

Winnipeg 1950-57 – A Memoir

"The Cisco Kid was a friend of mine
The Cisco Kid was a friend of mine"¹

Wildwood

In October 1950, our family moved to a house in a new post-war suburb of the Fort Garry district called Wildwood Park, which lay in the southern part of the city of Winnipeg, where we lived until June 1952. Most of the small single family dwellings in this planned residential neighbourhood faced Wildwood Park itself and road access to them came from the back of the house.² Our home at 86 Wildwood Park, a loop off Oakenwald Avenue had been rented from Dr. Wally Grant. Between April and June 1950, the Red River, which snaked around Wildwood Park on three sides, overflowed its banks and generated extensive flooding beginning on May 6th and lasting for a month or two. Our arrival in Wildwood was therefore delayed by the subsequent cleanup. I have no memory of the flood's aftermath except for the piles of sandbags along the river and the more permanent dikes surrounding the nearby Riverview area to which we later moved.



Tribune Photo by G. Aikman
Figure 12. WILDWOOD PARK DISTRICT
Wildwood Park district was one of Greater Winnipeg's most hard-hit suburbs. Many houses were submerged up to their roofs.

Wildwood Park in the spring of 1950 after the dikes gave way.³

¹ Written by Thomas Allen and performed by War in 1972.

² <https://www.erudit.org/fr/revues/uhr/2001-v30-n1-uhr0603/1015940ar.pdf>

³ Library and Archives Canada, e002343919.

My father had accepted an invitation from Professor Joe Doupe to join the Department of Physiology and Medical Research at the University of Manitoba which sat a short distance south of Wildwood off the Pembina Highway and before long he commuted to the university in his first car, a little black Austin 7. At the time, the Premier of Manitoba was a conservative leader of the provincial Liberal Party, Douglas Lloyd Campbell, who apparently opposed new government initiatives, as well as bilingualism in the province. He reigned over the Manitoba legislature from November 1948 to June 1958, the entire time we were in Winnipeg.

In December 1950, we celebrated my fourth birthday and I do have a few memories of life in Wildwood around that time. One of my playmates was Geoffrey Dyer, a year or so younger than I, the son of English immigrants who were apparently friends with Geoffrey Fisher, the Archbishop of Canterbury, which impressed my mother to no end. At some point, my parents discovered that I was eating two breakfasts every morning, one at home and one at the Dyers'. Next door, toward the Dyers' house, lived two young girls, both a little older than me. One day, I remember being completely fascinated by the bit of underwear showing between the legs of the short shorts on one of the girls as she sat on the front steps of her home, a fascination which would expand as I grew older.

In the following year, 1951-52, I attended kindergarten in Wildwood, schooling I didn't particularly relish and from which, on occasion, I asked to be excused using various pretexts. My mother was accommodating. My sister, Sheila Margot, was born on April 22nd 1952 at the Winnipeg General Hospital shortly before we left Wildwood for a home of our own at 293 Ashland Avenue in Riverview, a district immediately north of Wildwood across a loop in the Red River.

Ashland School

The move to Riverview took place on June 19th, before Ashland Public School had first opened and there in September, I began Grade 1.⁴ In the vanguard of the post-war baby boom, my cohort would cause a wave of school expansion over the next fifteen years as baby boomers advanced through the educational system. Since the rules of the time required a child to be six years old at the beginning of the school year, my parents had to push to get me into the first grade and I was admitted as an exception. For the next three years, I walked east along Ashland Avenue past the modest Pembina Fisher Park to reach school a little less than three blocks from home.

⁴ <http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/sites/ashlandschool.shtml>

Further east on Ashland Avenue, past the school, was the Riverview Community Centre, complete with baseball diamonds and skating rinks where I learned to skate. Standing upright on skates without bending one's ankles was considered a rite of passage for a boy, sort of like learning to ride a bicycle. As with the first time I learned to pedal a two-wheeler, I remember standing up straight on my skates for the first time. This was probably during the winter of 1953 when I was barely six years old. We often froze our toes while skating and I discovered how to walk in the snow in my stocking feet to raise gradually the temperature of my feet and avoid the bite that came from thawing frozen feet too quickly. At the Community Centre, there was the usual rough and tumble, and I had my nose bloodied once by a punch which came out of nowhere, without apparent reason and to which I had no idea of how to respond.



"After the Game" by Bill Mason, depicting the club house at the Riverview Community Centre in the early 1950s⁵

Our house on Ashland was a modest two story bungalow, with four bedrooms of which two were on the second floor under a sloping roof. When we arrived, I think we relied on the old coal furnace for heating, but before long my father had it replaced with an oil furnace. An Esso truck supplied heating oil for the oil tank just as delivery trucks conducted by the bread man and the milkman delivered their goods at the time. The local grocery store on Osborne Street was a small venture nothing like the supermarkets of today, although it seems to me that a larger Safeway grocery store opened a little further north off Osborne before we left the city in 1957.

We lived one house east of the corner at Hay Street, the corner house belonging to the Duncans. Chester Duncan was an Assistant Professor of English at the University of

⁵ <https://riverviewcc.ca/bill-mason-prints/>

Manitoba and a specialist in the poetry of W.H. Auden. He was also a pianist who performed from time to time as a soloist with the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra and acted as an occasional host on CBC's nationally broadcast program, *Critically Speaking*, with Clyde Gilmour and Lister Sinclair, commenting on radio, television, books and cinema.⁶ His daughter, Alison, was a year or so younger than I and kept a haughty distance from me. On the other side of our house lived Mr. Calcut, a semi-retired Scotsman who worked part-time as a guard at the Winnipeg Jail. Next to him lived Parkie Parkinson, a salesman, and his wife Fern, with two children about the ages of my siblings, Stan and Sheila. Across the street from the Duncans lived the Bratsens, with two boys the younger of whom, Gerald, was my age and a sometime companion. Mrs. Bratsen managed the convenience and gift store at the corner of Ashland and Osborne, and on one occasion, offered me a plastic bag to conceal the rolls of toilet paper I had purchased for my mother at a neighbouring outlet. Jimmy and Bobby Mitchell, who were one and two years older than I, lived five or six houses east of us on the other side of Ashland. One of the wonders of Ashland Avenue was the talking crow, a crow that waddled about on front lawns and responded, when encouraged, with words like "hello" and "no thank you".

