

Growing Up in Muddy, Illinois, in the 1940s

Jack Wiggins

The War dominated the lives of us all from 1941 until it was over in 1945. Remember the family members, friends and neighbors who went off to fight to save our country and to beat Hitler and Mussolini and the Japanese in the Pacific. McArthur, Eisenhower, Patton, were three of the names often in the news. I can remember being in downtown Chicago in the loop celebrating the Victory in Europe and later Victory in Japan. Dancing in the street with sailors from the Great Lakes Training Center is one memory. Yelling, dancing, hugging prevailed. We were indeed happy.

For us kids we were often scared, but we also were proud Americans and were eager to help. Remember the huge pile of scrap metal we assembled on the front lawn at Muddy Public School? Also, remember the milkweed pods we gathered in late summer or fall? Seems like this was a project encouraged at school. Most of all, I am sure you can remember the rationing of food products and the scarcity of many products. Sugar, coffee, shoes, chewing gum are a few things which come quickly to mind. There was a federal Office of Price Administration better known as OPA. Many products were rationed and required ration stamps to purchase; others were scarce or available on the black market.

Remember the movie short films about the war and the patriotic films we would be happy to see and live the lives of the film war heroes? A Saturday movie was 10 cents for this second grader. Same for a comic book. Jerry Lewis and Dean Martin made the war seem less morbid as did the Andrews sisters.

Our family was held together by a mother who taught us to be hard-working and god-fearing. If we worked long and hard and tried our best, we could be confident that a better life could be had. My parents said, "You must work with a will. We don't want to be embarrassed by someone saying we didn't teach you how to work." We learned a lot of fine values from our Mom. She knew a lot about life and how it ought to be lived. And she was persistent. For sure, she taught us that there are consequences for youthful indiscretions. I well remember the taste of laundry soap, and can still feel the

sting of a belt on my back from her discipline. She taught us the value of education with a religious fervor, and insisted we go to Sunday School and church — Baptist, that is, The Muddy Baptist Church. About 16, I can remember making some negative comment about female gender, which caused her to force me to read Ashley Montague's book, *The Natural Superiority of Women*. I remember long conversations with her about fairness, about religion, about school, about sports, and sportsmanship, about sharing, about how it was our responsibility to be happy. If you are bored it is your own fault. There was lots to do that will be interesting.

FDR (Franklin Delano Roosevelt) and John L. Lewis (President of the United Mine Workers of America) were heroes in our house. I remember fear when our dad came home early from his job at a coal mine and announced, "We are on wildcat." I waited a long time to find out that a "wildcat" strike is one unauthorized by the union leaders and is in essence one where some disgruntled workers walked off the job.

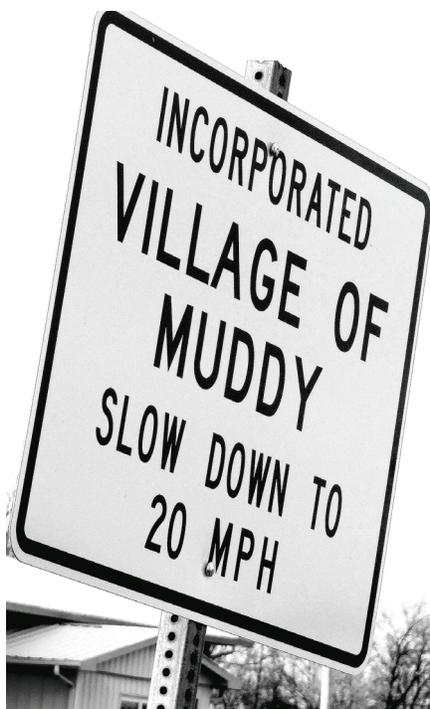
Muddy Public School

Remember these at Muddy Public School: John R. Murphy, Grace Warfield, Rose DeMasso, Flossie Schreiber, Mr. Miller?

There were others, but these are the ones who taught me.

I have vague memories of having to put away our things and clasp our hands on our desks before we could leave Miss Warfield's room to go to recess, or lunch or home. It was dull and painful to wait for a straggler, often the same ones time and again. The smell of paste, the black boxes of Prang crayons (large size) and the boxes of six or eight crayons (green and yellow then, as now). I remember that I liked the cutting and pasting and reading. Everybody competed for the duty to pound the erasers on the ledge at the top of the staircase to the playground.

