

Lessons Out of School



Boyhood Home from 1948 to 1961
208 E. Brown Street, Earlville, Illinois

Ten Anecdotes from Childhood

by Alan Harris

Each life is a leaf that knows little of the whole tree.

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Stories and Essays by Alan Harris
Meditations, Meanderings, and Yarns
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1. A Shooting in Town

ONE HOT SUMMER DAY when I was about ten, I was sitting alone on our front porch when I looked east and saw Jerome, our rotund old neighbor, carrying a rifle as he walked my way from where he and his ancient mother lived three doors away.

I knew that Jerome was an accurate shooter because he and Dad would sometimes shoot rats around Jerome's barn, and Dad had remarked once that Jerome hardly ever missed a rat.

Anyway, when Jerome got about halfway to our house with his rifle, a big dog was trotting along on the other side of Brown Street--probably a stray. That same dog had come up to me the previous day and I had petted it—it seemed pretty friendly. Jerome stopped walking, aimed his rifle at the dog, and shot it dead with one bullet.

Then he lumbered across the street, grabbed the ex-dog by one hind leg, and dragged it over to his front yard, all the while muttering loud oaths about how that dog ever got into this world.

I never found out what Jerome did with the carcass because I went on into our house, not feeling too well.

I was dumbstruck that anyone could be allowed to do such a thing, right there in town. I told my parents about this, but what could they do?

Lesson: Killing is a bad deal.

2. A Shrill Focusing

THERE HAD BEEN A BIG SNOW the day before, and I was walking home from school along Stilson Street where a stretch of sidewalk had been shoveled very straight and neat, leaving foot-high cliffs of snow on either side of the bare concrete. Absentmindedly, I walked along and rounded off the neat top corner of snow, kicking some of it down onto the sidewalk with each step.

Suddenly Florence's shrill voice (my first acquaintance with her) scolded me from her ample front porch—for wrecking a shoveling job she had just paid perfectly good money to get done.

“Come up here on the porch,” she commanded. Like someone who owned me, she put a broom in my hands and ordered me to sweep up all the snow I had kicked down.

I dutifully did, and it took an embarrassingly long time.

When I returned the broom to her, she softened into “I hope I wasn't too harsh with you. I can see that you probably didn't mean to do it. Were you daydreaming?”

“Yeah, I'm sorry.”

Lesson: When you mess up, people can own you with their tone of voice.

3. Wayne's Hardware Store

HUMOR AND HARDWARE CAME TOGETHER whenever Wayne was in his store. His laugh, once it got going, sounded like a 2-cylinder John Deere tractor at a little above idle. Every time Dad and I would stop in (and we seldom really needed any hardware), Wayne would banter with us and tell us a new story.

One of the stories I remember was that a backwoods father had confronted his son about possibly having tipped over the family outhouse. The son, thinking to save himself with honesty, replied: "I've read about how George Washington confessed to chopping down his father's cherry tree, so I must be honest, Paw, and tell you that I did tip the outhouse over."

"That's a nice try, son," said the father, "but there's one big difference: George Washington's father wasn't sitting in the cherry tree at the time."

Then Wayne's laugh would come to life like our old flywheel-cranked Model A John Deere, catching and firing.

Another time Wayne passed along to us the championship lie from the year's National Liar's Contest, which was: "I have a grandfather clock which is so old that the shadow of its swinging pendulum has worn a hole in the back of the case."

Lesson: Hardware is human; humor, divine.

4. How Cold It Can Get

WHEN THERE WAS SNOW AND ICE on the ground I couldn't use my bicycle for delivering the Ottawa newspapers, so the route always took longer then and wore me out.

There was one house on my route which required walking up north of town a quarter mile, and whenever the wind was very strong and cold from the north or northwest, I wasn't sure I would live through it. No houses or trees were beside the road along the way to slow the wind down.

One night when I was about twelve years old I came back home to report an unusual phenomenon to the rest of the family, who were already eating supper in the kitchen. Dad asked me, "Was it cold out there tonight?"

I said, "Yeah—it was so cold that when my nose ran, the mucus would freeze before it got down to my upper lip."

Dad wasn't impressed by this observation at all, and he scolded me: "Can't you see that we're all eating supper here? Now don't say things like that."

Lesson: When trying to impress, always consider context.

5. A Sorry Quarry

I WAS 16 AND DAD HAD GIVEN ME thorough mechanical and safety instructions on how to use his .22 pistol. I was never to have it out when kids were around and was only to use it for target practice or shooting pests like rats and gophers.

