

How We Spent Our Saturdays Without TV

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Since you were asking about what I did when I was your age, I thought I would write you a few stories about it. The first one is about the gramophone that we had to enjoy listening to records – the round, flat type – with a small hole in the middle, not the ones that Zachary thought of when we talked about a broken record. He thought we were talking about a record that an athlete might win!

Chapter 1: The Gramophone

When I was your age Samantha, we had no TV. The first TV station in Vancouver arrived when I was 9 years old, but of course we had nothing to watch it on. The first time I saw a TV was in the window of a store. It looked very weird to see the pictures moving!

We weren't completely cut off from the world, though. We had the radio.

I used to love listening to the Ross Mortimer show every day on CJOR when we came home for lunch. It was called “Kiddies Carnival” and they would tell stories, play music, and have lots of jokes that were perfect for young children like us. I particularly remember hearing the “Teddy Bear’s Picnic” as a regular part of the music we heard. I wish I could remember some of the stories as well, but I found out from the Internet that they didn’t tape the programs during that period of radio history (<http://www3.telus.net/vanradiomuseum/home.html>).

Although we didn't have the Saturday morning cartoons, we had plenty of paper, pencils, crayons, and imagination that gave us all the ingredients for our own cartoon drawings. If we were tired of telling stories ourselves we could always listen to the gramophone in the basement.

“What's a gramophone?”

Well, in our case it was a piece of furniture about the size of a narrow dresser. I have included a photo of the kind we had when I was about 6 years old. If you were standing beside it at your age right now, you could lift up the top and peer in to see the turntable and needle holder without standing on your tip toes. But before you could use it you would have to crank up the spring by turning the handle on



the side until it was nice and tight. You can just see a bit of the crank on the side in this photo – behind the open front door of the cabinet.

You could then pull out a record from the front of the cabinet (ours had a special place to store them like the one in the photo), put it on the turntable, and prepare the needle to play.

Preparing the needle meant looking for a fresh sharp one in the small tray on the top, unscrewing the old needle much as you would change the needle in a sewing machine. You would then put a fresh one in its place and tighten up the screw to hold it.

The next step would be to turn on the turntable using the small lever just beside it, wait for it to get up to speed, and then gently place the needle on the outside groove of the record.

You wouldn't need to plug this gramophone in because it didn't use or need electricity. The sound of the needle vibrating in the groove would be amplified simply by a large cone that got bigger and bigger until it opened at the front end of the gramophone. You can't see it in this picture because it is behind the light brown cloth cover at the front but you might remember seeing it in pictures of the type where the cone comes up the top. The one where there is a dog like Charlie listening is a very famous one.

If it was too loud, you would just have to close the doors on the front of the cabinet. If it wasn't loud enough with the doors open, then you were out of luck since there was no volume control.

We thought we were fortunate because we had a nice a big collection of records that we could play – at least 10 or so!.

Uncle Ted had a gramophone as well, although his was smaller and more compact like the one in the picture at the right. It could only play music that came on cylinders that looked like plastic drinking glasses without bottoms. In his machine the cylinder would slide onto its holder and the needle would travel along the cylinder picking up the sound from the grooves. This one, of course, had a smaller crank on the side and a smaller cone that curved around under the front.

Saturday morning would have been a good time for me to go and listen to our gramophone. In fact it was the best time for me to listen to our record of Peter and the Wolf because there was light



coming through the basement window, kitchen noises coming from upstairs, and as often as not one or the other of my brothers would be downstairs with me. If I was really lucky, Dad would even be in his workshop busy with some project just around the corner.

By the time I was six I had learned that the worst time to play Peter and the Wolf was at night when everything was dark, and I was on my own. I can remember being so frightened when the sounds of the Wolf came out of the gramophone that I didn't even bother turning it off but ran upstairs as quickly as I could fearing all the time that the Wolf was at my heels..

Chapter 2: The Icebox

If we didn't feel like drawing or coloring or listening to music on Saturday morning we could always hop on our bicycles and head off to the school grounds just across the street. In fact, we didn't even need our bicycles since the school ground was so close but once I learned how to ride a bike, it was always more fun to head off for a ride down the little hill or maybe even the middle hill at the school yard. It took me a long time before I had enough courage to ride down the big hill. That was why I was so surprised to find you and Zachary riding down the big hill almost as soon as you got going on your bicycles.

There were lots of things to do in the playground as you well know. We didn't have the climbing apparatus that is there now but it seemed to us that that trees, walls, hills, and gardens made perfect climbing, hiding, and scaring apparatus for our entertainment. We would often find that we weren't alone since the school ground was a favorite gathering spot for children from around the area and Saturday morning was a good time for a monster game of hide and seek.

If it were springtime then out came the marbles and we would gather on the upper field close the school. In those days the upper field was just dirt, not covered over by asphalt the way it is today. In the springtime we would begin by drawing circles in the dirt, or sketching out the boxes for hopscotch, or clearing an area for two or four-handed skipping.