What struck me later was the relative equality of life in the Riverview district; everyone seemed to issue from the same kind of economic and social background. There were no rich or poor in the area, though perhaps in my youth, I was simply oblivious to differences in wealth and income. As far as I can remember, all of our neighbours were of British origin. There were no ethnic groups distinguishable to me, certainly no visible minorities. While I lived in Winnipeg (that is until 1957), I was oblivious to the French-speaking population of St Boniface, which lived closer to the center of town on the east side of the Red River, a community from whence emerged, among others, Gabrielle Roy and Daniel Lavoie. Nor was I aware of the Eastern European migrants who, since the end of the nineteenth century, had settled in Winnipeg's north end, separated from central and south Winnipeg by the enormous railway yards, a community whose members were slowly integrating into Winnipeg's dominant political, social and cultural elite. Canada's participation in the Second World War against the fascist powers, and the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps, probably had a salutary effect on the value attributed to democracy, freedom of expression and racial tolerance in the postwar era, although these values were by no means shared by everybody.

In the 1950s, there were very few Aboriginal people in Winnipeg and I don't recall any native people in town other than those seen on television, such as "Indian" Jack Jacobs, the American quarterback (1950-54) of the Winnipeg Blue Bombers football team.⁷ At

⁶ http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/people/duncan_c.shtml

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jack_Jacobs

this time, the migration of indigenous people from the outlying reservations to prairie cities was just beginning, the 1951 census reporting only 210 Aboriginal people resident in Winnipeg.⁸ In the course of my schooling, we learned about the Red River Settlement, the town of Selkirk and Louis Riel, but the message conveyed was ambiguous. Certainly, Louis Riel had contributed to the founding of Manitoba, but his relationship with indigenous people, métis and the Canadian government remained unclear to me at the time.

In September 1952, I entered Grade 1 at Ashland Public School in the class of Miss Kaye Dixon, acquainting myself with many of the kids with whom I would hang out for the next five years, including Lyle Moffatt, Johnny Wells and Andy Woodall. I probably knew the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic before I started elementary school, and was not enamoured of Dick, Jane and Spot, the characters who inhabited our instructional reader imported from the United States.⁹ In her November report card, Miss Dixon wrote that I was very shy at first, but seemed to have overcome most of my reserve. By the following February, I was making "excellent progress" and by April had overcome my shyness. I remember a story recounting how a boy negotiated a hill, illustrating a saying which impressed me as a universal truth – the longest way round is sometimes the shortest way home.



Miss Dixon's grade 1 class, 1952-53

A few events stand out from Grade 1, including the classmate who stabbed me with a pencil leaving a small piece of lead in the flesh of my hand for a number of years. While crawling through an entrance to a snow igloo outside the house of a classmate on

⁸ By 1961 there were 1,082 aboriginals, and by 2006 there were 68,380, the largest urban Aboriginal population in Canada. <https://canadiandimension.com/articles/view/winnipeg-north-end>

⁹ <http://mentalfloss.com/article/68475/15-fun-facts-about-dick-and-jane>

Fisher Street at the foot of Ashland School's playground, I became stuck and was seized by a moment of panic until I decided to calm down and work my way out. The memory of the claustrophobia that passed through me then remains to this day, although I can't recall any particular negative result. In a flat area like that of Winnipeg, we used to seize advantage of every irregularity in the landscape and the dikes lining the Red River were therefore used as slides. During our first winter, a boy from Ashland School died after sliding down one of the dikes on his sled, hitting a rock buried in the snow, and being pierced by a splinter from his wooden toboggan.

Every morning we stood and sang God Save the Queen and O Canada as part of a ritual whose underlying meaning was beyond me. God lived somewhere up in the heavens, Canada surrounded us, and the Queen was no more than a mysterious figurehead who lived in London, England, my place of residence a few years earlier. In commemoration of the Queen's coronation on June 2nd 1953, each school child at Ashland School received a copper coin the size of a silver dollar. On the coin was inscribed "Elizabeth II Regina Coronata MCMLIII EIIR Canada". As I walked home at the end of the year, I sang to myself, "I'm an old grade one-er, I'm an old grade one-er...", proud to be rising up in the world.

Back in January 1947, a month after my birth, my grandmother on my father's side had given me a small gold sovereign dated 1898 with Queen Victoria's image, perhaps commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of her coronation on June 28th 1838. Each year in Winnipeg, we celebrated Victoria Day on the Monday preceding her birthday, the 24th of May, known to us as "Firecracker Day". There appears to have been little municipal regulation of fireworks, and the parents of many of the children in our neighbourhood purchased explosives ranging from sparklers, hand-tossed lady fingers and mini-cans, to dazzling windmills and rocket launchers anchored to the ground that sprayed or shot brilliantly coloured fire into the sky. My father supplied us with pretty much what we wanted and he himself seemed to take great pleasure in lighting the more treacherous windmills and rockets, as well as our favourite – the Burning School House.

At the end of grade 2, our teacher, Miss Laurin, commented on my ability to read and, above all, my "print" handwriting ability, no doubt a reflection of my interest in form and appearance. Throughout my three years at Ashland School, my teachers and my parents were often preoccupied with my spelling, but otherwise, my grades were generally satisfactory, no more.

I lived through a few jarring incidents during my time at Ashland School. On one occasion, while walking to school with two classmates, one or both of them threw snowballs at a passing car while I stood and watched. Throwing snowballs on the way

to or from Ashland School was strictly prohibited and, as it happened, a school official who was driving by, picked up the three of us in the back of his vehicle and drove us to our destination, vilifying us with his silence for our errant behaviour. We knew the ultimate sentence could be "the strap", for this form of corporal punishment was in vogue at the time. Before descending from the car in front of the school, I said frankly to our captor, "I wasn't throwing any snowballs, sir." He looked at me intently and then told me to be on my way. My two classmates were given the strap and when I saw them later in the schoolyard, in tears, they complained bitterly (and wrongly) that I had launched the first missile.