We had an old wooden shed behind our house which would collect forgotten miscellany for a period of several years and then, with grand human effort, get cleaned out in order to again collect forgotten miscellany for several more years, world without end.

Not much miscellany was inside the shed this particular summer and you could actually walk around inside it. The shed's outside north wall sported a large parabolic rat hole such as you would see in Tom and Jerry cartoons. Rats had chewed it out of the clapboard siding for access to their nests beneath the shed's wooden floor.

One day while in the back yard feeding our three geese, I saw a rat scurrying through that hole to get under the shed, so I decided to go get Dad's pistol and see what could be done. Nobody else was around that day.

I went to his bookcase and pulled the main part of the pistol out from where it was hidden behind some books, and then to the fireplace mantel to pick up the cylinder, which always had bullets in it. I was forbidden to assemble the pistol inside the house, and I never did.

I then walked out back, assembled the pistol, quietly entered the shed, and peered down with my head stuck through the open north window. I also pointed the pistol straight down at the rat hole and just waited. Before long a rat stuck its head out through the hole and looked around. I shot him and got him.

My feelings of triumph were surprisingly mixed. The rat had never bothered me personally, but you were just supposed to shoot rats. I was a hero but a murderer. Dad would praise me when he came home, but I felt dirty inside. There was no cure for this ugly feeling except time.

Lesson: Killing is a bad deal.

6. Canine Chemistry

EARLVILLE IN THE 1950'S ALLOWED DOGS as much freedom as it did people. Dogs weren't walked with a leash or tied up or scooped behind or fenced in or dogcaught as are their descendants in modern suburbia. On my paper route a common experience was to be barked at, nipped at, lunged at, or bitten by a frenetic dog.

I would receive all kinds of advice from people for handling dogs, but nothing really worked. Once somebody told me that I could fill a toy squirt gun with ammonia water and use that for self-defense--the ammonia would irritate the dog's eyes and make it stay away. So one day I filled my squirt gun with the proper mix of water and ammonia.

Skippy, the most ill-tempered dog on my paper route, belonged, appropriately enough, to the most ill-tempered couple in town, and this 15-pound terror-terrier was forever harassing me. It was a darn shame that Skippy would sometimes tear up his mean owners' newspaper after I tossed it inside their screen door, but that behavior was beyond my control.

On this particular day Skippy was loose outdoors for some reason, and he rushed at me with furious barking as if to bite me. I whipped out my ammonia gun and shot a squirt at him. Probably only a few millidrops actually hit him, but he immediately became even more furious. He didn't actually bite me, but the ammonia was no help at all.

At the end of my route that day I discovered that the ammonia had gummed up the works inside my squirt gun, which wouldn't squirt properly anymore. I threw away the squirt gun and the whole idea.

Lesson: Chemical warfare is iffy at best.

7. Striking Out the Shed

I WAS 11 YEARS OLD AND ALREADY PLAYING in Little League Baseball. My observation at that time was that the pitchers received all the glory, and I coveted that position. I played left field for a while, and later the coach moved me to shortstop as I became more skilled, and finally to first base near the end of the season. But being a pitcher was my dream.

One problem was that my aim wasn't very precise, and another problem was that I couldn't throw the ball fast enough. Those are problems for an aspiring pitcher.

I determined to throw harder and more accurately, so at home I chalked a big square on the north outside wall of our back shed to represent the strike zone for an average Little League batter. Whenever I could, I would practice throwing the baseball hard at the shed, keeping track of how many pitches were hitting the strike zone and how many were missing it. Whap. Whap. Whap. I fancied myself a dangerous new pitcher in the making.

I was improving a little, I think, until one day I saw that a siding board on the shed had developed a crack about where I'd been throwing the ball. I must be getting stronger to be able to do this, I thought, so I kept on pitching the baseball at the shed with renewed vigor.

After a few days that crack had widened, and finally, with one mighty pitch, I broke a hole through the siding and a piece of board fell down inside. Wow, I said to myself, it's amazing what a little baseball can do.

A couple of days later Dad and I were walking in the back yard and he spotted the hole in the shed.

"What's this?" he asked me.

"Oh, I was throwing my baseball at the shed and I guess I threw too hard." was my braggart's apology.

Dad was not impressed in the least. "You mean you saw this starting to happen and you kept on throwing until the siding board broke? I can't believe you'd be so stupid."

