

IN NORTH MINNEAPOLIS

# Sawmill City Boyhood

Melvin Lynn Frank

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*THE FRANK FAMILY posed for this snapshot in 1921 when Melvin, the author, was fourteen. Also shown are his mother, Laura; sister, Bonnie; and younger brother, Clifford.*

*ship in denominational and civic organizations. The Franks have two children — Forrest J. Frank, professor of chemistry at Illinois Wesleyan University, Bloomington, and Mrs. Karen King, supervisor of special education at Pasadena, California.*

NORTH MINNEAPOLIS was a great place to be a boy during the first couple of decades of this century, and the neighborhood of Lowry Avenue and the Mississippi River was the best. A kid was always aware of the adventures possible along the river, and there was always the aroma of freshly cut pine lumber and the smell of wood smoke from the steam plant of the Northland Pine Company sawmill.

My family lived first on Washington Avenue between Lowry and Thirty-third avenues North. We came to live



*ARTHUR FRANK, Melvin's father, operated the Twin City Rapid Transit Company's power substation at Lowry Avenue and Third Street North.*

there in 1910 when I was three years old. My father, Arthur Albert Frank, began work as the operator of the Twin City Rapid Transit Company's power substation on Lowry and Third Street, one block west of Washington Avenue. Dad had been on the crew of a generator plant on the Apple River near his birthplace at Osceola, Wisconsin. Grandfather Peter Olaf Frank had been of the generation that Vilhelm Moberg writes about in his stories of the Swedish immigrants who settled there in Polk, County, Wisconsin. He emigrated in 1862 from Malmo, Sweden.

Dad had little formal education — just through the third grade in the country school a half mile from the family farm. As the eldest son, he quit school at an early age to be the houseman and cook after his mother's death. While on the job at Apple River, Dad had met my mother, Laura, a daughter of Peter Linn, a Danish immigrant who had settled in Hudson, Wisconsin. Their first home was in a company house near the power plant at Apple River. I was born in the front bedroom of my grandfather's house on Hudson's Kinnikinnic Street.

The job with the streetcar company was a good one for Dad in spite of the long hours. He was his own boss in the sense that he was in charge of the station and was the supervisor of the engineering students from the University of Minnesota who worked evenings from six to eleven o'clock and did most of their studying on the job. Dad handled the maintenance chores during the daytime.

Washington Avenue was the chief commercial street, the main drag on the north side. The streetcars ran there on a long line that extended from Cedar Avenue and Lake Street on the south end to Camden Place and,

later, Fifty-fourth Avenue at the north. From downtown to Forty-fourth Avenue North there had long been numerous sawmills, sash and door factories, cooperages, and other wood-products factories. One of the city streetcar barns on Washington Avenue extended from Twenty-fourth Avenue to Twenty-sixth. These rapid transit facilities served the sawmills and the residential areas of the north side and were the reason for the powerhouse where Dad worked.

Sawmills had occupied both the east and west sides of the Mississippi all the way north from St. Anthony Falls to Forty-fourth. People from all over the city rode the streetcars to work. They were the most efficient and least expensive mass transportation available, and with the use of transfers it was possible to go from anywhere in the city to anywhere else for five cents. Two fares would take you anywhere in the Twin Cities — and on regularly scheduled runs.

Our Lowry Avenue stop on Washington Avenue was where the mill hands got off the streetcar for the Northland Pine Company sawmill. These were the workers who did not reside in the immediate neighborhood. They had only a three-block walk to their work from the car stop. Men who lived in our community had no more than a hike of six to eight blocks to their jobs, and they were a familiar sight in their denim work clothes and heavy boots and, of course, carrying their metal lunch buckets.

Clustered around the sawmill were all of the community institutions and organizations that were an important part of the neighborhood. Since the lumber company had given up use of the stables during the moribund period of Backus-Brooks ownership (1899–

1905) and before the Weyerhaeuser company bought it and started operation, there were many employees who had their own horses (all the transportation around the mill was horse-powered). Teams and singles were needed to haul the sawed lumber from mill to yard and from the yard to the planing mill, where seasoned rough stock was turned into finished material.

Johnson's Blacksmith Shop at Lowry and Washington served the teamsters of the neighborhood. This was a small, simple, warehouse-type structure with its heavily planked floor and a bricked forge area where the smith pumped the fire with his bellows as he worked the metal horseshoes. One of my earliest recollections is of being awakened by the ring of blacksmith Johnson's hammer on his anvil as he pounded the shoes into form to fit the hooves of sawmill horses. With one hand he pumped the bellows and with the other maneuvered the tongs and the horseshoe amid the bright coals to bring it to heat again and again until he finally had hammered it to a perfect fit.

How fascinating for a small boy to watch the blacksmith apply the hot shoe to the hoof! Johnson seemed to hold the horse erect with his hefty shoulder while he cut away the worn foot debris until it was right for fitting. Then he set the new shoe in place. I always wondered at the patience of the horse, especially when the hot shoe raised acrid smoke that filled the air. Johnson was patient, too, with us youngsters, who watched spellbound from the double-doored opening, edging always closer until he gestured for us to retreat to a safer distance.

What an imposing man that Johnson was, with his

*DRESSED UP in their "Sunday best" clothes, including shiny button shoes, Melvin (right) and his brother Clifford sat for this portrait on the steps of the substation.*



long, heavy leathern apron and wool shirt that in summer and winter covered his muscular frame and brawny arms. On his head he wore a grease-darkened hat that covered his mass of graying hair. In his mouth he held a huge "chaw" of tobacco that bulged his cheek, and now and again he raised a cloud of steam when he spat into the hot coals of his forge.

In summer the wide doors of the blacksmith shop stood open to give ventilation against the heat that bore down on Johnson and the horses being shod. On those warm days the horses were restive because of the flies that pestered them, and their swishing tails in turn annoyed the sweating blacksmith. Besides us kids there seemed always to be men watching Johnson at his work. Usually they were teamsters waiting for him to finish work on their horses or neighborhood men who had a small job for him to do. Sweat was the common smell that lingered about the shop — animal sweat and the perspiration of the men whose days were given to hard work. It was honest sweat for which no one apologized.