Because my father focused on his work, my mother ran the household on a day-to-day basis. Her experience as a nurse, and my parents' reading of Dr. Benjamin Spock's *Baby and Child Care* (1946), encouraged her to be flexible and affectionate with her children and to treat them as individuals. She liked to recount the story of the "little engine that could", the rhythm of her voice imitating the acceleration of a steam engine as it pulled its load up and over a steep hill in defiance of the larger engines that had refused the job.¹⁰ I remember her indulgence when she discovered that, instead of bothering to go downstairs to the bathroom on the ground floor, I had started pissing in one of my leather shoes in the clothes closet of my second floor bedroom. It was she who, in the name of the tooth fairy, replaced the baby tooth buried under my pillow with a twenty-five cent coin, perhaps to lessen the discomfort of having lost it. As an eldest child, she related to me in a way that my father, who was one of the youngest kids in his family, did not. But all was not roses. I also remember her telling me condescendingly that she wouldn't buy a cushion for my bicycle until I gained some weight. Her needling of my leanness continued for the rest of her life, perhaps encouraged by memories of her own struggle with chubbiness when she was adolescent.

My father looked after male chores of the time such as fixing the house and repairing household appliances, mowing the lawn, and taking care of his automobile. When, in July 1953, he acquired a beige second hand 1951 Ford Victoria hardtop to replace his little Austin, I promptly burnt a hole in the plastic cover on its front seat while testing the cigarette lighter to see how it worked. Of course, I didn't tell him of this until many years later – he had assumed the hole was there when he acquired the car. (Five years or so later, he bought his first new car, a black 1956 Ford sedan, reasoning that he wouldn't have to wash the new car as often as the beige coupé and could use the time saved for other pursuits.) After my father returned from one of his frequent academic trips, he presented the other children with small gifts. When I protested that there was none for me, he looked embarrassed and explained that he intended to bring me something the

¹⁰ I think I can, I think I can, I think I can... I know I can, I know I can, I know I can... I knew I could, I knew I could, I knew I could.

next time, which he did. But the gift was clearly a token and I felt uncomfortable for having raised the issue.

My sister, Mary Louise, was born on December 9th 1953. Unfortunately, from a young age, I never related strongly to my younger siblings. Arguably, at this point in time, my indifference was to their advantage since I did not interfere in their lives. In the case of my brother, Stan, for example, I felt there was too great an age difference between us (three and half years) for him to be a true partner, playmate or confidant. I had neither the advantage nor the disadvantage of a sibling close to my age, or one older. To the extent that I consciously had a role model on whom to base my daily behaviour, it was my father, though my mother certainly exercised as great an effect on my development.

The railway yards in Winnipeg were among the largest in the world, responsible for transporting wheat and cattle from west to east and manufactured goods, including machinery, to the three Prairie Provinces. One Christmas, my father's fascination with locomotives led him to give me an elaborate model train ensemble which he set up in the basement on a large green wooden table with papier mâché mountains and various accessories, such as miniature lead people and vehicles. (By reversing the table, it could also be used for ping pong.) Unfortunately, my enthusiasm for running a toy train around and around a toy track in our cellar was not as great as his and the model train sat largely unused until we left Winnipeg. I'm sure this was a disappointment to him.

At the time, I had no particular ability to play hockey and, although I still possess a photo of the Grade 2 hockey team, I have only a vague memory of being on the ice on an outdoor rink during a game in the cold at the Riverview Community Centre. I found it difficult to skate, control the puck and shoot with any consistency or fluidity. In the early 1950s, there was no formal instruction available to us and each player learned to play on his own, often from older brothers, which I did not have. For good and for bad, the lack of a role model close to my age conditioned my childhood and adolescence.

When I was seven or eight years old, I had a recurring dream of falling down the stairs from my sisters' bedroom toward the main floor below before taking flight at the last second to avoid hitting the ground below. This kind of takeoff produced an ecstatic feeling of lightness and joy. There is no doubt I adored Walt Disney's animated film, *Peter Pan*, released in February 1953, and cherished its characters; perhaps my dream of flying bore some relationship to the adventures of the Darling family's children in the film. Certainly I longed to rise to great heights and view the earth in global perspective like Peter Pan and Wendy.

In the days before television, and even after, we relished the big-screen, communal experience of Saturday afternoon at the movies with an audience of school kids. Our local movie house was the Park Theatre on Osborne Street between Baltimore Road and Oakwood Avenue.¹¹ Once at the Park Theatre, on a pretext, one of my classmates, Blake Emory, grabbed a ring I had pulled out of my box of Cracker Jack, put it on his finger, and refused to return it. I wanted that ring back and brewed about it for some time. Sometime later, with the help of an older friend, probably Jimmy Mitchell, we jumped Blake Emory in Pembina Fisher Park and, while my accomplice held him down, I tried to pull the ring off his finger. But when he struggled and then burst into tears of frustration, I abandoned the effort as too cruel and we let him go.

While I was at Ashland Public School, one of the neighbouring school children whom I didn't know very well invited me to his house to participate in a play. He lived on Baltimore Road directly north of our house on Ashland Avenue. Unfortunately, I never really found out what he had in mind for, in his bedroom, I spent the time jumping up and down on his bed and playing the clown. Needless to say, the frustrated neighbour did not invite me back for a second audition. That I have such a distinct memory of this incident testifies to the remorse I felt, even at the time, for behaving uncontrollably in this way and perhaps missing an opportunity.

Before the age of television, our reading material focused on the British classics – the illustrated versions of A.A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh*, Beatrice Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and Hugh Lofting's *Doctor Dolittle*, in addition to Jean de Brunhoff's *Babar the Elephant*. Our mother read the stories to us before we were able to read and we took on the task as our reading improved. Was it my maturing as a child and the time spent outdoors that disrupted this trend and led to the decline in my reading of children's literature, or the advent of television?