I never did become a pitcher. Pitchers have to be fast, accurate, and above all, smart.

Lesson: Power can be stupid.

8. A Close Call

ONE WINTER'S NIGHT AROUND 6 P.M. I had been delivering newspapers up north of that windy quarter-mile stretch north of town and was walking south back toward town through the snow. I was 14 and far too young to die.

Coming out of town toward me were the wavering headlights of a car being driven fast and erratically. I stepped off the left side of the road to be cautious, but as the car came closer it appeared that the driver had spotted me and was heading straight for me on the shoulder in an attempt to run me down.

I completely stopped thinking (as people do in such moments) and darted away from the left shoulder out in front of the car to escape the threat of being splattered into the ditch. I barely cleared the front of the car and escaped being hit, then ran toward town as fast as I could plop my heavy four-buckle boots along the pavement.

At a safer distance from the maniac car, and completely exhausted, I looked back and saw that the driver, a man, had stopped his car and was getting out. Now what? I was breathing so hard from the exertion of running that I doubted I could escape another attack from him. I walked south into town and he drove on north.

The next day at school I found out that this death driver had been a high school boy who lived in the house where I had just been delivering a newspaper, and that he was probably driving more carelessly than homicidally. But whichever stupidity was prevailing that night, his car's impact could have been lethal.

I didn't dare tell my parents about this close call because they would probably make me give up my paper route.

Lesson: Getting killed is a bad deal.

9. Birthday Glory

THE EVENING OF MY 12TH BIRTHDAY BEGAN with a Little League baseball game on the Earlville High School ball diamond. My coach and the rest of the team had been impressed by my having hit a triple in the opening game of the season, so they were always peppering me with “Get a triple, Harry! Get a triple! We know you can do it!”

Harry was my nickname. Bernard, my coach, was also my mother’s first cousin. After those Little League days he continued to call me Harry until he died twenty years later.

My first turn at bat culminated in a walk. Nothing exciting. My second time up, the bases were loaded and my teammates were yelling their usual “Come on, Harry! Drive everybody in. You can do it!” The pitcher’s first offering was a fat one and I nailed it for a home run. Our low-budget baseball field had no outfield fence, so the opposing team didn’t get the ball thrown back into the infield until long after I had crossed home plate. From my team there was backslapping and “Way to go, Harry! We knew you could do it.” Such glory.

My third time at bat, with nobody on base, I watched a few questionable pitches go by. “Look for the good one, Harry! Hit another homer, Harry!” Then a fat pitch came in and I hit it pretty deep into right field. It wasn’t hit as hard as my earlier home run, so I ran as fast as I could. After I crossed second base the shortstop bobbled the throw coming in from right field. I took a chance and ran around third base and sprinted toward home plate. It was a reckless move, but I crossed the plate just ahead of the throw to the catcher and was safe. The cheerings were crazed now, and the backslappings were manifold. “Nice job, Harry! Keep it up, Harry!” I was in Harry heaven, it seemed.

Next time I went to bat, everyone was screaming for another homer, and I was psyched up for another one, but instead I hit a low single to right field. Teammates and crowd cheered anyway. “That’s okay, Harry. They can’t all be homers! Get around those bases now!” Our team won the game, and I had tasted glory knowing that my family was in the stands.

At home after the game my family had a birthday party for me, during which I drank tremendous quantities of Kool-Aid and ate far too much cake. When I went to bed that night, I was all Harry the Hero. 12 years old now. Two home runs. On and on went my mind while my stomach, filled with Kool-Aid and cake, was feeling worse and worse. There was no sleep until halfway through the night.

Lesson: Glory isn’t a natural state, but it’s fun while it lasts.

10. Rat Stampede

SHELLING CORN ON THE FARM WAS ALWAYS a big occasion. Ear corn was stored for several months in the crib because it dried better while on the cobs and would bring a better price if you didn't sell it at the time of harvest rush. Today's technology of shelling corn in the field with a combine and drying it with heat wasn't yet widely used.

Dad and Uncle Bob would hire John and Elmer each year to come to the farm with their loud, complicated corn sheller that was mounted on a truck bed. All hands had to be there early on shelling day to help make the job go faster.

It was time to shell corn at Uncle Bob's farm, and the rats that year had been especially plentiful in his corn crib. Uncle Bob's son (my cousin) Tom was 13 and I was 14. Our job was to stand between the corn crib and the barn (which were about 25 feet apart) with ball-bat-length 2-by-2 clubs and kill all the rats we could as they ran away from the emptying crib toward the barn.