ONE OF THOSE teamsters was Frank Berry. He lived on Third Street down the block and across from the power station and was one of Dad's neighborhood friends. They visited oftentimes when Frank would stop in and sit a while in the little cubicle that served as my father's office. This was never a drawn-out occasion, for both were busy men.

Berry had a fine team of horses he was very proud of. We knew him around the neighborhood as the man who delivered kindling to our houses. Most of the women cooked with wood ranges, especially in winter, for few houses had central heating. At our house, after we moved from the cottage on Washington to 3226 Sixth Street North, mother had a three-burner gas plate for use in summer when the wood-burning cookstove made the room unbearable. But in winter the kitchen stove was a welcome addition to the base burner, or Cole's Hot Blast Heater, that warmed the house.

Frank Berry drove for the B-B Fuel Company, a Backus-Brooks subsidiary located across Lowry from the sawmill and close to the Soo Line tracks. He was only one of a number of men who hauled coal or kindling wood to the consumers in the neighborhood. The vehicle used was a dumpcart with a heavy box that rode over the axle on large wheels. At the front of the cart were two small wheels over which the driver's seat was located just ahead of the dump box. I recall that Frank usually walked beside the rig, doubtless because it was as uncomfortable to ride as the proverbial lumber wagon. The carts were loaded at the sawmill and set off to one side until the teamsters could deliver them somewhere on the north side.

It was always Berry who delivered the wood to our house, probably because Dad ordered through him. He





backed the cart very neatly into the yard from the alley and dumped the green wood close by the woodshed door. I loved the smell of the fresh-cut pine and enjoyed piling the wood in the shed that was attached to the back of the house. I liked to see the pile grow as Frank delivered load after load during the summer so that the wood had time to dry out for use during the winter.

It was my pleasure, too, to show off the carefully stacked wood to Dad when he came home after work. He was always appreciative. The growing woodpile gave both of us a sense of security. There was also a coalbin in the shed, and one day late in summer Berry delivered

anthracite coal for the heating stove. That hard coal made a heavy rumble when each scoop of the fuel slid down the steel chute as Frank shoveled it from the wagon. Winter, then as now, was a long struggle against the chill. It was a good feeling to know that both wood and coal were stocked up in the shed.

When the first snow came to lie deep on the city, Berry would undertake the job for which he was hired by the Minneapolis Street Department. He would start out with his horses pulling a heavy, V-shaped plow to clear the snow from the sidewalks. The plow was sidewalk width, with plank sides, steel-bound, and with weight enough to push the snow aside. If it snowed on a Saturday or during winter vacation, we kids would run along behind the plow and find excitement in keeping up with the horses. We noted their steamy breath as they responded to Frank's "Get along, boys."

Frank kept his horses in the barn back of his house on Third Street, north of Lowry and next to the Morrison Memorial Baptist Mission Chapel. Sometime during the winter, I am sure, Dad and Berry discussed plans for the garden my father kept back of the powerhouse. They arranged for Frank first to lay a blanket of manure from his barnyard and then at the right time to bring over his wagon with the walking plow. Walking behind his team, both hands on the plow handles, reins hanging around his neck, Frank turned over the soil as he cut the furrows. Then he leveled the garden plot with his harrow further to prepare the ground for planting.

It would be hard to imagine how we could have made out without the help of the genial little man, Frank Berry, who the long year round came and went, fulfilling the needs of our family and many others who depended on him and his faithful team of horses — Bob and Joe.

CATER-CORNER from the powerhouse was an indispensable adjunct to the sawmill community — the Minneapolis Fire Department's Station 18, "the fire barn." Similar engine houses were located at intervals on both sides of the river to defend the sawmills against the most dreaded threat to the lumber industry — fire. The story of the Minneapolis sawmills is in the epitaph of a number of them — "destroyed by fire."

Deep in my memory is the burning of the C. A. Smith Company mill at Forty-third Avenue North and the river when I was a small boy. I recall that early in the evening of that day my father took me by streetcar to Camden Place, from which we walked to a vantage point where we watched the flames and smoke as the mill and lumber piles were destroyed. It was an awesome sight as the orange and red tongues of fire illuminated the night sky and brightened the surrounding neighborhood. We saw the firemen pour streams of water from their hoses on the burning structure only to have the fierce heat turn the water to steam without stemming the flames. Sparks

and burning fragments of wood flew upward in the firestorm created by the conflagration.

Among the fire fighters were men we knew from the Station 18 company. The captain of the crew directed the men with loud shouts. He stood out in his white rubber coat and helmet which contrasted with the black rubber gear of the crewmen. When Dad had seen all he could bear, he carried me off on his shoulders to a distant hydrant where there stood the gleaming steam pumper working to force the water from the hydrant through the winding hoses under high pressure. The rotund pumper operator was the usually jovial Pat (I do not remember his last name) of the Station 18 outfit. But now he was all business as he fed coal into the firebox, checked the gauges, and cared for the horses that stood ill at ease amid all the excitement. My father exchanged a few remarks with Pat, and then we made our way homeward, pausing now and then to look back at the blaze that still burned furiously.

The fire barn, or "enginehouse" as the department preferred to call it, was an intriguing place. I haunted it, and as I grew older became acquainted not only with the crew members but with their work routine. (The crew, of course, was always on duty when it was in the house and subject to being called for a run at any time. Members divided their days, with time on and time off, usually with twenty-four-hour duty every other day.)

The men began their workday after descending the brass pole from the dormitory section on the second floor. There the dozen or so crew members on duty slept in the common bedroom with its neatly made cots set in rows. The descent came after they had showered, shaved, and breakfasted before the morning inspection time. Each man had his special assignment in the morning in caring for equipment and horses and harnesses. On the heavily planked first floor were three rigs — the impressive hook-and-ladder, the hose cart, and the steam pumper. The men polished this equipment's heavy red enamel and gleaming brass and nickel metalwork.

