandmother in the preparation and cooking of this one rabbit, I gracefully retired from most future hunting experiences and I'm certain my dad wondered if his son would ever acquire any manly skills.

Chapter Nine

Central Grade School

Lincoln had several neighborhood grade schools and mine was only two blocks away. Unlike my other classmates, there were spies in my grade school who were watching me all the time. I was sure that my mother knew everything I either did or didn't do because of these people. First and foremost, my Uncle Stanley was the head janitor at this school and I would see him most every day. I was certain he wouldn't snitch on me, but one never knew. Next the principal was a friend of my mother and they had gone to school together. Finally, and far worse than anything else, one of my teachers had taught my mother in a rural grade school many years before. As all boys who grew up in the 1950s will attest, we had it much worse in school than the girls, especially in grade school. In Lincoln we had exactly the same kind of teachers as did Bill Bryson in Des Moines, Iowa. They were all women, all spinsters, large, lumpy, suspicious, dictatorial, and unkind, and they all hated boys or so we thought.

We had public service movies shown to us in the school gymnasium and got our dose of films of the above ground atomic bomb tests in both Nevada, near some place called Las Vegas, and on the Marshall Islands in the Pacific Ocean. We had Civil Defense drills and fire drills.

The school gymnasium was also where we all lined up for shots by the local doctors and nurses each year. It was in this gymnasium that we all took the first oral polio vaccines and the days of fear of this dreaded disease rapidly diminished, much to the relief of our parents.

Report cards were a big deal back then and I was under constant stress and pressure to get "straight A's" as my mother and, I suppose, her mother had gotten in school. Such was not going to be the case, but we—meaning the home tutoring I received—sure tried. Since music was one "class" I recall being mentioned on our report cards, I want the world to know that I think it represented the most unfair of all entries on one's report card back then. What if one, like myself, couldn't sing or carry a tune? Couldn't then, and

can't now. The study of human genetics had not advanced back in the 1950s where an understanding of a person's natural abilities was understood and accepted. In my case, I remember the dreaded comments and suggestions on my report card year in and year out about how Norman should practice his singing more, etc. *&%$#@!

Cloakrooms—every school had them. They were that little "hallway" type room at the rear of the classroom where all the coats, hats, black rubber boots with buckles and those wimpy galoshes were stored. Cloakrooms were also where the teacher took the unruly boy—never a girl—for administering corporal punishment (it was "legal" back then) with a belt or yardstick. The fear of being sent to either the cloakroom or the principal's office for corporal punishment was enough to deter most of us. But, some rebelled throughout grade school, and beyond. One boy, who I won't name for fear that I may be mistaken, swore all of us to secrecy one day and told us that only one out of every two or three whacks with the belt or yardstick ever struck his behind; the others were against either the wall or someone's hanging coat. The goal of the teacher was to put the fear of god into the minds of the other boys by the sound of the whipping.

My remembrances of Central Grade School would not be complete without some mention of our recess activities. Our playground equipment consisted of the standard stuff: merry-go-round, slide, jungle gym and monkey bars. For the most part, recess was segregated with the girls doing their thing and the boys theirs. The usual games such as red light/green light, tag, Simon says and dodge ball were played but three activities which I doubt are experienced or tolerated today included marbles, the arrival of the yo-yo man, and our version of a game which we may have called "Stretch."

Marbles involved bringing one's bag of marbles to school, along with your favorite "shooter." Things were fine until some wise-guy would substitute a "steelie" (a ball bearing) for his "shooter" and with an "eye drops" move, smash your favorite "shooter" into dust particles. The guys with "steelies" were often those with either farm connections or boys whose father worked as an automobile mechanic. Among the guys who had access to ball bearings, the challenge was to come to school with a bigger "steelie" than anyone else.

The annual spring arrival of the Yo-Yo man was greeted with great enthusiasm since that meant he would introduce us to the latest yo-yo models and tricks. Soon thereafter, we would race to either Ace Novelty or the Kresge's toy department to buy one of the latest yo-yo models.

