

Growing Up In Gaithersburg

Trouble

By Marien Helz



In the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s, parenthood, it seems, was viewed as a kind of see-saw dance between people and their offspring. Parents were constantly involved in trying to keep their children out of trouble, and children were constantly trying to get into it. Trouble, as viewed then, however, was quite different from what it is now. Some of the dangers that parents need to be concerned about now were relatively non-existent then, and adults demanded more restraint from children in the past. None-the-less, children remain fairly constant through the ages—it's the parents who change. My father's idea of

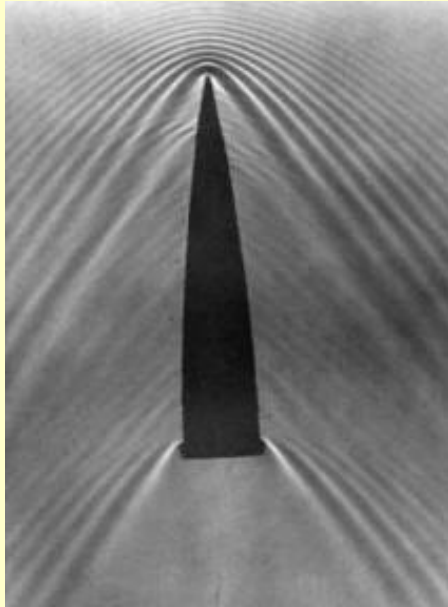
trouble constituted a much firmer interpretation than was typical of the era. The problem with having children on a short leash, though, is that when the leash is removed, there is no control since self control was never developed.

My father was well aware that children need to release energy. One of the things he did to facilitate that was to take us to Sugarloaf Mountain or sometimes to the Damascus school playground to let us play on the swings and monkey bars. A common way to keep children out of underfoot was to let them play in the basement. Basements, when I was growing up in Gaithersburg, were usually unfinished—recreation rooms were just coming into vogue—and unfinished basements could be useful for all kinds of things that would seem messy elsewhere. My mother kept her jars of foods she'd canned there. My father kept various equipment including an oscilloscope, darkroom materials, and, for awhile, a water table that he and a friend had built in order to study the physics of waves.

There are pictures taken in the basement of our activities: of my brother and me with plaster of Paris statues we'd made, of my sister at a workbench and in a nurse's uniform that my mother made for her since she had wanted to be a nurse when she grew up—as it turned out she became a doctor.



What the parents didn't know was that you could, in fact, get into quite a bit of trouble in the basement, and



you could do it at peace without their interference since they thought everything was fine.

Our house was heated with oil, so there was a basement oil tank. It was about five feet high and stood on angle irons. We could just fit our feet on the part of the angle irons that stuck out and reach for a four inch wide bolt and then grab the pipes and pull ourselves up to sit on top of the tank. The tank became a ship and the basement floor was the ocean—an ocean full of whales and swordfish [we hadn't heard of sharks then but *Pinocchio*, and Gregory Peck in *Moby Dick*, and other movies had made whales famously dangerous].

There was a six foot long wire bush with four inch circular bristles [probably for cleaning ducts]. It had a wonderful bounce when you held it, and we decided that it was a special fishing pole that would catch hundreds of fish at a time. Then, of course, we would have to go to the other part of the ship—the laundry tub and the work bench some distance away. Naturally, we couldn't get down and walk on the floor

because that was full of dangerous ocean creatures.



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The way to get there, obvious to us, was to swing by hand along the water pipes as though they were monkey bars. We avoided the hot water pipes because, of course, they were hot. The cold ones worked fine for navigating our ship that the basement was. If they had broken.... But we were lucky, and they never broke. If our father had known.... But we were lucky, and he had no way of finding out since the pipes never broke.



There was one time when we carried the game upstairs. We climbed up on the kitchen counters, swung with our feet on the handles of the basement door to the swinging dining room door, and from there to the French doors and over to the piano. My mother was talking with guests from her hometown who were staying with us, and my father was away on business. Whenever I think about that, I'm perplexed as to why my mother put up with it—I never would have. My father had been out of town for several days, and I'm sure that we wouldn't have been so impudent if he had been as near as twenty miles away in Washington or as close as home at dinnertime. It wasn't that my mother relegated discipline to him. Being an orphan, however, she seemed to distrust her own sense of family structure, and took the cue from him except when he was out of town, at which time she seemed to enjoy taking something of a break from being the enforcer.

Things were looser when our father was away. We even swung on doors.