

Running Round Monroe

by

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My father used to tell stories of his childhood that absolutely fascinated me. He grew up in the Depression, and kids back then had to think of free ways to have fun, things that didn't require toys or special equipment or admission costs. Modern kids like me didn't know how to have real fun because we needed money to have it. We needed other things to entertain us. Not so my dad.

Picture San Jose when Stevens Creek Boulevard was still a black-topped road. Orchards didn't just dot the landscape, they dominated it. The miles of rich, black Santa Clara Valley soil outnumbered the few miles of concrete and asphalt, and everyone's backyard gardens flourished gloriously under the clear unblemished sky. Little Santa Clara was still a sleepy town--unless you were little Gilbert and his brother and cousins striving to wake up the streets.

The kids all called Gilbert "Four Eyes." Because he wore glasses? No. Gilbert's pants had holes in the knees that looked like eyes looking back. Or if you counted the holes in his seat, you would have to call him "Six Eyes." Everyone had a nickname in those days. Gilbert's brother Fred was nicknamed Tilinguise, which had its own special meaning among the cousins. Cousin Joaquin was Chapolín--the grasshopper--because he couldn't walk anywhere, he had to skip. And Angelo was known as Ninnybottle because by age five you could still see him playing in the streets with the big rubber nipple of his baby bottle between his lips. They all called cousin Arthur ol' Batatabloomers like a sweet potato because he had the baggiest drawers of the bunch. Nor were the girls exempt from such verbal shenanigans. Cousin Teresa went by Pinochio since she had the bad habit of pulling on the end of her nose. Poor Maria

Louise caught the derision of her cousins by gossiping too often. Moscamuerta--the Dead Fly--was her curse.

Still the saddest fate must have belonged to little moon-faced Carlos. He had the darkest complexion of the cousins and the sweetest disposition of all. He must have been a poet at heart. One day Angelo, equipped with ninnybottle, was playing in the yard with Carlos when the Devil jumped on his shoulder and tickled his ear. Looking at Carlos, Angelo couldn't help but shout, "Chocolate bar! Chocolate bar!" For Carlos, this was devastation. He froze, and huge, glistening tears wept from his black eyes as he looked back at his cousin. The other kids gathered round to join in the chant. "Chocolate bar!" "Carlos is a chocolate bar!" How heartless kids can be. But it was later, after the war when Carlos was dying of cancer that Angelo stood steadfastly by his side and would not leave him. Carlos would not utter a single epithet throughout his painful dying; Angelo always said, "That's the mark of a true gentleman."

Of course, adults were not exempt from this nickname game. Tío Pepe, better known as Piez de Tablas or Board Foot, had worked for years in the boiler room of the Pratt-Low Cannery to earn his name. Even Gilbert's Papa had a nickname--Pintaíscho or the Painted One, because his run-in with small pox left scars like paint marks all over his face. We've come so far since then. Nowadays, kids only have to worry about acne. Gilbert Four Eyes knew better than to call his papa anything but "Sir." Some of the cousins, however, were not so respectful (or maybe they just ran faster). Uncle Frank, or Tío Paco, who smoked that bitter Tuxedo-brand tobacco, was taunted with the epithet "Paco Retaco." I don't know if he was really "shaped like a taco," but his broken leg from his Pratt-Low days kept him

from catching up with his abusers.

Kids can be so irreverent. My dad tells of a humid summer evening when he and Joaquin were wandering around downtown Santa Clara and got themselves into mischief. Santa Clara evenings are so beautiful--the earth has kept its warmth from soaking up the daylight sunshine, and it is a delight to feel the toasty dirt under one's feet. A little breeze wafts down off the Almaden foothills and ruffles the leaves on the big Chinese elms. This is how I recall summer as a child, when it's so tempting to stroll along the streets of the neighborhood, so I can picture Gilbert and Joaquin wandering down Franklin Street by the University just looking for something to do.