In many ways, I was a child of television and it became my companion and primary source of entertainment. Although the CBC commenced broadcasting television programs in Montréal and Toronto in September 1952, just as I was starting Grade 1, it wasn't until May 31st 1954, near the end of Grade 2, that the Corporation provided service to CBWT in Winnipeg. In the beginning, the CBC stations in central Canada could not transmit live broadcasts to the new station and many programs originated on film, often the product of kinescope recordings – the film recording of the screen of a television monitor carrying the program which was then "bicycled" (i.e. transported physically) to the Winnipeg station for local broadcast. As might be expected, kinescope recordings provided poor quality images until September 1956 when the microwave

¹¹ <http://westenddumplings.blogspot.com/2014/04/a-history-of-park-theatre.html>

relay system used in Ontario and Québec extended the fledgling CBC network to Winnipeg permitting the transmission of live network programs.

At the time of the launch of CBWT Winnipeg, my parents were reluctant to purchase a television set, perhaps because of the start-up nature of the technology, doubts about its cultural value (there was already much criticism in newspapers and magazines on this account) and concern about its price.¹² So, in 1954-55, I spent time across the street at the Bratsons' home, sampling daytime U.S. shows such as *Burns and Allen*, *Kit Carson*, *Range Rider*, *The Roy Rogers Show* and *Annie Oakley*. All of these programs circulated in syndication and since the CBC's Winnipeg studios could not generate enough material to feed its schedule, CBWT completed its programming with shelf product from the United States. For example, CBWT aired a number of programs from the CBS network apparently resulting from an affiliation agreement with the network.¹³

Owing to US economic and political domination of the post-war Western world, the power of American movies in the 1950s, and US television's head start in the entertainment field, television programs based on the mythology of the American West were increasingly popular, although they would not completely dominate U.S. schedules until 1957-58.¹⁴ There is no doubt that Canadian programs remained in second place in the popular imagination. While watching TV in the afternoons at the Bratsens', I don't remember seeing many Canadian programs, perhaps because the CBC aired most of its Canadian content in the evening. The evening schedule included the *Plouffe Family*, an English-language re-shoot of a French-language "téléroman" (drama series shot in a studio) with the same actors which emphasized character rather than action, a program that didn't interest me at the time. But there was an important exception: Howdy Doody aired at 4:30 pm three days a week beginning in November 1954 and its characters (Howdy Doody, Flub-a-dub, Dilly Dally, Clarabell and the Peanut Gallery) became a point of reference within our family.¹⁵

¹² According to ads in the September 1st 1954 edition of the *Winnipeg Free Press*, a 21" Northern Electric cabinet television set cost \$299.50 in current dollars and a price-reduced 22" RCA Victor equivalent, \$215.

¹³ According to the September 24th 1954 edition of the *CBC Times*, published in Winnipeg.

<http://winnipegdowntownplaces.blogspot.com/2013/09/541-portage-avenue-cbc-building.html>

¹⁴ Tim Brooks & Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network TV Shows, 1946-Present (Fourth Edition)*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1988.

¹⁵ Howdy Doody originated in 1945 on a New York radio show and in the autumn of 1954, the CBC built its own Doodyville in a Toronto studio. Most of the puppet characters, including Phineas T. Bluster, the cranky mayor and chief killjoy of Doodyville, Dilly Dally, a carpenter who was usually the butt of Bluster's plots, Flub-a-dub, a beast with a duck's head, cat's whiskers, and the parts of several other animals, Heidi Doody, Howdy's sister, and Howdy himself, were retained from the U.S. production. With the exception of Clarabell, the clown, and Cap'n Scuttlebutt, a pirate, the appearance of most of the human performers differed in the CBC version, and reflected an image of Canada. The show's host was Ranger Bill and after the chief forest ranger called him away to fight a forest fire, Timber Tom took his place. In addition to the adventures of the citizens of Doodyville and the Peanut Gallery, the show also featured film presentations on nature or travel.

My parents eventually purchased a television set, reportedly to bring my brother and me back into the home on a more regular basis. My brother Stan told the story of my mother calling a neighbour to send him home for dinner. When he failed to show up, she called him again and the neighbour found him outside her house following the action on the TV screen through a window. As I remember, our first set was not deemed of sufficient importance to merit space in the living room and my father set it up in my mother's laundry room in the basement. There, sitting on stools, we occasionally ate dinner in the early evening while watching television programs, such as *Our Miss Brooks*, *Life with Elizabeth*, and *Jackie Gleason*, all pre-recorded US programs.

Growing up on a farm in Saskatchewan in the 1920s and 30s profoundly affected my mother's view of the world and fed her desire for her kids to appreciate life on the prairies. Thus it is not surprising that our parents took us to see Walt Disney's feature documentary, *The Vanishing Prairie*, after its release in August 1954. While we lived in Winnipeg, a visit to my grandparents on their farm near Boharm, Saskatchewan, just over 400 miles away (650 km), required a day's travel. My brother Stan and I made the trip at least once on our own, our parents sending us off on the midnight train to Moose Jaw, and our grandparents receiving us at destination, an adventure I adored and which testified to my growing maturity and independence. Stan has said that I insisted on taking the upper berth which allowed him to spend the entire time looking out of the window from the lower berth as the train chugged through the prairie night. Apparently, my mother's youngest sister Anna came from Moose Jaw to stay with us for a while at the beginning of her training as a nurse at the Winnipeg General Hospital, but I have no recollection of this. It was on a Christmas visit to the farm just after my sixth birthday that I received a Kodak box camera that became a source of enchantment – surprised and delighted as I was that my parents would entrust me with such a sophisticated piece of electronic equipment. My first photos accordingly depicted scenes at my grandparents' farm.

Riverview School

In the autumn of 1955, having completed Grade 3 at Ashland School, my classmates and I were sent to Riverview School on the corner of Casey Street and Maplewood Avenue. My cohort was eventually destined for Churchill High School which opened that year to accommodate the wave of baby boomers washing through Winnipeg's school system and soon to arrive at the secondary level. The population covered by Ashland School, overlapped with that of Riverview so, with Ashland's opening in September

1952, Ashland dispensed Grades 1 to 3 and Riverview Grades 4 to 6.¹⁶ Riverview was three and a half blocks from our house, about the same distance to the north as Ashland was to the east. In winter, we trudged to school in ankle-high moccasins (called "mukluks" in Ontario) fabricated of light grey animal hide, possibly rabbit skin.

