

The Fourth of July

by Lenore Salvaneschi

When I was a child, it was almost impossible to decide which was better, Christmas or the Fourth of July. True, Christmas usually provided a "new" dress made over from one of my mother's or sister's old dresses, the holiday lasted a little longer with Second Christmas Day, and it afforded a good week's vacation in which to read the books which were found under the Christmas tree. But the Fourth of July was shiveringly exciting, with people from all the neighboring towns, even from as far away as Cedar Rapids, gathering on the St. Stephen's church grounds, to enjoy a full afternoon and evening of entertainment. Moreover, the day after the Fourth had its attractions also. Then the clean-up committee was at work, and we venal little souls helped with the scouring of the church grounds, with an eye to finding a dime or nickel around the pop stand or bowling alley. One could be almost certain of finding some discarded Cracker Jack prize or, if nothing else, shreds of a burst balloon which could be stretched out and blown up into miniature balloons the size of one's fingertip. And there were always heaps of pop caps which we took apart and attached to the skirts of our dresses (little girls didn't wear slacks in those days) or in the case of the boys, to our overall bibs. Not until I was an adult did I learn that the word "overhaul" was really and more logically overall.

Preparation for the biggest day of the summer started at the end of the school year, about

the middle of June in the case of our parochial school. The teacher drenched and drilled his pupils in three- and four-part songs, "speeches," plays with a country flavor (usually a take-off on a classroom situation with some smart-alecky kid revealing things that happened at home) and the inevitable flag drill, which later would be performed to the music of the congregation's volunteer band. The same teacher would have been drilling his girls' choir in such songs as "Glowworm," and the participants would have been preparing their patriotic costumes of red, white, and blue crepe paper, which in those flapper days showed clearly the healthy quality of our village beauties. A day or two before the Fourth, the children came once more to the church grounds to practice the entire program and especially to review the flag drill. That exercise was a torture, standing in the hot July sun, raising the flags above the head, crossing them, and marching from one end of the baseball field to the other. The sun always took its toll, especially in that year when the whole school had just been vaccinated for smallpox. More than one youngster, white-faced as the catalpa blossoms expiring in the Iowa heat, finished the drill prone under the trees.

The part of the preparation that we parsonage kids liked best was the setting up of the stage and the building of the benches and refreshment stand. The smell of fresh pine lumber, mixed with the fragrance of catalpa blossoms, was heady enough to make all the neighborhood youngsters show their skill at



St. Stephen's school students practicing the flag drill for the 1926 Fourth of July picnic. (G. Rickels Collection, SHSI)

leaping the benches straight in a row. By the Fourth, most of us usually exhibited honorably skinned shins and elbows.

How we prayed for sunshine on the Fourth of July. Usually we were lucky, but one year, the year of the terrible drought, we were luckily unlucky. The Fourth was the day the rains finally came and spoiled the picnic entirely. But everyone rejoiced in the miracle of moisture. For weeks my father had been gloomy; when a thunderstorm arose, it always followed the path of either the Cedar or Iowa River, and missed those of us who were situ-

ated between. Hope rose and fell with every cloud that summer. When on the morning of the Fourth the clouds actually gathered above Atkins and produced a wicked storm, we dashed out at the first drops of rain, literally let the drops fall into our mouths, and perked up as quickly as the parched young plants of corn. Gleefully we went barefoot, tried out all the best — muddiest and deepest — puddles, and ended the day in an orgy of ice cream which the sodden picnic committee had sold to my father at half-price. For once — but only for once — we didn't mind that the Fourth had been

rained out.

Ordinarily on the day of the big celebration we would have awakened to the sound of firecrackers exploding in the neighborhood. We were never permitted any of our own, our joys being limited to the more decorous display of sparklers and an occasional daring firewheel which always fizzled miserably. (I sometimes suspect this was my father's secret revenge, since he considered fireworks, together with most everything else which we considered exciting, as being extremely dangerous.) The refreshment stand committee arrived early and prepared its tempting displays. There were huge washtubs filled with ice and a most con-

fusing display of pop. It was almost impossible to decide among the flavors, each one representing a special form of nectar to youngsters whose tastes had not yet been jaded by all the television-advertised colas. The strawberry was always such a beautiful color, and frizzed so prettily when blown up with a straw; the grape was heavy, intoxicating; the orange — my brother's favorite — was all right; but my final choice was always cream soda, a flavor of no particular identity, but one which seemed to include all delicious flavors at once.