Now to our version of a pocket knife game which I think we called "Stretch", but I may be mistaken. Regardless, here is how it was played: two boys face off, one goes first and throws his pocket knife (we all carried pocket knives to school back then), two opposing blades open, and attempts to stick the knife into the ground close, but a challenging distance, away from the opponent. The other guy would then have to move one foot to that location and it was his turn to repeat the knife throwing exercise. The game was over when one player either, chickened out, fell down or a knife stuck in someone's shoe. A mother got really upset when her son came home from school with a knife mark in his leather shoes. You can only imagine the impact that would have on our future recesses; the recess police would increase their vigilance of our playground games.

As we advanced in grade school, the boys all looked forward to seventh and eighth grades. In those years, the classes were segregated by sex for one class each year and finally we would have the benefit of a male teacher, Ray Hitchcock in my case. The girls all took home ec (economics) which consisted of learning to sew and cook. The boys went to shop class where we learned drafting or "mechanical drawing" one semester and the other we worked to avoid cutting off one of our appendages as we built the required pump lamp and hat rack, among other woodworking projects.

At the last PTA meeting of each grade school year, the seventh and eighth grade home ec and shop students would display their projects. The girls had their sewing projects to show off. The boys had the results of all their hand and power tool experiences. The "pump lamp" project was a Central School tradition. It was a replica of hand-crank water pump and was intended to be used on an end table, most likely for a guy's bedroom. The base of the lamp was fashioned from a 1x6 and a 1x4, glued together, with a hole drilled sideways and through the center to accommodate the lamp wire. The stem of the pump was a 2x2, drilled to accommodate the lamp socket stud and lamp wire. On one side of the 2x2 was drilled and chiseled out an approximate 1x1 opening to accommodate a movable pump handle, cut and shaped from a 1x piece of wood, to which the lamp socket pull-chain was attached. Completing the pump lamp was a pump spout on the side opposite the pump handle, cut and shaped from a 1x. The finished product was carefully sanded and either stained or painted; mine was stained.

Finally, after six long years, I found myself in the dreaded second floor, corner classroom of seventh and eighth grade arithmetic, taught by Lincoln's legendary math and most feared teacher: Miss Mattie Anderson. Miss Anderson had taught my mother arithmetic many years before, a fact that was shared with the entire class the very first day and often thereafter when I

didn't measure up to her standards or as she would tell everyone: "Norman's mother would have gotten that problem correct." I was not alone with such treatment. Any student with older brothers or sisters, who had studied under Miss Anderson, was always compared as far inferior to their older siblings, regardless if it was true or not.

Miss Anderson exposed us to a unique method of teaching, one also followed in high school some three years later by my high school algebra teacher, Ms. Joos. Based upon how well you were doing on your tests and homework assignments, you were put onto "trains": the "fast train" or "best" students were seated in the two or three rows closest to her desk, and then there were the "slow" or "slowest" trains in the remaining rows. Each "train" had different assignments and the "fast train" students were expected to finish all or more of the textbook than their less studious or intelligent classmates. Reassignment to "trains" would occur at the whim of Miss Anderson and she would kick kids off the "fast train" with a fanfare that one would not soon forget. As with all grade school classes, seats were assigned by the teacher and my seat was always in the front row, very near to Miss Anderson's desk where I had the pleasure of being watched like a hawk and having to smell that god-awful perfume or whatever it was she wore or her body emitted. The one good thing about eighth grade for me was that I didn't have Miss Anderson for homeroom; her homeroom students had to endure her for more than just arithmetic. In spite of all we had to endure with Miss Anderson, one thing was certain for most of us; we didn't leave the eighth grade without knowing arithmetic.

Chapter Ten

The Logan County Fair

In the 1950s, county and state fairs were a big deal. Everyone looked forward to them and everyone bragged that their fair was bigger and better than all the rest. In Lincoln, we were no different; our fair was advertised as "Illinois' Cleanest and Best County Fair." The Logan County Fair was always held the first week in August.

Our county fair had special meaning to me since my father had worked at the fair since its inception in 1937 as the chief groundskeeper and, during the harness racing events, he was the designated "Superintendent of Speed", meaning he was responsible for getting the race track into tip top shape for the pacers and trotters each year. As far back as I can remember, I always went with my dad to the fairgrounds and observed and tried to help with all his jobs. He, and only he, knew where all the standpipes and shutoff values were for the water lines and each fall we would shut off the water, drain the lines and reverse the process in the spring. Repairs to these old galvanized water lines were something my dad did with ease. In fact, I don't recall any job too small or too large that he couldn't handle, either at the fairgrounds or around our house. In the trunk of our car was an old wooden milk crate, filled with wrenches, pliers, screwdrivers, you name it. My dad would pull a tool out of that box and fix anything that needed fixing.

