JP's Skateboard
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Hi Thomas,

I was sorry to hear that you strained your ankle on your skateboard the other day, but I'm glad that it is mending quickly.

It reminded me about JP's early experience with the skateboard. He was a little bit older than you when he first became interested in them. Like the other boys at his school, when skateboards first became popular he was eager to try one out and maybe even get one for himself. I remember seeing him drawing sketches of the type of board he wanted, and laughing at me when I told him about the kind of skateboard we had when we were kids.

When I was a boy we made skateboards by attaching roller skates on a board. I'm sure that you wouldn't consider it a skateboard by today's standards, but it gave us a lot of fun anyway.

Even the roller skates were different from those you know. They were made out of metal and we would strap them on to a pair of our good shoes. We had to use good shoes since the clips that held them on were designed to clamp on to leather soles. Running shoes just wouldn't work. I have included a picture of the type of roller skate that I am talking about.

You can see that they have 4 wheels and a leather strap to hold our heels on to the metal part. At the toe of the skate you will see 2 metal clips. These are the ones we clamped on to the leather of our shoes. They would move in and out by turning a threaded piece of metal under the toe. You can see it in the picture if you look hard. We had to carry a metal key with us to tighten those clamps since they would often fall away from our shoes with all the shaking and rattling of our skating. I have included a picture of the key as well.

I used to think that these roller skates were cleverly designed because they also had a way to make them longer or shorter to fit any sized foot. You can see in the picture how the middle part can slide back and forth. We would always have to keep changing it since we only had one pair of skates and Robert's feet were smaller than mine and Pete's were bigger. When I had my turn, I would loosen up the nut holding them in place, slide the skates to the right length, then tighten up the nut again. Since the same key could be used for the length or the toes, we didn't have to carry a toolkit wherever we went. Clever, eh?

If we wanted to make a skateboard, we would get an old pair of skates, take off the toe clamps, bend down the heel bracket then bolt them to a board – one skate at the front and another at the

back. Of course, the board was not curved and the skate didn't bend on the turns, so it was much more like a scooter without handlebars than the kind of a skateboard you are used to. In fact, sometimes we would even put a handle on the board and play with is as if it were a scooter.

This wasn't the kind of thing that JP had in mind when he was dreaming up his skateboard, however. The big problem was that his version was very expensive. He didn't want to ride the cheap flat boards that were available but (as usual) had a dream of a very special shape on his board, a new design that would be only his.

"Will you buy it for me, Dad?" he asked – probably knowing the answer from the many times he had asked for something.

"Save up your money yourself." was the answer he got – just as he had heard so many times before. He also got my other usual suggestion: "Why don't you make one yourself?"

I was surprised to see that he didn't reject this possibility out of hand. Instead of stomping off in a huff he seemed a little intrigue with the idea of making his own skateboard. I don't think he had ever thought that this was possible, and since he had such a special design in mind the idea of being able to make it himself was very appealing.

"How could we do that?", he replied.

"Well, tell me a bit about skateboards and the design you have in mind." I said, "..and we'll see if it can be done."

JP sat down with paper and pencil and sketched out once again his idea for the skateboard. In the process he explained to me the way the wheels worked, and the meaning of the 'trucks' that held them, what the 'rails' were for, and the importance of the length and curve of the board.

I headed downstairs and began rummaged around in our scrap lumber looking for the right type of plywood. It had to be solid, with waterproof glue since we were going to have to soak it to make the curves. Luckily, I found a nice piece of Douglas Fir plywood that looked like it would be perfect for the job. Since we were heading off to our ski trip in Vermont, however, the project had to be put on hold until we got back.

It turned out that on the way to our chalet in Vermont we passed by a city called Burlington. JP knew there was a special store selling skateboard equipment, so he made sure that we stopped in to look around. It was there that he found the right trucks, wheels, toe protectors, and rails for his project. He even found some of the abrasive material used to keep the skater's feet from slipping on the board and a decal for some kind of special board.

When we got back home after our trip we immediately set to work fixing up the plywood that would become his new skateboard. Using his sketch, JP traced the shape he wanted on to the plywood and we headed off downstairs to get out the jigsaw. He cut out the shape as we made plans for the more difficult part of the process.

The plywood was flat of course so the hard part would be to curve it at the front and back. To do that, we would have to make a jig in the shape he wanted, soak the board so it would be pliable, then clamp it in the jig until it dried.

We designed and carved some old lumber to make a jig for bending the plywood. The jig was like a mold for the wood, but instead of filling the mold, we were going to curve the wood on its outside.

We set up the jig, then soaked the plywood overnight in water. In the morning we bent the plywood around the jig using clamps and a jack from our VW. Then we just had to wait.

It took about two days in the clamps before we were confident enough that the plywood was dry. We carefully took off the clamps and released the jacks to find that the piece of plywood was nicely dry – and most exciting of all, took on the shape that JP had dreamed up and sketched!

JP immediately drilled the holes for the trucks and began painting the skateboard with his own special design. When the paint was dry, he put on the trucks, rails, toe pieces, and decals then cut the abrasive material that he had bought in Burlington and carefully placed it on the top of the board. The only thing left was to give it a test drive!

I have put a picture of JP with his new skateboard so you can see what a beauty it was.

It certainly was an exciting little project. Not only had he been able to get his skateboard, but it was one-of-a-kind – made exactly to his specifications. He was certainly excited and proud as he headed off to try it out.

We discovered soon after that, however, that the process of soaking and shaping the board had weakened it so that it did not last long before splitting. It was obviously disappointing but JP did not seem to be extremely upset because of his accomplishment.

His next board was purchased from the store even though we knew we would be able to do better the second time around.

It wasn't as special as the first one, of course, since it wasn't designed by JP.