CHAPTER 15

GAMES OF YESTERYEAR:
PLAYING OUTSIDE AND OTHER LOST ARTS

"I'll be the Post!" cried one of the boys as waves of noisy children spilled from the schoolhouse door. A group of boisterous boys ran to the perimeter of the playground and quickly formed two five-man teams to play their favorite recess game.

The boy who had shouted that he would be the "Post" positioned himself, standing straight up with his back against a fence post. A teammate faced him, then bent over at the waist, put his head between the legs of the "Post," and wrapped his arms around the Post's thighs. A third boy put his head between the legs of the second boy and locked his arms around the second boy's legs. In less than a minute, a caterpillar of five boys was ready for action.

An opposing team of five boys chose its captain, then selected its smallest member to go first. Running full speed toward the caterpillar of boys, he leaped into the air and landed hard on the backs of the bent-over boys. A loud expulsion of breath was heard from the portion of the caterpillar where he landed, but there was no collapse, and the leaper, now perched on the caterpillar, awaited the arrival of a teammate.

A second boy ran full speed toward the five-man line, none of whom could see him coming except for the Post, who yelled, "Here comes the next one!" The runner vaulted above the pile and crashed down on the opposing team, which sagged but did not buckle under the weight of the two classmates on their backs.

"Get ready, get ready!" came muffled shouts from within the caterpillar as the boys below tightened their grips on their teammates' legs before the arrival of the next soaring opponent.

One after another, five kamikaze schoolboys launched themselves onto the growing pile, each hoping to be the straw that would break the camel's back. When the last boy landed, if the opposing team still had not collapsed under the burden of five classmates, the last boy to land thrust one hand high into the air and shouted, "Buckety Buck, how many fingers up?"

From below the heap of boys came the strained voice of the captain of the caterpillar team, who could see nothing but the ground beneath him.

"Three!" he grunted loudly. His teammate, the Post, was the only member of the caterpillar team who could see the uplifted fingers of the opposing captain. The Post either triumphantly confirmed that the captain's guess was correct or dejectedly declared that it was wrong. Then the boisterous mass of humanity would collapse in a heap, some laughing, others groaning, untangling arms from legs, ready to play another round with the same boys on the bottom unless their captain had guessed correctly, in which case the teams would switch places.

This rough-and-tumble game was called Buckety Buck and was very popular among school-age boys years ago. Several weeks ago, I invited readers to share their memories of the games they played when they were children, and Buckety Buck (also called Buck Buck) was one game that was mentioned often.

"We played Buckety Buck on the concrete pad in front of the garages at the intersection of Hibbs Street and Fifth Avenue," recalled Bernard (Barney) Sabo, "and the kid who was Post would stand against the garage." Barney, who now lives in Sequim, Washington, hasn't forgotten the childhood games he played on Brownsville's North Side.

"When we played," concurred Newboro-native Jerry LaMonica of Dearborn Heights, Michigan, "the 'Post' was usually positioned against a wall for support."

"We played right outside my house at the telephone pole near David Street," added South Side native Sherman Elias of White Oak, Pennsylvania. "It was a little rough, as I was a small boy and some of those big boys were heavy!"

Wally Mulligan, now of Pecos, New Mexico, played Buckety Buck during recess at Hiller School, and the caterpillar of boys was positioned a little differently than in the game that was described above.

"Each boy placed his head next to the waist of the boy in front of him," Wally explained, "and held him tightly around the waist, braced for impact."

Wally Mulligan reminded me that a nationally known comedian has immortalized Buckety Buck in one of his acts.

"Bill Cosby did a routine about this game," Wally told me, "and in so doing, introduced 'Fat Albert' to the world."

Another rowdy game was described by Jay Smith of Baldwin, whose roots are elsewhere but who is spending plenty of time these days in Brownsville, reassembling the Plaza Theater organ at the Odd Fellows Building. When Jay read of my planned articles about the "Games of

Yesteryear," he submitted his favorite childhood game – Goo Ball.

"It was a game we played in the mid-1950s," Jay told me, "with two opposing teams of one or more players. Played in a handball or racquetball court, the object of the game was to score points by hitting a member of the opposing team with a soccer ball.