Dad and his good friend Cal Broughton, head maintenance foreman for the Logan County Highway Department, were the principals in carving out and constructing the race track at the fairgrounds. Well-known local horseman Edgar Leonard taught my dad and Cal the fine art of producing just the right "cushion" on the race track for the harness races. One of my earliest fairgrounds memories is sitting on Cal's lap as he operated the highway grader, reshaping the racetrack and the infield ditches.

Standing on the left side of the tractor or perched on the left fender, while my dad mowed the fairgrounds or worked the race track, was something I looked forward to each spring and summer. As I got a little older, my dad and

I became a well oiled track crew as I jumped off the tractor, sometimes while it was still running, to wrestle the log chain as one harrow was changed out for another. I was also the one to climb up on the water truck tank for refilling duties. It was at the fairgrounds that I was able to hone my skills at driving a tractor, and eventually a car, way before my sixteenth birthday. My tractor driving skills resulted in me performing most of the fairgrounds mowing chores for my dad as my principal summer job during high school.

My father, mother and I traveled all over Illinois during the summer, visiting other county fairs. My dad would pass out business cards, advertising our fair dates and the purse amounts for our harness races. This was done in order to attract Illinois' finest harness horses to our fair, to serve as a final practice before the Illinois State Fair, which began the week following our fair. Dad would also use these fair visits to observe what kinds of homemade harrows and other equipment others were using to work their race tracks. Either Cal or one of his County Highway Dept. co-workers and my dad made all of the fair's race track equipment. When new harrow teeth were needed to be made or sharpened, he took the job to the blacksmith shop on Clinton Street just up the street from our house. To a kid back then, or at least me, a trip to the blacksmith shop and an opportunity to watch the belt-driven devices and the forging of metal shapes and parts was almost as much fun as a visit to a candy store. This was where we took our push mower each year for the reel blades to be sharpened.

Throughout my childhood and young adult years, the Logan County Fair was a big part of my life. During college and after my father's death in 1962, I actually took on my father's race track duties for two summers, with help from his old friend Cal Broughton. It seems that my entire childhood was spent playing in and working with dirt. Perhaps this gave me a special appreciation for dirt and maybe that's why I choose Civil Engineering as my college major. It wasn't until some years later, in my junior year in CE 210, that I learned that the earth's outer crust is soil, not dirt; dirt is what you get under your fingernails...from soil.

The fair was not all work for me. As with all of us who looked forward to each year's fair dates, fair food was something to behold. In particular, we all had our favorite lemon shakeup stand. Mine was on the north side of the race track. Lemon shakeups were lemonade, made in a special way. A fresh lemon was cut in half and reamed in a glass tumbler; sugar, water and ice were added; then the glass tumbler was covered and vigorously shook. The resulting mixture was served in a tall paper cup to the thirsty buyer. The best corn dogs anywhere, slathered with a liberal coating of mustard, were at a stand just north of the grandstand. A serving of very salty French fries and maybe a stick of cotton candy would complete one's gourmet fair treat.

No evening was complete without many walks around and through the carnival and stops at the mechanical cranes. These devices, inside glass cases, and with prizes—small novelty toys—on the bottom, were the carnival game which took most of our weekly allowances. Terry Werth and I would spend hours, it seemed, playing this device, trying to swing the crane's clamshell against the glass case and drop it right over the piece we wanted. One was always envious of someone playing another crane which seemed to respond better to the operator's directions. Therefore, you would carefully watch until the instant this other crane became available and then race to become its new operator. However, the new crane would always change its mechanical characteristics the minute you took possession of it.

Of course, the fair was the place to be seen. In the evening, boys and girls in groups of three or four "walked the fair", usually from the south end of the grandstand up to Carl Lauer's dad's Ford farm implement dealership tent, back again, and through the carnival area. We retraced our route until time to meet up with our parents or when the evening's horse show was over.

The Logan County Fair left another permanent mark on me, as I'm reminded each year when I visit my dermatologist. As Doctor Sharp examines my forehead and arms for those precancerous lesions, he always remarks: "You were just a fair-skinned white boy who got too much sun when you were young." If he only knew; the annual chores at the fairgrounds resulted in more than one case of severe sunburn each summer, not to mention my annual "farmer's tan" (face, neck and arms).

