

Summer 1954

When I drive to work, I always listen to the radio. Not too long ago the station that I listen to had a promotion where the D.J. asked his audience to describe their best summer ever. Since I don't have a cellular phone, I could not call in, but it made me think about hot weather, swimming, vacations and good times. I've had a lot of really good summers, but probably my best one was the summer of 1954. The definition of summer to a young boy is not the same as it is to everyone else. It has nothing to do with the weather or the equinoxes. To a kid, summer is the period of time between the last day of school and the first day of the next school year. 1954 was a very important year for me. My family had moved to Florida the year before, and by the following year my brothers and I had discovered a kind of unstructured freedom that is just about impossible for a boy to find these days.

There were six kids in my family. In the summer of 1954, my older sister Pat was 16 and I had just turned 12. My brother Jack was 10, then Jerry was 8½, my other sister Merrily was 6, and my youngest brother Rickey was almost 4. My dad had started a photo finishing and camera store in the Palma Ceia section of Tampa. It took all the cash he could scrape together to get it going and the business did not look very promising at first. The financial worries that my mother and father must have had, did not have much of an effect on us kids. We knew that we didn't have very good clothes or toys, the family car was old, and we never got to eat out at restaurants, but I don't recall giving it much thought. As a twelve year old in 1954, I was too busy having fun. It never seemed like my mother or father had much time to keep up with what we were doing. I suspect they were more aware than I thought they were. I know that whenever they made a rule or told us not to do something, we did not challenge it.

Our family had an odd collection of bicycles and tricycles that my dad picked up over the years. The bike that I inherited was a "LaSalle." I never saw another one like it. It was really old

and heavy. It had two mysterious mounting brackets protruding from the front that had once held some stylish fake shock absorbers in place. I bolted a piece of wood on the brackets and had something really unique, a bicycle with a small bookshelf on the front. It would later come in very handy to prop up the bag for my paper route. The fact that it looked weird didn't matter at all. No one wanted to steal it, but I was proud of it. The size of the sprockets gave this particular two-wheeler some unusual gearing. As with most bicycles in those days, it had only one speed with a coaster brake. This one had a higher gear ratio than the polished Schwinn's and American Flyer's of the fifties. That meant that I could not take off as quickly from a dead stop, but I could go faster with less effort than most other kids could. My brother, Jack and I could range over an area that would scare the day lights out of most parents today. I know we routinely rode four miles one way to our grandparent's house on Davis Island, and a lesser distance to my grandmother's house on Deckel Ave. We also sometimes rode a fourteen mile round trip, right through one of the roughest most blighted sections of West Tampa, to visit our friend Tommy Fry who lived near



This is me and my old beat-up two wheeler.

the Hillsborough River. No one would think of allowing twelve and ten year old kids to do that today, but we had a really well developed sense of adventure.

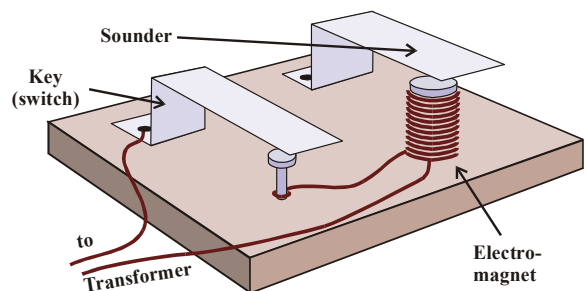
A lot of time was spent during the summer of 1954 constructing and riding on a push car that we called the “Junk Mobile.” It really lived up to its colorful name. To look at it, you could not imagine how it could defy simple gravity, and not just fall apart into an ugly heap. But it really was rugged. We made it from the back wheels and frame of an old baby buggy. The front wheels and steering mechanism came from a junked kiddy car. A seat was made from plywood. If a part of it did not prove to be sturdy enough, then we buttressed that area with bailing wire or rope or what ever we could scrounge up. To use it you had to get a couple of kids to push you as fast and as far as they could run, while you sat in the driver’s seat and steered. We also fixed it so it could be pulled (much faster) with a bicycle. We then made a special hitch on the front so two or more bikes could pull it, and then be simultaneously disconnected by pulling a lever on the dashboard. In 1954 we hadn’t heard of Viet Nam or Sputnik, but we were fairly sure that World War III was just a few years ahead. We were also confident that we could beat the crap out of the Russians as long as we were able to create contraptions like the “Junk-Mobile.”



My sister, Merrily, and brother, Rickey, are playing around on the Junkmobile. It had to be a lot more rugged than it looked, and it was.

