

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

"A Boy's Eye View of Westminster, Part III"

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The previous two columns have included sections from Paul Reese's autobiographical sketch entitled, "A Boy's Eye View of Westminster." This final column will deal with the mischievous side of a boyhood in Victorian Westminster.

Perhaps it was by accident or, perhaps by design that the Gang made one of the most brilliant discoveries of its career as a means of frightening and annoying its friends and relatives. A storm sewer was laid across Main St. in front of the City Hotel [now 205 E. Main St.] and its outlet was in the lane about half way down the side of Emory Buckingham's house. At first it was merely used as a sort of glorified speaking tube to carry our messages - secret, or otherwise - over the distance.

Now, it may be that our first victim gave us the grand idea and brought it upon himself by giving us the suggestion that the voice he heard coming from the sewer grating was that of a boy who had crawled into the pipe and gotten stuck there, our ingenuity would rather suggest that we thought it up ourselves, however. But the fun was on in real earnest.

Without exception our first victims were game and after they had learned the truth would laugh and enjoy the joke with us and by wisdom, little short of inspired, we were careful not to carry the hoax too far. The terrain was ideally located for the guerrilla tactics at which we were all expert. Enough trees for every boy to hide behind and a dark lane opposite which was even a part of the field of action.

One evening Tom Baumgartner approached, head high and whistling as he went as was his habit. There was not a boy in sight. As he passed the hotel steps a faint voice caught his ear. He suddenly stopped, looked about him and listened.

"Help, help!" the cry continues, muffled and a little fainter.

The direction of the entreaty is now located; it comes from the grating over the sewer. Quickly kneeling Tom answers.

"What is the matter; who are you?"

"I'm Ralph Reifsnider," moans the sufferer. "I crawled in here after my baseball and got stuck. The sand is choking me. I can't move."

"How long have you been there?" gasps Tom.

"Since about six o'clock," Ralph groans.

By this time night has descended, and quite a crowd of boys has mysteriously assembled, apparently from nowhere. They ply Tom with eager questions. But Tom lingers neither to hear nor answer. Down the dimly lighted street he speeds and reaches the Reifsnider home just as the Judge, Ralph's father is coming out. In a few tragic words the story is told.

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"Get a rope," shouts the Judge, "get Tom Dorsey, get a lantern, get men to dig up the street." But Tom Dorsey having already heard the story from the beginning has gone for the lantern and the rope. So here they come; the other Tom in the lead; the Judge a close second and the rope and ladder brigade bringing up the rear.

By this time a goodly crowd has collected and Ralph has been subjected to a constant battery of questions from each end of the pipe. From each end! Why, then, was the trick not discovered? For the simple reason that the little star of the comedy would go to either end of the pipe completely enveloped in a nimbus of larger boys, there to carry on, while all the adults, true to form, would at some catch word, or demonstration by his fellow conspirators, flock, en masse to the other end leaving one completely deserted. But a report from home soon made it imperative that the truth must come out.

The "Gang" also delighted in scaring the wits out of an unsuspecting passerby who was walking along Main St. in the days before adequate street lighting:

So the long deserted old Winters mansion stood a little distance "down" the street from where I lived on the other side. Through years of emptiness it was rapidly falling into a state of ruin, but the long front steps with a box seat at each end remained in fairly good shape. Their approach was a brick walk leading to darkness and seclusion well back from the street.

We secured a stout length of rope, stood the long steps on end, tied one end of the rope around the top of the steps and the other to the big sycamore tree opposite the walk about waist high on a tall man and stood them just far enough away to prevent them striking the passerby who collided with the rope.

While this sport lasted it beat all the circuses, shows and baseball games any boy ever saw. From the mere nature of the set-up, however, I can hardly suppose that it was tolerated very long. But the ecstasy, the joy, the rapture of hearing those tall steps thunder down with a hollow roar upon the brick walk, waking all the echoes in our part of town in the stillness of the night, is a thing not to be reckoned in terms of time.

A relish almost as keen as the crash itself was added by the abrupt panic of our prey. With but one exception that I can recall, he would stand petrified for a split second and then beat his own speed record to the nearest street light, without once looking back until he had reached the safety of its glow.

The old adage, "boys will be boys" certainly applied to Paul Reese and his boyhood chums. The boyhood pranks were apparently harmless and Paul Reese later became Westminster's first architect. Among the Westminster buildings he designed are the former Farmers and Mechanics Bank at 195 E. Main St. and the Westminster Theological Seminary.

Photo Caption: The sometimes mischievous Paul Reese as he appeared as a choir boy at the Ascension Episcopal Church in Westminster. Historical Society of Carroll County Collection, Gift of Mrs. Philip Kirkland.