"What made this game interesting was that it was played in complete darkness. By turning off the lights in the court and the adjoining hallways, it was impossible to see the targets (opposing team members), so one had to rely solely on sound. Once the ball was thrown, everyone would scurry to get the ball as it bounced so as to become the next thrower. The only advantage to possessing the ball was that you knew that you could not be the next target.

"Opposing team members could not be distinguished in the dark from members of your own team, so points were scored against a team on a hit regardless of which team threw the ball. A certain amount of trust was required that whoever was hit by the ball would admit it rather than stay quiet to avoid having points scored against him. Of course, it was difficult to remain quiet since the ball was hard and hurt considerably!"

Barney Sabo remembers another game he played called Hop Scotch, but the game Barney described is different from another game by that same name.

"I played Hop Scotch with Goodloe Rodgers, Barbara Sedlosky, the Butcher girls, and anyone else who wanted to play at the top of Hibbs Street and Shaffner Avenue," Barney said. "A small area was designated as home base. The person who was 'It' had to stay in that area and tag anyone brave enough to approach the area. The game's name comes from the rule that whoever was 'It' had to hop on one leg to catch anyone."

Most games mentioned by readers required very little fancy equipment or adult mediation. Kids were their own referees and learned to negotiate disputes rather than turn them over to a higher authority. Everyday items were magically transformed into recreational equipment. Barrel hoops and old tires were junk to most folks, but to Lyn Mortland of Gainesville, Georgia, they were an invitation to an afternoon of fun in the 1940s.

"When I grew up in Blainesburg," Lyn told me, "we were poor, but so was everyone else. We had to use our imagination to entertain ourselves. We often played with a barrel hoop, rolling it with a stick, or we would push an old tire around. There was a hill behind the 'incubator' in Blainesburg, and I remember a bunch of us boys tying several tires together, getting inside them, and rolling down that hill. What a great

place Blainesburg was for a boy to grow up in. It just seemed like there weren't enough hours in the day, and I hated to go in the house at night."

Night time could be the best time to play some games, like Release or Kick The Can. W. James (Whiz) Mountain of Arlington, Virginia, grew up on Union Street Extension in Brownsville, where he often played Kick The Can.

"Kick The Can was a frustrating game to play when you were 'It,'" Whiz said. "The game was similar to Kick The Wicket, where a stick − the wicket − was placed across two cans or rocks. Kids would hide, and the person who was 'It' went in search of them to capture them. Those who were captured could be released by one of the hiders coming out of their hidden spot and kicking the wicket. If this was done prior to being tagged by 'It,' all captives would scatter back to find new hiding places.

"You can see the frustration if all of the hidden guys except one were captured, and he would come tearing in and kick the wicket. While 'It' ran to retrieve the wicket and place it back between the two cans, all the guys would head for a new hiding place."

Many of these games involved a lot of physical activity and could be rough, but there were other popular games that required more than strength or speed to be successful. Many kids carried a pocket knife in those days, and learning to handle one skillfully could mean a successful afternoon of competition with your buddies. Next we will see how many readers remember how to play Pocket Knife Baseball or Mumbley Peg, two popular pocket knife games of yesteryear.

POCKET KNIFE GAMES WERE POPULAR PASTIMES

"There goes a doozy maroony into center field!"

In the 1930s and '40s, those words from colorful Pirates radio broadcaster Rosey Rowswell often meant that a Pirate hitter had lifted a soaring fly ball toward the batting cage that was stored on the outfield grass at Forbes Field, near the seldom-reached 456-foot mark painted on the center field wall.

But on this particular afternoon, the "doozy maroony" (a double) did not fly off the bat of the mighty Ralph Kiner. Instead, it was launched by the hand of a Hiller boy who was sitting on his back porch steps. With a flick of the wrist, the boy had sent his pocket knife, its two blades opened, flipping upward into the air, tumbling end over end until it landed with the large blade stuck solidly in a splintering porch floorboard. The youngster excitedly turned to his companions and cried

triumphantly, "There goes a doozy maroony into center field! That's runners at second and third and only one out!"

On summer afternoons in the 1940s, hundreds of adolescent would-be Rosey Rowswells "broadcasted" from back yards throughout southwestern Pennsylvania. Their play-by-play described action that took place not on the natural grass of Forbes Field, but on weathered back porches, where a popular game called Pocket Knife Baseball might attract an onlooker or two.