There were big cardboard boxes filled with boxes of Cracker Jack, baskets filled with nickel bags of peanuts, and in later years, even boxes of candy bars which got deliciously soft and



The Atkins girls' choir in patriotic dress for the Fourth of July celebration in 1929. (G. Rickels Collection, SHSI)

sticky in the heat of the day. And who could ever forget the ice cream cones — vanilla, chocolate, or strawberry — which dripped down our fingers, attracted flies and bees, and gave almost every child a “schnurrbart” at least once during the day. We knew that later there would be hot dog sandwiches — the ketchup and mustard were already staining the fresh boards of the stand — and hamburgers, mixed in big dishpans in the parsonage kitchen. “You don’t mind if we just work over here on your table. The flies are a nuisance over there.” No matter what our parents thought about the invasion of privacy, we kids loved the running in and out and the pungency of the chopped onions and pepper which were added to the ground meat.

Near the old schoolhouse, which served as parsonage garage, cob- and woodshed, the *Vorsteher* had set up a bowling alley and soon the scent of cigars, the hearty laughter, and the crash of pins indicated that the older men had started their day of fun.

By one o’clock the church and school grounds were full of Model A’s and Chevies, and friends and relatives from neighboring towns were greeting each other, wandering over the cemetery, and waiting for the program to begin. In the meantime, the committee had attached a tarpaulin across one angle of the church, from outdoor stage to church entrance, and here was the fishpond, a place of eternal hope and almost certain disappointment, at least for me. Why was it that the person before and after me always found some substantial prize, like a celluloid doll, attached to her hook, while I never got more than a box of Cracker Jack, which I could have bought anyhow with one of my five tickets (each school child received five tickets, worth five cents, imprinted with the church seal, in recompense for performing that day). By this time the front seats were all lined with the older ladies of the congregation, the middle-aged ones in the next

rows, and the men, with their Sunday straw hats, standing behind. We children were hidden behind the curtain of the fishpond, waiting our cue to go on the stage.

Never was there a more receptive audience. Everyone seemed prepared to laugh. No tragedies were ever enacted on that stage except when some youngster forgot his lines, or when some exceptionally emotional child dissolved in stage fright and ran off crying to his mother’s lap. The latter humiliation occurred at my first stage presentation. The situation was not at all helped by the teacher’s apology that I had known my piece perfectly the day before. The attendant disgrace brought on a sick headache, which took considerable amounts of cream soda to cure.

At the conclusion of the children’s program, the band took the stage and the pupils stepped briskly to the tune of “Stars and Stripes Forever,” and other Sousa marches, in our flag drill. The audience applauded, and the smaller children ran in and out, confusing our formations but adding to the fun. Once the flag drill was over, we were free to run. There was a ball game on the school grounds, youngsters were tumbling about the school pump after their trips to the ice cream stand, the bowling alley was lively, and the potato, sack, and egg races began on the south side of the church. The noisiest part of the day came when the hog-calling contest was announced. To anyone not raised on a farm, or at least within hailing distance of one, the sight and sound of a portly, sun-dyed farmer standing on a bench and delivering himself of a mighty “Poo-ee, Pooee, Pooee, POOee” would have seemed absurd, but the crowd understood and loved it when the stentorian performance of Henry Schminke won the prize.

In the evening, lights were strung around the bandstand and the refreshment stand. Still more cars arrived, many of them with the younger adults who had brought their dates. In