Remember the preciseness of Rose DeMasso? We learned the state capitals and how to spell them in her classroom. I also remember a project of drawing



and painting a large mural of water birds and animals. I am certain we learned a lot of other things that are attributable to her efforts. Remember the arithmetic drills at the blackboard in all the classes? The one of two at the board who correctly answered a math problem remained there and could choose whether the next problem would be addition, subtraction, multiplication or division. I thought this game was great until I lost a few times to some smart girl.

Ms. Schreiber was a favorite for me: We learned our multiplication tables from her and we learned cursive writing in her class. Remember when she taught us about time — the task was to be silent for five minutes and at the end of five minutes to raise your hand. At the end of 40 seconds some hand went up and finally only one student had decided that everyone else was wrong and held his decision on how long five minutes was until just about five minutes had elapsed. Remember who it was? Chick Girot. We also did some type of play in her class. A dentist also visited our class with pictures of teeth and talked about brushing them and gave free samples of Ipana toothpaste. Later I remember the whole class receiving a sample bar of Lifebuoy soap from Miss Schreiber's efforts to provide good health learning.

Remember Mr. Murphy teaching seventh and eighth grades, coaching all sports, especially basketball, principal of the school, hall and playground monitor, water chemical checker, school nurse, minister to the PTA and the board of trustees, song leader, organizer of the school lecture circuit speakers and performers, and leader of our educational program. In addition to interviewing teachers, hiring and firing them, I am sure there were days when I saw him running the floor mop up and down the gymnasium and running-up the American flag on its standard in front of the school and blowing his whistle to referee basketball games.

The most favorite thing was to go to the auditorium and sing or be entertained. Remember us belting out songs from our songbooks, from *Old Macdonald* and *Clementine*

to the *Yellow Rose of Texas* with Rose DeMasso at the piano? No one had so much enthusiasm as Mr. Murphy in these singing events — and it was contagious. I can see him now, songbook in his left hand and with his right hand, swinging high and fast, directing all of us — his school choir. Heaven knows, we needed some heavy doses of happiness and enthusiasm.

A frequent activity during recess or lunch was to play a game called Rabbit — remember a tennis ball and running kids were all that were needed to make this game good? The child who was "it" had to chase and hit another student with the tennis ball. The one who was hit then became the one who was "it."

My shins are still deeply indented from the steel-toed and hard leather shoes which slammed into my wobbly legs as we played many hours of soccer, better known to us as kick ball. I don't remember any soccer goals, nor do I remember keeping score. The idea was to chase the ball and kick it again and again. The younger ones liked the swings and the teeter-totters. I can remember John R. Murphy on an occasion winning some sort of teeter-totter contest.

Can anyone forget the many recitations from the early American poets, that Mr. Murphy offered, by memory?

Remember the Palmer Penmanship classes, the coat closet and the door at the rear of the room?

The geography game — we all turned to a map and Mr. Murphy stated the name of a distant continent or river or state or city? I liked that game plus we learned a lot of geography.

Remember the memorization of the Gettysburg Address and then reciting it verbatim? (Four score and seven years ago, our forefathers brought forth upon this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal...")

I liked our little library. It was small but it had a lot of unread books in it and was a place we could hide for a little while.

Also, Mr. Murphy said that he wasn't going to send us to



Gary DeNeal photo

The O'Gara No. 12 concrete tippie is an iconic Saline County landmark. The massive structure was used to load coal onto box cars.

Harrisburg Township High School without some knowledge of grammar and some knowledge of algebra. So, we all got a fast class in high school elementary curriculum and behavior before we left Muddy Public School — including manners, and how not to wear our caps indoors. If we didn't know how to act when we left Muddy School, it wasn't the teachers' fault.

The basketball competitions with other schools were a highlight as were the events when our school band played and when we were all dressed for Halloween and received lots of good things and played great games.

Also, in 1946 as young boys often do, we were stretching our wings and on one occasion an unwise decision was made to mutiny or go on strike against a kindly lady substitute teacher. At recess, all of the boys (except Herb Lambert, who didn't get the word), stayed in the boys' restroom at the bell for class to begin. No one came to get us, so we spent a boring hour-and-a-half standing around in the boys' restroom wondering what would happen to us. Since consequences follow such evil deeds, we all met for school the following day with not a word said until time for class to dismiss for the day, when we boys were all summoned to the office for our consequences. First, we got quite a piece of what was on Mr. Murphy's mind. He expressed some serious disappointment in our lack of judgment and unfair treatment of the substitute whom he had gone out of his way to find for us. And when he had cleansed his mind of all that was on it, he pulled a leather strap from his secret place (up high on a shelf-out of sight) and began one by one to administer justice in the manner prescribed. After he had fully expressed his feelings about the restroom mutiny, a group of seventh and eighth grade boys were trying

to recover their dignity and guilty feelings about how badly we had really treated Mr. Murphy. We never had the chance to tell Mr. Murphy nor the substitute how sorry we were for the sad conduct nor how much lifelong knowledge we learned from this experience.