Chapter Eleven

The Beginning of Teen Years

As the 1957 graduating class from Central Grade School in Lincoln, Illinois, raced to this milestone in our lives, we retired our comic books, Boys Life magazines, Hardy Boy books and became interested in science, space and the great beyond, and began reading "Popular Science" and "Popular Mechanics" for stories about the forthcoming space program by the U.S.A.

My early adventure with building crystal radios eventually expanded into the desire for radio receptions from far away and thus created the need for a short wave radio. With the help of my dad, I installed a dipole antenna between two of our roof chimneys and connected the antenna to the shortwave radio in my room. Every evening, I would put on the headphones, so as not to disturb my father, and listened to the BBC and shortwave messages from ham operators all over the world.

The summer of 1956 was the start of one of my most memorable childhood experiences. Having never tried out for Pony League Baseball before, this was the last season of my eligibility, and I was determined to play Pony League Baseball just once. Fortunately I was "drafted", picked or assigned to play on the Langellier Motor Company's (our local Ford, Mercury, Lincoln dealership) baseball team with my childhood buddy Terry Werth, along with another rookie that year: Tommy Zurkammer. Surprisingly, I became the starting third baseman on this team but I was not a batter whom our coach, John Alexander, or our manager, John Miller, could depend upon. Regardless of the number of hours my father spent working with me, when it came my time at bat, the results were generally disastrous and a huge embarrassment to me, the team and my father. Don't people understand that you have but a nanosecond to assess if that white blur, coming at you at Mach 2, will either hit you, be within the strike zone or not. I usually prayed that it would be outside the strike zone and waited to be walked or I either struck out or was called out on strikes by the umpire. Understandably, I was the guy the other team would trash talk with the usual "easy out, easy out…" cat calls. Our team was

otherwise blessed since we had the league's ace pitchers in the likes of Tommy Zurkammer and Bob Miller. Tommy was our Pony League's Sandy Koufax and boy could he throw "heat." We climbed through the league's standings, no thanks to me, to eventually meet in the championship game at the end of the season. But, wait—let's go back—let's examine my contributions (or not) to the team's success that year. My play at third base got perfected such that I could be depended upon to catch ground balls hit in my direction and throw to first base for the out or to second base for a double play. Bob Alexander, our catcher, and I practiced the pick off plays and we got to be a formidable team. As a normal routine, he could stand up and rifle a throw down to me to pick-off the man attempting to steal third base.

One day, however, we were playing a game at the Odd Fellows Children Home's field during the day, as opposed to the early evening. The sun was going to be a factor that afternoon, which I would learn all too well. Sometime during the game, with a man on second and about to steal third, our catcher signaled me that the pick off throw was coming my way. I positioned myself in front of the third base bag, with my arm outstretched to catch the throw and tag the man out. Everything was as it should have been except…when the ball left the catcher's throwing hand, it and the sun became one and the next thing I knew the ball was bouncing off my chest and the runner was safe. To the fans and my dad, this was nothing to cheer about; just another baseball embarrassment by Third Baseman Norman Dobbs.

Now it's the day of our championship playoff game. We are excited. On the afternoon of that game I accompany my mother to do some shopping downtown and during that excursion, my mom slams our car door on my right hand, damn near smashing the middle finger of my right throwing hand. The finger is not broken, but it just as well should have been. It's bloody, black and blue and swollen beyond belief. My mom cleans and bandages it up and the result is a very extended finger, you know, "the finger!" The game is at 6:30 p.m. or thereabouts and at the Central School ball field just two blocks from our house.

The first thing our coach and manager did was to attempt to assess how far I could throw a baseball in this condition. Playing third base was not an option, since I could barely throw the ball past the pitcher's mound. Playing shortstop was no better, but it was decided that I would play second base since I could at least lob the ball to first base from that position. Now it's time for that "easy out" player to try and bat. Can you imagine the trash talk as I walked to the batter's box with this extended, bandaged "finger" sticking out for all to see? I don't remember the opposing pitcher, it could have been Bill

Grimsley or Jim Griffin but it doesn't matter.