This night there happened to be a congregation of evangelists meeting to hear the stumpspeaker. They had gathered in a dusty brown tent in the dirt lot downtown by the Post Office. The piano clanged and the preacher bellowed. The followers rolled on the swept dirt floor in the ecstasy of their faith. Joaquin spotted a dull shininess in the weeds of the empty lot as he and Gilbert shuffled along kicking their toes in the earth, and he stooped to pick up the broken knife. Mischief gleamed in his childish eye. He and Gilbert stealthily crept closer to the Holy Roller's tent, keeping their footsteps to a patter, until they reached its side. Fwack, Fwack. The ropes snapped apart, the tent collapsing in a heap over its holy inhabitants. "Praises be!" cried the folks from the floor. The piano continued to bang as two guilty cousins ran all the way home to Lewis Street.

Gilbert and Joaquin could always forget their misdeeds by committing more the next day. They might play at "The Pit." They might make rubber guns. Or they might have weed wars with the Portugese kids on the next

street.

"Mama, Freddy and I are going to play at The Pit," little Gilbert would cry as the two of them slid out the back door hiding the mischievous grins on their faces.

"Alright, boys. Freddy, you watch after your little brother."

Out at The Pit, the boys would have a field day scurrying through the wreckage looking for broken wheels and skates, ball bearings, innertubes, bottle tops, and anything else fanciful or useful for their wild imaginations. The rats scurried through the wreckage, too, but with the different aim of hiding from young boys with good aim.

The Pit. Needless to say, Mama didn't know The Pit was code nifos for the City Dump. When Papa came home from work and asked where the boys were, he didn't expect to hear The Pit either, but he could decipher the inexperienced codename and know Fred and Gilbert's secret. Off he marched to drag the boys home before the foot-long rats could drag them away.

Papa made another famous march that time at the old swimming hole. Little Gilbert and Freddy wheeled out their one rickety bike, Fred pumping Gilbert on the handlebars of their rusty bicycle. It was much harder to peddle on those dirt lanes, but I suppose there was less traffic for the bikers to fear. They traveled down Trimble Road. Back then, Trimble was one lonely lane that led to the next sleepy town called Milpitas. You wouldn't recognize Trimble now as Montague Expressway. The boys had wheedled a package of weenies from Mama--it was their turn to bring them--and the Portugese boys brought summer squash and horse beans from their backyard gardens. Once at the creekbed, they would make a bonfire, wet the food, and bury it in the ashes to fix themselves a true

tramp-style meal while they swam in the water hole.

Now, as I've said, this was the Depression. Only rich kids had money for swimming trunks, and Mama better not catch her kids cutting the legs off their trousers, even if there are holes in the knees. What else could Gilbert and Fred do but join the others skinny-dipping?

Just picture the bright sun sifting cozily down through the trees, creating shadow patterns on the creekbed. The boys recline around the burning logs, accidentally dropping weenies in the fire from time to time, digging squash from the ashes to then toss from palm to palm while it cooled. A near pastoral perfection.

Suddenly, silence broken by a piercing whistle. I can even hear that whistle in my head because my father used it to call my brothers and me when we were children. Gilbert and Fred feared because they knew it meant only one thing: Papa.

There stood Papa on the bank above them. There stood Papa viewing them in the buff. Don't ever let Papa catch you skinny-dipping! Papa disappeared. The boys dressed as fast as they could, pulled the clothes over their still-wet bodies, and hopped on their one bike to peddle at breakneck speed down Trimble Road to home.

"Don't ever swim there again," bellowed Papa.

Gilbert has always wondered why Papa never said any more to them about the water hole after that day, why they never got a thrashing. But they knew they had done wrong.

The days spent with the Portugese kids weren't always so pastoral and peaceful, though. At other times a bitter rivalry caused war, battlefield, and artillery. Then there were rubber guns.

My dad made these simple wooden toys for me when I was a kid, and I thought them better than any of the fancy plastic pop-guns or G. I. Joes. With a rubber gun, I could be on even par with my bigger, older brothers because I was the feline, stealthy little sister who could use guerrilla tactics. But back in Dad's childhood memory, those rubber guns meant serious playing and a means of survival.

