

Excerpt from *Tales from a Free-Range Childhood*
Look It Up!

When I was growing up, there were a lot of things that had not been invented. One of those things was called, "Self Esteem." Since self esteem had not been invented, it did not need to be taken care of. It was a different world.

When we got in trouble, no one was put in "Time Out." "Time Out" would simply have been a nice, quiet opportunity to think up more troublesome stuff to do. There was no such thing as "Grounded." No...here is the way it went: if you got into trouble at home, you got a flat-out, un-caged, free-range whipping. But, at school it was different. If you got into trouble at school, you got a paddling.

The difference was legal. If you got spanked with a paddle, the teacher could later stand up in court and truthfully swear, "I did not touch him!" Every teacher I ever had in school taught with a paddle...it was standard equipment.

In the first grade, Mrs. Annie Ledbetter used a red Fli-back paddle. The Fli-back paddles were manufactured for the teaching industry by the Fli-back Toy Company in High Point, North Carolina, and, they came disguised as toys. The new paddles arrived as gifts on birthdays and Christmas. They were wooden paddles with a long rubber band stapled right in the center. On the other end of the rubber band, there was a small, red rubber ball. The deception was that if you practiced long enough at trying to hit the rubber ball with the paddle, eventually you would be able to intercept the ball when the rubber band returned it faster than you had hit it and again knock it with the paddle before it hit you square in the eye.

That first grade year, it was William Birchfield who got one of these Fli-back paddles on his birthday. William brought it to school. We could see it sticking out of his back pocket. While Mrs. Ledbetter was not looking, William pulled out the paddle and was practicing, "Whackety, whackety, whackety..." Mrs. Ledbetter recognized the sound, turned around, and, before William could take a quick breath she lifted the red paddle from his hand, popped the rubber band off of it, and recycled it on the spot! William yelped as the paddle found Mrs. Ledbetter's target on his first-grade rear end.

For the rest of that year, and for the rest of her teaching career, the red paddle dozed on the corner of her desk, ready to sit up and go into action whenever it heard the right tone in her voice.

Even in the first grade, however, I soon discovered that most of us did not have much to worry about. It seemed that in every class of little kids, there was installed in the room two or three designated "paddle-ees," whose role in life was to get paddled for the rest of us. It was the reason they had been placed on the face of the earth.

In Mrs. Ledbetter's class, which was basically the "A's through the Gr's," (Charlotte Abernethy through Lady Ruth Green), the designated paddling recipients were: Tommy Conard, his cousin, Aldean (they were already genetically related), and a tall, faded-looking boy named Lynn Fowle.

Lynn Fowle was the youngest of seven brothers. Every year, year after year, all seven of the Fowle brothers started the year at Hazelwood School, even though there were only six grades. As the year progressed, the Fowle boys, one at a time and every few weeks, disappeared from school. Gradually we heard the whispered tales: they were being gradually transported to a mythical land known as "The Stonewall Jackson Training School." It was a far away place where evil boys would be gathered from all over North Carolina. There they were all joined together so that they could exchange evil information with one another and each one be a lot worse when returning home than he had ever been to start with.

Every day of the week, Mrs. Ledbetter paddled one of these three boys. On Monday, for example, she paddled Tommy. On Tuesday, it was Aldean. On Wednesday, it was Lynn. On Thursday, back to Aldean. On Fridays she paddled all three of them. She knew that she was

going to have to miss paddling them for two days over the weekend and that they all three needed it anyway. The next week she would start the paddlings in a different order for fairness.

Finally we finished the first grade, and, all of the “A’s through Gr’s” moved up to Old (that was her first name) Miss Lois Harrell’s class.

Old Miss Lois Harrell was profoundly old. She once told us that she had been teaching second grade for one-hundred-and-eighty-three years, and that was after she had taught in all the other grades to find out for sure where she really belonged.