I particularly enjoyed the marble game where we would dig out a cup-sized hole in the dirt, stand way back, and toss our marbles toward the hole. It was something like 'Rolley-hole' (<http://www.marblemuseum.org/games/rolleyhole.html>) but we played it with only one hole. The objective was to get your marble in the hole and keep the others out. You could only keep the others out by hitting them with your marble, however. I must have been reasonably good at it since I know I enjoyed so much.

If we got tired of that game there were plenty of other variations to try. Drawing a big circle and trying to keep your marbles inside while knocking the others out

was another one I remember well. We would play it for hours – spending as much time over the rules or challenging someone who didn't "knuckle down" as we did shooting our marbles. We could always liven up the game by winning any of the marbles we knocked out or trading them along the way. I remember that cats-eyes and gobbers were always in demand.

The springtime was always a favorite time for jacks as well. We could get very quick at going through from one to five although I think that the girls were better at this than the boys.

Do you still play jacks? If you don't have a set of jacks, you can always play five stones instead.

With all of these things to do it was very easy to lose track of time. That was why we had worked out a whistle signal for returning home. One whistle was for Peter to come home, two whistles meant that I should get home, and three of them meant that Bob should drop what he's doing and head home. One long blast on the whistle meant that all three of us should hightail it home for lunch, supper, or bed, whatever the time of day it was.

On Saturday morning of course it meant lunchtime and we would reluctantly say goodbye to our friends and head off to quench our thirst and fill our bellies.

It didn't mean, however, that we would rush home to grab a glass of nice cold juice out of the refrigerator. We couldn't do that, because we didn't have refrigerators in those days. Instead we would go to the icebox.



I put a photo of one type of icebox to give you an idea what it was like (I'm not sure why it is outdoors – maybe just to get a good photo). This one has 2 doors – one for the block of ice and the other for the food. The ice was put in the top compartment and the food in the bottom. Since cold air is heavier than warm air, the cold air moves down from the top and keeps the food in the bottom cabinet cool. As the block of ice melts, the water is drained into a bucket.

We would get the block of ice from the 'ice man' (in those days it was usually a man). He would come with his wagon full of ice pulled by one or two horses. He would pick up the big block of ice (just a little bit smaller than the top cabinet of the ice box) with his ice tongs and carry it into the house over his shoulder. I have also included a picture of the tongs so you know what I am talking about.



In those days they didn't have refrigerators, so they would have to save the ice from a river or lake that froze during the winter. It would be easy to find one in Quebec because the winters are so cold, but I don't know what they did in Vancouver. Maybe they went up a mountain and got the ice from a river or lake up there.

All during the winter they would cut the ice into blocks with long saws. It would be stacked up in ice houses, then covered with sawdust to keep it from melting as the spring and summer sun warmed everything up. Just about the time that the ice house was empty or the ice had melted, another winter would arrive and they could start filling it up again.

I especially liked seeing the horses come down our street pulling the truck with the load of ice. It was very special – especially on a hot summer day!

Chapter 3 – Chores

Of course, we could always occupy ourselves with the chores we had to do – but we struggled (as you probably do) to avoid them as long as we could. Of all the chores on our list, the most memorable – and disliked – was to bring in the wood for the furnace.

Imagine – instead of just turning up the thermostat when we got cold, it was necessary to go downstairs, open up the furnace burner, and toss in some more wood. The furnace was a monster – like a great spider in the middle of the furnace room with arms reaching upward. Each arm was actually a big pipe to carry the warm air into all parts of the house.

The monster ate wood. It was delivered by a big dump truck that would leave a huge pile of wood pieces left over from the sawmill. We hated working with it since it was covered with slivers that would get in your hands, clothes, and shoes.

Our first task would be to stack the wood into long, high piles. This seemed like hours of work – picking up the pieces from the dumped pile and carefully stacking them in a way that they would not fall over as the stack got higher. I must admit that my only pleasure at this point was building the end stacks just right so that they would rise up neat and high while holding the loose wood in the middle.

By the time we were finished we would often have about 5 or 6 rows of wood standing about as high as we could reach.

The next task was to carry the wood from the stacks in the back yard into the wood bin in the basement. Dad came up with a great way to help us do this – a

stretcher of wood on which we would stack up a load, carry it to the basement window near the furnace, and throw it in to the wood bin through the open window.

It was a great plan – but it had one main drawback: the stretcher took two people to carry. This was the source of many fights, tears, arguments, and extra time as we negotiated our way through – who was doing more work, who was not carrying the stretcher properly, and who was getting in the way. I'm surprised that we got any wood in at all, but I guess we must have since the system continued until we got the furnace changed to burning coal or sawdust. These were days of celebration for us!

I have included a photo of Peter and I carrying a load. I don't know why I am smiling, though – I only remember it being a pain.