A rubber gun consists of a chunk of wood cut in the shape of a gun--usually a handgun or rifle--a clothespin snatched from Mama's line, and cut strips of inner tubes from The Pit or the one bicycle. The inner tube bands are stretched from the nose of the gun to the clothespin at the back, which acts as the trigger. Joaquin, one of the more ingenious cousins, had fashioned a machine gun by adding a wooden wheel to his rifle with a volley of twenty-five clothespins. He had the further advantage of confounding his enemy should his gun fall into their hands because they wouldn't know the sequence to shoot the bands in and would instead shoot themselves. Another of the boys had discovered that knotting the inner tube in the middle made his shot go further and harder, leaving a swollen scarlet welt on its target.

The kids would hide behind the cars, garbage cans, or whitewashed fences and aim at their rivals. All of the families on Monroe Street were Spanish or Mexican, but if the cousins crept one block over out of their territory onto Lewis, they entered the street of the Portugese. Gilbert's family was the only Spanish one on the block. Perhaps without understanding their own feelings, the cousins saw this one difference as reason enough for battle.

If rubber guns didn't work or if the kids couldn't find discarded inner

tubes that week, they could always resort to using weed bombs. Weeds were plentiful and free and fast and easy to fashion into potent weapons. Just pull up a handful of weeds with a good-sized hunk of dirt on the bottom, soak the dirt in some gutter water to make it extra sticky and wet, add a hefty rock to be particularly nasty, pack the dirt bomb into a solid sphere, and chuck it at full speed at el loco across the street. The weeds make a wonderful comet tail at the back to direct your aim and accelerate the bomb.

Little Four Eyes squats behind the big juniper bush on the corner. From the corner of his eye he spies a movement across the street on Lewis Street. Four Eyes turns his head and motions over his shoulder to Ninnybottle, "There's the enemy!" The two of them gather forces, pull together their stockpile of rocks and weeds, and confer on how best to attack. The enemy hasn't realized he's been spotted. Ninnybottle fires first, fwoosh, getting gutter water all over his Pendleton shirt and down his arm in the process. "Rats," he mutters. But the shot has struck its mark. The enemy is hit! Up he stands, spattered mud and grass dripping down the side of his face. "Papa's gonna get you!" yells Fred across the street to Gilbert as he wipes his cheek with his sleeve. Ninnybottle and Four Eyes just giggle as they slink off to gloat over their victory.

Angelo and Gilbert often paired together--or were paired together by the others--because they were the two littlest of the cousins. But they were happy to stick together, even when victimized, because it was better than being a single victim. In fact, whenever the cousins played "Tarzan, King of the Jungle," Gilbert and Angelo were always duped.

On Monroe and Liberty Streets behind the Trinity Church stood two

ancient fig trees. Their limbs were gnarled and tangled in muscular contortions, their leaves and branches twined in and about each other to form an endless, answerless labyrinth. Most of the kids knew just how to crawl among the puzzle to find their way in and out. But there were penalties for those who were not so smart.

This was the war between the Warriors and the Peasants in the great Tarzan trees. Of course, it was also the war between the Big and the Little. Angelo and Gilbert were the Little, the Peasants. All the others were the Big. If the Big decided the Little were being mean to them--and this was a totally arbitrary decision based on whether or not they felt mean--they could sentence the Little to a stay in the hoosegow where the leaves and branches and limbs wove so tightly together so as to form an inescapable deep cell from which the Little could not escape, being too short.

"That Arthur, he's so mean," grumbled Gilbert. "We've gotta go see the new Tarzan movie next Saturday and find out how he gets even."

"I just wish I could call the animals to help us," said Angelo. "Where's Chita when you need him?"

The only way to escape the dungeon was to give their captives the secret password: A gotcha boom ba oh beedy um. But do you think Four Eyes and Ninnybottle could remember this?

"A gotcha." "A bootcha." "A botcha goom."

"Rats."

I wonder if that's why Angelo developed a photographic memory later in life?

So Gilbert and Angelo and Fred and all the cousins would find a way to

get to the movies on Saturday so they could cheer their heroes Tarzan or the Lone Ranger. The movies were only ten cents then, but in those poor days that was like six dollars for the movies now. The cousins couldn't let down their heroes by not going to the movies. Where there's a will, there's a way.