A major highlight of our lives was the Muddy School. It had the first indoor plumbing we had known, the first running water, drinking fountains that worked, with chemically treated water, the first showers, and a planned educational program that provided the key to some of our lives. It had a boiler that provided central heating and was a bit of magic for our young minds. We liked all of this richness and magic.

Games

But growing up in Muddy was more than family and school. We played a lot. I'm thinking about: Kick the Can, Hide and Seek, Hopscotch, skates with keys — on the sidewalk by the school, riding bikes for fun, making a sling shot and shooting them at birds or railroad telegraph insulators, Jacks with the girls, lifting the chain link fence for each other to crawl under — by the old oak tree which still stands — to get onto the school grounds to play after hours, weekends and summertimes, jumping on beds, Halloween fun — throwing shelled corn at houses, noise makers made from an empty thread-spool and a long string, throwing rocks up into the air when the bats were out at dusk looking for insects — they would chase the rock almost to the ground — it was such a great sport.

Remember running until you hurt inside, or laughing until you cried, or being tickled until you were out of



Gary DeNeal photo

The Middle Fork of the Saline River winds between Muddy and Harrisburg. This photo was taken on a bridge on the Harrisburg-Eldorado Bike Trail that passes the north end of Muddy.

breath? Remember walking home for lunch? Playing card games of Old Maid and Authors? Making chains of clover or looking at clouds and using your imagination? Playing cowboy and Indian or army or cops and robbers? Building a fort of wood or logs from young trees or digging a hole in the ground for a fort? Climbing the trees, carving on the trees, smoking corn silk, getting eaten up with chiggers and putting clear nail polish on them. Swimming in the pond at Big Twelve — mainly to bathe, but sometimes for fun? Riding field horses without permission?

Gathering what nature offers

Then there was an activity best described as Gathering What Nature Offers.

Remember fishing in the spray ponds that made rainbows in the fine mist, and Little Twelve pond and Big Twelve pond and the creek, which is a part of the Middle Fork of the Saline River? We took fish for food, not for sport.

The same might be said for the many rabbits served at our home, especially in winter and the many squirrels. Some, including my brother, Frank, took muskrat, mink and fox for pelts.

Berries: First in the spring came what we called dewberries and later we picked blackberries which mother canned and made into pies in the winter time. Also, we probably rarely had store bought jelly — it was grape or blackberry which she canned, along with peaches, green beans, corn and apple sauce.

Nuts: All year long we were in the woods and on the look out for nut trees, especially walnut and hickory. We liked certain hickory nuts that had a thinner shell and tried to be the first there after the first frost caused the nuts to begin to fall. The thinner shell made them somewhat easier to crack and remove the nut-meat. Since we used a hammer

and brick or rock to pound on, the hard shell was always a big obstacle. Finally, we found some pecan trees near the railroad track near No. 1 mine.

We also gathered loose coal which fell legitimately from the rail road cars and some probably had been caused to fall. We dug through the coal mine tailings a few hundred feet from our house. The rains would wash away the gray dirt and the black coal would glisten in the sunlight and made it easy to find and pick up. We did this to supplement the supply of coal we knew we would need in the winter.

We also found young pigeons at the coal mine called No. 1 — we risked our lives to climb up rotted out steps to get at the young squab to take home and hand feed in order to later have a group of adults. The pigeons went forth and

multiplied until my mom formed an opinion that she had had enough to do with pigeons and ordered that we make some other arrangements for the birds other than her house roof and chicken house. We were also good at finding pop bottles — Coke, Nehi, 7-Up, Royal Crown Cola — because they had a redemption value of a couple of pennies. These bottles were the source of a trip to the store for candy or if saved up, a trip to a movie. It was great to have a little discretionary money.

Social activity

Social activity depended a lot on the season, the church and whether company was coming or whether we could scrape together enough money to

take the bus from the Muddy Post Office to the square in Harrisburg to see a movie at the Grand or the Orpheum Theater.