We lived in a house at 3210 Empedrado St. It had two huge trees in the front yard and two even larger ones in back. I think they were live oaks. I know that new leaves were growing on them each year before they shed their old ones. We learned to climb those trees really well. One game we played involved climbing the tree with a cloth rag in your pocket. The object was to tie the rag as high up as possible. The next person would then try to untie it and move it up higher. It did not take long for that game to run its course. We also had a rope swing from a tall limb of our biggest tree. We had no use for tires or wooden seats. It was just a long double strand of ½ inch hemp with several knots tied in it. It was probably tied about 20 feet above the ground. We usually would use one of the lower limbs that was about six feet high as a platform. It was a pretty impressive ride, especially if you had to jump for the rope. We sometimes used the swing to play bombardier. That involved lobbing water balloons at a fleet of war ships cruising at the far western edge of our yard. The fleet may have only been several pieces of scrap wood, but the skill acquired to swing across the yard with one hand, and make a direct hit, was a great source of pride.

My father showed me how to make a telegraph when I was very young. I remember making keys and sounders from doorbell wire, nails, and old tin cans. I put one set in a wooden box that I nailed about 25 feet up, in one of our back yard trees. It had wires that led to a similar station in the room that I shared with my brother Jerry. The set was powered by an old model train transformer. I never did learn Morse code but we made up a code that put 25 of the letters of the alphabet in a grid. We would then tap out



Powered by a model train transformer, a simple telegraph was easy to make from scraps of wood, insulated wire, nails and metal from tin cans

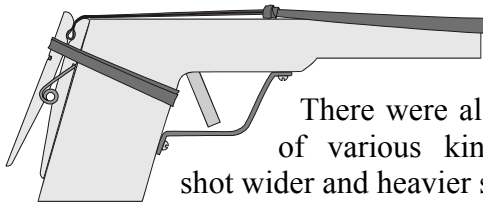
the row and column numbers of the letters we wanted to send. This communication device did not last very long. We learned that there really is not very much to talk about, over a primitive telegraph from a perch high up in a tree to a room that is only a few feet away.

Back in the fifties Tampa was a very active port of entry for a lot of fruit and vegetables coming into the country from Central and South America. Banana boats were always tied up at the docks along the estuary while workers manually unloaded them. The bananas came in green, and were loaded onto trucks or railroad boxcars, which carried them to markets in the north. A lot of times bananas that were still too green to eat had to be thrown away because they were too mature to ship. They knew that by the time the fruit was loaded, hauled, and unloaded it would be too ripe to sell. This product was culled out and put in a pile that the workers could have. My father sometimes would take us down to the banana docks and he'd buy some of this produce. He would give one of the loaders a quarter or 50 cents and that guy would bring us a bunch of bananas that might weigh as much as 75 pounds! He'd put it in the back of our 1949 Desoto Station wagon and each of us kids would have one or two on the way home. Then my dad would hang the rest of the bunch on the back porch. We could have them whenever we wanted until they were gone. He sometimes got deals like this on fruit that was shipping out. We could sometimes get watermelons and citrus fruit at a real cost savings. A lot of times he couldn't get anything, but if something was available, we had a lot of whatever he made a deal for.

When I was growing up, a lot of the toys that I had were things that I made myself. Battery powered toys were rare. My father had quite an assortment of hand tools that I had access to, and I could get unlimited quantities of certain raw materials that are not available at all today. MacDill Blvd. Was less than two blocks from where we lived. Along MacDill were small businesses like appliance dealers, furniture

stores, drug stores, and small super markets. There were no plastic garbage bags or dumpsters then. Each store had a trash bin behind it, where packaging and other flotsam were thrown. This unwanted material would be picked up later by open dump trucks, if we didn't get it first. Store owners did not always welcome a bunch of marauding children digging through their trash, but that never stopped us. We considered it a God-given-right to take any discarded item that we were the first to see. We waited until no one was looking and invaded. All we had to do was watch out for rats, scorpions, and snakes. We also felt it our duty to leave the place just as orderly (or disorderly) as we found it. We discovered there were all sorts of valuable substances to be had for the taking. We could get wooden crates from Hot Point refrigerators and Maytag washing machines. We got smaller peach crates and cardboard boxes from Sumner's Super Market. We also got large cardboard boxes that Admiral T.V.s had been shipped in. There was a fabric store in the neighborhood called Mary Perez where we could get long stiff cardboard tubes and fabrics that had been thrown away. Other stores also contributed to our stock of materials. We were always on the look out for whatever stuff we might find that could be useful. Old inner tubes could be very useful. World War II was a fairly recent event. Its conclusion brought a great demand for new cars and better tires to put on them. Tubeless tires were introduced around 1950. Since they were a big improvement, people were quickly changing over to these better tires. In our neighborhood that was happening at the Firestone store just 1½ blocks away. There was a big pile of old tires, many with tubes still in them, behind the store. We continually prowled over this dumping ground to get the best inner tubes before the store owner had them hauled off, and before some other kid could beat us to them. Both automobile and bicycle tubes were prized. The older real rubber inner tubes were considered better than the new artificial (neoprene) ones because they were much more stretchy. We learned that the very best rubber band products could be made from the old rubber tubes that were red.