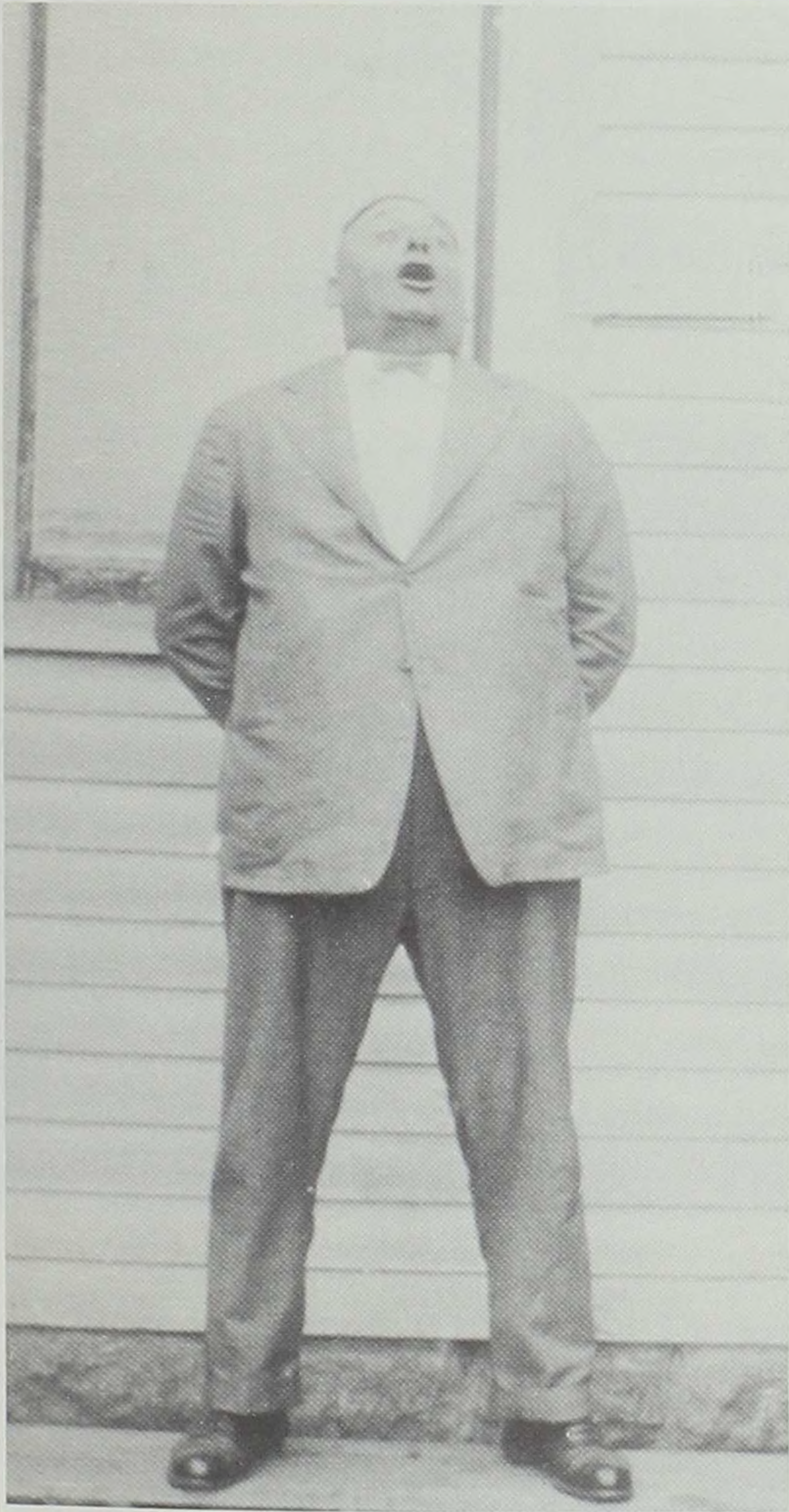
One of the highlights of Fourth of July celebrations in Atkins was the hog-calling contest. In the above photograph Henry Haerther urged the celebrants to "come one, come all" to enjoy Henry Schminke's hog-calling style. (G. Rickels Collection, SHSI)

those seemingly innocent and moral days, a girl would hardly dare to hold her boy friend's hand in public; if the young man leaned his arm across the girl's shoulder, he was considered extremely "fast" — and so was she! We children had no idea what the word meant, but we knew that it gave us the right to peek askance at such worldly characters.

The evening program was usually given over to performances by the girls' choir, in their patriotic dress, and by the Walther League, the youth organization of the church. The Walther Leaguers were even more tongue-tied than the youngsters, and performed in such a safe fashion that they often succeeded in obscuring any plot the play might have boasted. Occasionally some luckless person would be chosen to read the Declaration of

Independence, and the eloquence of his reading diminished in proportion to the squirming of the audience. By this time the parents with cranky, squealing babies were driving away, the older men had begun to drone out some German songs, and the younger adults were playing "party games" (one didn't dare call them square *dances*) on the area that had served as a ball diamond during the afternoon.

By this time, Father had shepherded his family home through our own gate, warned us to pull the shades ("For goodness sake, there are still people about!"), and insisted that we use the indoor facilities that one night. During the summer we made frequent use of old "Tant' Meyers," the wooden structure down the south sidewalk, but since there had been a continuous stream of visitors to our privy all



(G. Rickels Collection, SHSI)

day, we had to wait until it had been sanitized the next morning by a proper scrubbing with broom and boiling lyewater suds.

It was difficult to settle down with the *Männerchor* still exercising on the stage outside our window, and with all the once-in-a-year indulgence exercising itself in our stomachs. No wonder that we woke up with our parents at five the next morning, they to restore their house and yard to its usual order, and we to join our friends in "helping" the committee clean

up the church yards. Our help consisted not so much in disposing of any trash left over, but in hoarding it in our rooms, where it quickly incurred the wrath of our older sister, who didn't appreciate dead butterflies, broken pencils, cigar bands, and bottle caps littering her dresser or the top of her cedar hope chest. Even the night after the Fourth it was hard to relax and to realize that for the "grand and glorious" we would have to wait another whole year. Our dear mother usually put on the finishing touch by saying, "There, you can hear the locusts again, right after the Fourth; that means that summer is almost over and fall is on its way!" □