I remember being called out of Miss Kavanagh's Grade 4 classroom for an interview with what must have been a child psychologist of some kind who questioned me with the aid of diagrams and puzzles. I suspected that this testing was related to the fact that I had deciphered Miss Kavanagh's habit of posing a question and asking one of those pupils who had failed to wave a hand in the air, to answer it. So, on those rare occasions when I didn't know the answer, I waved my hand in the air as if I did, and Miss Kavanagh passed me over. But on other occasions, when waving hands filled the air, I sat quietly with my arms folded. When Miss Kavanagh inevitably asked me to respond, I stood and gave a complete answer as if it were as plain as the nose on her face. I think this disconcerted her a little and she may have been concerned that I was bored with her classes. Years later, my mother told me that I had been slated to "accelerate" (i.e. skip a grade in school) but that our eventual move away from Winnipeg put an end to the project, though I was not aware of any such venture at the time.

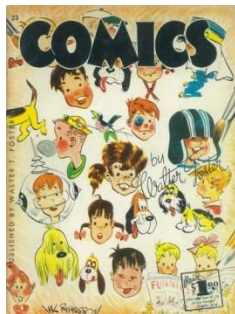


Miss Kavanagh's grade 4 class 1955-56

Although we said grace before dinner on special occasions, religion did not play a significant part in our daily lives. I don't remember going to church every week, but when we did, our destination was Riverview United Church on Oakwood Avenue between

¹⁶ <http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/sites/riverviewschool.shtml> However, beginning in 1956, my brother apparently attended Grade 1 at Riverview.

Osborne and Hay Streets.¹⁷ My father was a non-believer and critical of religions while my mother was faithful to her upbringing, so we were baptized and attended church services more regularly as my two younger sisters grew older in an effort to set them on the path to righteousness. Under the direction of my parents, I joined the Cub Scouts in September 1955, organized by St Alban's Anglican Church, which enrolled 8 to 11 year old boys in the scout movement founded by Robert Baden-Powell. Cubs prepared us for Boy Scout status at about age 12. Through cubs, I learned such practicalities as how to tie a reef knot, but not much else.¹⁸



Of course I enjoyed comic books, but I don't think we had any in the home. It seems to me that my main source of comic strip characters was the Saturday or Sunday edition of the *Winnipeg Free Press*. Perhaps I showed a little bit of interest in drawing, enough that my father presented me with a copy of *Comics* by Walter Foster, a large soft cover booklet, published in about 1950, which explained, step by step, how to draw comic characters. This was an eye-opener and I developed an attraction to drawing characters that I knew, such as Yosemite Sam, no doubt partly because of my attachment to American frontier culture.¹⁹ Toward the end of our stay in Winnipeg, I won a prize for my poster advertising a cub scout event, with Yosemite Sam riding a tricycle under the headline "I'm on my way to the [whatever the event was]".

¹⁷ Riverview United Church (1925-95) succeeded Riverview Presbyterian Church, the name change occurring because Riverview's congregation joined the United Church of Canada in the year of its foundation. Riverview United Church erected a new building, but the old Presbyterian church structure remained attached to the new building until it was replaced in 1957.

<https://main.lib.umanitoba.ca/riverview-united-church-fonds-2>

¹⁸ "Akela! We'll do our best. Dyb - dyb - dyb - dyb. We'll dob-dob-dob-dob."

¹⁹ In the Looney Tunes series of cartoons produced by Warner Bros., Yosemite Sam, an aggressive gun shooting prospector, created by Fritz Freleng and voiced by Mel Blanc, occupied himself with opposing his mortal enemy, Bugs Bunny.



Around 1956, I began to develop romantic interests which were undoubtedly fanned by the music lyrics and television storylines available to us. Two such interests were Alison Leach, who had been my classmate since Grade 1, but with whom my relationship never progressed beyond a hope, and the attractive Patti Legg, who lived with her younger sister on Balfour Avenue next door to Lyle Moffatt. We envied Lyle living so close to the Legg sisters and apparently indulging in such intimacies with them as might be imagined at the age of nine or ten. On one summer evening, Lyle, Andy Woodall and I accompanied the Legg sisters from their house over to one of the baseball diamonds attached to the Riverview Community Centre. Patti Legg elected herself to assign positions for each of the players. The Legg sisters would be the batters, Lyle would be the catcher, Andy would be the pitcher and I would be first baseman. This assignment irritated me to no end and I grumbled throughout the game because Patti's lineup implied a pecking order among the boys that relegated me to third position. Though purely symbolic and perhaps in my mind only, I had difficulty accepting last place. What is more, I respected my father's notice to return home by a specific time in the evening and reluctantly left the game. Upon arriving home proudly at the appointed hour, my father told me the warning should not have been taken so literally!

We continued to travel to Saskatchewan to visit our grandparents on their farm near Boharm, a wonderful opportunity to explore open spaces, cow pastures, the CPR railway tracks, farm machinery and farm animals such as chickens, cows and bulls. Though there were no horses on the farm at this time, there is no doubt the farm reinforced my fascination with television cowboy culture and vice-versa, On one trip, at a family picnic in a park near Moose Jaw, while exploring nearby wooded sand dunes, my cousin Wendy Keeler and I came across a middle-aged man who recommended that I take one path down the dunes and that he and Wendy take another. Minutes later, Wendy came screaming down the hill saying that the man had pulled up her skirt. My grandfather and my Uncle Stan immediately organized a posse of men who went looking for the offender, without success.

During our first few years on Ashland, two of my friends, brothers, lived east of us and at one point the two of them moved west on the same street to join their father, after

their mother became involved in a romance with her next-door neighbor. My mother later referred to this romance as a neighbourhood scandal, but I was unaware of anything untoward at the time. In an evening of May 1957, I accompanied one of the brothers to the center of town to visit his father, an officer in the Canadian army, who apparently held a desk job at an armory. A kind of sadness enveloped the entire visit and I recognized then the weight that lay on my pal's shoulders, a weight distant from my own family experience.