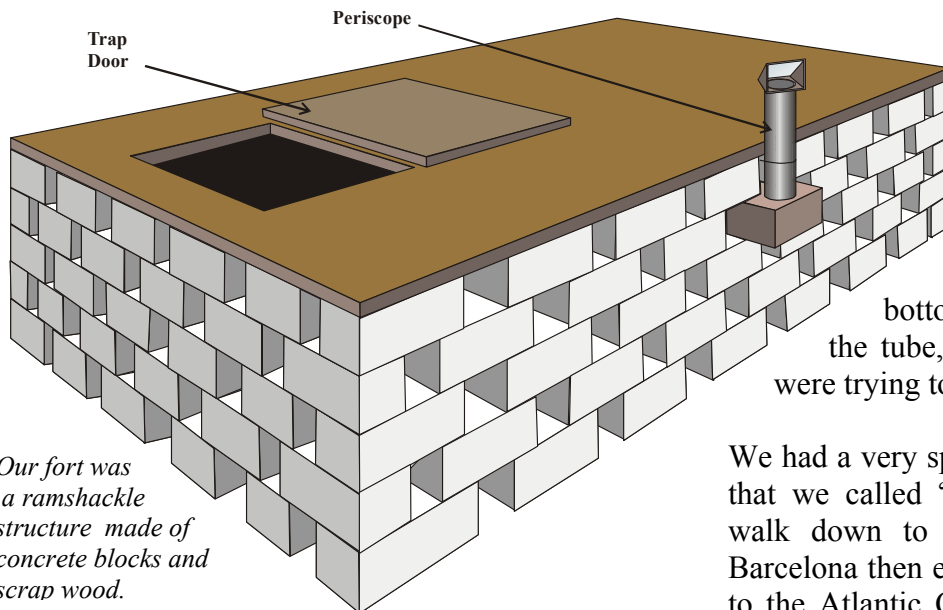
Probably the tasks that occupied the most of our time in the summer of 1954, was the making of and playing with rubber band guns. They looked really bad but the strips of rubber that they shot were cut from automobile and bicycle inner tubes. Even a direct hit at point blank range did no harm to the victim. It gave you a lot of status to be able to make and use a weapon that looked kind of wicked, and also could shoot a large projectile with some degree of accuracy. We had two basic kinds of rubber band guns. There were pistols that shot ½ inch thick strips of rubber cut from bicycle tubes. Their maximum range was around 25 feet.



There were also rifles of various kinds that shot wider and heavier strips of rubber that we got from automobile or truck inner tubes. Some of the bigger rifles could shoot as far as forty feet. Our pistols were fairly simple to make. The body of the gun was made from a piece of one by four. That was a ¾ inch thick and 3½ inch wide piece of wood. Its length was a variable that depended on the skill and usually the age the gun's user. We used coping saws or whatever hand tools we had to make the wood sort of gun shaped. A spring clothespin was then tacked to the back of the gun to serve as the trigger. A segment of the band was then pinched together and stuck in the jaws of the clothespin. The other end was stretched around the barrel of the gun. To fire it, you pointed it and squeezed the clothespin. We found that it worked better if a knot was tied in the rubber band. That shortened its length to give it more muzzle velocity and the knotted rubber band hit the target with more authority. The longer the gun was, the more the rubber band stretched and the farther it would shoot. This could be a loading problem because there was a limit to how tightly the clothespin could hold onto the

ammo. A second rubber band could be placed over the top of the clothespin so it could grip the ammo rubber band tighter. Older kids could use guns with much more tension on the trigger. They could therefore make their guns longer and shoot them farther. We also found that clothespins would pick up wax or soap or other contamination. Occasionally it was necessary to wash the pins in really hot water to get them clean. Roughing up the trigger jaws with sandpaper or a file also helped. We were always looking for a good balance between ease of loading, portability and shooting distance. Older kids would try to improve their collection of weapons by making better models. This would make their old hardware available to pass along to younger kids. In rubber band battles, it was desirable to have a lot of loaded weapons. It was also important that they could shoot far, be easy to reload and it was important to have reliable friends.

