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Backyard Drama

In the twenties and early thirties, our backyard at 5726 Morningside was a gathering place for all the neighborhood kids, at one time some fifteen boys and girls between the ages of six and ten. One important reason for the popularity of our yard could be found in the play equipment Daddy had constructed for my sister, brother, and me.

He used four-inch pipes which had been discarded at one of the oil wells he followed in his work. With the pipe he constructed a very large swing set almost the equal of any playground equipment in the city parks in Dallas. He began with a crossbar some twelve feet long, which connected four ten-foot legs spread for maximum stability. In addition, he centered a fifth support between two of the legs. From that upright support, he connected a horizontal, stationary bar of 1 ½-inch pipe some four feet from the ground, ending with its own upright post. When he turned the entire construction upright, he imbedded the four main support legs in concrete to be sure that the apparatus was absolutely stable. When the concrete had cured to his satisfaction, Daddy suspended a swing and a trapeze from the crossbar between the four legs. Needless to say, my brother, sister, and I, along with all the kids on our block, impatiently awaited his signal that our playground equipment was ready for use. We immediately began swinging, contesting to see who, if anyone, could emulate circus performers by going so high that we went around and around the crossbar. We discovered to our sorrow that a swing, no matter how magnificent, could not accomplish that circuit without more sturdy supports than a heavy rope. Even when the rope showed signs of wear and Daddy replaced it with heavy one-inch link chains, we still couldn't wrap the swing around the bar, but we had great fun trying to swing in a real half circle, parallel to the ground on both the forward and backward swings. I can't remember anyone ever being hurt on the swing, although we sometimes had to watch for small children darting across the path of the swing. I enjoyed the swing even when I was the only one around, pumping myself into the air, an invigorating and cooling operation that could occupy much of a summer morning. The swing was also wonderful for two children facing each other, one sitting and the other pumping, or sometimes both pumping for the maximum acceleration. Sometimes we would take turns, one standing behind on the ground and pushing the other. There were enough variations that we seldom ran into conflict on the use of the swing.

The trapeze vied with the swing in popularity. We could get the trapeze bar swinging and drop backwards, using our knees to grip the bar. We could swing suspended by one knee and return to a sitting position. Occasionally the wooden bar of the trapeze would support two children in the same way the swing did. The exercise we got was vigorous and great entertainment both to do and to watch.

Simultaneously, one or two children could use the stationary bar to do pull-ups, or hang by our knees, or stand on the bar and challenge the neighborhood as king of the hill. On a hot Texas summer afternoon when the yard was shaded by the large oak trees next door, the backyard swing was often the center of activity.

One summer when I was about ten, several of us decided to hold a fair in the backyard, charging admission and donating the proceeds to the Dallas Dispatch milk fund for underprivileged children. In order to attract as big a crowd as possible, we decided to stage a play. We first established that the stage could be between the uprights of the swing set if we tied the swing and trapeze back out of the way. The curtain could be sheets hung from the clothesline, conveniently located in front of the swings and extending across the yard. In a book at the public library, we discovered a one act play which looked as though it was not too demanding for our skills and could be prepared in a minimum of time. Assigning parts proved remarkably easy; no two persons desired the same role. We discovered that the cast actually needed just the number of kids required by the play.

We spent several happy afternoons discussing the details of making and selling tickets around the neighborhood, charging ten cents for adults and two cents for children who weren't acting in the play. We counted on the support of the immediate neighborhood and any relatives in town. Rehearsing didn't take nearly the same amount of time, but we enjoyed perfecting our lines. I don't remember much about the play except that Rodney Derby, who lived next door, had one of the parts. Rodney's step sister, Jane West, didn't want to act but was willing to help sell lemonade before and after the performance.

The afternoon of the performance, we strung some extension cords for lamps to light our stage, clothes-pinned the sheets to the line, and wondered what had happened to Rodney and Jane. After dinner, when we were close to panic about Rodney's appearance, he came over with his blue pants stained white because he had had to scrub the bathroom floor for his stepmother. He had gotten scouring powder on his pants. That necessitated quickly changing his role from a farmer to a miller to account for the state of his pants and reinforced our speculation that Mrs. Derby was the prototype cruel stepmother.

By curtain time at dark, the backyard was filled with neighborhood parents and romping preschoolers, adding to the high level of our excitement. We put on our play with much ad-libbing to cover our excited forgetfulness, glorying in the standing ovation our audience gave us when we pulled the final curtain.

We counted our "take," and were delighted to discover that we had made eight dollars and twenty-six cents. That sum is indelibly etched in my memory, for the next day, a reporter and photographer from the Dispatch came out to our house to take the picture of the excited cast pouring the contents of a jelly jar into the hands of the reporter. The picture in the afternoon paper prolonged our fifteen minutes of fame and made us very contented performers, although none of us ever aspired to repeat the performance.

Recently my sister and I drove by the house. The neighborhood has changed. The house has not. We were not able to get a glimpse of the backyard to see if the swing set is still there. If it has been removed, I can imagine the tremendous job someone had dismantling it. But we didn't have to see it to remember the many roles the swing had played in our summertime lives.