I was determined that night on the last Pony League game of the season to not be another "easy out," bandaged finger or not. The results, for me, were pretty spectacular for I hit not one, but two line drives out of the infield for singles or doubles and we went on to win the game and the league championship. Such are the life and times of Pony League baseball player Norman Dobbs from Lincoln, Illinois.

In other baseball news, the Brooklyn Dodgers played their last game at Ebbets Field on September 29, 1957, moved west and became the Los Angeles Dodgers the next year.

In October 1957, our lives and the world we had once known changed forever. For it was on October 4, 1957 that the Russians put their spacecraft Sputnik 1 into orbit. Then a month later, the Russians put an even larger and heavier satellite, Sputnik 2, carrying the dog Laika, into orbit. In Lincoln and in the rest of the country, we watched on television one Vanguard rocket after another lift off the launching pad at Cape Canaveral only to blow up. Finally, on January 31, 1958, a Jupiter-C rocket sent Explorer 1 into orbit and the space race between the Russians and the U.S. was underway and the rest, as they say, is history. I was a freshman at Lincoln Community High School at that time in the same high school and the same building that my mother had attended 40 years earlier.

Left: The Dobbs Children. Photo taken February 9, 1912, the day the Dobbs siblings entered the Illinois Odd Fellows Orphans' Home in Lincoln. From left, front to back, Edgar and Opal; Raymond (my father) and Ruby. Brother Arley in the rear was not admitted to the Home because of crowded conditions.

Below: The Cooper Children: My mother Hazel and her brother Stanley; circa 1908.

Above: My parents' engagement picture, circa 1929.

Right: My parents at their home on 6th Street, circa 1930s.

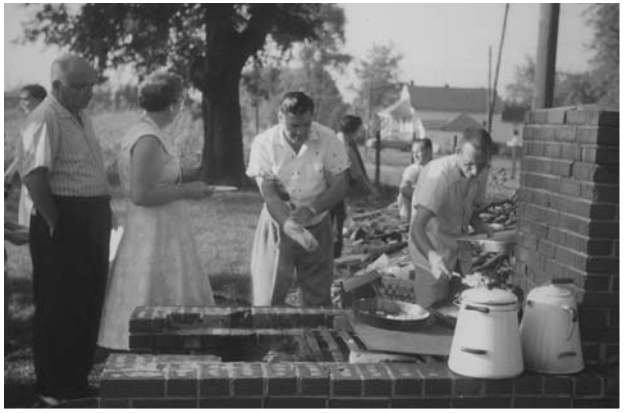
Top: Lincoln's downtown square and Logan County Courthouse, circa mid-1950s *(Leigh Henson photo)*

Above: Our house in summer (notice the brick streets) and our house in winter.

Right: 8th Birthday. Without a camera flash, all posed family pictures were taken outside, circa 1951.

Above: Norman and Buttons, circa 1953.

Right: Norman and his dad; circa 1952.



Left: Uncle Ed Dobbs, center, cooking breakfast at the Sons and Daughters Reunion at the Orphans Home on Labor Day.

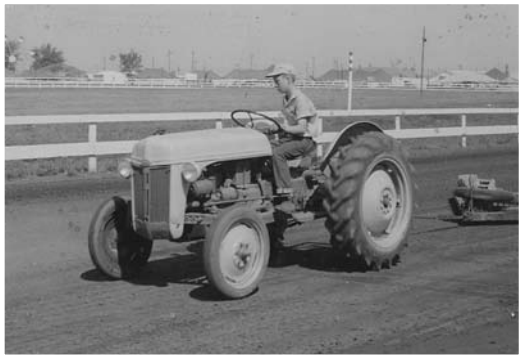
Below: Norman captures Christmas dinner at the Dobbs'; clockwise from top: Cousin David, Marie (Nanny) Cooper, Cousin Linda, Dad, Uncle Stanley, Aunt Alma, Mom, and Cousin Robert, partially hidden.

