

The Rag-A-Muffins

By: Richard F. McClure

The year was 1943. The summer had been one of an unrelenting dry spell. Everyone prayed for rain, any amount, but none was to be had. The lawns were burned brown, and the farm fields were nothing but dry dust blowing with the scorching winds.

The one saving grace for a young fellow like me and my uncle was the shade from the towering Elm tree that stood beside Grandma's old farm house. Rain or no rain, we had the shade, a pile of sticks and lots of dry dirt to play with. We had houses to build, a road to make, and an old chunk of two by four made a great bulldozer. After all, when you are three and five years old, who worries about the weather?

My name is Dick, or Dickey as Grandma likes to call me, and I am the oldest. Bruce, my uncle, was born late in life and had problems from the day he was born. Bruce was born with Club Feet and had to have an operation to twist them straight. Once the large, plaster cast had been removed, he was fitted with a set of metal braces that had high-top shoes attached to them.

We were into our second hour of our major building projects when Grandma hollered out from the open window and said, "You two have been out there in the heat long enough, plus it is time for you guys to get your nap." She then added, "And don't forget to brush off all of that dirt!"

Bruce looked at me with a sad look and said, “Man!”

I leaned over and whispered, “Let’s pretend we didn’t hear her.” Bruce thought this was a good idea, and a big smile spread across his face. It didn’t work. This time, Mom stuck her head out the window and said, “Dick! Get in here.” Grown-ups! They never want kids to have any fun.

Once inside the house, we were given our marching orders to head on up to the second floor, take off those dirty clothes, and get in bed. Dad chimed in and said, “And, we don’t want the two of you fooling around and making lots of noise.”

The two of us did what we were told. I made it up the rickety, old stairs with no problem. Bruce, with his braces, never had an easy time doing much of anything. With great effort, he finally made it to the bedroom.

I liked visiting Grandmas house, but to sleep in one of the old beds was not my idea of fun. The mattresses were old and smelly and never had any clean sheets, let alone blankets, on them. The walls and ceilings of the bedroom were old and yellowed. I could tell they had never been painted.

After taking off his braces, Bruce crawled up on one bed and I got on the other one. We were wound-up a little and chatted back and forth for a few minutes, but nice and quiet. We didn’t want to get a swat on the butt. We fell fast asleep with the hot breeze blowing through the open window and the sound of the grown-ups talking in the kitchen below.

I had been sleeping soundly for about a half an hour when my eyes suddenly popped open. Bruce was sound asleep. I could hear his slow, steady breathing as he lay there. That was the only noise in the entire house.

Quietly, I got down from the bed and walked slowly to where Bruce lay sleeping. I shook him, and his eyes opened wide. I put my finger to my mouth and said, “Shh! Listen.” I told him, “I’m going to sneak down stairs and see where they are.”

He shook his head up and down and quietly said, “Ok.”

At every step on the old, wooden stairway, a loud squeak would announce my progress. I held my breath with each step. Not one person hollered for me to get back into bed. I continued cautiously until I reached the living room. There was no one there. I went into the kitchen. It was empty. Where could they be? I walked to the open, living room window and peered out. Dad’s old, Model “A” car was not in the drive. We were all alone!

I ran up the stairs and rushed into the bedroom. Bruce was sitting on the edge of the bed rubbing the sleep from his eyes. He gave me a quizzical look, as if to say, well! I told him, “We are the only ones here.”

He gave me a big smile and said, “Good.” I smiled back and knew exactly what he meant. We were free! No more nap for us. We had plans to make and things to do.

We put on our dirty clothes, and I helped Bruce put on his braces. With several failures and encouragement from Bruce, I managed to get all of the straps buckled and both shoes tied. Bruce slid down the stairs on his butt, and I took them two at a time. We were eager to get back outside and have some fun.

We sat in the shade of the big, Elm tree and made our plans. Bruce wanted to play in the dirt some more, but I had a better idea.

Grandpa had let the small town of Holly construct a baseball diamond on a corner of his farm. All summer long, the town’s baseball team would practice there.

Once each week, they would play a game against another local team. We would spend many lazy hours watching these games. Every now and then, someone would break a bat, and we were allowed to take it home with us. A little glue, a few screws, and a lot of friction tape, and it was good as new. At least, that's what we thought. The real fun was helping the ball players find foul balls that had landed in the tall weeds that surrounded the playing field. We weren't always successful in our search, but that was ok by us. A lost ball gave us the chance to come back later and find it for ourselves.

My plan for fun was a simple one, and it didn't take long to convince Bruce to go look for a lost baseball. His eyes lit up, and with great excitement he said, "Let's do it!" He wasn't a real talkative guy.

The first thing the two of us had to do was to get properly dressed for our walk to the ball field. The weeds in the field were tall and dry. The sandy ground was alive with Sand burrs, and that was no place for a barefooted kid like me to be walking. In one respect, Bruce was lucky. His braces had new shoes attached, but this was summer time, and the rest of us kids never wore shoes during the summer months.

The two of us went back into the house and looked in the storage room for something to wear and protect us from the sharp weeds and burrs. We found one of Bruce's older brother's ragged sweatshirts that we pulled over his head. Finding a pair of long- legged pants, that had been handed down from someone; we slipped them over his shorts and braces. I found a chunk of old rope, and bunched up the pants and tied the rope around his waist and rolled the legs up a couple of times to keep him from tripping. We found a couple of Grandpa's old, beat-up caps and put them on. They were so big that they came way down over our ears.

