



## Junior High School Memories A Memoir by Curtis Jerry Smothers

I read somewhere that time is nature's way of keeping everything from happening at once. That may be true, but my memories of junior high school are way back in the food chain of time's crystalline smorgasbord.

It has been over 60 years now since what I like to refer to as the "starving time" seared into my memory those school lunches that somehow never seemed to fill me; where bored, old crone teachers never seemed to inspire me, and bubbling hormones surfaced in the croaking sounds of my breaking voice.

### The Butt-Slapping Incident

The memories, then, instead of queuing in time's orderly path, play out like a kaleidoscope where the clearest ones are those accompanied by some kind of emotion, or—in the case of my long-remembered "butt-slapping" incident in the cafeteria one day—by pain and shock.

I was a 9th grader, and we were killing time after lunch in the cafeteria waiting for the bell to ring for class. Unfortunately, I chose to sit on the surface of one of our lunchroom tables, which happened to be the pet peeve of the male teacher who had lunchroom duty that day.

I don't remember what his name was, but I do recall seeing him around the school. He had a somewhat odd, disheveled and somewhat off-kilter look about him--almost psychotic, actually—as if his many years of teaching had made him slightly nuts.

### **I Was the Psycho-teacher's Pet Peeve**

Anyway, this particular teacher hated it when students sat on a lunchroom table. Freudian connotations of anal behavior notwithstanding, his justice was swift and terrible, especially if you were a boy student. I was his boy-student victim that day, as he crept up behind me and slapped my behind so hard that I nearly wet my pants.

The slap was followed by an almost insane rant the point of which was "Don't sit on cafeteria tables. People eat there."

I remember thinking that a less violent and more private verbal admonishment might have worked. I doubt that this maniac was into enlightened discipline, though. I hated that teacher, and I fantasize to this day that he came to an especially bad . . . er . . . end.

### **The Desperation of Being the Last to Eat**

I also refer to my junior high experience as the "starving time" because our class had the final lunch period of the day. We had to wait until one half hour past noon to be fed.

There were no snack machines in schools then, and the only thing to eat was what the student cafeteria served up. This was 1957, and we could buy a lunch for 25 cents and an extra pint of milk for two cents. The meals weren't bad, really, but one could never grow fat eating them.

The hunger problem was exacerbated, then, by our late start and the healthier-than-average appetite of growing adolescents. I remember sitting in study hall just before lunch trying to study over the distraction of my own and my classmates' rumbling stomachs.

### **The Clock Second Hand Cued the Lunch Bell**

The trick was to watch the classroom clock and be closest to the door as the second hand swept to the top of the hour and the bell rang. The favored position, then, was right at the pencil sharpener just adjacent to the door.

When the bell rang, we hungry students would swarm out the door and towards the food smells of the cafeteria, hoping earnestly that today the mashed potatoes were not so cold and lumpy or the sloppy joe's were not so sloppy. We were not unlike those western movies where thirst-crazed cattle stampeded towards the smell of water.

### **My Favorite Teacher**

Just after lunch, we had one of my favorite classes. It was English, and the teacher was a 60+ year-old lady, Mrs. Richardson, who seemed to me at the time to be older than salt water.

Mrs. Richardson was a hysterically funny and demonstrative woman, who loved teaching and being in the spotlight. She taught us to appreciate Shakespeare and could imitate Shylock or stand on her desk waving her ruler in imitation of a sword fight from Ivanhoe. She was the single

exception to almost every teacher I had in my public school stay, whose classes were anemic to the point of excruciating.

### **Mr. Crowley's Unendurable Social Studies**

For example, there was Mr. Crowley. He was our history and social studies teacher. He could have been a clone of that male teacher in the movie, *Ferris Beuller's Day Off*, except he was older and slightly more boring.

Mr. Crowley not only was boring, but also he had the power to instill boredom in others. Unlike Mrs. Richardson, who was eclectic and inventive in the way she taught, Mr. Crowley sat at his desk and droned on and on about things like President Jackson's kitchen cabinet or the Panic of 1836 and this president named Martin Van Buren.

Mr. Crowley was the last class of each day, and loomed like an almost unendurable initiation rite we needed to endure before we could break free for the freedom of the smelly school bus.

### **Flunk Latin and Go Straight to Shop**

My academic memories of junior high are dominated by my one big failure: I flunked Latin. Considering that I spent my first eight years in a Catholic school and was an altar boy to boot, I cannot explain that failure in any other terms than my boredom in class and yet another lackluster teacher I had.

Nevertheless, it was totally my fault that I failed the semester, and I was banished to shop class, where the dumb kids wallowed in the saw dust amid the sounds of roaring table saws and the smell of varnish.

I wasn't any good at shop, where the only project I managed to complete was making an unevenly sanded clipboard, which I gave away to a young

Biology teacher I had in 10th grade. (I had a crush on her. She was really a looker.)

## **Bittersweet Memories**

So my memories of junior high school are somewhat bittersweet. The bitterness comes from my lack of appreciation of what it meant to be only 14 with the road of life straight ahead and the need to be fully prepared for the long haul.

The sweetness comes from remembering things like the jukebox in the cafeteria blaring out Bobby Helms' "You are My Special Angel," and nearly dying with what passed for yearning at my age over the pre-nubile, long-skirted girls with poodle decorations gathering around and singing along.

In the end, I believe that George Bernard Shaw may have been thinking of me when he said, "Youth is a wonderful thing. What a crime to waste it on children."