

## **Growing Up In A Coal Mining Town**

For many “old timers”, Heilwood, Pennsylvania is loaded with memories. With all of the technology that youngsters have available today, it must be hard to imagine being able to “have fun” without any of that stuff. Who would think that one could “amuse” themselves without a mobile phone, an electronic tablet, or a laptop computer?

If you lived in Heilwood, or one of the surrounding coal mining communities like Mencil, Alverda, or Clymer, you could have a blast. We would walk for miles through the woods, to find a berry patch. There were black berries, huckle-berries, wild strawberries, and who could forget, elderberries. During the season, industrious, energetic youngsters would head for the woods to pick elderberries by the bushel. A couple times a week, a man in a truck would come by and pay you \$1.00 for a bushel. That was “big money” in those days. Some men were only making \$1.00 an hour, working in the mines.

Then there was the thrill of finding a small dam, or a creek to go swimming. Many a young person learned to swim, on their own, trial and error. It’s a wonder most of us didn’t drown. If we survived those times, we became pretty self sufficient adults.

For Halloween, there was no “trick or treat”. Mischievous teenagers would take someone’s “bird bath” and put it in someone else’s yard. Or perhaps, move someone’s “out house” off the foundation, or tip it over. No permanent damage was ever meant by these acts. Just fun and games for “idle hands”.

Of course, in Heilwood there was the football field by the school, the baseball diamond, and in later years, the Gymnasium by the ball field. Most poor children, (we weren’t allowed to call them kids then) couldn’t afford a real baseball, a real football, or a real basketball, so they improvised. Most days in the nice weather there was some kind of game going on. There were rarely enough players for a full team of anything, but we managed to enjoy the games nevertheless. Of course, if someone did have a ball and bat, and rarely a glove, he got to play whatever position he wanted, weather he was any good or not, for fear he would take his ball and bat and go home.

We used a softball for a football, a ball of friction tape for a baseball, and discarded volleyball for a basketball. We made our own hoops, goals, and bats. In the winter time, not many had sleds, so, once again we improvised. We used old inner-tubes, trash can lids, barrel staves for skis, and some of the most outrageous contraptions you ever saw, just to slide down a hill. It took 5 minutes

to walk back up the hill for a less than a minute ride down. No wonder the youngsters were in much better physical shape then. I never saw a pair of ice skates, but I wore out quite a few shoes, just taking a run, and then “skating” on a section we cleaned off. We made “forts” out of snow mounds, and had some real snow ball fights. It was fun until some idiot would make an “ice ball”, and give someone a black eye. Then we were all in trouble for a while. Any adult, whether your parents or not, could grab you by the ear and shake you up when you got in trouble. That kept any bunch of bad kids from becoming “hoodlems”. Once in a while there would be a few who turned out to be “bad eggs”, but in those coal mining towns, no one was ever allowed to get “totally out of control”

In hunting season, we would go back in the woods towards “Penn Run” and freeze half to death, waiting for deer. We didn’t have high powered rifles. Just a shotgun with “punkin balls”. After a while my uncle would say, you wait here and I’ll go drive some deer to you. When I was older, I found out what he really meant was, I’m going over to Missus McQueeney’s place, get a cup of coffee, and get warm.

We climbed trees, climbed up and down the “rock dumps”, picked nuts, berries, made whistles from tree bark, and made pea shooters. Ate beechnuts, carved our initials on trees, made slingshots with old inner-tube rubber. There was always plenty to do, it was fun, and it kept you healthy. And all it cost was your time and your imagination. If you wanted a few cents to buy some penny candy, you could collect a few old “pop bottles”. You could get 2 cents for a 12 ounce bottle, and a nickel for a quart bottle. You could get a lot of candy for a dime. If you got a quarter, you thought you were rich.

For many, they spent their entire life there. When they grew up, they went to work in the mines, and their children followed in their footsteps. As the coal business became more automated, and controlled by huge businesses, life in the mining town had to change. Youngsters moved away as soon as they finished school. A few managed to “work their way” through Indiana State Teacher’s College, or go to Penn State, and a few to Pitt University. They went on to be doctors, lawyers, teachers, architects, engineers, etc. But most just moved away and became “blue collar” workers. The schools in Heilwood had no computers, TVs, or fancy equipment. Not even a calculator. (I used a “slide rule”). Still, they were able to raise fine families, because, even though their experiences in the coal mining towns gave them no “tech”, it gave them imagination, ingenuity, and common sense. Qualities that are extremely rare these days.

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