The men of each rig also shared in caring for the horses kept in the stalls in the stable section at the back of the station, but under the same roof. The stable's trigger-release doors swung open when the dispatcher pushed a button in the control center in the northeast corner of the building. There were nine horses in all, bred for their task. They were not heavy draft horses but of middle weight and both strong and fast, for they were driven at full speed to the fires. Four horses pulled the hook-and-ladder in two teams, one behind the other. Three horses in a three-abreast hitch were needed for the steamer, and a two-horse team hitch pulled the hose cart.

The first chore of the morning was cleaning the barn area. After removing the manure and pitching it into a

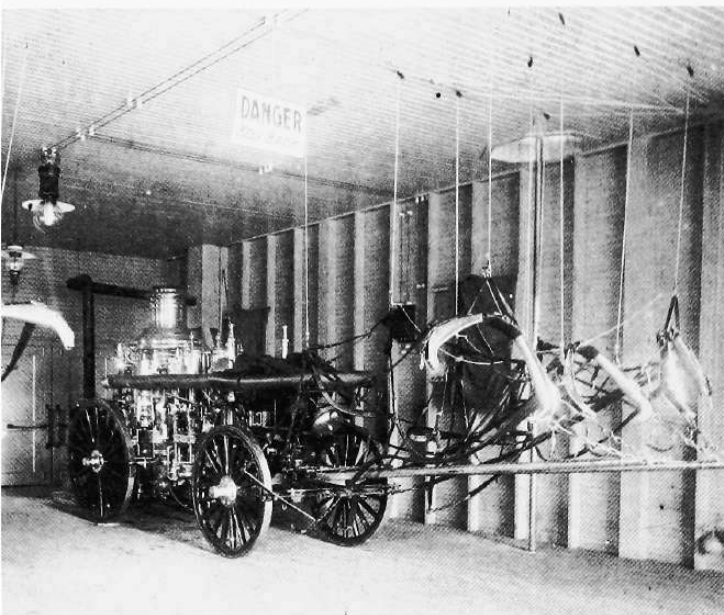


*FIRE STATION 18 in winter*

covered box at the back of the station house, the men flushed the trough at the back of each stall to wash away the horse piss and sticky manure. Over the barn area was a hayloft from which the men threw down forage for the day. They filled the mangers and the horses chomped away at their feed, now and then pushing their muzzles into the oats box at one side of the manger. As the horses fed, contentedly, the men curried the animals until their coats shone.

Once in a while I was lucky enough to be at the firehouse when the alarm box tripped and a fire call sounded. Bells rang, there was the sound of running feet overhead, and the firemen came down the brass pole one after another and raced to their places on the rigs. At the same time the stall doors opened and the horses bolted into their places under harnesses suspended overhead. With his horses in position, the man in the driver's seat pulled on a release rope and the harness dropped onto the horses, ready to be snapped into place by the men. By this time the enginehouse doors would be open. Hooves pounded on the plank flooring as the horses responded to drivers' orders. Warning bells clanged, and calls to the teams cut through the air.

While the rigs pulled away, the men put on their boots, slipped on their rubber coats, and adjusted their strangely shaped headgear — all the time clinging to the handles lest they be hurtled into the street. I would watch the whole fascinating operation, which from beginning alarm to the pull-away took less time than the telling. Exciting? You bet!



*THIS INTERIOR VIEW of a Minneapolis Fire Department station (not necessarily no. 18) shows how harnesses were suspended overhead, ready whenever horses bolted into place at the sound of an alarm.*

In winter the fire rigs were equipped with snow gear, and a department blacksmith with a mobile shop set up out back of the enginehouse and fit each of the horses with calked shoes for the season. These sharply pegged shoes enabled the horses to achieve firm footing on icy or snow-packed streets. In those years only the route of the streetcars was plowed. This was done by trolley gear with front-end plows and outrigger sweeps that pushed the snow to the curbing. This special equipment was weighted with sand which was fed to the cold steel rails to give traction to wheels running on the frosty iron.

Soon after the first snow each year the Station 18 men moved in the winter hook-and-ladder outfit with its snow runners front and back. The forward sled was fixed for turning. Compared with the wheeled rig with its red enamel and polished brass fittings, this equipment was decidedly drab. Hurriedly the men transferred material from the wheeled vehicle to the winter outfit. They did not want to have a fire call catch them in the middle of their task. The same was true of the hose-cart crew which had a similar job of shifting to winter equipment. It would be embarrassing to get caught with their hoses down!

Special runners were attached to the axles of the pumper after the wheels were removed. The runners kept the steam rig at the same height from the ground as the wheels did. This was necessary because it was a low-slung unit with minimum clearance. The pumper was fired with a low pressure of steam at all times, and a

special chimney carried away the fumes from the pumper's stack so it did not stink up the fire barn with unwelcome smoke. This meant that when this rig pulled away on a fire run it belched black smoke as a fireman stoked up the boiler.

The fireman I remember best, and for good reason, was George Hibbard. Every summer as soon as school was recessed, my father would say to me, "Melvin, George Hibbard is ready to clip off your hair today." So I would obediently traipse across the street to Station 18 and climb the stairs to the top level as a sheep to be shorn. Hibbard fastened something of a sheet around my neck after I climbed onto a stool in the station washroom. Then he set to work with a joke about getting rid of a winter's crop of head lice. Of course, my mother had already scrubbed my head with unusual vigor that day so that when my scalp was uncovered it gleamed in the sun.

While Hibbard cut and my hair spilled to a brick-red circle on the floor around the stool, various members of the station crew came in to make remarks like, "The kid's mother won't know him when George has finished scalping him." While this was not exactly true, I would scarcely know myself when the clipping was over. For some days I was self-conscious and felt positively naked, but this soon ended and, boy, this certainly was the way to a cool head in summer. Hair combing was done until fall. Vacation had really begun when I climbed down from that stool at the station. Of course, I had to sweep up the clippings myself!

I should explain that the rest of the year my father cut my hair and that of my brother Cliff who was two years younger than I. Dad usually cut my hair on a Saturday so that I would look sharp for Sunday School. He was a good barber and did as fine a job as any pro. He even cut hair for some of the firemen, including Hibbard.