Old Miss Lois Harrell was so ancient that she existed on the outer fringes of total dehydration. The only thing that kept her on the face of the earth was a giant bottle of Jergens Lotion that she rubbed into herself all the time to try to keep herself puffed up so that the wind would not simply blow her away.

Old Miss Lois Harrell had an electric paddle!

The electric paddle had been invented by her boyfriend, Harry. In a previous eon Harry had been slated to marry Old Miss Lois Harrell. But, before the wedding time came, the World War came along, and, Harry was sent off to fight the Germans. In a short time he discovered that fighting the Germans was a better prospect than getting married to Old Miss Lois Harrell. So, Harry just kept signing up to stay in the army.

After two-and-a-half wars he finally came home. Now it was too late to make any point at all by getting married. So, he simply eroded into being Old Miss Lois Harrell’s boyfriend for life.

Every afternoon he came over to her house and stayed through supertime, after which he went home to his own house. But...in the middle of all this, he invented the electric paddle.

Years later I thought back and figured out how he had done it. Harry had taken a board and cut it out into the shape of an elongated paddle. He had then painted it red, except that on one side there was a sort of explosive logo like that which later popped up on television if you were watching “Batman.”

Near the end of the handle, Harry had drilled a hole into the wood. Deep into this hole he had glued one end of an electric wire on the other end of which was a big plug. Now the electric paddle was complete.

It laid on top of Old Miss Lois Harrell’s desk, tail curled like a sleeping snake, waiting to be called into service.

When she got all wound up, Old Miss Lois Harrell would pick up the paddle. Its long, electric tail would unroll and dangle to the floor. Then she would proclaim: “I am going to do you a favor today, boys and girls. I am going to use the paddle by hand. But, you listen to me! If you keep on acting like this...I am going to be forced to plug it in! I cannot even begin to tell you what happens when I plug it in. It might get out of control and use itself on every one of you!”

We were paralyzed with fear, especially after the fifth and sixth graders told us about how she had actually plugged it in when they were back in the second grade. They told us that a little boy totally melted through the floor of the classroom, so totally, in fact, that they could not remember his name and his own family could not remember that they had ever had him. It was terrifying.

The same three victims, Aldean, Tommy, and Lynn, were in Old Miss Lois Harrell’s room. Just like in the first grade, one or more of them got the paddle almost every day. It was routine.

One afternoon after lunch, Old Miss Lois decided that it was time to give a dose to Tommy. She had him bent over a desk and was warming up her paddling arm. When she started paddling, Old Miss Lois did not take into account that she had just been rubbing a whole gob of Jergens Lotion into her hands, and, the lotion had not yet soaked in.

Tommy was hanging on to the desk, the paddle was singing its song. About the time it got up to seventy-eight RPM, the paddle slipped out of Old Miss Lois Harrell’s hand and flew in an arc through the air, dragging its electric tail behind it. The paddle struck the upper pane of the

big tall schoolhouse window, the glass shattered into hundreds of pieces, and we watched the paddle go out the window and fall toward the sidewalk below.

Just as the window shattered, Mr. Buck Bowles, the Superintendent, was coming up the walk to visit Mr. Leatherwood, our principal. That may be what changed the course of the afternoon.

In only a moment Mr. Leatherwood and Mr. Bowles both arrived at our classroom door. We students had already taken the initiative and were, on our own, cleaning up the broken glass as Old Miss Lois seemed to be paralyzed by the turn of events. Suddenly Miss Lois left the room with Mr. Leatherwood and Mr. Bowles and we had an instant substitute: Haskel Davis, our janitor.

It was a great afternoon. Haskel got a stepladder and let us help him cut cardboard and fill in the broken window. Then he spent the last hour of the day telling us stories about fire, blood, and throw-up!

We went home.

The next morning when we got to school, there was a new pane of glass in the window. As soon as the morning roll was called and lunch money was taken up, we lined up to go to the auditorium for an unannounced all-school assembly. When we got there we saw that both Mr. Leatherwood and Mr. Bowles were up on the stage. It was going to be a long and serious meeting.