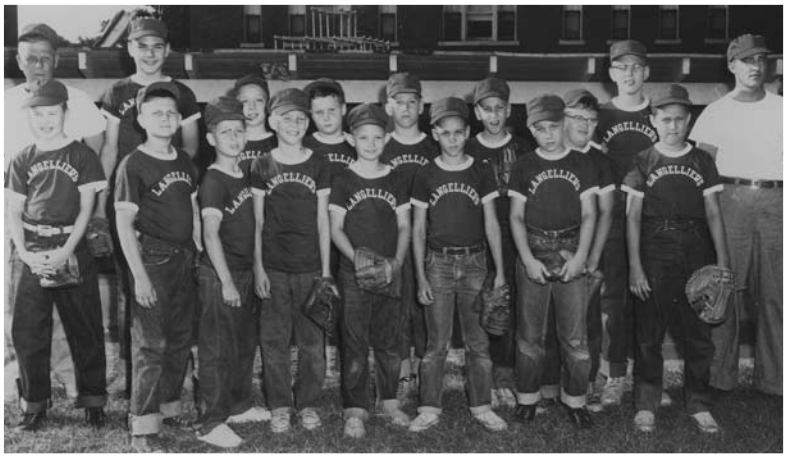
Left: Central Grade School, 101 Eighth Street.
(Leigh Henson photo)

Below: Central Grade School's Marching Band.

Above: Dad (left) and Cal Broughton (right) with Norman grading the infield at the fairgrounds, circa 1948.

Right: Norman working the race track;, circa 1955.





Top: Harness racing at the Logan County Fair *(from Paul Gleason's* Lincoln: A Pictorial History*)*

Above: Langellier Pony League Baseball Team. *Front row (l-r): Bob Miller, Robert Choates, Tom Bunner, John George, Dick Logan, Tom Jones, Larry Spurling, Bob Alexander. Back row (l-r): John Alexander (Coach), Tom Zurkammer, Norman, Rick Dearborn, Frank Richard, John Taylor, Leo Logan, Terry Werth, and John Miller (Manager).*

Above: Norman's 8th Grade graduation picture, circa 1957.

Right: Typical summer attire in the 1950s

Author's Footnote

I'm sure that the character and personality of a person is formed some, if not to a large degree, by one's childhood experiences. In my case, I'm certain that growing up in Lincoln, Illinois in the 1950s played a big part of who I became. There is one person and set of experiences which laid the foundation for some lessons which I wish I had learned and practiced much earlier in my adult life. The person responsible is Joe Hackett. Joe Hackett was the cousin of the comedian Buddy Hackett and Joe was our very own class clown. I sat across from Joe in one of our Central Grade School classes and was immediately drawn into his humor and antics. If he didn't get me and others sucked into trouble with the teachers for unacceptable behavior, then it wasn't one of Joe's better days. I "blame" Joe for inspiring me to do some really silly things in grade school, high school, college and even in my professional career; all of which I will not share. Nevertheless, Joe made us laugh and doesn't it seem odd that while fun was so easy to have as a youngster, it seemed so much harder to have as an adult? Therefore, the lesson I wish to share from Joe's influence is that we shouldn't take ourselves too seriously; learn to laugh at ourselves and laugh with others. In addition to remembering my Uncle Ed saying: "Take time to smell the roses along the way." I would add: "…and take the time to smile, laugh and have fun."

About the Author

Norm Dobbs graduated from Lincoln Community High School in Lincoln, Illinois, in 1961. He subsequently graduated from the University of Illinois with a B.S. degree in Civil Engineering and a Regular Army commission in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Norm married his college sweetheart Lee Ann Waclaw, from Danville, Illinois, one week after he graduated/survived the U.S. Army Airborne School at Fort Benning, Georgia. The initial years of Norm's professional career were with the U.S. Army and encompassed over ten years and included assignments in Germany, very close to the then East German border, as a nuclear weapons specialist; as a Construction Company Commander in Vietnam; an Army ROTC instructor at South Dakota State University in Brookings, South Dakota; advanced Army schooling at Fort Belvoir, Virginia; and finally as a Corps of Engineer project officer on the $200 million Smithland Locks and Dam project on the Ohio River, near Paducah, Kentucky. The next 31 years of Norm's professional career included obtaining a MBA degree from Murray State University, and work as an engineer and engineering manager with the Union Carbide Nuclear Division and subsequent government contractors managing the uranium enrichment plant at Paducah, Kentucky and at the original World War II Manhattan Project plant sites at Oak Ridge, Tennessee. Norm retired from the Y-12 Nuclear Weapons Plant in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. Norm and Lee Ann live in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. They have two grown children: Marc of Orlando, Florida, and Angie of Knoxville, Tennessee. Norm still plays and works in the "dirt," although today he does it in his yard and garden as an aide to his accomplished Master Gardener wife Lee Ann.