

'THE GLORIOUS FOURTH

No history of our Village would be complete without a review of one of its most unique and durable institutions: the Fourth of July celebrations. For no less than sixty years, Independence Day has marked the Grand Opening for our summer season, and Labor Day (proclaimed in 1894) has signaled the close of the halcyon "days of wine and roses".

Yearly since time began, meaning thereby at least as far back as 1916, the late sleepers of the Village, perhaps aroused from the torpor of sleep induced by overindulgence in the potables offered at the Log Cabin the previous evening, would be awakened by the call "ALL OUT FOR THE BIG PARADE", and announcements of the day's feasts and galas.

For those of us who were younger, however, the Great Day had commenced at the crack of dawn. When we recall that in the earliest days the concept of "daylight-saving time" did not exist (having first been proclaimed in 1918 as a World War I measure), .so the "crack of dawn" meant something like 4:00 A.M. standard time. The denizens of the Log Cabin would barely have had time to crawl under their sheets before the cacaphony of the "Day of Days" began. To be honest, the day for children had begun many days earlier, sometimes as much as three weeks earlier, with the collection and organization of the paraphernalia and impedimenta requisite to the performance of the day's "fire ritual". Among the sine.qua non of the times, we may mention:

cap pistols and caps

firecrackers of assorted sizes, initially two-, four- and six-inch salutes being most acceptable, followed by packeted multiple-firing "Chinese" firecrackers

carbide cannons (mostly for the timorous)

"Torpedoes" (miniature paper "baggies" filled with fine gravel and containing a percussion-type cap which detonated when thrown with youthful vigor on the cement road)

"Devil Walkers" ( smallish discs which, when ground under the heel, crackled venomously and emitted malodorous vapors)

"Snakes" (small whitish pills which, when ignited by punk or match, writhed and expanded obscenely into twisted brownish worms), and perhaps not well known outside Shoreham

the "Apple Cannons" ( about which, the less said the better)

These, together with a requisite supply of punks and matches, were all that were required to properly greet "The Morning's First Gleam". For the end of the day there would be Roman Candies, Sparklers, Colored Fire, Skyrockets (only a few because they were expensive), Star Mines, Vesuvius Fountains and an occasional Pinwheel.

To return to our story, honors for the day probably went to the child who first detonated his firecracker on that Great Morning. One crash was enough; all the children were promptly up, dressed and out on the streets. The racket of firecrackers, cannons and cap pistols rose in a crescendo which only the dead, the deaf and the very ancient could ignore. By seven in the morning, the less

provident of the children would already be running out of their hoards of ammunition. They were being reduced to the ignominy of unravelling the fuses of their little Chinese firecracker packets and firing, individually, their rather miserable little components. Many of these either merely sputtered or failed completely because, instead of gunpowder, they were adulterated with Chinese clay which, in the view of many parents, was infused with tetanus bacilli. At this time of day, bold measures were taken to attain the most spectacular firecracker explosions: tin cans were blown rocket-fashion high in the air. One regrettable incident occurred when one of our venturesome youths tried the inadvisable experiment of exploding a six-inch salute in a glass milk bottle, and spent the day having glass splinters removed from various parts of his anatomy with a pair of tweezers. After greeting the dawn, a spell of relative calm prevailed while breakfast was being consumed and spirits were being refreshed for the next round.

Except for the evolution of the firecrackers into cherry bombs and the latter into whatever more fiendish devices still persist, these opening hours of the Fourth, and the closing hours to come much later, are the aspects of the day's festivities which have undergone the least change over the years. They are the hours of the day which belong primarily to the children, and who wants to change Santa Claus?

In trying to look back through the mist of years your historian has found it difficult to set forth in proper sequence the various evolutionary stages that this Village went through in developing today's accepted rituals. Characteristically we have always had a parade, followed by a ball game, and in the afternoon, races, track and field events.

The town criers' summonses were answered by the



#### THE OVAL

This is scene looking north, probably dates from around 1910. Part of the Inn may be seen under the trees at the extreme right. Just to the right of the buggy is part of the backstop of the Inn's tennis court. Woodville Road went to the beach through the ravine hidden by trees and shrubs in the Oval. The old "Log Cabin" can be made out under the trees to the left. The old Pavilion is hidden under the rim of the bluff.

assemblage of all citizens at the Oval in early years; more recently on Wardencliff Road, Sometimes we had a band, sometimes not. At first we paraded (struggled might be the more appropriate word) up Woodville Road, all the way through the tunnel to the old "ball field" which lay between Woodville Road and today's N. Y. Telephone building. The recipe for the parade was equal parts of small children on foot or bicycle and grown-ups in automobiles.