"Pocket Knife Baseball was one of my favorites," recalled Hiller native Harry Hackney, now of Spring Hill, Florida. "You needed a pocket knife with a large blade and a short blade that hinged from the same end. To play, the short blade would be fully opened and the long blade would be opened ninety degrees. The home team would be selected by one flip of the knife and would bat last.

"The playing surface was often a porch. That was ideal, as it provided a seat for the players, who could dangle their legs in space while putting the action at hand level. Of course, an old wooden plank under a shade tree could serve nearly as well."

To begin an at-bat, the "batter" first had to position the knife in the wood.

"To position the knife," Harry explained, "the player would pinch the end of the knife handle opposite the blade hinges and, with a downward toss, lightly thrust the long blade into the wood surface. After planting it, the index finger was then inserted under the handle of the knife near the end, and with an upward flick, the knife would be launched into the air with a spinning motion and fall to the wood."

The batter's success was determined by which blade (or blades) stuck in the wood when the knife landed.

"If the long blade stuck in the wood with any part of the handle touching," Harry continued, "it was a single. If the long blade stuck in the wood with no other contact, it was a double. If the long blade stuck or made contact with the wood and the small blade touched or stuck into the wood, it was a triple. If only the small blade stuck into the wood with no other contact, it was a homer. If the knife landed on its back, it was a walk. Everything else was an out."

J. P. "Rocky" McAndrews of Needles, California, spent hours playing this game when growing up in West Brownsville. "You could always tell where we played baseball on the porch step," he joked, "from the marks the knife blades left in the wood. We played for hours on the steps of the corner store on Middle Street."

"And of course," added Harry Hackney, "all of this action was done to the accompaniment of a play-by-play description for the imaginary

radio listeners. Rosey Rowswell had a distinctive line of banter for every game situation. To signal a home run, he would cry, 'Get outta the kitchen, Aunt Minnie, and open the window, here it comes,' followed by the sound of smashing glass. Even though Rosey was often reading a ticker tape in a studio hundreds of miles from an away game, he was able to bring the action to life. Rosey made us love a perennial last place team.

"'There they are, F O B – full of Bucs,' Rosey would say when the bases were loaded. 'There goes a sock out into right field' (a single) we would cry, sitting on our porch steps and imitating Rosey, when the pocket knife landed with its large blade stuck and the handle touching."

It was a unique way to enjoy the game of baseball without having to assemble enough players for a game or find an unoccupied field on which to play.

Another popular pocket knife pastime was called Mumbley Peg. Jim Hartmann of Bartlett, Tennessee, shared his memory of that game.

"We played at the playground in West Brownsville," Jim told me. "Each person had his own pocket knife, opened to the big blade. The objective of the game was to finish all the various knife throws into the dirt so that the knife was sticking up. If it was leaning, the handle could not be less than two finger widths above the ground. If it did not stick, you had to let the next person take his turn."

"There was a series of knife throws you had to make," explained Mumbley Peg veteran Delmar D. Franks, Jr. "You would start with the knife lying flat in your open hand and flip it into the ground. Next you went off the back of your hand, then your wrist, knuckle, elbow, shoulder, nose, head, and so on."

Some versions of the game involved performing more than twenty-four different knife throws to complete the series. The loser was the last player who had yet to complete all of the throws. The penalty for losing the game is where it got its name. A wooden peg or matchstick was driven into the ground by the winners, using the knife handle as a hammer. In one version of the game, the player who had finished first was allowed three strikes at the peg with his eyes open and three more with his eyes closed. In another version, each of the winners got to hit the peg once. No matter which rules were used, the peg was usually driven out of sight into the ground.

The loser had to root into the ground, using only his teeth, and pull the peg out of the ground with his teeth. He would burrow his face into the dirt for all he was worth trying to grasp that peg, because if he didn't succeed, a worse fate awaited him.

"If he did not pull the match stick out of the ground," Jim Hartmann

explained, "he had to run through a line of belt swinging winners. Ouch, that hurt!"

Although these pocket knife games were usually played by boys, occasionally a girl was admitted to the game.

"At the Prospect Street School playground, I was allowed to play mumbley peg with the boys," Nancy Campbell Bender of Grindstone told me, "so I must have been pretty good. I think I was probably coached by my brother."

