

A flying farmer on frozen pond

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Sunday, February 22, 2009

We were driving through the high country last week when I saw a stock pond covered with ice. And I think I caught a glimpse of my father in his second childhood.

My parents migrated to Idaho long ago from North Dakota where winter ice was plentiful and where ice skating was sometimes a part of a farm kid's life. On slow days when the fields were frozen solid, farm families had fun for a change.

In warmer months, they might play baseball on summer weekends or fish a bit in a nearby stream. But mostly they got their exercise the old-fashioned way - drudgery.

Today, we have lost sight of how hard those farm families worked early in the last century in the time before tractors and milking machines. When you live a life like that, I suspect the occasional episode of fun is more enjoyable than the more frequent recreation that most of us enjoy today.

Maybe we don't skate or fish or play baseball, but we sit and watch others do it on television. And that's fun, partly because it isn't work.

But farmers like my parents didn't have television or time. However, they did carry remnants of fun around with them inside their heads while working. Most of us who garden or work on the car or do housework think on other things. When you bury yourself in physical tasks, you tend to get lost in thought. And I know from the expression on my father's face during those days when he was digging a posthole that the post and the hole were the last things he was thinking of.

He was thinking of the baseball game he had recently enjoyed.

He was thinking of a movie he had seen.

He was thinking of a magazine article he had read.

We don't really get to know our parents and other elders until we become them, until it is made apparent that what we are thinking about today at this age is pretty much what was once going through the minds of those now missing.

Like many sons and daughters, I discover every day how much I underestimated my father. His mind was filled with more ambitions than I realized.

I understand now that his head held dreams that he might have gone into professional sports or show business or even politics. This farmer with an eighth-grade education, who pushed his kids toward college, could argue history and public policy with anyone, and did so vociferously.

He could explain why Babe Ruth was a bum - because the self-indulgent Babe had no appreciation for how lucky he was to get paid to play a game.

Most surprising of all when looking back, my father, the tough farmer, baseball player and deer hunter, could explain in detail how Olympic figure skater Dick Button lifted that sport to a new level, inventing several of the fancy moves now standard in figure skating.

One day, not long after singing the praises of Button, my father came home from a farm auction with something astonishing - a pair of rusty old ice skates, the kind that you strapped on over your shoes. He spent a couple of hours at the grindstone he used to sharpen farm tools, slicking up and sharpening those skates. Then he took them to the frozen stock pond. He put on the skates, tested his ankles a time or two and then stepped off onto the ice.

To my surprise, he didn't fall. He skated smoothly across his farm-style ice rink, circled it carefully a time or two and then began to do spins.

I had never seen anyone outside the movies ice skate, let alone do tight circles and spins. Ice skating is one of those sports that is far more impressive in person than on the screen. There is a freedom about it, like flying across a frozen plane. For a few minutes, the weight of work was lifted from my father's shoulders and he could fly. I was amazed. I had never seen him look so pleased with himself, so happy, so young.

When Sharon and I drove by another frozen stock pond the other day, I found myself witlessly looking to see my father, the flying farmer.

And memories being what they are, for a moment there he was.

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