

HAWARDEN....HOW IT ALL BEGAN

DO YOU REMEMBER THE FOOTBRIDGE?

Chapter 46

By: Mary Truesdell Johnson

Much has been written about the Hawarden Footbridge. Sadly, the bridge that for many decades joined the high school /middle school and the grade school is rapidly becoming a distant memory. With the completion of the Dry Creek Flood Control Project, the creek bed that held so much intrigue for past generations was filled and landscaped; turned into streets and parking lots; eliminating the need for any type of a bridge.

This may be a sign of progress for some, but to others it was the equivalent of losing an old friend. A friend that was always there to provide a place of solitary or a place of excitement; a place to patrol for enemy soldiers or a place to hold hands and maybe steal a first kiss without the whole world watching. To the children it was a world without adults a world where kids could be kids.

Stories of escapades around or under the bridge are as varied and numerous as the students who walked over it multiple times each day.

“No running on the bridge!”, “No climbing on the rails!”, “No balancing on the top boards!”, NO, NO, NO; words that just added to the magnetism of the bridge and lured the young people there to do just what they had been told not to.

Dry Creek was a very real “crick” in those days, and it was not always dry! Water ran under the footbridge at a very swift rate at times of high water and ice melt, but during the summer and quiet times, it meandered under the bridge with clear water and clouds reflecting in its clear pools.

The school years were made more memorable because of Dry Creek. When the creek was calm anyone who lived south of dry creek usually followed the path to its’ banks and walked home next to the water, rather than following the sidewalks. Many students walked as far as the tenth street bridge, but some were lucky enough to walk as far as the 9th street bridge and others followed the creek banks to eighth street by the old ball park and then followed it east as far as Avenue O. Skipping rocks in the water, testing the depth with limbs and sticks, walking on the ice in the winter, and sometimes finding it too thin to hold you; sliding down the banks on cardboard after a heavy snow, and playing Tarzan in the summer. Any season of the year was a time of fun and memories for those of us lucky enough to grow up and walk across that cherished wooden bridge.

Just as in the loss of a loved one; a parent, spouse, child, or even a pet, the memories become even more vivid and precious as the years pass. The generations of students who remember the bridge are rapidly disappearing. For those of us who crossed the bridge from the huge old grade school with the tubular fire escapes to the ominous high school that held so many mysteries, the bridge became a rite of passage. Freshman boys were often surrounded by upper classmen and forced to walk the top rail as an initiation ritual....many of them did not pass the test, falling into the muddy waters below. Football players loved running across the wooden planks just to hear the sound of their cleats on the bridge. Without a doubt for the alumni of Hawarden High School, the bridge was a journey to adulthood.

Once the Old Central School was demolished and the new lower, sleeker grade school was built, the bridge provided a pathway for the children; rain or shine, snow or wind the entire grade school trudged across that bridge for lunch every day and physical education at least a couple of times a week. One student reminisced that when they had physical education in the gym at the high school and then had to return over the bridge to the grade school, he would leave his hair wet after the shower to see if it would freeze on the way back to the classroom. Other students talked about the spring ice thaws and huge chunks of ice to float on. On one particular day, a huge chunk broke loose with one of them on it, headed at a swift rate towards the river. Fortunately, I have never heard of a serious injury on the bridge or the creek. I’m sure there were cuts and bruises, but no fatalities, other than during the flood of 26.

Of course we can't remember Dry Creek without visions of sitting on the banks with a homemade fishing pole waiting to catch that trophy fish. The Spike Club of the 40's and 50's was originated by a group of young boys who lived on Ninth Street. The club was named after one of the member's dogs, Spike. The club had an Air Force piloted by club dogs in orange crate biplanes powered by old truck tire inner tubes. The dogs and their owners patrolled Dry Creek at night during the Korean War Conflict, looking for spies and saboteurs. The dog named Pal that was the Squadron leader unfortunately had a lot of white hair on his coat, so the members of the club used shoe polish to dye him brown so he would not be detected by the enemy. They were not taking a chance of losing their Squadron Leader. Many of these secrets have just recently become declassified according to a member of the club.

These are only a few of the stories of adventures on Dry Creek or on the Footbridge that spanned it for over eighty years. The wooden bridge and Dry Creek are now gone, but the memories will live on as long as there is someone to tell the story. I hope I have done just that.