I found someone's old tee shirt that was full of holes. I put it on, and it hung way below my shorts that were pinned in place to make them fit proper. The old farm boots I found would protect my legs from the weeds and the sand burrs. We were finally dressed and ready for our adventure.

As we made our way outside, I took one last look at Bruce and approved of how he looked. The hat had tilted off to one side; the old shirt had slipped off one shoulder. It gave him a comical look. I knew that I must have looked equally funny, but we were used to wearing old hand-me-downs, and it was no big deal. If my Ma saw us just then, she would have said, "My, look at the two of you, if you guys don't look like a couple of Rag-A-Muffins." She would then let out a big laugh. She sure did like saying that about us kids.

I was glad the walk to the ball field was only a couple of hundred yards away. The farm boots were six inches too long for my little feet, and they came way up to my crotch. I made a lot of thumping as I drug the boots along one step at a time. Between my thumping and Bruce's braces squeaking at every step, we were quite the pair.

On the way to the Ball field, the path would cut along side of the dried up swamp where Grandma threw all of her old cans and junk over the edge in a big pile. We stopped for a breather next to the swamp. The old boots proved to be tough to walk in, and Bruce was tired too. Standing in the waist high Fox Grass, the kind that was real fuzzy on top and would go up your pant legs and stay there, Bruce looked down into the dump, pointed and hollered out, "Look, matches!" Sure enough, in a pile of newspapers was a book of matches.

In an excited voice, Bruce looked at me and said, “Dick, go get em.” It took me some time to drag myself and those big boots down the slope, but I finally made it and located the prized book of matches.

When I made it back to where Bruce was waiting, he said, “Open em up and see if they are Ok.” Once again, I did what he wanted, and upon inspection I found the book of matches to be perfect.

As we eyed the matches, I could see that Bruce was getting more excited by the moment and he said, “Go ahead, light one.” With nervous little hands, I tore one of the matches out, and I scratched it against the striker strip. The match flared up on the first try, and the flame was high, way to high, and up went the entire pack with a whoosh! I burned my fingers, and threw the matches high into the air, where they lit into the waist-high Fox grass. I let out a scream! And Bruce said, “Wow!”

The blaze erupted into a mighty fireball, and the fire began spreading at an alarming rate. I ripped off my rubber boots, threw one to Bruce, and said, “Quick, let’s beat the fire out before it goes too far.” These would prove to be empty words, and we soon found ourselves standing dumbfounded by the speed of the advancing flames.

A plan had to be made, and it had to be made quickly. At this point, I was thinking of self-preservation only, and my plan was simple. I turned to Bruce and said, “There is no one home to help us, so let’s run back to the house and get back in bed. We can pretend that we don’t know anything about the fire.”

Bruce had this frightened look on his face, and managed to say, “Ok, let’s go.” We both took off on a dead run, with me in the lead. I could hear Bruce’s braces squeaking as he ran as fast as he could. I made it to the house huffing and puffing, and

managed to climb the stairs and jump into bed. I couldn't hear Bruce anymore, but I figured he would be coming as quick as his braces would allow.

I closed my eyes and pretended to be sleeping. And then I heard it. The model "A" came screaming up the driveway and squealed to a stop. I could hear the car doors open, and Mom and Dad, were shouting loudly! I could hear Dad say, "Bruce, where is Dick?" He then added, "Who started the fire?"

Good old Bruce said, "Dick did it! He's upstairs pretending that he's sleeping. Dick did it!"

Upon hearing all of this from a guy who doesn't ever say much, really made me cringe. I knew that I was in big trouble!

About then, I could hear fire engines with their sirens blaring and more voices in the front yard talking excitedly.

The next sounds I heard were those of Dad coming up the steps—one loud squeak at a time. This was not good!

Dad walked into the room and said, "Dick, I know you're not sleeping, and I know what you did. You had best sit up right now, young man!"

With my lower lip quivering and the tears welling up in my eyes, I pleaded my case and said, "But, but Dad, Bruce is the one who told me to do it." I could see by the look on his face that he wasn't convinced. After all, who was he going to believe? Me, who is five years old, or Bruce, a three year old who is as cute as the Gerber Baby.

Before I knew it, I was placed over his knee, and I was getting the spanking of my life. All the while, Dad kept saying, "Dick, this is going to hurt me a lot more than it

does you.” As the tears came pouring out, I couldn’t understand how that could be, because I was the one getting the spanking.

Once my punishment had been met, Dad stood me up and marched me down the steps and out into the front yard where a huge crowd of onlookers stood. This would be my first look at what I had done.

There were fire trucks everywhere, with their red lights flashing. The land was scorched black from the swamp all the way to the blacktop road, one quarter of a mile away. The fire had consumed forty acres of dried weeds, an entire apple orchard and nearly burned down six houses.

As I stood there, with Dad’s hand on my shoulder, choking back a sob, I could see Bruce pointing excitedly at all of the fire engines and saying over and over, “Dick did it!, Dick did it!”

To this day, I can give Bruce a call, and when he answers the phone, I ask him, “Hey buddy, may I borrow a book of matches?”

Without missing a beat, he always says, “Dick did it!”

The End