Rifles were similar but bigger and shot a heavier payload than the smaller guns. The trigger had to be on top of the weapon. Normally a rifle was so difficult to load that only those of us that were over ten could handle one. Their overall length was 3 to 3½ feet long. We had repeating and tandem rifles that would shoot more than one shot, but these were more difficult to load. Since you were a sitting duck during the time you were loading, it paid to only use your simplest, fastest loading, and hardest hitting firearms. I once made a rubber band gun with a range finder on it, but it was more of a gimmick than a practical implement of war. We also had a version of the rubber band gun that shot stones. It had a 42-inch rifle body but the rubber band was pinned onto the muzzle with a large roofing nail. You just got a rock, put it in a loop of the rubber band and shot it like a slingshot. Of course with the rifle stock as a lever you could pull back a lot harder, and it was quite accurate. My dad appropriately banned this weapon when he found out I could fire a marble sized piece of gravel right through a coffee can at ten paces.

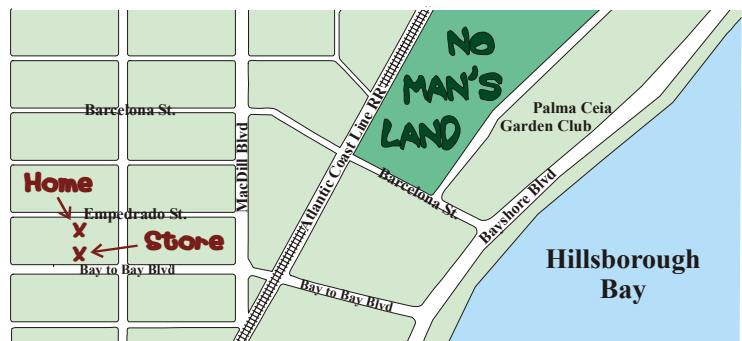


Our fort was a ramshackle structure made of concrete blocks and scrap wood.

When we moved into our house in Florida there were several hundred concrete blocks that came with the property. They were probably pieces of lintel beams. They were all 8 by 8 inches in cross section. There was no reinforcement in them and someone had broken them into 10 to 12 inch lengths. They probably weighed 50 to 60 pounds each. The sidewalk around the back of the house was made with these blocks. We used the remainder to build a variety of stone forts. We had enough of the blocks to make a fort about six by twelve feet and around 40 inches high. The roof was made from wood taken from crates that we found. We were able to make this sturdy enough to stand on and to have a functioning trap door. However, it really was not watertight and the roof was always in need of repair. We were always finding it necessary to move the fort or redesign it so it was a continuing project. Usually we left large gaps between the blocks. This let light in and it allowed us to fire our rubber band guns at any invaders. In one version of the fort we had a fireplace, but my father wisely disallowed its use. I also made a novel periscope that was built into the wall. It had a wooden box that was tightly fitted into the wall. A mirror was mounted at a 45° angle so when you looked into it you saw the inside of the top of the box. I cut a round hole in the top and a 3½-inch diameter cardboard tube was inserted. The top of the tube extended about a foot above the roof. The top piece of a periscope was put on the top of the tube. A piece of string was

wrapped around the tube several times. By pulling the string, you could rotate the tube. Marks on the tube indicated the compass direction that the top was pointing. By looking into the bottom mirror and slowly rotating the tube, we could tell if any attackers were trying to sneak up on the fort.

We had a very special place when I was twelve, that we called “No-Man’s Land.” We had to walk down to Esperanza, then go north to Barcelona then east past MacDill. When we got to the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad tracks, we turned left. After a couple of hundred yards the land became a vast impenetrable wilderness. I doubt that it was much larger than a few acres but to us it was immense. The underbrush was so thick that when we beat paths through it they were really tunnels. Above this were some incredibly large trees. Several of these were climbable. We had a tree house high up in one of them. It was really just a platform but we concealed it behind curtains of Spanish moss. It made a great look out post. When Lewis and Clark returned from their exploration of the Louisiana Purchase, I doubt that they had as much of a sense of accomplishment as we did when we returned from one of our rubber band gun wars in “No Man’s Land.”