I particularly liked it when we changed to a sawdust furnace. Instead of carrying wood, we were treated to the spectacle of a long huge metal tube like an enormous snake between the truck and our house. The truck would pull up to the curb and the men would hitch up the metal snake to the back end of the truck. They would then pull it out along the side of the house and poke it into the window where the wood box used to be. This time, however, it was a sawdust bin.

They would walk back to the truck and start up the motor that would blow the sawdust through the tube and into our house. The motor would roar into action and the snake would wiggle like a fire hose being filled as the sawdust raced through it and into the house. The swoosh of the sawdust would continue until the bin was filled and the motor turned off. It was so much better than suffering the stretcher!

Our coal furnace was almost as much fun. The nicest thing about coal was the lovely smell it produced when Dad fired it up on a cold evening. These days I'm sure that it would be outlawed because of the pollution it created, but in those days we didn't think of such things – or perhaps we were simply ignorant of the bad effects.

Chapter 4 – Summer Nights

If we were successful in getting our chores done, and if we finished our supper quickly, we were often able to have some time outside before having to go to bed. Remember, there were no TV show to watch so it was easy to find the time for more outside play.

In the summer, the evenings were long and warm, so there was considerable incentive to finish our chores and supper – especially when the word was out in the neighbourhood that there would be a game of kick-the-can on 38th avenue.

The announcement was spread by word-of-mouth mostly because few people used the telephone – especially for children’s news. In those days, if you had a telephone it was on a party line. This means it was shared by a number of families along the block.

People had different types of telephones, but they all required you to speak to an operator.

One type was in a big cabinet on the wall with a trumpet-looking cone sticking out of the front and another on a cord hanging from the side. To use it, you would lift the piece off the side and put it to your ear, turn the small crank on the side to ring a bell for the operator, and be prepared to speak clearly in the mouthpiece poking out from the front.



After you turned the crank, you would hear someone speaking “Number please” This was not a machine-generated sound but it was the operator who was on duty at the telephone centre. As often as not, you might have a short chat with the operator before giving her the number, but you wouldn’t take too long since you knew that as long as you were on the phone, the other people on your party line couldn’t use it.

In fact, if they happened to pick up their phone while you were speaking to someone else, then they could listen in or even join in to your conversation. This was considered bad manners, though, just as using the phone for too long was considered rude. If there were an emergency, however, it was always okay for someone on your party line to interrupt.

Sometimes, there were people on the party line that liked to listen in on others’ conversations. For this reason, you had to be careful about what you said or the news would get out and the gossip would spread. In most cases, we learned who

these people were, however, and kept information that was personal to ourselves.

Our type of telephone was smaller and could be placed on a desk. It was like the second telephone pictured below. With this unit, you just needed to pick up the earpiece and wait for the operator to reply with “Number please”. You could then tell her the number you wanted to call – or ask for her to help you find the number, then proceed with your conversation.

As a result of all the people involved, the telephone was not for idle chit-chat and it was definitely not for children. If we wanted to organize an evening of kick-the-can, we had to find a way to do it that didn't require the telephone.



If a game were planned, we would rush through our supper and head up to our friends' house for the game. I'm not sure why it always took place on 38th, but this was certainly the centre of activity for all the blocks around.

The can would be placed in the middle of David's yard. It was the perfect spot since it was higher than the sidewalk and surrounding lawns, easily visible from all directions, and far enough away from hiding places that if you wanted to kick it, you would have to sprint across a wide expanse before getting to the prize. It gave an advantage to the person who was 'it', but it also made their task more difficult when seeking the hiders.

The can was at David's house, but the game spread out for the whole block. It covered such a big area, that we often had to play in teams – with scouts heading out in all directions while a guard stayed behind to protect the can. If I remember correctly, it was still up to the person who was 'it' to tag the others, but the scouts were useful for searching out the prey.

On those evenings, the whole block would go through periods of intense quiet as we ran for our hiding places and listened for the counting of the person who was 'it'.

“... 96, 97, 98, 99, 100 – Ready or not, you must be caught – hiding around the corner or not!” would ring out and the whole street would become perfectly quiet as 10 or 15 little bodies held their breath so as not to be heard.

The silence was always broken by shouts – either one or more of the hiders screaming across the lawn toward the can, or of the person who was 'it' announcing the discovery of a hider while racing to the can. It never ended in a whimper since there was always someone who wanted to test their skill at hiding or kicking – just the sort of daring that made the game a success.

It would go on like this well after the light had faded and hiding became easier and easier. At those times, it was those with sharp ears that became successful since the full trees and thick foliage accentuated the darkness and made eyesight almost useless.

The game would typically end slowly. First as the youngest were called in for bed, then as their older siblings would be summoned. Bob was the first to go of our family, so when we heard the three toots of the whistle, we knew that the game would not last much longer. Pete and I always stayed as long as we could however – stretching out the day as long as possible even after our whistles had sounded.

So you can see, our lives were seldom without things to do – even without TV. In fact, I have only told you about some of the activities that would fill our Saturdays, so there are lots more stories to tell.