

April, 1949

A Story by Jim Ebsen '59

At Jefferson Elementary School in the latter years of the 1940s, the month of April had special appeal for boys. April meant playing marbles and everything else took a back seat. Let it be said that many a legendary marbles game took place at Jefferson Elementary in those years.

What is most memorable is that the game of marbles played at Jefferson was unique. At Jefferson, marbles was not played on the sandy areas of the school playground nor did the game have anything to do with knocking someone else's marble from a circle, and it certainly had nothing to do with how close one could get his marble to a wall or some other object. No, at Jefferson, marbles was played on the wide, smooth, super hard concrete sidewalk that lay on the 16th Street side of the school. For about three April weeks of each year, come rain or come shine, early in the morning, before school began for the day, over the noon lunch hour, and until the bell rang for classes to resume, some Saturdays, and as late as supper time, marbles was played at Jefferson with abandon. It should be noted that only the toughest of the tough played Jefferson marbles.

Now, the game of Jefferson marbles was not only unique; it was also quite simple because it had very few rules. Players, however, were expected to know and abide by those scant rules. There were no exceptions. Though the Jefferson game was simple, to be successful required one to possess a good eye, a good right or left hand, a semblance of endurance, some devious stealth, and a bit of greed.

For a game to start, required that at least one player provide a perfectly clear glass marble called a *kornek*. For a true Jefferson marbles aficionado, a good *kornek* was a true thing of beauty. Large ones, perfectly clear (no bubbles) and devoid of scratches, would invariably bring oohs and ahs from the beholders. Those beauties came in an assortment of colors: red, green, blue, yellow, crystal, etc. They also came in several sizes which will be discussed later. Some players believed *korneks* to be as rare and valuable as pirate gold. Understand that there is no etymology for the word *kornek*. It's a mystery. No one knows where the name *kornek* originated or why these beauties were called *korneks*. All one needs to know is that's what they were called, and for a marbles game at Jefferson to ensue, a *kornek* was required.

As mentioned above, Jefferson marbles games were played on the wide sidewalk adjacent to 16th Street. As with all concrete sidewalks, grooves had been troweled into the concrete surface. Such grooves are always made a part of a concrete sidewalk in an attempt to confine future cracking (which would invariably occur) to the groove. Those grooves bisected the sidewalk and were placed every four feet or so. What is important here is that the players labeled the areas between the grooves *spaces*.

You should understand that there is a direct correlation between *spaces* and *korneks*. For example, a common glass marble is one half inch in diameter. A one half inch *kornek*, as everyone knew, was a *three spacer*. A *kornek* the diameter of a quarter was a *six spacer*.

Six spacers were extremely rare and highly prized by players. With that in mind, here is how Jefferson marbles was played.

The possessor of the *kornek* would seat himself on the sidewalk behind a groove of his choosing. With his legs spread and forced flat to the sidewalk, he would place the *kornek* eight to ten inches in front of the highest point in the V of his crotch. If, for example, the *kornek* were deemed a *three spacer*, the shooters would kneel behind a groove facing the *kornek* holder three spaces away.

The object of the game was for a player referred to as a *shooter* to roll or shoot marbles at the *kornek* until one of the shot marbles struck the *kornek*. All of the shot marbles would become the property of the *kornek* holder who would have collected them by *raking* them in and holding them between his legs in the V. Any marbles that rolled on through because the *kornek* holder hadn't held his legs flat to the sidewalk or had bounced to the side became anybody's to grab. As such, opportunists (usually crumb snatching little first graders who were the lowest of the low) would lurk like vultures out to the sides of the *kornek* holder just out of range of his peripheral vision waiting for the opportunity to snatch errant marbles. For one of those little twerps to get caught snatching marbles usually resulted in the little imp's receiving a good *pounding* from the *kornek* holder, but only if the *kornek* holder could snag the little slug. Please understand that such violence only occurred if the little monster wasn't particularly fast and couldn't reach home before he was caught.

Any player who was able to strike the *kornek* would now become the *kornek* holder. As such, he would now assume the seated position and the game would continue.