A circle of boys seated on the ground often meant a pocket knife game was in progress. Sometimes, though, the objects of everyone's attention were not pocket knives, but marbles.

"We played marbles a lot," Brownsville native Malcolm Crawford remarked from his home in Raleigh, North Carolina. "We were proud of our often-full pouches, hoping some sharpshooter wouldn't win them from us. You could buy marbles, large and small, at the Five and Ten, but my favorites were quarter-sized steel ball bearings that my dad brought home from work at the coal dock at the Monongahela Railway yard in Newtown."

Some kids were so good at marbles that they soon cleaned out the opposition. As Harry Hackney recalled, "We all had bags containing a variety of marbles such as cat's eyes, but steelies (ball bearings) were frowned upon because they smashed glass marbles. Regis Remington was the best marbles player in Hiller. He had crocks full of marbles that he had won from the other kids.

"Regis was like a well-equipped pool shark. He used a fleece-lined knuckle pad and approached each shot as a golfer examines a long putt or a pool shark plans the position of the cue ball for the follow-up shot."

Regis even figured out how to make a profit from his skill at marbles.

"He would sell the marbles he won from you back to you," Harry explained, "so at least you didn't have to buy new ones. Eventually, those crocks of marbles became worthless. Perhaps there is a lesson in life there."

Knife games and marbles kept most of the guys busy, but what about the girls? While the boys spent the afternoon playing Buckety Buck, pocket knife baseball, mumbley peg, or marbles, the girls were having their own fun. Next we will look back at games favored by the girls, as well as those that were played by boys and girls together.

GAMES OF YESTERYEAR WERE NOT ALWAYS ROUGH

Buckety Buck, Pocket Knife Baseball, and other games played years ago were often rough or a bit dangerous, but there were plenty of less risky games for kids to play.

Republic native Mildred Winterhalter Keppel of Wheeling, West Virginia, emailed me, "The thing I remember best about games we played is where we played them − in the alley beside the outhouses. The kids who lived in my alley did not have many chances for recreation, although the church in our town tried to help."

"One game that we played in the alley was May I?" Mildred wrote. "The point of the game was to get to the goal line by taking steps when it was your turn. A leader [sometimes called 'Mother'] would tell you how many steps you could take, but you had to remember to say 'May I?' before you moved. If you forgot to say that, some kids played that you lost your turn; others played that you had to go back to the starting line."

In one variation of May I? or Mother, May I?, the steps meted out by "Mother" were expected to imitate animal movements. Mother might assign two "kangaroo steps," which could produce giant bounds, or perhaps one "snake step," which resulted in a kid doing the belly crawl. The type of exotic animal steps Mother could assign was limited only by his or her knowledge of the animal kingdom.

"My question," Mildred mused, "sixty years after playing those games, is why didn't we play in our yards instead of the alley? I guess it was because most families needed to have a vegetable garden in their yard, leaving no room to play there."

Some games attracted girls more often than boys. One of them was Jacks.

"It was a game that you could play alone or play with friends," remarked Patty O'Neil Wilson of Coal Center, Pennsylvania. The game was played with a small rubber ball and ten small metal "jacks." As was true of pocket knife baseball or marbles, winning at Jacks required coordination and practice.

"You started by scattering the ten jacks onto a flat surface," Patty Wilson explained. "Only one hand could be used to pick up the jacks and catch the ball. In the first round, which was called One-sies, you had to bounce the ball, pick up one jack, then catch the ball before it hit the floor or ground. If you missed picking up the jack or catching the ball, or if you touched another jack while doing it, your turn was over.

"If you successfully picked up all ten jacks one at a time, your turn continued into the second round, which was called Two-sies. Picking up

two jacks at a time, you had to pick up all ten jacks using the same technique. The next round was Three-sies, and so on until the final (tenth) round was reached, when you had to bounce the ball, pick up all ten jacks, and then catch the ball before it hit the floor.

"This game was usually a girls' game, but when I was in school, there were some boys in my neighborhood who were not to be outdone by us girls."

Of course, no boy in those days would dare be caught jumping rope, even though nowadays jumping rope is a common conditioning technique employed by both male and female athletes.