Some of our best times were with the family listening to Mom tell stories of her youth and listening to the radio. Popular with us were Jack Armstrong, The Lone Ranger, Tom Mix, Jack Benny, Burns and Allen, Fibber McGhee and



Gary DeNeal photo

The Muddy Post Office held the distinction of being the second smallest post office in the country, with one in Florida setting the record for the smallest. After serving the village for decades, the U.S. Postal Service built a new post office in the 2000s and the tiny post office serves as a roadside museum.

Molly, Red Skelton, and a lot of country music. My mother was a huge fan of reading so we inherited a reading interest. Also, she always read two daily papers and we were often exposed to the daily news on the radio station WEBQ.

Remember how hatchling chicks were advertised on WEBQ by a hatchery in Eldorado for delivery by US Mail? You could order these baby chicks by the hundreds or an order as small as 25 chicks for delivery in a cardboard box, with a bottom lined with wood shavings. Such ads were designed and ran in the winter in order to have spring frying chickens, which was almost a ritual for some families. Unlike today, you had to plan months in advance for a bit of choice fried chicken, grow them, pluck, butcher, and cook them — makes me cringe a bit to think of what a difference between then and now. Were the good old times that bring such nostalgia and for which we sometimes long perhaps not so good?

We really loved the parties where we learned about each other and who knew how to kiss, which resulted from such games as Spin the Bottle and Post Office or some such name. This stuff was intimidating, but high on my list of priorities anyway. I rationalized that I would just watch everyone else do this hug and kiss stuff.

We knew there was a good reward for hard work when the work involved homemade ice cream. Someone had to assemble the ingredients, chop the ice, put rock salt on the ice and — most demanding of all — someone had to hand crank it. After the hours of work, you could get a serving of good tasting, not very stiff ice cream, BUT NEVER ENOUGH.

My most favorite treat in the whole world was home-made fudge. This candy is today still an art form and loved by many and made by few. My mom knew how to make great fudge. She used the softball in water test and some other cooking witchery. So did Sylvia and Virginia Bragg, our next door neighbors. I would sometimes offer to provide the shelled nuts if they would provide the candy, which was considered then, at least by some, a reasonable trade. The Muddy Baptist Church offered more than the study of the Bible and Worship. Although it offered the chance to worship, my interest was in the people, the Sunday school lessons, some parables, the baptisms in the creek, the songs, like *Amazing Grace* and *The Old Rugged Cross*, the testimonials offered by the congregation and a feeling that I was doing good and learning how to be a good person. There were times when I wished the preacher would explain better what he was trying to get across and other times when I wished he would just stop and let us all go home. But I liked best the singing, testimonials and prayers that told what was on the adults

minds.

Work for money

My brother Frank and I worked some as kids to earn money. We delivered a morning paper, the *St. Louis Globe Democrat* and an evening one the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, still an award-winning newspaper. We trudged through snow, rain, sleet, hail, cold waves and heat waves, but we did deliver the paper and went to school. We delivered the papers all days, every day including Sunday, for many years. It was a part of our life, duty and income. We needed the work is what we used to say, but today I can say that I knew we needed the money.

John Molinarolo hired me to work at the Venice Club in Muddy from 1946 through May of 1950, when I left to go to Blackburn College, in Carlinville, Illinois. The period of Venice Club work paralleled my attendance at Harrisburg Township High School. John hired me to keep the coolers filled with Coke, 7-Up, and Squirt and to serve soft drinks and ice for the customers who came to dance and listen to Deacon Wathon and his band. Often Rex Bowman and John Small played in a band when I worked there. The hours were interesting: Wednesday, Friday and Saturday nights from 8 p.m. until midnight. The pay was 50 cents an hour plus tips. It might seem like a low wage today, but it was considered fair at the time and I believed it a tremendous opportunity and definite improvement over delivering newspapers. I know that it was a major contributing reason why I made it through four years of high school. That regular income of a few dollars each week kept pace with an adolescent's need to do some of the things one is expected to do in high school.

Hundreds of times I heard the multiple bells ring in synchronization at the Russian Orthodox Church. I can hear them now. Can you too, hear them? How many bells were ringing, more than two, three, more? They seemed to ring on Sundays and some other Holy Days. They were mysterious in sound, name and meaning, but I liked the bells and I liked the Kertis family who cared for the church. (Edward Kertis has assured me that there were only two bells.)

The bells competed with the noise of the CIPS (Central Illinois Public Service) electric generating station and the noise the generators and coal-handling crane made. It is ironic that the bells prevailed long after the coal generating station was gone.

As in Hemingway's novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* we know the bells toll for us.

