

Pete McMartin: The beautiful perils of child's play

Wanga-cha-chas, hidey-holes and a tree house were joyful places for boys growing up in Richmond farmland

BY PETE MCMARTIN, VANCOUVER SUN COLUMNIST APRIL 4, 2015 8:12 AM



A photo of the McMartin boys' tree fort. Sitting in the tree are John McMartin, age 6, and (in foreground) David McMartin, 8.

"Overly safe playgrounds aren't challenging enough for children's bodies or minds, says a pediatrics professor at the University of B.C. — and they're no fun, either."—Vancouver Sun, Page A1, April 1.

When my older brother was a boy, he and his friends would fashion lances out of two-by-fours, hurtle down the street at each other on their bikes and joust like knights. Would it be pointing out the obvious to say that they could have poked an eye out?

When I was a boy, my friends and I roamed the back alleys of our neighbourhood in packs and played war. Using the metal garbage can lids we stole from the neighbours' backyards as shields, we would hurl the walnut-sized stones the alleys were laid with at each other. We threw as hard as we could: The stones were meant to wound. I still wonder at the crazy danger of it.

When my two boys were boys, they grew up in old Terra Nova, in the farthest northwest corner of Richmond. It was bordered by Westminster Highway to the south and No. 1 Road to the east. The middle arm of the Fraser River flowed by our front door, to the north, just as it reached the Strait of Georgia. Back then, it was the last remaining island of farmland left in west Richmond — this, before the developers got their hands on it and threw up a ghastly subdivision.

My boys were raised in an 800 sq. ft cottage that had once been a net shed for a fish-packing plant,

and which we rented from a family friend of my in-law's. My in-laws lived next door on a two-acre spread, and they had horses, chickens, a couple of barns and an orchard of old pear and apple trees. There might have been a dozen other properties like that in Terra Nova at the time; all else was crop fields. Pheasants still called to each other from the hedgerows then, and barn swallows nested under our eaves, and clans of barn owls colonized the high rafters of the old barns.

The boys had the run of it. We left them to themselves and they and their friends would roam the fields all day.

They caught frogs in the ditches. They pelted each other with the turnips left rotting in the fields. They dissected the owl pellets they found, carefully extracting the jaws and teeth of half-digested mice carcasses. They made treasure maps, singeing their edges so they looked old. They buried a time capsule and filled it with their Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles toys. It's still there, somewhere. They had a tree fort cradled in the branches of an enormous old apple tree: the fort must have risen 30 feet in the air and could only be reached by an extended aluminum ladder. I have a picture of it, and just looking at it gives me the willies. They once dug a trench, covered it with boards and piled dirt on top of the boards. It took them a month to dig it. It was their hidey-hole, one we had no idea existed. If it had collapsed ... I shuddered at the thought when they told me about it two days ago. Once, my son waded into the river to save a duckling in distress. I did the same thing to rescue a dog that had been carried away in the current and I nearly drowned, and I was in my 30s. My son was seven. The duckling died. This, too, I learned about only two days ago.

They played in the hay bales and sawdust piles they were forbidden to play in and, unbeknownst to us, fought duels with the machetes we used for clearing brambles. My in-laws had an old thoroughbred named Bumps, and Bumps, not to put too fine a point on it, was crazy. Without warning, he would rampage through the orchard at a gallop, and more than once I had to dash out into the orchard and scoop my boys up out of harm's way.

At the mouth of the river, beyond the dike, the land gave out onto big stretches of cattails, and our boys would wade out into them and disappear. They called the cattails wanga-cha-chas — I have no idea why — and they found a dry clearing where they couldn't be seen from the dike. There, they convened with their friends and played King of The Wanga-Cha-Chas. The game entailed ... who knows? It was their business and no one else's.

In the spring, the rain would turn the fields into sucking bogs, and I once had to dig out one of my boy's little buddies who had sunk up to his waist in the mud. And once, while walking through the fields with friends and their children, we all sank up to our knees in the muck. Stuck there, we did the only thing we could. We had a mud fight.

I feel for the kids now who spend their childhoods trapped between the sidelines of a soccer field, or who have to make do with the safety-council-approved mundanities that pass for playgrounds these days. I feel, too, for those parents who are compelled to protect their children from all harm, including that which they might encounter during play. I have felt that compulsion myself.

But children need a little mud on their souls, and the thrill of adventure only children can feel. Why have so many of us forgotten that simple truth, once we've become adults?

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