# SCHOOLYARD GAMES

*Alonzo Gibbs*

SOMETIMES, AS if viewing a Brueghel painting, I see in my mind's eye the old Valley Stream District #13 schoolyard during a morning period of freedom pronounced *re-cess* in our homely Long Island diction.

The word *recess*, as compared to rest period, suggests the somewhat elegant vocabulary employed in public schools of those days. Even now, such old terms as kindergarten commencement, auditorium, eclectic, girls' room, boys' room, mix German, Greek, and Latin derivatives and Puritanical euphemisms into a rather unique jargon. The boys in our school were tough and we didn't know from nothin' but we accepted this highbrow nomenclature and never thought of substituting slang for the imposed terminology.

When the bell rang, we tumbled down the stairs and out the doors at either end of the two-story, eight-classroom wooden building. No one ever left through the front doors which opened under a small Romanesque portico, supported by two white columns at the head of a flight of steps. I don't know who designed our schoolhouse, but it was classic in a sense, for I've seen similar structures in other towns and even in other states.

Out from the portico jutted a flagpole set at slightly more than horizontal and some favored boy climbed through an upstairs window each morning onto the roof of the portico, not to "raise the flag," but rather to launch it forth in a due-east direction. How we envied him that precarious chore!

"Pop Schmidt" (Leslie Smith) was our principal. He was a trim man with a mustache, who came by train from Far Rockaway each morning. Often he would hustl into the classroom, take over fro the teacher and talk for hours on ethics and morals, always illustrating his points with stories out of his life.

One gruesome tale concerned a policeman who jumped onto a Long Island Rail Road car as it was leaving the station, only to have his overcoat catch on a picket fence and drag him under the train. I can't recall the moral but I suppose it had to do with getting to school on time.

It was Pop Schmidt who introduced the first school lunch program I ever heard of. Each child brought a good-sized white potato into which his mother had carefully engraved his initials. Our good-natured but rather stolid janitor, Mr. Mills, would then collect these potatoes each winter morning and before noontime bake them in the coals of the school furnace. I can still see the look of chagrin on the good man's face when, as sometimes happened, you went to the furnace-room door to retrieve your "micky" and after desperate raking he brought forth a tiny black ball of charcoal or nothing at all. Kid-like we held him responsible upon such occasions and went away murmuring threats against his life. Also, there was a boy with the initials A. G. who brought salad-sized spuds and always walked off with my over-sized cobblers. (I'm still looking for him!)

But I started out to tell about schoolyard games. One of the best Long Island poets, Howard Griffin, has a poem called *The Secret Lens*. I like to use the idea to explain those photographs the mind takes for permanent record. For instance, I am sitting in an upper classroom at this moment, looking out under a snapping flag and watching a lanky boy maneuver his bicycle "no-hands" in the sandy field on the far side of Wheeler Avenue. Who he is I can't recall, but there he goes, round and round, and has for a long time now.

I can also see a fat boy, during one of those periods of recess

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Mr. Gibbs, an author, is an alumnus of the Wheeler Avenue School (pictured here) who has written a number of books for young people. This article originally appeared in the May 1968 issue of the *Long Island Forum*.

**SCHOOLYARD GAMES** (cont. from November)

I mean to describe, backed against a tree, another fellow with his head tucked into the fat boy's belly, another with his head tucked in between the legs of the second fellow, and another in that position and another until a line of five or six boys presents one long back. Other boys then run, place their hands on the hips of the last boy out from the tree, vault high, and land as crushingly as possible, as far forward as possible on the inviting backs. The game was called "Johnny-Ride-a-Pony" and the object was for one side to collapse the line of backs formed by the other side. Is it ever played any more?

Springtime, of course, meant marbles, and we shaped pots by spinning on one heel, and we bowled with large glass marbles in which colors swirled in curving streamers. Another game was "Picture Cards." We either swapped or matched the pictures of baseball players and prize-fighters or we slapped them against the schoolhouse wall and tried to make them fall on cards already on the ground. Only a few in the schoolyard played baseball there. They were a kind of self-appointed elite who had qualified themselves and disqualified the rest of us by some obscure and I suspect irregular procedure. Yet such methods have a way of advancing the most aggressive, if not the most skillful, and in sports or business aggression counts for a lot.

Today, when I pass along Corona Avenue, I can still see two old trees in the schoolyard which were flourishing forty-five years ago. The schoolyard, too, is about the same shape: a long rectangle with the northwest corner cut out of it. When I went to school, "Ma Cash" (really Kearsch) kept a little store in that corner. It was long and narrow and she sold copybooks and pads and such candies as jujubes, nonpareils, banana fingers, and those little dots of sugar on paper whose name escapes me.

She also sold licorice whistles one could blow before eating, and licorice ropes, sticky black and braided, called "shoelaces." We could buy from her for a dime a spiral length of wire and a tin propeller. Once the propeller was wound down the spiral wire, it could be propelled upward by use of a tiny metal tube. At the top, the propeller would climb high into the air, almost as high as those trees I speak of.

"Rooster Fights" come to mind. A light fellow like me would ride pick-a-back on a stocky classmate and wrestle with another boy astride some other sturdy lad. When pulled off balance, we'd go down like a knight and his charger.

It worries me a little that I seldom see children playing games today. No marbles when the smell of spring is first in the air; no "Ring-o-leveo," no "Red-Rover" on summer evenings under the streetlights. Is television really as thrilling as a good game of "Hares and Hounds"?

Times change, I suppose, and maybe that's why we need men like the elder Brueghel to put down for us the ways of children at a certain time and place, just as Velasquez put down the ways of kings. In their tyranny, in their naivete, aren't children kings and kings children?