"Boys did not jump rope," declared South Side native Nancy Campbell Bender of Grindstone. "That was a girls' activity. Using a specially made jump rope or a length of clothes line held at each end by a girl, the rope would be twirled. A third girl would step into the middle and begin jumping, and sometimes a second or even a third girl would jump in. I don't recall seeing anyone doing the fancy rope jumping that we see today."

There were some games that boys and girls most definitely enjoyed playing together. Uniontown native Dick Alexander of El Granada, California, told me, "A popular birthday party game was Spin the Bottle. How I dreaded having the bottle point at me, which meant I had to go into a closet and kiss a girl!"

"If the bottle pointed toward you," added North Side native Barney Sabo of Sequim, Washington, "you had the choice of who you wanted to kiss."

More subtle, yet at the same time more provocative, was a giggle-inducing party game called Under The Sheet. Such a name today would conjure parent-panicking images of un-chaperoned tomfoolery, but Under The Sheet relied more upon the youthful players' imaginations to provide titillation. Dick Alexander remembers playing the game when he was a student at Uniontown's Ben Franklin Junior High School in the 1930s.

"In those days, when radio was still in its infancy and television was light years away, the piano was very popular in many parlors," Dick told me, "and of course, there was a lot of sheet music to be found under the lid of the piano bench.

"To play Under The Sheet, players would gather in a circle in the living room and take turns selecting a piece of sheet music from the piano bench. The game required that each player say aloud the title of the tune. The rest of the group would then repeat the words 'under the sheet.'

"This could result in some very funny moments, as well as some

racy stuff for us pre-pubescent youngsters, when you consider that some of the popular tunes of the day were entitled 'I Got Rhythm,' 'Moanin' Low,' and 'Yes, We Have No Bananas!'"

If the party was held outdoors, a popular back yard game was Red Rover. Rosalie Coughenour of Hopwood explained the rules.

"The children divided themselves into two teams," Rosalie told me, "then lined up like soldiers facing each other about fifteen to twenty feet apart. One team would lock arms with hands only − you could not hook elbows − then call to the other team, 'Red Rover, Red Rover, let Johnny (or whatever opposing player they selected) come over.'

"The selected child would then run full speed toward the opposing line and try to break through their locked arms. If he did, the team whose player cracked through the locked arms won the point. This continued until each child had at least one turn, so as to avoid the bigger kids not being called upon to 'come over.' The team with the most points won. It was surprising how successful many of the smaller kids were at stopping the charger from breaking the line."

North Side native Ken Nickalo of Canton, Ohio, noted that games requiring the least equipment were often the most popular. Kick The Stick was one of them.

"I spent my childhood on Sixth Avenue in the late 40s and early 50s," Ken recalled, "and played nearly every game there was. One that I particularly remember was Kick The Stick. We would slant a stick on the curb near Cooper's house on the corner of Sixth Avenue, and kick the stick as hard as we could. The game was a simple take-off on baseball. Catch the stick on the fly, and the kicker was out. Tag him running the bases and he was out. There were two kickers on the team, and when somebody was out, he would go to the field. As few as three kids could start a game, and as many as wanted to join in could do so.

"Kick The Stick took absolutely no money to play. There were no balls, no gloves, no $100 bats, and no taxpayer-supported playground or ball field. If a car came, the game stalled while it went by. It was just a bunch of kids using their imagination and having fun, and it sure beats Playstation 2 and Game Boy."

Playing with other children when no adults were around to supervise taught youngsters valuable interpersonal skills. Dealing with those who violated the rules and settling disagreements through negotiations (or the occasional fist fight) gave kids practice at dealing with their peers.

I wonder if kids play games with other kids as often as they once did. Or are they more likely to play electronic games by themselves, straining thumbs and eyes playing a video and computer game instead of

exercising their bodies and learning to get along with others?

As Christmas approaches, anxious-to-please parents will fork over hundreds of dollars for the latest must-have toys and electronic games. We wonder what would happen if on Christmas morning, a few modern boys and girls would rush to the Christmas tree to discover that the only toys and games Santa had left this year were a stick, an empty tin can, an old pocket knife, ten jacks, and a rubber ball.

The cost of shopping to provide such an old-fashioned Christmas? Pennies, if anything at all.

The value of seeing the bewildered expressions on the kids' faces as they looked over these popular children's games from yesteryear?

Priceless.