After the shelling started and the rats were stampeding, we found this task to be great sport. Some rats got away, since there were so many, but we clubbed many of them to death and made piles of their bodies as the shelling progressed.

Uncle Bob's dog Spot was a big help too. A fine farm mongrel, small and bearing mottled markings which no one questioned, he was considered a valuable part of the team. As the rat exodus picked up speed, so did Tom's and my efforts at transporting those freeloaders into rat heaven.

At one point a big rat ran between Spot and me and I swung hard at it just as Spot independently made a lunge for it. Spot grabbed the rat at the very moment my club came down and actually broke in two over the top of the poor dog's skull. I was excruciatingly flummoxed.

Spot immediately rolled over on his side as if he were dying, and he was emitting horrible howls of agony: Awwwr Awwwr Awwwr Awwwr (but an octave higher). I thought I had killed him. Uncle Bob came right over, but he had no idea what to do or say. He picked up Spot and carried him away.

After this incident, Tom and I felt far less gusto for killing rats, but we continued doing our assigned job until the corn shelling was finished, around noon.

That afternoon we saw Spot walking around the barnyard again, apparently recovered from his trauma. He lived to be an old dog.

I don't remember what Dad and Uncle Bob did with those heaps of dead rats.

Lesson: Killing is a bad deal.



About Alan Harris

Born on June 20, 1943, Alan Harris was raised in Earlville, Illinois, a small farming community of about 1,400. His father Keith was a World War II B-17 pilot who for the rest of his life (he died in 1980) farmed the family acreage east of Earlville while also taking time out on weekdays to drive a school bus. Alan's mother Margie served as a diligent housewife and mother of four children, and for many years was Head Librarian of the Earlville Public Library.

Although he studied plenty of poems (often half-heartedly) in the local elementary and high school system, it wasn't until he majored in English at Illinois State University (minoring in trumpet and piano) that Alan began experiencing strange inner stirrings that resulted in some serious poems. His college poems seemed to spring from a new unknown place and seemed rather odd, yet were satisfying to write. Several were published in annual issues

(1964-1966) of ISU's literary magazine, *The Triangle*.

Alan and his wife Linda were married in 1966, and all through the next 35 years, new poems continued to emerge and seemed to need readers. Every year or two, between 1980 and 1995, he would assemble that interval's crop of poems and self-publish a volume to give to family and friends.

In October of 1995, having acquired some HTML skills, Alan published on the World Wide Web all of his poetry books as *Collected Poems*. Within a year he added four more site sections: *Thinker's Daily Ponderable* (original aphorisms), *Stories and Essays*, *Christmas Reflections*, and *Garden of Grasses*. The latter section, originally co-edited with Lucille Younger and now co-edited with Mary Lambert, is an on-line literary collection for work contributed by other authors.

In 1998 Alan's literary collection took on its current Web address of www.alharris.com and in 2000 was given the title *An Everywhere Oasis*. After buying a digital camera and taking it to the forest, Alan published several photographic essays and poems which are now available in the site's *Gallery*. Also offered are 76 audio poetry readings, with 20 poems being read by actor and friend Paul Meier and the others being read by Alan. New "Web-only" poetry books posted since 1995 are *Writing All Over the World's Wall*, *Heartclips*, *Knocking on the Sky*, *Flies on the Ceiling*, *Just Below Now*, and a new 2001 work-in-progress entitled *Carpet Flights*. Launched in December 1999 with co-editor Mary Lambert, a new anthology entitled *Heartplace* began accepting and publishing work from contributing authors. In 1998 Alan's son Brian composed and performed *Bunga Rucka* (a recording of which is offered on the Web site), which is based upon Alan's poem of the same title.

Alan has earned his living in a variety of occupations—high school English teacher, junior high band director, piano tuner—all of these before settling into a long career of computer-related work. He retired in 1998 after 22 years' service at Commonwealth Edison in Chicago, initially as a computer programmer, then a systems analyst, and later a computer training coordinator. For his final three years at ComEd he developed Web sites for its corporate Intranet and the Internet. Linda retired in 1999 after working for 20 years at an insurance company, but rejoined the work force in 2000 as a transcriptionist in a large medical clinic. Since retiring, Alan has been doing freelance Web design for individuals, non-profit organizations, and other non-commercial interests, as well as continuing his creative writing.