On the arrival of television in Winnipeg in 1954, professional sports leagues refused to allow the CBC (the only station in town) to broadcast live television games. Was it because of a technical inability to broadcast live, or for fear of undermining local ticket sales?²⁰ In any case, each Saturday morning, the Winnipeg Blue Bombers projected films of their previous week's WIFU game on a 16mm screen in an auditorium in downtown Winnipeg to members of the Quarterback Club.²¹ Most of the members of the Quarterback Club consisted of kids like me who relished the opportunity to witness a game on film, see one or two players in person, and participate in a random draw for an autographed football or the like.²² On one occasion, a child in the front row was selected to make the weekly draw of members in the audience and the name drawn from a hat passed on to the master of ceremonies. When the name was read out and the lucky winner asked to step forward, nobody responded. Again the name was read out without any response. Finally, the child who had made the draw modestly acknowledged that it was he the lucky ticketholder. Randomly, he had pulled his own name out of the hat.

Inspired by the Blue Bombers, we played informal football games on the adjoining front lawns of the McDermott's and Mitchell's houses down the street from our home on Ashland Avenue. Our game involved tagging, no tackling, and since there was not much space for five or six of us within the area bounded by the street and the bushes in front of the two houses, the ball changed hands quite often. That said, I developed a technique for running with the ball without being tagged by scraping through the branches of the bushes immediately in front of the two houses just long enough to escape my opponents' grasp.

²⁰ Football games aired on CBC television, but with a delay of several days. Thus, the Monday, October 4th 1954 night game between the British Columbia Lions and Winnipeg aired on the following Friday at 10:30 in the evening.

²¹ The Western Interprovincial Football Union (WIFU) and the Interprovincial Rugby Football Union (IRFU) united to form the Canadian Football Council in 1956. Though the IRFU still referred to its sport as rugby football, the member clubs played a gridiron style of football. At this time, professional football deployed a ball that seemed fatter than that used today, closer to a rugby football, and later in the 1950s covered in white leather to make it more visible at night. The WIFU and IRFU became the Western and Eastern conferences of the new league, which changed its name to the Canadian Football League (CFL) in 1958.

²² The players of these years included Jack Jacobs, Leo Lewis, Bud Grant, Gerry James, Tom Casey, Bud Tinsley, Herb Gray and Steve Patrick, all coached by Allie Sherman.

I didn't see black people in Winnipeg, except occasionally at Blue Bomber football events such as the Quarterback Club's weekly screenings or on television, in series such as *Amos 'n Andy* and *The Jack Benny Show* (Rochester). All were Americans. My mother later related how one of the African-American members of the Blue Bombers disappeared before midnight from a New Year's Eve party for hospital staff apparently to avoid the potential embarrassment that might have been caused by his presence as the clock struck twelve and those present began embracing one another. She was probably referring to the running back Tom Casey, who was then a medical student at the University of Manitoba,

The move to Riverview School opened the door for me to two sports which were popular at the time – soccer and softball. Riverview's playground contained soccer fields and softball diamonds which allowed the practice of these sports during "gym" classes. They also offered the opportunity to play impromptu games during the lunch hour recess, when I was one of the best players. To my disappointment, the gym teacher did not invite me to join the school team, probably because of my passive performance at the tryout. During an improvised soccer match in January 1956, I ran into another player and banged my head, chipping one of my upper front teeth. Our dentist (this was the era of slow-speed drills) placed a silver metal cap over the tooth, which subsequently shined whenever I opened my mouth until it was removed some eight years later. I remember playing organized softball in June of 1957, and one of my classmates who played for the opposing team, Sandy Alderdice, loudly warning his teammates each time I stepped to the plate that I was an accomplished and dangerous hitter. Perhaps from trying too hard, I was unable to obtain any success in that game, my last in Winnipeg.

Of the professional sports that attracted our attention, football dominated because Winnipeg possessed a professional football team. In November 1956, for the third year in a row, Montreal and Edmonton played for the Grey Cup, now available on live television since the national microwave relay system used by the CBC in Central Canada had then been extended to Winnipeg. In our hearts, baseball and hockey took second place to football because of the presence of a local professional team. Winnipeg harboured a baseball team, the Winnipeg Goldeyes, who played in the Northern League from 1954 until 1964 as a minor affiliate of the St. Louis Cardinals.²³ We also followed the two Canadian National Hockey League (NHL) teams, the Toronto Maple Leafs and the Montréal Canadiens on television since live NHL hockey had also become widely available by means of the CBC's microwave relay. At one Cub Scout banquet, I obtained goalie Jacque Plante's autograph. Of the various ways we followed our

²³ The Goldeyes name was resurrected in 1994 when the Rochester Aces relocated to Winnipeg to join the new Northern League.

favourite Canadian football and hockey players, one was through buying and trading the playing cards enclosed in bubble gum packages.

As we grew older, the bicycle became more and more an instrument of liberation which allowed us to adventure out of the neighbourhood and away from home. In the autumn, a few fenced gardens housed crab apple trees, one of the few fruits that Winnipeg's relatively short growing season could accommodate. Often on bike, gangs of us would descend on a yard with a crab apple tree and pick the forbidden fruit. Once or twice, rumours of a potential gang fight spread among the kids of my age and a group of us would gather on our bikes looking for the opposition. Inevitably, the apprehended battle was the invention of overactive imaginations and there was no such clash to be had.

One time, while riding my bicycle to the Riverview Community Centre, I began to race with an unknown cyclist of my age encountered on the way. Upon tearing into the unpaved parking lot, my front wheel hit the Centre's bicycle stand which was obscured by grass and I flew over the handle bars collapsing onto the ground in front. I had somersaulted like a cat with my bicycle landing on top of me, but I assured my worried competitor there was no harm done. Another time, while at a playground with Jimmy Mitchell, we left our bikes behind to engage in some activity or other. Soon after disembarking, someone of my age picked up my bike with the intention of riding off. Jimmy and I shouted at him, but the thief picked up a rock and threatened to throw it at us if we approached. Jimmy was absolutely undaunted by this gesture and moved toward him, but I, influenced by American frontier lore, restrained him, and convinced him to play it safe, put his hands in the air and let the bandit go! Then, I ran after the culprit on foot for two or three blocks with Jimmy on his bike beside me like a sheriff's posse – until the thief mysteriously fell off the bike and injured himself. I was thus able to recover the stolen item from a desolate kid sitting in tears on the pavement.