I recall with a special poignancy that Dad had a healthy masculine aroma about him — something I have never before mentioned to anyone. I became aware of this when my father cut my hair. He wore the usual shirt and pants which were his powerhouse uniform. Perhaps the smell of his body and the atmosphere of the substation mingled to make the scent that was distinctly his. I liked it and remember it with acute nostalgia. No barber has smelled so good in all the years since then.

Dad always finished the job like an expert as he rubbed his own blend of petroleum jelly and bay rum into my hair. Then he carefully parted and combed my hair before bringing out a wooden-framed, rectangular mirror so I could inspect his work. After I got down from the chair, which was his wooden-armed office swiveler with a board across the arms, there was always a treat. Often it was a horehound lozenge or a piece of licorice. To this day they are among my favorite candies.

One day Pat, the steam pumper operator, was fitting harness to his horses when one of them made a sudden



swing of his head and caught Pat under his chin in an uppercut. Pat was killed instantly. Everyone missed the roly-poly little man who was so full of fun. This was one of my earliest experiences of grief. Pat had been my friend, and Station 18 was not the same for me when he was gone.

Firemen of the station had a very close association. When they were on the night shift they bedded down and ate their meals together. They shared inner resources that kept time from lapsing into unrelieved boredom. I always had a sense that the men liked each other. They developed a deep trust that helped them depend unreservedly on each other in facing the hazards of fire fighting. There were long hours that could have been dull, but there also was the discipline that held them steady, the quiet games of cards and dominoes that helped pass the time, and the saving sense of humor. They did a lot of reading and sometimes engaged in heated discussions on the issues of the day.

Station 18 was an important part of the sawmill culture of north Minneapolis. It stood there on the corner of Third and Lowry with a crew of men trained and retrained to protect the big mills and the factories from their greatest enemy, fire. They were the smoke-eaters always at the ready against the fiery threat.

BEING YOUNG on the north side during the 1910–20 decade was such an adventure there was never a dull moment, winter or summer. For one thing, we were close to Farview Park, which we usually called “Fairview” and which stretched in immensity for a small boy from Twenty-sixth Avenue North to Twenty-ninth and from Fourth Street to Lyndale Avenue. Within those dimensions was a world that encompassed ball diamonds, a playground with swings, a merry-go-round, teeter-totters, and all the rest. The park had picnic areas, tennis courts, hills for sledding and tobogganing, and a stone tower from which one could look out on what seemed to a child to be the whole city.

In winter the Farview hills were a constant challenge. One steep hillside was especially fearsome and bumpy for sliders — an awesome slope that gave breathtaking speed to a ride. There, when nature provided the white gift of snow, kids spent hour after hour on Flexible Flyers riding belly floppers till dark.

Of course, there was street sliding as well. The hill by the fire barn on Lowry was alluring. When it was icy, a youngster could go coasting for three blocks, all the way down to the Soo Line tracks by the shavings shed near the mill. This slide meant crossing the streetcar tracks on Washington Avenue. The boys walking back up the hill stood on the car tracks and signaled those at the top to come on when the coast was clear. Once in a while a boy would mistake a “don’t come” signal for an “all clear” — like the day when a youngster went clean under a street-

car, right between the trucks, and continued for two more blocks, scared to death to the end of his ride. The rest of us were shaken, too, and must have been more careful after that experience. I cannot recall that any of the gang was hurt while sliding.

Now and then when conditions were right, the city would ice up Twenty-sixth Avenue from Lyndale to Washington, a distance of four blocks, for a bobsled run. When this happened the bobsled owners would break out their equipment and head for the hill. Some of the sleds were long jobs with room for a dozen riders or more. The old-time bobsled is pretty obsolete now, but it was a fun thing in those years. It rode on two sleds with steel runners, one front and one back, with ropes for steering attached to the front sled and handled like reins by the front rider. Passengers sat on long planks that stretched from front to back. When all the riders were on board, a couple of older fellows at the rear would push off and give the thing a running start and then climb on.

The bobsled gathered speed, and we would go whizzing down the grade, with the girls in particular screaming their excited delight. It was great for us little kids when the bobsled owners invited us to ride. So it was that, when the word was out that the big sleds were running, we would hurry to Twenty-sixth in eager hope of snagging a ride.

Experimenting with homemade equipment was also a part of winter fun. We put together barrel-stave sleds and toboggans. The staves we scrounged from broken barrels at the dump on the river at Twenty-sixth, or we found busted barrels behind grocery stores or butcher shops. Lots of stock was shipped in barrels — sugar, vinegar, apples and other fruit, and pickled and salted fish. Many of these barrels were made in cooperages right on the north side.

My favorite homemade sliding toy was the “Johnny jumper,” as we called it. Where the name came from I do not know. I took one wide barrel stave and mounted it on a one-foot length of four-by-four, and then capped it with a piece of one-by-six about ten inches long for a seat. We got our odd pieces of wood for free from the scrap lumber pile at the sawmill. This made the “Johnny jumper” a one-runner ski-sled that a boy sat on and balanced as he rode it downhill. The ride was exciting and usually ended in a spill. I also made two-stave models of the jumper. They were not so tough to balance but were not as much fun either.

Most of us were lucky to have a sled. To own a Flexible Flyer or another model of a steel runner put us on the hills with a first-class outfit. Many boys had wooden sleds their fathers built in their home shops. These were substantial jobs but lacked the advantage of flexible runners that simplified steering. Only rich kids had toboggans. The rest of us made “cheese box” toboggans from the round boxes in which cheddar wheels were shipped.



*MELVIN FRANK and his father posed for this picture about 1911 soon after moving to north Minneapolis.*

When we were lucky a grocer or butcher would give us a box. Then we would spend hours converting the box into a toboggan. This took some doing. The trick was to maintain the curve at the front end without splitting the part used for the seat. Once completed, the makeshift toboggan served for a season of good rides.

Farview Park offered another winter attraction besides hills for sliding — skating. When freezing weather arrived, usually between Thanksgiving and Christmas vacation, the Park Board each year flooded the baseball diamond to make ice for skating, and the shelter would be converted into a warming house, with fires started in the big oil-drum wood burners.