Winning was determined by who among the players held the most marbles by game's end. However, it wasn't really that simple, for no winner could be determined until all players agreed not to continue. It was then and only then that an official winner could be declared. But, it was really more complicated than that because just when everyone assumed the game might be over, some player or players would choose to return home or speed to Sticklemeyer's Grocery for more marbles. When that happened the game was required to be put on hold until those restocking their marble supply returned. A contingency rule would then come into play that was readily enforced. That rule required that a player choosing to replenish his stock of marbles must return to the game within fifteen minutes. The timing of such marble retrievals was preferably kept with a Mickey Mouse watch though someone counting by ones was also allowed if no one had a watch and if someone able and willing to count that long could be found. It should be mentioned that darkness and supertime were the most common reasons for games to conclude. What was really hard for some to fathom, this is very important, no *kornek* holder was ever allowed to determine when a game was over!

The ultimate victory and the thing most cherished by players was when a *kornek* holder found himself holding all of the other player's marbles, the *kornek*, and the realization that all the others had given up. When that occurred, a feeling of victory, of conquest, and of total satisfaction would over whelm the victor that defies description.

In April, 1949, I was really into marbles. I was so into marbles that on one Saturday morning, I chose to play marbles rather than listen to the *Smilin' Ed McConnell Radio Show*. Now, for those who don't remember that show, it was brought to you by Buster Brown Shoes and featured *Froggy the Gremlin* who was, hands down, bar none, the funniest character to have ever been featured on this planet! For anyone to preempt listening to *Froggy* was indeed a rarity, but on that particular Saturday morning, I forced myself away from *Smilin' Ed* and our old Zenith council upright AM, FM, Short Wave radio proudly enshrined on an inside wall in the living room of my families home located at 1520, 3rd Av S, and took my half block trek to Jefferson just to play marbles. That is a day I will never forget.

On that day, by chance, I became involved in a game where I was the youngest player. I was a third grader and the other players were fifth and sixth graders, the "Big Boys" as we referred to them. Please understand that I was out of my league but obnoxious enough not to realize it, and furthermore, the rules of the game had not become firmly etched in my still developing semblance of brain. Let me say this, after that day, I knew the rules.

The *kornek* of that day just happened to be a perfectly clear blue *six spacer*. It was a true beauty, completely flawless, and totally free of bubbles. Now, for me a third grader, to even play in a *six spacer* game was the Big Time. Not only because of the unbelievable treasure at risk, but because I was playing with the "Big Boys." In addition, for me it was truly a Herculean labor to strike a *kornek* the diameter of a quarter positioned six spaces away, but no one would or did tell me that I wasn't up to the challenge.

On that day, the *kornek* holder, a player whose name is lost to me forever, foreshadowed the events to come. He set the stage by *raking in* marbles in droves. He did so because everyone was having difficulty finding the range. Remember the distance was six spaces. I, however, was totally relaxed and slowly began to find the range. Then suddenly, my perfectly shot marble struck that clear blue beauty dead center making a sharp plink. Needless to say, I was ecstatic. Though ecstatic, I was also nervous, because I now found myself in a situation that I had never been in before.

With that giant *kornek* in my possession and after taking a deep breath, I proudly assumed the *kornek* holder position. It was then that my stealthy, devious, and greedy little mind went to work. I wanted every advantage I could muster because a chance like this might never come my way again.

I quickly studied the *space* directly before me. Though the concrete sidewalk for the most part had been trowled perfectly smooth when laid, a small depression caught my eye, a flaw small enough that a *shooter* knelling six spaces away would never see, but large enough and capable enough of hindering the path of a well shot marble. Wearing a very nonchalant demeanor, I placed my *kornek* directly behind that depression, about four inches behind it. It was then that a small chip of concrete also caught my eye, a chip that was almost invisible because its color blended in perfectly with the color of the sidewalk. I cleverly palmed the chip into my right hand and without arousing suspicion dropped it

directly in front of the depression, about three inches in front. It fell into place almost perfectly. I snickered silently to myself.