On another occasion before our departure from Winnipeg, three or four of us set off on our bicycles for a grand tour of the city. Since one of my friends didn't own a bike, I generously offered him my younger brother's little two-wheeler. It was a beautiful sunny Saturday in May or June 1957 and we had a wonderful outing. But when I arrived home after three or four hours, my mother was furious – she had called the police to report my brother's bike stolen.

After World War II, cigarette smoking was common, a practice encouraged by the military and popularized by various cultural icons appearing in the media.²⁴ My father, who had smoked intensively at least since his wartime service, apparently quit "cold

²⁴ <https://smokingjacketmagazine.com/2014/11/11/smokes-for-the-boys-a-history-of-smoking-and-the-military/>

turkey" after reading of the strong evidence linking nicotine and cancer in the British medical journal, *The Lancet*.²⁵ Gerald Bratsen was a companion with whom, for a short time, I picked up cigarette butts off the street, consolidated them, and tried to learn to smoke tobacco. When our parents learned of this, Gerald claimed it was on my initiative and I said it was on his. The practice was discontinued. This was also an era of X-ray machines in shoe stores, used to picture the distance of one's toes from the end of the shoes under consideration. Eventually, it was determined that X-ray technology was a danger to everybody involved in shopping for shoes, buyers and salespeople alike, and the X-ray machines disappeared.

One of the joys of summertime was going to the beach. My parents rented modest summer cottages, first at Lac du Bonnet northeast of Winnipeg on the Winnipeg River for two weeks beginning at the end of July 1951, then at Victoria Beach north of Winnipeg on the east shore of Lake Winnipeg for two weeks in August 1953, August 1954 and July 1956, and at Sandy Hook (on the west shore of Lake Winnipeg) for six weeks in July and August 1955. Going to the beach was a great pleasure which allowed for swimming, playing with inflated rubber inner tubes, building sand castles and picking wild blueberries. On occasion, I was able to hook up with my pals from school, Andy Woodall and Johnny Wells, whose parents also rented cottages on Lake Winnipeg.²⁶



Andy Woodall, Robbie Armstrong & Johnny Wells
at Sandy Hook in 1955

²⁵ During the 1940s and 1950s, various researchers examined the link between smoking and lung cancer. There were five papers on the subject in 1950 alone. But, "the two really good ones were Wynder and Graham, and Doll and Hill in 1950", [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(05\)67047-X/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(05)67047-X/fulltext) In 1953, a great deal of media attention was given to an experiment showing that tumours could be generated by painting cigarette smoke tars onto the shaved backs of mice.

²⁶ <https://tobaccocontrol.bmj.com/content/21/2/87>
<https://www.cfhof.ca/members/john-wells/>

At Victoria Beach in 1956, I played softball with kids my age, participated in foot races during local festivals, and was given freer rein and more responsibility since I was by then nine years old. My mother often sent me to the local store to buy a few necessities and, although my weekly allowance had been suspended for the summer holidays, I carefully extracted the usual amount from my mother's change purse and continued to buy the green candy gum drops that I so cherished, storing them in a secret cache at the cottage.

In the springtime at Riverview School, everybody participated in a school choir, organized class by class, in a city-wide choir competition at which we were warned not to take our eyes off the conductor. At one such event in April 1957, I assured my mother that, to try to catch a glimpse of her in the audience, I had looked in the audience only for a split second, of course recognizing nobody. For some reason, I was chosen to make a statement about Miss Robertson's grade 5 class' contribution to a fund-raising event, perhaps in connection with the choir. I wrote a presentation, which was heavily redacted by my father, and read it on a local radio station. On my return to class, one of my classmates confronted me and said that his father had assured him the statement was my parents' work.

My mother was a good piano player and I'm not sure when we acquired a piano, but in September 1956, I began piano lessons with Ken Winters, a teacher perhaps suggested by our neighbour Chester Duncan. Ken Winters (later the host of *Mostly Music* on the CBC) was an excellent mentor and introduced me to the fingering of piano keys and my first piano pieces. I can remember making excuses about stiffness in my fingers and so on, but Ken always moved on generously without missing a beat. From him, I learned to read music and dabble on the piano, though my departure from Winnipeg the following June unfortunately put an end to our collaboration.²⁷

Of course, nearly everyone my age adored dressing up and going out on Halloween, shouting "Halloween apples" outside the front door of houses up and down the street. We would collect our loot in shopping bags, the most common offerings being apples, bubble gum, candy (caramel) kisses and lolly pops. On birthdays, there was a cake, with candles, my favourite being a chocolate marble cake my mother made "from scratch" rather than the standard Betty Crocker, Duncan Hines or Pillsbury cake mix.²⁸ In the cake, she placed nickels, dimes and quarters wrapped in wax paper which

²⁷ By that time, at age twenty-seven, Ken Winters was writing live music and dance reviews for the *Winnipeg Free Press*, and contributing music reviews to CBC Radio.

<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/kenneth-winters/>

²⁸ "Nothin' says lovin, like somethin' from the oven, and Pillsbury says it best" was a lyric heavily promoted on television in the 1950s.

offered a prize to the lucky recipient. At some point during the celebration, the birthday child was given "the bumps", a curious ritual apparently originating in Great Britain, which involved the celebrants holding the child by the arms and legs, and bumping his rear end on the ground, once for each year since his birth day.

From television, I developed a fascination with guns and the Wild West mythology as portrayed in U.S. television programs. Not the least among these were regularly scheduled series such as the *Cisco Kid*, the *Lone Ranger*, *Stories of the Century* and the Walt Disney's *Davy Crockett* mini-series (aired on *Disneyland*).²⁹ In these programs, mostly drawn from the imagination, Good triumphed over Bad to our great satisfaction. However, in the case of *Davy Crockett*, the retelling of an historical event made the experience more realistic and upsetting. With a few exceptions, the portrayal of Mexicans and Indigenous peoples did not endear them to us: Davy Crockett's death at the Alamo infuriated me, which is a sign of the extent to which American mythology with its racist undertones held sway over Canadian youngsters such as me at the time.