Our so-called ball park was, in fact, no more than a hay lot which had been cleared the previous day by a horse-drawn mowing machine to provide a stubbly but acceptable playing field. There was no backstop. Behind home plate there was a thicket of poison ivy, luxuriant and virulent enough to discourage most of us from entering to search out foul ticks, passed balls and wild pitches. As the innings wore on and the remaining supply of baseballs diminished, rewards of 5q per ball ( a princely sum in those day) were offered for retrievals. One of those games nearly ended at the half-way point when the entire supply of twelve balls had disappeared in the ivy, and even though the bounty was raised to a dime, only one was retrieved to permit a precarious completion of the game. The outfield was shallow, and many a ball was lost in the woods to the northwest. A loss of a ball in that area spelled trouble for the spectators. To relieve the tedium of waiting for the ball to be retrieved, the occupants of the spectator cars lined up along the first-base line - were subjected to a merciless bombardment of firecrackers tossed into their midst by the slightly older and therefore (presumptively) more provident boys who had not recklessly squandered their carefully collected treasures in the ecstasies of "The Dawn's Early Light".

For many of those early years, the competition was between the Marrieds and the Singles (men, of course; no one

had thought of Women's Lib at that time). Later, the rivalry was between Shoreham and Wading River. This, however, was not an entirely happy arrangement from Shoreham's point of view, since the latter more often than not came out on top and, regardless of who lost, the winner was invariably accused of having recruited "ringers" who shouldn't have been allowed to play in the first place. The games at the old ballpark were invariably "hardball games", not the softball contests that prevail today. Injuries, none serious, were common. Somewhere around the time of World War II the ballgame pattern changed. Instead of being, played on our field, at least one was played in Wading River on a field near their present elementary school, and at least one was played on "Siegel's" front yard. When the ballfield on Woodville Road near the tennis courts was opened, or perhaps even before that, the parade was shortened and the old ballpark south of the Tunnel went into eclipse.

By afternoon in those early days, matters became rather involved. Some of our older residents, who today might be on the golf links, had signed up for a bit of sailing and were out on the Sound on the yachts (the Santana or the Bagheera mentioned earlier). Others stayed ashore for the field events on the bluff lot north of the Inn. The activities included the tug-of-war, the three-legged race, the sack race, and for the youngsters a potato race. Of course all of these were to the accompaniment of firecrackers and cap pistols.

Eventually the bluff property was deemed unacceptable, and the afternoon field events were cut down to children's competitions, staged on the northerly end of Woodville Road. There were foot races. There were bicycle races from the store to the tennis courts. For those old in years but young in spirit, there were firehose races, the losers wind-

ing up thoroughly soaked. The races for the children were invariably on a handicap basis, and the arguments as to whether or not the handicappers were being biased were loud and vociferous. Later still, water events were added to the day's program.

By evening the survivors among us, bruised, abraded, contused, lacerated, linimented and bandaged, assembled on the beach for the fireworks. The hour's advantage that Mother Nature had gained in the morning was now repaid; darkness fell at 8:00 P.M. Shortly before that, the celebration started in a far more diverse and spectacular fashion than today. Come 7:30 in the evening, 8:30 by our present standards, the cooling southwesterly wind had steadied down, and the time had arrived to start launching the balloons. Ordinarily about eight or ten would be on hand. They were tissue-paper affairs with a hot-air generator consisting of a wad of excelsior soaked in paraffin wax, capable of burning perhaps ten or fifteen minutes. The smaller of them, four or five feet high and shaped like pigs or elephants, were reasonably tractable, but while relatively easily launched, lost their character when aloft. The large candy-striped ones, however, were as much as eight to ten feet tall and hard to inflate. They were released from the foot of Beach Lane, where they were mostly protected from the fitful gusts of the dying southwester, and where willing hands along the steps could hold the fragile tissue clear of the sputtering hot-air generators. Even so, casualties were frequent; the breezes would blow the tissue within the reach of the flaring paraffin and the balloons disappeared in a burst of flame. Those that became airborne soared majestically upwards and outwards over the Sound, and rose steadily until, invariably, an air current from the northwest was reached. Then they turned sharply and flew southeast until their fuel was

exhausted and they fell into the scrub pines of the inner reaches of the Island. There is an authenticated record of one such balloon having been launched in Bayshore one summer day and found in Shoreham near the Sarkany house the following morning.

As darkness fell, Roman Candles stabbed at the darkness, Star Mines and Vesuvius Fountains appeared like miniature volcanoes, colored fire gave a garish glare to the scene, and sparklers, like small nests of fireflies, lived their brief lives and expired. In the early years the spectaculars were the skyrockets. Launched from their cradles on the beach, they roared skyward ahead of a trail of sparks, only to end in a display of crashes, sparks and strings of parachuting lights, changing colors before perishing in a watery grave in the Sound. While the balloons have left the scene, and the rockets have departed before the inroad of aerial torpedoes and "bombs", the fireworks still retain their early appeal. We owe a deep debt of gratitude to those who so unselfishly paid for those fireworks, and who risked life and limb to set them off.

Next section

Table of Contents