I don't believe I've ever appeared more innocent or trustworthy as I stacked the deck to my advantage. I remember lauding myself in total silence and confidence, for now I possessed the double whammy. Then, I nonchalantly signaled for the shooting to begin again, and lo and behold no one could find the range. My heart began to pound. Beads of sweat appeared on my forehead. I couldn't *rake in* marbles fast enough. As the marbles rained in faster and faster, I became even more excited, and the first graders became excited because I wasn't a particularly good *raker*. No matter, it was beautiful, for marbles would appear to be heading in a direct path for the Blue Beauty, and then suddenly, at the last possible instant, they would veer ever so slightly to the left or right and miss!

One marble passed directly over the depression forcing it to become airborne. It actually flew over Blue Beauty, and with my highly refined third grader reflexes, I skillfully snatched it out of the air just like a New York Yankee first baseman would have done. Amazingly, the *shooters* suspected nothing. In my mind, I was now a marbles genius. My *kornek* placement behind the depression and the cleverly positioned chip ranked right up there with Einstein's theory of relativity!

After I had gleefully cleaned everyone out, I quickly and nervously stuffed marbles into my corduroy pants pockets front and rear, into my jacket pockets inside and out, and into a paper bag I'd found lying on the school lawn. Even my hands were full of marbles. Yes, I was now the only player with marbles and the owner of the Blue Beauty. Julius Caesar after crossing the Rubicon couldn't have been flying higher, and like him, I came, I saw, and I conquered!

It was then that I announced loudly and clearly for all to hear that it was time for me to get home for lunch. I explained that I heard my mother calling for me. The mother calling ruse usually worked in such situations, but on this day it didn't. My announcement brought only silence and glares of animosity. After all, these players were well traveled. They were the "Big Boys".

It was then that a notorious sixth grader stepped forward. His name was Chucky Thompson. Not only was Chucky a sixth grader, he was a tough sixth grader, and Chucky hadn't just rolled off the turnip wagon. Chucky, nose distance away, looked me straight in the eye and said: "What did you just say?" I blurted out with a stutter: "My, my mo mo mom's calling me, I go go gotta get home for lunch!" Chucky, now smiling and speaking very snidely, uttered, "You ain't goin' no where Jimmy! We ain't done with the game yet!"

Suddenly, in fear and confusion, I attempted to bolt, but two things impeded my escape: my pockets and hands full of marbles and Chucky. Chucky was not only tough, he was fast, and in an instant he had me and held me long enough for the others to grab hold too.

I began to scream in total desperation calling for mom and asking her to bring dad! That strategy didn't work either.

What took place next is what would and did happen to a Jefferson marbles player who had skirted the rules. I was subjected to a *dumping*. Now, a *dumping* is when a player is held high in the air, turned upside down, and shaken to such an extent that all his marbles can't help but leave his possession.

As my marbles thundered to the turf those wonton fiends tore my shirt and went after my marbles like a school of piranha just introduced to a Hillshire Farm Ham. In looking back, I now realize that what had happened to me was an early in life lesson demonstrating how wealth could be redistributed. It was kind of like an early form of estate taxation. Whatever, I was cleaned out. Even the marbles in the paper bag were gone. I was totally devastated. The most disheartening part had to do with the first graders, for even those little jerks got some of my marbles.

I was to learn sometime later that my *dumping* was considered the highlight of Chucky and his hee-hawing buddies' time at Jefferson, and those brutes would continue to remind me of it again and again in the days, months, and years that followed. Those reminders finally began to abate as those low life thugs graduated and/or left the area. The reminders totally subsided after I graduated Fargo Central in 1959 and left for Grand Forks to attend the U.

After I was *dumped* that day, I was now free to return home to my mommy. When I entered the house she angrily queried me about my torn shirt and tears. I explained that I'd fallen from a tree, torn my shirt on a branch, and hurt my arm. She gave me a stern and harsh reminder about climbing trees and a cookie. My sister got a cookie too. I never did tell Mom the true story and I never will.