My first skates were steel clamp-ons that attached to everyday shoes. Web straps helped hold the skates on and at the same time lent support to the skater's ankles. Those skates were the bane of my life. I would get them on with painstaking effort and take to the ice with other kids. Just when the hockey game or tag was going great, I would find myself on one skate, with the other dragging from the strap. And so I would limp back, rather humiliated, to the warming house and repeat the struggle to get the skate attached securely. The clamp had to be adjusted to the size of the shoe sole and heel, fitted on, and the strap set and tightened. Not long after I returned to the ice, sure enough the other skate came loose.

Next I tried screw clamp skates. These were a hockey model, unlike the rocker runners of the old clamp style. They were handsome and well designed, but the trouble was they called for heavy shoe soles and mine were not up to requirements. Dad resoled my shoes, using leather from old sawmill belts. It was good leather but tended to be limber, flexible, and not hard enough so the screw-on clamps gripped solidly. The result was a repeat of the problems of the clamp-ons they replaced.

Shoe skates came in about 1916, but who could afford them? Knowing how I loved to skate, Dad undertook to make me a happy skater. So for Christmas I got a pair of shoe skates. Dad had bought a set of runners and attached them to a pair of my best shoes. But the shoes fastened with buttons! Dad had not anticipated that the buttons would pop or come undone under the pressure of skating. Dear man, he tried. Having never skated with anything but clamp-ons himself, he figured that shoes were shoes even with skates on, but he was wrong. Button shoes with skates just did not work. They were one of the biggest disappointments of my boyhood. Shoe skates had to wait until I earned a pair of Nestor Johnsons myself.

If Dad's effort to furnish me with skates did not work out, he did succeed in making me a pair of skis that were sheer joy. They came as a gift another Christmas. He made them at the powerhouse workbench, and they were beautiful to behold. Crafted in the best Norwegian style, they were long enough so I could just reach the tips. Dad had steamed the fine-grained birchwood and gradually achieved the bend at the front and the curve in the long blades. He had attached buckled straps to fit my shoes. No boy on Sixth Street had finer skis. It was a great day when I first took the skis, newly waxed and polished, for a ride; and then, day after day as long as the snow lasted, it was ski, ski, ski.

Life on the Mississippi has always lured boys to adventure, and for us north-side kids there was always the attraction of the river no matter what the season. There was no way we could skate on the river, because it rarely froze over all the way across. Besides that, the "hot-pot system" the sawmills used to keep pools open for moving logs around also meant that warm currents prevented freezing. Of course, portions of the river did freeze. Big slabs of ice were thrust up along the banks, and we were tempted to clamber over them in treacherous places. Then we risked a dangerous slip into the water that ran under the buckled ice, but this made playing tag all the more exciting.

Often huge pieces of ice broke loose and floated slowly downstream. We watched them and talked of going for a ride but never quite dared make the attempt. Now and then somebody fishing on the slick ice slipped into the frigid water and drowned. Usually the body was not found until ice went out in spring.



WHILE WINTER offered a wide range of play possibilities, it was summer that gave us the greatest fun time of the year. Lots of open land was still available for roaming and exploring. Right at hand for our Sixth Street bunch was a pasture stretching north from Thirty-sixth Street. The area was open except for a few scattered houses, and we felt free to run there at will. The people of the neighborhood who still kept cows and horses staked them out for daytime pasture.

Stretching what for us was "way out" beyond Penn Avenue was an area we called Lily Hills. Our occasional all-day outings there meant romping along the shores of Twin Lakes and wading in the creek that ran through Glenwood golf course, then just a nine-hole layout. At Lily Hills we met kids from different north-side schools — McKinley, Logan, Willard, Penn, and others as far off as Seward. There was room for everyone to make cook-out fires to roast weenies or heat up a can of beans for lunch. We explored the area and picked wild flowers, taking care to avoid the bulls that seemed to watch nervously over the small herds of feeding cows.

At the end of summer, hazelnuts were available for the picking at Greenstein's pasture west of Humboldt Avenue and north of Thirty-sixth. This was a large, fenced area that later became Folwell Park. Cows were pastured there for a dollar or so a week for the convenience of those who owned cattle and lived nearby. That was before the law forbade the keeping of domestic animals and fowl within the city limits.

We would set off early in the morning with lunches packed and carrying containers, usually gunny sacks, for the day's pick of nuts. We spent the day scrambling from bush to bush to get the good "pickins." Some years we had good luck and came home with a peck or more of the nuts to show for our effort. The nuts had to be dried in the sun before they could be used. I would scatter my haul on our woodshed roof and hope that the squirrels would not carry the nuts all away before they were ready for cracking. The treat was for Mom to use the nuts in a cake or cookies that always seemed to taste especially good because of the delicacies we picked from Greenstein's pasture.

Marbles was the game for early spring, and boys with their sacks of mibs were a harbinger of warm weather to come. As soon as the snow was off the sidewalks and the cement was warm enough for a boy to sit on without freezing his hinder, we had the big games going. The prizes were the choice agates or glassies with their bright, colorful designs. The prettier they were, the fiercer the competition.

In our neighborhood we did not go in for "spits and spans" as much as for rolling our common clay marbles at the prizes. The procedure was for a boy with a good agate or glassie to set it down on the sidewalk and declare the distance for shooting as six or eight squares. He

would then sit down on the walk with his legs spread wide apart and put the prize "on the line" in front of him. Those competing rolled their marbles at the prize. The kid who made a hit with his "commie" captured the prize. The player who put up the prize got to keep the marbles that missed. He gathered them up, stowed them in a cloth sack or in bulging pants pockets, and took his place in the line of shooters to try to retrieve the prize by scoring a hit.

Marbles were cheap — fifteen or twenty for a cent, depending upon the quality. Agates and glassies were dear and cost from a penny to a quarter each. The more expensive rated the eight- or even ten-square distance in the game. It was great fun, after a couple of hours of play, to spill out your sack of marbles and, like Midas, take stock of the accumulated treasures. Swapping marbles and choice items was an agreeable and time-consuming sport as well. A guy was rich who had a sack of, say, 500 or 1,000 marbles. The sidewalk game was fun but chilly on a boy's rear end and hard on his britches.