The "way" was through Pepsicola, a brand-new upstart company at that time. Five Pepsi bottle tops and a penny would get Gilbert into the show where he could cheer Tom Mix or Buck Rogers, laugh with Spanky or Groucho, or yell along with Tarzan. Gilbert and Fred arranged with all the local gas stations and Ma and Pa groceries to clean out their pop machines and collect all the bottle tops.

Of couse, since Pepsicola was just a baby, not many people bought that soda at that time. This left the boys with bags of extra bottle tops after they had collected all the Pepsi ones. What to do? Well, why not pave the backyard walkway? Just what I would have thought of. The walkway became a steady chore for the boys. From the back stoop, through the vegetable garden, past the tool shed to the huge oak by the back fence, Gilbert and Fred would smack the bottle tops into the soft soil. Turn one over, heft the wooden mallet, and tap, tap. Take another, tap, tap. The job never ended because once the first layer settled deeper in the dirt, another layer had to be added. Wooden mallet, tap, tap.

Even with all the hard work and poverty, I envy the children of my dad's generation because they had opportunities I will never have. That's a switch--people usually think that my generation has more opportunities since we have computers and TV and pavement. But I disagree. I look back at little Gilbert and Fred and wish I could have swum in the creeks when

they still consisted of water instead of rocks. I wish I could have looked forward for months to the traveling Ringling Brothers instead of having too many entertainments to choose from. And, most of all, I wish I could have pulled mounds of dripping vermillion watermelon in my little red wagon back from the pickling plant to my Santa Clara home. That's why I envy Gilbert most.

Watermelon quenches that summer thirst in the dry heat of Santa Clara. The Santa Clara Pickling and Preserve Factory stood downtown beside the mortuary and behind the Casa Grande Theater. On Washington and Franklin, it was only a few blocks from Gilbert's home. Those few blocks were a long journey for Four Eyes' little legs, but it would be worth every mouth-watering bite. The pickling factory wanted only the rinds, so they threw their unwanted red hearts in the bin out back. What a field day for the niños! Tilinguise used to say that some day when he was rich he would buy himself a whole watermelon. But with the melon hearts practically in his backyard, Fred could live like a king in the heart of the depression. The king of hearts!

The kids would often tramp down as a group to the pickling factory and then load up their wagons and tubs and sacks with all the watermelon they could carry. They would play the child Saint Nick and deliver the fruit to the relatives that lived all along Monroe Street. Gilbert's Tía Rosario, Nino Martín and Nina Lola, Piez de Tablas, and Paco Retaco. It was important that the cousins be nice to Nino Martín because his was the home where the recalcitrant cousins were sent.

Gilbert and the others never knew they were poor. The Depression raged, work was scarce, and they often had to do without, yet their needs

were always met. Somehow Mama found a way to make the beans stretch a little further, and Papa was a wizard at finding a use for every last nail, scrap of wood, or ounce of human energy. Wasting was simply not considered.

It wasn't until the cousins went to Fremont Elementary that they realized they were different from other kids. Many of the little girls had starched new frocks and Shirley Temple curls. Or the boys would not be wearing hand-me-downs from previous generations of cousins. Gilbert realized his own poverty one day when it was time for milk and graham crackers during recess. Gilbert had no nickel, but he still got his snack. Someone was watching out for him.

It's funny for me to think of all the cousins as children running about the streets of Santa Clara. To me, Monroe was the old part of town where my great Aunt Rose and Uncle Dort lived. It was the area of my rival high school, first called Santa Clara High and then Buchser Junior High and soon Santa Clara High again. I can hardly picture that the house where I grew up by Mariposa Gardens was the outskirts when my father grew up.

I know the cousins as middle-aged people with children my own age and older. I picture them gathered together at the funeral of Maria Louisa or at the wedding of Joaquin's son, where I have seen them laughing and reliving the days of their youth. I imagine them with their nicknames--a secret my father Gilbert told me with the promise that I would never divulge it to them. I wonder if I will ever have the chance to relive my own childhood with my youthful friends in this city of Santa Clara that so swiftly grows and changes and dissipates out to the hills.

Sources Cited

González, Gilbert X., and Rita Jean González. Personal interview. 18 March 1988.