The Armstrong children, April 1956

When my sisters were old enough, I encouraged them to don cowboy apparel as did Mary (no doubt wearing my hat, bandana and holster) for one of my photos. Although my parents eventually relented to my repeated requests to buy a BB gun, they offered

²⁹ ABC first aired *Disneyland* in October 1954, divided into four rotating segments: Frontierland, Fantasyland, Tomorrowland and Adventureland. According to Brooks & Marsh, "what really got *Disneyland* off the ground was a three-part series of Frontierland adventures which began less than two months later – Davy Crockett." The three original Crockett episodes were "Davy Crockett, Indian Fighter", "Davy Crockett goes to Congress", and "Davy Crockett at the Alamo". (p. 838)

me – not a compressed air rifle like that of Gerald Bratsen's older brother – but an inoperable version that would not fire pellets.

In the early years, there was confusion as to what rock and roll consisted of and I don't know exactly when or how it entered my life.³⁰ I do remember Tennessee Ernie Ford's *Sixteen Tons* (1955) and Carl Perkins *Blue Suede Shoes* (1956). There was very little rock and roll on CBC radio (CBW) or television (CBWT), perhaps more on some of the commercial radio stations such as CKRC (a privately-owned CBC affiliate),³¹ CKY and CJOB, but not much before 1956. Maybe the music came to our attention through juke boxes, the floor or tabletop models found in some restaurants.

At the time, the theatrical feature film *Blackboard Jungle* (released in March 1955), with "Rock around the Clock" played over the opening credits, and later the movie *Rock around the Clock* (released in March 1956) with Billy Haley and the Comets, the Platters and others, capitalized on the new dance craze and fanned the popularity of rock and roll in the United States and Canada. Bill Haley and the Comets performed "Rock around the Clock" and "See You Later, Alligator" on the CBC's *Cross-Canada Hit Parade* on 29 February 1956.³² Elvis Presley became a phenomenon in the same year, first appearing on *Stage Show* (with the Dorsey Brothers) on January 28th and on *The Milton Berle Show* on April 3rd – both programs airing on the CBC's schedule. Elvis' first appearance on the *Ed Sullivan Show* on September 9th 1956 was also broadcast on CBWT. I know that on leaving Winnipeg in the summer of 1957, I was aware of the most popular artists of the day – Chuck Berry, Fats Domino, Carl Perkins, Elvis, Little Richard, the Platters, the Everly Brothers, Marty Robbins, Patsy Cline and the Drifters – though whether all of their music qualified as rock and roll is open to question.

By 1957, the Liberal Party had governed Canada since 1935, winning five consecutive elections. The federal election held on June 10th, 1957, to select the 265 members of the House of Commons created one of the biggest upsets in Canadian political history. The Progressive Conservative Party led by John Diefenbaker, elected in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, brought an end to 22 years of Liberal rule, and the Tories were able to

³⁰ The June 1956 edition of *TV Radio Mirror* (p. 4) announced that "CBS is convinced that rock 'n' roll is here to stay, at least long enough for a commercial radio series. They're starring Count Basie and his orchestra in a Saturday night show called *Rock 'n' Roll Dance Party*, on the full network. Basie's blues singer, Joe Williams, is featured and Alan Freed emcees. Freed, a former Cleveland disc jockey, is known as the "Rock 'n' Roll King", via his popular broadcasts over Station WINS."

http://www.otrr.org/FILES/Magz_pdf/TV_Radio_Mirror/TV%20Radio%20Mirror%205606.pdf

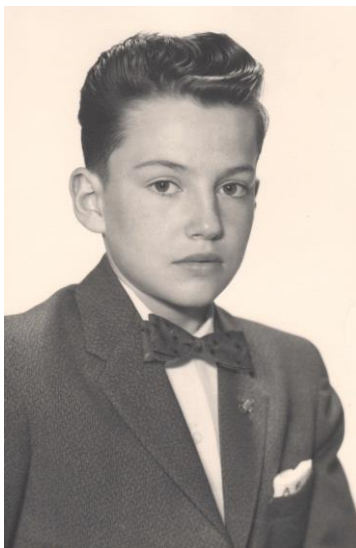
³¹ . The CBC's Dominion Network was set up as a complementary network to the owned-and-operated English-language service which became known as the Trans-Canada Network. While the Trans-Canada Network's focus was on public affairs, educational and cultural programs, the Dominion Network's broadcast schedule consisted of lighter programming with more source material from the United States.

³² Paul Rutherford, *Primetime Canada: When Television was Young*. Toronto: UTP, 1990, p.215.

form a minority government sensitive to Western agrarian issues despite losing the popular vote to the Liberals.

About this time, I completed grade 5 at Riverview Public School and on June 27th, we left Winnipeg for Toronto where six months earlier my father had accepted a position as Executive Secretary of the newly formed Canadian Heart Foundation, a grant-giving non-profit organization created to encourage research on heart disease. (Both of his parents had died of heart failure.) To reach Toronto, we travelled by car to Fort William on Lake Superior.³³ One of our favourite travel games in the car was tourist touch, which required being the first to identify the province or state of out-of-province cars, and tagging someone else. At Fort William, we boarded the Canadian Pacific Railway's SS Keewatin, and with our car below deck, travelled to Port McNicol on Georgian Bay, just south of Honey Harbour, before completing the trip to Toronto.³⁴

It is common to idealize one's childhood for I have heard many glowing testimonies of this kind, including from some who grew up in Eastern Europe during the Soviet era. The idealization of the pre-teen years may be related to the difficulties of adolescence which arrive in the teenage years. I had loved my life in Winnipeg but I accepted the move to Toronto with optimism and anticipation of a new adventure and better things to come.



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³³ Fort William is now a part of Thunder Bay. According to the *Historical Atlas of Canada*, it was not possible to travel directly by car from Winnipeg to the Great Lakes until 1946.

³⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS_Keewatin