After the marble season came kite time — not just flyin' but also makin'. We had some real artists on Sixth Street. Among others, we put together six-sided kites, measuring about thirty inches from top to bottom, that were quite a sight with their tissue-paper skins and long, many-colored tails. My own favorite was a bowed belly stick that required only a short tail for balance. It was fun to work out the big ones, using red, blue, orange, green, and yellow paper. For the tails I used scrap material left over from Mother's sewing of colorful house dresses or aprons.

We went a long distance for kite sticks — way down to Sixth Avenue North and Washington where a cigar-box factory was located. The trimmings from the thin cedarwood made dandy kite sticks. They were from a fourth- to a half-inch wide and about six feet long. The man at the box factory tied the sticks in bundles and sold them to us for a dime or fifteen cents. Then, loaded down with our unwieldy bundles of sticks, we would hike down Washington for some two and a half blocks to buy a bag of broken cookies at Loose-Wiles or the National Biscuit Company. Young women at the cookie factories sacked up the damaged pieces for sale in different sized bags. Armed with small change we had begged from our mothers with the promise of bringing home some of the goodies, we bought a half-peck sack for fifteen cents and got an amazing variety of "washboard," peanut, frosted, macaroon, and gingersnap cookies. These made our return trip shorter, for we would be munching the choicest morsels along the way. By the time we got home the cookie sack had been squeezed until what remained was a mass of crumbs. Even so, younger brothers and sisters dug in for a treat and were happy.

Our back porch became our kite shop. In fact, that

porch served many purposes, and I have always felt sorry for youngsters who lived in houses that lacked a back porch. In the porch shop the kite frames were shaped, the flour-and-water paste mixed up, and the tissue paper cut to fit the chosen pattern. It was an exciting and creative time. After the kite had been fabricated, it was left to dry overnight. In the morning, strings were attached to the corners and knotted at a cross point where the long kite line was tied on, and the creation was ready to fly. To get the kite airborne required a short launching run. For this one boy held the kite and the flyer stretched out a length of his control cord until he was ready to start his run. With breeze conditions right, we yelled, "Let her fly!" and began our run, our eyes fixed on the kite. This was the test of the kite-maker's skill. If we had built a good, well-balanced kite, it flew in grand style; if not, it could be broken in a takeoff dive. If the kite took to the air as if it belonged there, we just let it fly.

It was a great sensation to let out several hundred feet of line and to feel the bright flyer mount in the breeze. There was a gentle tugging that signaled the movement of the air up where the kite was flying. Now and then a weak line would break and the kite would careen out of control. It would flutter into a tree or get caught up in telephone or electric wires. Then the heartsick boy would hurry to retrieve as much line as possible and go back to the porch to build another kite.

Competition on Sixth Street was keen, and often half a dozen kites would be in the air at once. We wanted to see whose kite could fly the farthest. In our hands were held the cords wound crisscross on sticks to which we bound the string. It was nothing to have four or five hundred feet of line attached to a kite that was several hundred feet in the air. It took a large kite, of course, to be able to lift that much string and keep it taut. The long cord sagged and tightened with the action of the kite as it pulled on the line held way down there by an excited boy.

IF FARVIEW PARK was a lively place in winter, it was even more so in summer. Then baseball was the thing. It was a regular event to get a game of "scrub" going. Or we chose up sides for team games. Since the park was only three blocks away, our Sixth Street bunch could hurry off to Farview at the drop of a suggestion. Lefty Cliff Borgen, who lived across from us, was a natural pitcher and began throwing when he was only eight or nine years old. He had a great curve that nowadays would be called a screwball, dipping away from a righthanded batter. From somewhere a catcher's pad and mask turned up, and I was frequently found behind the plate in the receiver's spot. I did not like the bruised shins or stung fingers from foul tips, but I caught when no one else would, and usually no one else would.

Occasionally, "Rube" Schauer, a pitcher for the Minneapolis Millers who lived near the park, showed up at the Farview field to give us kids some pointers. I recall that I was catching one Saturday morning when Ol' Rube took the mound. I had never seen such a curve or drop before! The kid pitchers usually aimed for a spot and hoped. Rube was something else. I looked with awe as his curveball followed the end of the swinging bat in its arc. And the drop! It came toward the plate and then nosedived, so I had to scoop it out of the dirt. We were proud to have the big pro from the Millers show us how it was done. I guess my lifelong interest in organized baseball goes back to those days and the part Rube Schauer played in games at Farview Park — though that was a far cry from the "Met" and the Minnesota Twins.<sup>1</sup>

Some of the guys — mostly teen-agers — swam in the river, but for us Sixth Street kids it was off limits. So we headed for Camden and the park pool. One of the Minneapolis families, the Webbers of Deere and Webber Company, whose son died by drowning, gave the Camden Park pool as a memorial. It provided a safe, supervised swim for the hundreds of north-side kids who trekked there on hot summer days.

This was quite a distance from Lowry. It meant a walk of well over a mile to Forty-third and Colfax, but that was nothing when the reward was a dip in the cool waters of the creek that ran through the park and the pool. We checked in, got a basket for our clothes, showered, and raced out to jump in the water. We stayed until our lips turned blue and we shook with chills from the cold water. An observant attendant would gesture us out, and we would dress and then watch from shaded benches as later-comers cavorted in the water before we turned our steps homeward.

Camden Park was a gathering place for everyone on many different occasions. How well do I remember a Fourth of July when the speaker for the community picnic was Congressman Tom Schall, the blind representative from Minneapolis. What an orator! He berated the big steel companies for plundering the iron ranges of Minnesota. He called for increased taxes on the ore taken by the mining interests to compensate the state and local Range towns. Governor J. A. O. ("Jake") Preuss spoke, too. He was a conservative Republican in those days before the Farmer-Labor party began to dominate Minnesota politics.

