

## First Years in Madison

I was eight when Dad's job took us to Madison, Wisconsin, where I lived through my college years. That's where my parents bought their first home, a small two-bedroom house with an attic under its gabled roof.

As you opened the front door you walked right into the living room, which was our main living area. It had a sofa, a few end tables, a small bookcase, and soon, a television set. In my younger days, before we moved to Madison, we didn't have a television, and we would listen to the radio together. We had one of those cabinet radios that's more like a piece of furniture; I think it was a Magnavox. Our family would sit around the radio listening in the evenings sometimes. Mom and Dad loved Lawrence Welk, because when they were dating they used to drive to South Dakota and dance at the dance halls, when he was a bandleader there. And sometimes my brother Phil and I would listen to radio series like "The Shadow" or "Superman."

Soon after we moved, though, we got our first TV, a black-and-white box television with a small, octagonal screen. I vividly remember this interactive TV game for kids called "Winky Dink and You." It seemed just amazing at the time. You sent away to CBS for this sheet of clear acetate and these special crayons, and then you watched the show every Saturday morning



*Promotional photo from "Winky Dink and You," circa 1950.*

with the acetate sheet stuck over the TV screen - static electricity would hold it in place. Whenever Winky Dink, the hero of the show, was in trouble, you would use the crayons to draw on the screen something that would help him escape, like a bridge across a canyon or a ladder to climb away from danger. It was a ritual to watch Winky Dink. We never would miss it, because what

would happen if you weren't there to help him? But even as an eight-year-old, cynicism started to creep in, and I thought, I'll bet if I don't draw the bridge it won't make any difference. I tried it, and sure enough, my

suspicions were confirmed – Winky Dink walked right over nothingness to the other side of the canyon. Oh, well.

Beyond the living room was the dining room. We didn't have an eat-in kitchen, so we took all our meals there. And the kitchen was at the back of the house. I remember the kitchen mostly because of its old-fashioned refrigerator, which had a large round motor, a cooling unit, on top. I also remember a little framed picture that always hung on the wall, a colored-pencil drawing of a peach with the words, "Peachy Keen." Mom was a sunny sort of person, and many times when someone asked how she was, she would reply brightly, "Peachy!" Dad had found this drawing and given it to her as a gift because of that. Neither of my parents were very demonstrative people, but many times there would be these subtle signs of their affection for one another.

Eventually, Dad finished the upstairs loft into bedrooms for Phil and me, and I spent a lot of time in my room up there. It was a cozy place to read, tucked up there under the gables. I also liked the back loft in our garage. The middle of the garage was open all the way up to the pitched roof, but the front and back had wooden lofts built across them. The front was for storage, but the back was a hideout for Phil and me and the neighborhood boys, with an old mattress and a couple of boxes to sit on. That was our fort when the weather was good enough to be there, though in high summer or midwinter it wasn't too comfortable.

We also dug a number of underground forts in a vacant lot across the street. We'd dig a hole five or six feet deep, which took a long while, and then we'd lay two-by-fours on top and cover those with sod. Sometimes we'd take a kerosene lantern into one so we could read; in one fort, we even dug niches into the walls to set candles in. But the main point wasn't so much doing things in the forts as engineering and building them.

Eventually we got bold and built one fort at the end of a tunnel that branched from the main fort, so it wasn't open-topped like the others; it was actually completely underground. We dug two branches off from it, tunneling up to the surface; those were the escape routes. Of course, we didn't know to shore up the ceilings, and soon one of those tunnels caved in and half-buried a

neighbor kid in about three feet of dirt. Luckily, it was his lower half that was buried, so he could still breathe! Still, he was stuck very tight, and we had to get shovels and dig him out. I don't guess our parents ever found out about that one.

We also set up a track-and-field area in that vacant lot, with a running track, a pit for high-jumping and pole-vaulting, a hammer throw, and a shot put. We had a kettlebell with a chain on it that served as the hammer for the hammer throw. I remember being so interested in how the centrifugal force worked, how it affected the throw after you did your three turns. And somewhere, I had gotten an actual pole for pole-vaulting. In fact, later, in high school, I landed a spot on the high school track team mostly because I had my own pole, and they didn't yet have one! As long as I brought my pole with me, I was on the team.

Eventually I got a bicycle, and that widened my little world considerably in those days when parents didn't drive their kids all over town the way they do now. But in the early days, I remember spending a lot of time with Phil and the neighborhood boys either in the garage or in that vacant lot. Our parents gave us a lot of latitude, which I think was good for us. Certainly Cathy and I tried to do the same when we raised our kids, even though times had changed a lot by then.