Since my father had a small business, it was rare when my parents could get away from it. One of them had to be there from eight AM to six PM Monday through Saturday. On Sundays we went to church in the morning and evening. Holidays like Memorial Day, July Fourth, and Labor Day were some of the few times that the family

could actually go someplace. Often we would go to Clearwater Beach or have a picnic on Davis Causeway. The beach at Clearwater was only about thirty miles from where we lived. The best way to get there was to drive over the causeway which had been built back in the late '20s. It was just a strip of sand from 50 to a few hundred feet wide with a two-lane asphalt road poured on top of it. It had covered picnic tables strewn along its length. There never seemed to be a problem finding an empty one. My mother would fix food enough for a small army. Often it would be fried chicken, potato salad, baked beans and maybe a green salad. We might have Cuban bread to go along with it. For dessert she would often make a cake or "cherry slices." They were like a sour cherry pie but baked in large rectangular cake pans. We usually had soft drinks on these occasions. It would be Royal Crown Cola, or Nehi Orange, Grape, or Cream Soda. There was always plenty of good food, but that was never a big deal to us kids. We were normally more interested in exploring the intricacies of the mangrove swamp and investigating the dispositions of the fiddler crab populations. We usually were most motivated by getting over to Clearwater.

In 1954 Clearwater Beach was nothing like it is now. You went through a sleepy Florida town to the Million Dollar Causeway, then over a bridge to a barrier island. The road was just two lanes and as far as we knew, it ran north and south forever. There was no parking area. You just pulled over to the right side of the road and parked on the sand. Now it seems amazing that there was always a place to park within a few hundred yards of the bridge. They had a concrete wall with enough openings to let people get to the water but cars stayed along the road. It must have been a hundred yards from the road and wall to the edge of the water. By today's standards the beach was big, bright, clean and very uncrowded. There were no concessions or lifeguards. People just came, put a blanket on the sand, deposited their stuff on it, and went swimming. No one in my family could swim that well but that never kept us out of the water. My father had several automobile inner tubes that he had somehow managed to keep us kids from cutting up. We'd bring these to the

beach for floatation. He and my mother would each put one of these around them and wade for hours. To us kids that was much too boring. We had cheap plastic swimming masks, fins, and snorkels. They called the place Clearwater for a good reason. Under water visibility was very good. We all could pretend to be Mike Nelson on the T.V. show "Sea Hunt." There were still some pretty decent seashells to be found. Occasionally we discovered a starfish or crab but the easiest critters to harass were sand dollars. You could dive down where the water was five to six feet deep and always find two or three. I remember once we got exactly one hundred sand dollars piled on a plastic life raft. We then threw them one at a time, as far as we could into the deeper water. Sometimes we could get them to skip several times over the surface of the waves like a stone on a pond. Now it seems incredibly stupid, but at the time it gave us a real sense of accomplishment. Our fingers would get stained from the iodine or something that was in the sand dollars. When it finally got too dark to see, we were all thoroughly water logged and tired, so we squeezed into my dad's station wagon along with the inner tubes, fins, blankets and ten or twenty extra pounds of sand, and went home.

We went to Clearwater Beach on Labor Day of 1954. It was memorable because they were making a big deal of the grand opening of the new Sunshine Skyway Bridge. It was a long toll bridge that connected Saint Petersburg with Bradenton. On the opening day, the toll was waived so it was free to cross the bridge. My father and mother decided we should all drive across then come back over it, because it wouldn't cost us anything and we could see what Bradenton looked like. We spent the afternoon at the beach and instead of driving straight home, my dad turned south into St. Pete. As soon as he got us onto highway 19 we could all see that an unusual traffic pattern was developing. Every one on our end of the planet seemed to be trying to get in line to go over that bridge. By the time we got down into St. Pete, it was like a long slow parade. People who had obviously come over from the south were trying to turn around and go back home. They couldn't do that because so many were on the side streets

trying to funnel into the line. It was way past dark when we finally got onto the skyway. We all crept along at a snail's pace. When we finally got to where we could actually see the bridge, it alarmed my parents. My mother was always afraid of heights and this bridge was like a big high roller coaster. My father was worried that his overloaded Desoto might not have the horsepower or enough gasoline to make it. It seemed like hours but we finally got to the bridge, then up to the top, then down the other

side, then back onto solid ground. My dad had seen enough of the Sunshine Skyway so he found a gas station. We got gas and then returned home around the eastern edge of Hillsborough Bay. It was probably 11 or 12 o'clock by the time we got home. All of us kids had to get a quick bath and get to bed, because the summer of 1954 had officially ended. The next day was the first day of school and I had to report to James Madison Junior High School for the first day of seventh grade.



In the 1950's we always enjoyed our trips to Clearwater Beach. Here I am goofing off with Jack while Rickey and Pat look on. The place was unbelievably big, clean and un-crowded