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<sup>1</sup>Alexander John ("Rube") Schauer was born in 1892 in Odessa, Russia, and pitched in the major leagues for five seasons (1913–17), four of them with the New York Giants and one with the Philadelphia Athletics. After that he pitched for the Minneapolis Millers and was a familiar figure at the Minneapolis Courthouse while holding a succession of jobs there. The editor thanks Robert M. Beebe, who was a baseball writer for many years on the *Minneapolis Tribune* staff, for this information on Schauer.

There were fireworks, of course, at the park after dark on the Fourth. I remember it with a resurgence of the panic I felt when my brother Cliff and I became separated. Cliff was lost and I could not find him. I was terrified. He was my little brother and I was responsible. Forgetting the fireworks, I ran home as fast as I could leg it. There I burst out my dismay, "Cliffy's lost!"

My father was the soul of reassurance. He took me by the hand, and we set off to find the lost boy. Dad was certain that things were not as bad as I thought. And, sure enough, Cliff was with a bunch of kids who stayed at the park to see the fireworks. Then they started homeward on Lyndale. Dad and I met them a few blocks from our house. Cliff asked me where I had been. Stupid kid. He did not even know he had been lost.

Some of our summer play was under the arc light on Thirty-third and Sixth Street. Boys and girls gathered in the warmth of the evening to play hide-and-seek, pom-pom-pullaway, and other group games to which youngsters from several blocks around were attracted. Cliff and Carl Solberg, twins, lived on Thirty-third between Sixth Street and Lyndale. Johnny and Helen Wing lived toward Thirty-third, down the street from us on Sixth. The Gullicksons were on Sixth in a brick house close to Thirty-third. This was a family of pretty girls, with Alma the closest to my age. Dick Peterson's house was on our side of the street, as was Johnny Lindell's. Across the street were the Danielsons, Hendricksons, and Borgens. The Gulin girls lived two houses from us on our side of Sixth. All these names indicate that it was a solid Scandinavian neighborhood. Yah!

Near tragedy hit one summer day when the older boys swam near the sawmill by the Lowry Avenue bridge. On a dare, some of the fellows started diving from the bridge, about twenty feet above the water. Elmer Lund, who lived on Thirty-fourth and Sixth Street, was among them. On one dive Elmer struck a deadhead, a sunken log standing vertically below the surface. The blow peeled Elmer's scalp, damaged his skull, and nearly killed him. His swimming mates, including a brother, pulled him from the water, and he was rushed to a hospital for emergency care. That was some sixty years ago when there were no antibiotics and few antiseptics to fight infection. Elmer hovered near death for what seemed weeks, and his condition was a chief subject of conversation under the arc light as we all wondered if and when we would see him on the street again. The danger of swimming near the sawmill crept into our muted talk, too. Fortunately, Elmer eventually recovered.

House parties were a favorite diversion in our neighborhood, as in many others. Usually the Wings, and sometimes the Gullicksons, invited us to their homes as they were most suitable for entertaining. We dressed up for these kid affairs — boys in clean shirts and

ties and girls in pretty, starched frocks — and played parlor games. Most of us were eleven or twelve years old, and boys and girls eyed one another with friendly curiosity. We liked each other, boys and girls together, and enjoyed kissing games, especially "wink-um" and post office. We played forfeit games, too, like "lead-man" in which kids retrieved possessions by paying absurd penalties, usually involving kisses. These fun affairs neither embarrassed nor intimidated us. Best of all were the refreshments supplied by the hostess mother, with other mothers contributing homemade goodies. A party bid was a big thing.

"Go roll a hoop" was more than an expression akin to "get lost" on Sixth Street. It referred to summer fun that was an acquired skill. Of course, it began with making the hoop, usually from a discarded baby carriage wheel found at the north-side dump. We looked especially for a large-sized wheel, such as was used on the rear of a child's buggy, that might measure as much as eighteen inches in diameter. If the wheel had a rubber tire, so much the better. With wheel in hand, the next thing was cutting out the spokes and hub. This meant asking Dad for the use of his wire cutters or a hacksaw and then separating the spokes one by one from the rim until, at last, only the hoop remained.

In earlier days, when large steel rims from horse-drawn buggies were available for hoop rollin', a person ran alongside the hoop and guided it with a short stick. He gave it a sharp nudge to propel it forward or touched it lightly on one side or the other to steer it and keep it on course. Rolling such a hoop, three or four feet in diameter, was some trick.

Because our hoops were small, we devised a guide made from a portion of a barrel hoop nailed to a piece of one-by-two for a handle. The curved section of the hoop served to steer the rim so that a boy or girl could guide it skillfully at a full run. This took concentration on the uneven sidewalks, and now and then an unwary kid would stub a bare toe on the projecting edge of a sidewalk tile.

Both fun and exciting were hoop races held at the park on special days as well as the informal contests on our street when we raced around the block. Sometimes a youngster would get his hoop going downhill so fast he could not keep up and it would run away, while a kid who followed hoped he would not lose his hoop. The trick was to use the guide stick as a brake on the front side of the hoop so as to slow it and steer it at the same time. This took skill. Because I loved the sheer movement of running, rolling a hoop added zest to the fun of such action. Besides, I liked the hunt for a good rim and also making a guide stick to maneuver the hoop.

IN SPITE OF all the varieties of summertime fun in parks and neighborhood I have described, the number





*BACKUS-BROOKS SAWMILL crew at Lowry and the river in about 1900*

one attraction for outdoor play in warm weather was the sawmill. A lot of what we did was against the lumberyard rules, but that only added interest to our adventures.

When somebody suggested, "Let's go play in the lumberyard," what he really meant was, "Let's go play on the narrow-gauge tracks and cars." So we made for the large Northland Pine Company yard where the newly cut lumber was stacked carefully in high piles for seasoning. We kept a good lookout and chose a part of the yard where workmen were not piling or removing lumber.

Northland had nearly thirty acres arranged in streets and avenues, with the narrow-gauge tracks running throughout. There were always unused trucks on which we could play. We would appropriate them, get them rolling with a running push, and then jump on to go for a long ride, being careful to avoid the watchman who patrolled the yard. He was a neighborhood man who knew us kids, and as long as we were out of his sight he did not bother us. If we came under his eye, he had no alternative but to yell at us to get out of the yard. Some days we could ride the rails for several hours without being hindered.

