

What is “50s” Talk for “Dweeb?”

I admit it! I wore the blue uniform with the gold scarf for several years. Today this might seem nerdy in the extreme, but in the late 1950s, it seemed if not cool, at least acceptable. One big scouting activity was the annual Fourth of July parade, and everyone in Glencoe lined the streets of downtown to watch. First in this cavalcade of excitement was the mayor who rode in an old-fashioned open jalopy, waving and honking to everyone as the cars inched down the street. One car back were a few people from the village council whom we did not know or care about, but darned if they weren't going to take their moment in the spotlight after organizing the whole thing. Third came some majorettes from North School who threw, and occasionally dropped, batons. They were followed by a marching band, then us Cub Scouts, stepping lively in a formation we had drilled over and over. Nathan Stein carried the American flag for our pack. He had bright red hair about which he was rightfully teased all year so maybe we let him carry the flag as a gesture of kindness.

We marched past the ivy-covered library and Al's Deli, turned the corner down by the Glencoe Theatre and finally marched back around the police station to the park for hot dogs and lemonade. By the way, there were no bathrooms in the park, but there were woods in back. Thus we improvised if you know what I mean and I think you do.

The rest of the year, our scout troop met weekly in someone's basement and worked on accumulating merit badges. These were little gold stars that our mothers sewed on our blue Cub Scout shirts when we completed certain tasks. For example, a “nature project” described in our scout manual suggested we hold a neighborhood clean-up of leaves, twigs and big branches. My mom let me get by with just sweeping our driveway. A “science project” called for coordinating several fellow scouts and getting a teacher to help. I think I cooked up something or other with iron filings and distilled water from my chemistry set in about a half hour and that was that. A merit badge was awarded for perfect attendance at scout meetings, so this was a “freebie” for me. As you can imagine, within a couple of months my uniform was ablaze with little stars. And this taught me a valuable lesson: you can be recognized by your peers for doing very little.

But scouting was about more than undeserved merit badges. The best event was the annual Pinewood Derby. This was a contest wherein we were each supposed to hand-carve a little car out of a block of pine, and then race it down a track while our parents cheered us on.

The rules said that we were to demonstrate our own design and woodworking skills. Well, once again I jiggled the system. My father had someone at his factory fabricate a gorgeous little car for me. It had these huge tail fins that were quite popular in the late 50s, and then I painted the car blue and gold. It looked amazing! Unfortunately I didn't bother to insert a weight into it, so it didn't go very fast. In fact I had to "help" it down the track at a couple of points. Meanwhile, guys with cars that looked like crap beat me because they had inserted huge chunks of scrap iron into them. Their entries were basically chunks of iron hurtling down the track on greased wheels. Another lesson: if you're going to cheat, do so in a meaningful way. Few pictures remain of these wholesome activities, but I remember wearing that blue ensemble, gold scarf and gold stars sewn all over the shirt. Add my buck teeth and a goofy scout cap and you have quite a picture. What a little dweeb!

Another memorable Cub Scout undertaking was a cookout on the beach. Glencoe had a lovely sandy area on the shore of Lake Michigan and we gathered down there on a warm Saturday night with all the essential ingredients: hot dogs, buns, potato salad, pop and whipped cream. The latter wasn't for our consumption, it was for our entertainment. We decided ahead of time to recreate in our own fashion the highjinx of Soupy Sales, the host one of our favorite TV shows, "Lunchtime with Soupy." For the uninitiated, Mr. Sales was known for his rambunctious pet dogs White Fang and Black Tooth, whose arms were always wildly gesticulating at him from just off-camera. Invariably each skit would end with one of these fun-loving canines smashing a pie in the host's face. Here is where the whipped cream came in. After our bonfire and marshmallow roast, we got out our scripts and prepared a bunch of paper plates filled with the sticky dessert topping. I don't remember who played Soupy in our little revue; maybe we took turns, but we ended up throwing pies at each other for about a half-hour. Afterwards we all waded into the water and washed the goeey mess off of our faces and uniforms. Throwing pies is one of those things that young boys do that, like watching the Three Stooges, seems stupid to girls and adults. But I can say with certainty that all the participants enjoyed themselves immensely. In fact I can still do a pretty passable White Fang impression, although the opportunity comes up very seldom in our current social circle. The man who in his dotage, realizes he never got into a pie fight, is a very sad man, indeed.

The Glencoe Public Library was one of those huge WPA projects, built in 1934. Its stately stone and brick walls were covered in ivy and the entranceway was impressive. But down in the

musty basement, where almost no one went, was a small stage where I was scheduled to perform feats of magic in front of my fourth grade classmates after school. Picture me with my buck teeth and blue Cub Scout uniform with the gold neckerchief. If there was a nerdier kid in town, I never met him.

But where did I get these magical abilities with which I would astound my audience? I had a distant relative who had either been a magician in vaudeville or *knew* someone who was a magician, I'm not sure which. In either case, our home became the repository of his props which included steel cylinders lined with black felt, various scarves that changed colors as the prestidigitator pushed them through a brass ring, a few "Chinese" wood boxes with trapdoors, and a deck of cards, which I felt I had sufficiently mastered to use for my debut. A thin, dog-eared instruction book was part of the package, and I skimmed that just in case.

On the appointed day, my mother made sure our whole scout troop was in attendance for the debut of "Kenny, the Great!" To be honest, I didn't spend a lot of time practicing these tricks because I knew I'd be a smash! Well, in retrospect I could have done with a bit more practice. My first "guess the card" trick went OK, meaning I got it on the second try. But I went off the rails with my "Disappearing Ace" spectacular.

Prior to the performance, I had hidden an ace of spades in a vase on the piano, stage right. The trick involved getting my subject from the audience to choose a duplicate card from the deck. I would then rip it in half, say a few mystical words, and retrieve the doppelganger from the piano. It worked great when I tried it on my dad the previous weekend, but he knew which card he was supposed to pick. Maybe I should have used him as a "plant" in the audience.

As you can imagine, my volunteer that afternoon kept picking card after card that was *not* the ace of spaces. Each time this happened I would say, "Excellent! And that leaves us 51 cards so would you please pick one more?" Mercifully, after picking about 14 cards, the kid got it right. With a flourish I tore it in two, spun around and stuffed the pieces into my pants pocket. "Now, sir, would you tell the audience again what card you picked?" He answered correctly (thank God) and I stepped up the three stairs to the piano, waved my magic wand and plucked the ace of spades out of the vase and flashed it for all to see, to absolute silence. No applause at all. Well, it was a public library so kids were used to being quiet! Had my vaudeville-trained relative (or the person he knew) seen my act, he would have said I bombed.