Mr. Bowles did the talking. "Boys and girls," he started. (Mr. Bowles had a habit of rattling the change in his pocket while he talked...it was like the bell on the cat and we were the mice.) "Yesterday afternoon after school we had a special teacher workshop on discipline," he went on. "Things are changing here at Hazelwood Elementary School. We decided yesterday that there will be no more paddling in school." About three boys out of every thirty students applauded.

"Now, listen to me," he was not finished. "I did not say that there would be no punishment...no...because many of you are still evil. It is just going to be different.

"There is a new kind of punishment that has been invented. They are doing it at schools all over the country, and, we are going to try it here at Hazelwood Elementary School. It is called 'getting suspended.'"

Mr. Bowles went on to explain everything in great detail. There would be two levels of "getting suspended." First there was the misdemeanor level. He read off a list of minor offenses and told us that any of these would result in getting "suspended in school." We would be put in a special room with all the other students who were being suspended in school, and, we would all be suspended in there together with a teacher watching us.

Then there was the felony level. This was a serious list. It included things like: fighting on the school bus (especially fighting with the driver), stealing lunch money, changing grades on your report card (but only if you made them better), and, worst of all, calling a teacher the same thing you had already heard your parents call them. If you did any of these things, you would be suspended out of school on your own! That was it.

With this last pronouncement the assembly was over and we marched out of the auditorium and back to our second-grade class.

Once back in the room and settled down, Old Miss Lois Harrell looked us over and asked: "So, boys and girls...did you all understand what Mr. Bowles told us?"

"Yes!" it was Tommy who answered for the class. "No more paddling!!"

"That's right, Tommy," she intoned. "But there is to be punishment. From now on you are going to get suspended instead of paddled. Is that clear? Do any of you have any questions at all about this? I want it to be clear."

Near the back of the room a little boy named Eddie Curtis raised his hand. Every year Eddie would be seated near the back of the room. I remember often seeing his eyes closed for long periods of time in the school day.

“Eddie,” she saw his raised hand, “do you have a question?”

“Yes ma’am...I heard everything Mr. Bowles said, but he just didn’t make it clear to me. There were a lot of big words. Just what does ‘suspended’ mean, anyway?”

The entire class wondered the same thing Eddie did. Mr. Bowles had worn that word out for most of a good hour and had not one time actually told us what the word itself meant.

Being a good second-grade teacher, Old Miss Lois Harrell did not answer the question. No, we already knew what she was going to say: “Go look it up!”

Every one of us hated that phrase: “Go look it up.” Whenever you did not know what a word meant, you heard, “Go look it up,” whenever you did not know how to spell a word, “Go look it up!” How were you supposed to look a word up if you did not know how to spell it to begin with?

I remembered a day when I spent what seemed like hours flipping back and forth between “c” and “k” trying to find “katsup/cetchup/catsup/ketchup” or whatever in the dictionary. It was torture.

We all watched as little Eddie trudged over to the dictionary. It was a gigantic and heavy “New Century” dictionary. A dark red color, Old Miss Lois Harrell had acquired it, one section at a time, over a year of shopping at the A&P store. Now it was finished and bolted together for all of us to use.

Eddie opened the big book and started turning toward “s.” Soon he was to the “su’s.” Suddenly Eddie spotted the word. His back arched, his eyes rolled back in his head, and he wailed: “NOOO! Jesus, Joseph and Mary...they are going to HANG us!

“If you are just a little bit bad, they are going to put you in a room with all the children who are a little bit bad and hang us all together with a teacher watching. If you are really bad, they are going to drag you out of school and hang you all by yourself without even having anyone to watch. NOOO!” The entire class fell apart.

Two days later in the Waynesville Mountaineer the following headline appeared near the bottom of the third page: “Twenty-eight second-graders petition school board to re-establish paddling as their preferred form of punishment.”

And...it was done.