Company employees salvaged shavings from the planing mill and stored them in what to us was a huge shed on Lowry and the Soo Line tracks. It was a good place for boys to tumble in, wrestle, and just clamber about. We played "king of the hill" in the cool shade of the shed, with one or another of us standing at the top of the pile and fending off challengers. When we grew tired of the game, we emerged with many thin wood chips

clinging to our clothing. No amount of hand brushing shook off the evidence of our play. At home at night my shoes would betray where I had been playing by spilling a small pile of shavings on the floor when I removed them before going to bed.

Even more fascinating than riding the narrow-gauge trucks and playing in the shavings house was to visit the big sawmill itself. Occasionally we were permitted to venture onto the long catwalk that overlooked the whining, thrumming scene where logs were cut up into lumber. Most enthralling, I guess, was the start of the wet log on the way to becoming lumber. It came, dripping, up from the river on an endless chain-lift runway to where it was maneuvered onto the carriage by the chief sawyer, who supervised every cut of the log. He was the most important man in the process, because his know-how produced the highest yield possible from every log.

When it was "dogged" to the carriage, a log was driven by this steam-powered machine into the whirring bandsaw that made the initial cut. Then with lightning speed it reversed its motion back to the starting position, flipped the log and fastened it in place, and rode it to the next cut. We wondered how the setter on the carriage kept from getting thrown from his place on the shotgun return ride after each cut. Equally amazing was the way in which the steam-operated clamps turned the log and held it in place while it was being sawed.

As we continued on the catwalk we saw the boards move from the saw on steam-powered rollers to the next

saws that trimmed them to the desired width and cut them into standard lengths. Moving continuously and given only an occasional assist by a mill hand, the lumber was processed until it emerged from the huge factory shed, stacked in neat piles, and loaded onto the narrow-gauge trucks for removal by a yard man driving his horse and taking it to its assigned place for seasoning. My pals and I knew how the men piled the lumber, reversing each course so the pile could breathe and the boards dry out evenly.

One of the Sixth Street adults, Cliff Borgen's father, worked in the saw shop handling the big saws that required regular sharpening. Both bandsaws and circular saws of various sizes were used in the mill. When the saws came into the shop the men mounted them on stands where they could be worked on with grinding wheels and hand files used in the sharpening process. Those saws seemed to sing as they vibrated in response to the file or wheel. Sparks flew and had to be watched lest a fire start. I could see that working in the big mill was exciting.

Throughout the sawmill, leather belts drove the machinery. Overhead spinning shafts were suspended from building beams, and power take-offs transferred power to the belts. Everywhere belts flapped as they moved from pulley to pulley. Such a mixture of sounds a sawmill made!

### *Postscript*

OUR FAMILY lived at 1504 Plymouth Avenue in 1920, after my father's death, and Cliffy and I were enrolled at Grant School just a few blocks from our home. One summer day on my way home from school I was galvanized to attention when I saw a huge column of smoke rising high in the sky to the north and east of our new neighborhood. I was excited at the thought of a big fire, one that I guessed might be burning the Northland Pine Company sawmill. I soon learned that my guess was correct. The Weyerhaeuser mill was ablaze. This was sensational news for me. The sawmill around which so much of my boyhood had centered was going up in smoke.

I knew, of course, that the last log had been made into lumber at the mill the year before. The vast pineries

were gone that had made Minneapolis the lumber capital of the world. In less than a century the great forests had been depleted by logging and fires. Now the silenced mill was burning. Northland Pine had come to the fate of innumerable mills that had been built on the banks of the big river.

On that fateful afternoon I told my mother that I was going to see the fire. She understood and gave me permission. I ran as hard as I could go for the long distance between Irving and Plymouth and Lowry and Second Street, utilizing every shortcut I could think of. Through North Commons I ran, then later through Farview Park and past my old school (Maria Sanford), and into the familiar old neighborhood. All the way I was led by the pillar of fire and smoke.

Not until I was at the powerhouse and fire-barn corner could I actually see the flames. Those last several blocks I covered like a boy possessed, for I could see the throngs of people gathered along the streets that sloped to the river. At the hydrants the fire department's steam pumpers throbbed as they pushed water through the myriad of hoses winding their way to the big nozzles held by men flooding the flames with water. The lumberyard and mill were going up in sparks and smoke. That mill where I had walked and watched as logs became lumber had collapsed and was now just a smoldering ruin. The vinegar smell of Gedney's pickle factory on Lowry was now mixed with the odor of burning pine in a strange blending.

Men from Engine House No. 18 and their equipment were there, and my friends were hard at work fighting flames that still burned fiercely. Their faces were grimy with sweat and dirt. I dared to ask questions, and they assured me the fire was under control. "The mill is gone," they said. "It's a goner."

What had been a raging mass of flames, with the plume of pitch-blackened smoke rising high in the sky, gradually subsided into many small fires scattered about the immense yard. Only the shavings shed west of the railroad tracks and the yellow office buildings farther up on Lowry remained. I stayed until long past the settling in of darkness when the last glowing embers still showed rosy red in the gloom.<sup>2</sup>

Such a sad sight, I thought.

Slowly I turned my back on the scene and trudged homeward, out of my well-worn old neighborhood paths toward Plymouth Avenue and my new life. The Northland Pine mill was gone, and with it like a wisp of curling smoke went my boyhood, except for so many memories.

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<sup>2</sup>The fire broke out at the Northland Pine Company's twenty-five-acre lumber yard about 6 P.M. Tuesday, August 24, 1920, and was not declared officially "out" until 4:21 P.M. the next day, having caused more than \$500,000 damage. The *Minneapolis Tribune* gave the fire extensive coverage, complete with banner headline and pictures, on August 25. In a follow-up story on August 26 (p. 15), the paper said the fire "was one of the most spectacular ever witnessed in Minneapolis and by far the largest lumber yard fire in this section of the country. It brought to the scene a larger crowd than ever witnessed a fire in Minneapolis."

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