

Country Entertainment

George Hagglund

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(Note: Sadly, George Hagglund passed away March 7th at the age of 81. This is the last of several articles about early life in our Township that he wrote for his family and shared with the Newsletter.)

These days, by the time a child is four years old, chances are he or she is already learning to use a computer. Television is a daily part of life, and for those with cable or internet, there are cartoon channels as well as a huge choice of other programs. The sociologists tell us that nowadays kids spend an average of 4 hours per day looking at television. Most of them have a place on Face Book where they bare their souls. They have cell phones if a little older to keep in constant contact with their friends, with the option of e-messaging besides. They don't get enough exercise to keep themselves skinny, so there's an outbreak of child obesity to contend with. Junk food is what for some kids live on.

My generation was in no danger of getting obese. After school came barn chores, filling the wood box, feeding the animals and then going in the house for supper, which usually included a little meat or fish, lots of bread, butter and potatoes, and sometimes a dessert, usually home-made.

There might be a little school homework; although teachers in a rural school tended not to make a lot of assignments to do at home (they knew we had work to do). Our parents tended to be less educated, so there wasn't much pressure to work hard at school.

But we had the magic of radio! Each evening after chores, there was a period where the kids might have a chance to hear the Lone Ranger handing out justice to the cowboy criminal, usually shooting the gun out of their hand. He was always careful to avoid killing them. There was Captain Midnight and Jack Armstrong, The All-American Boy (he turned out to be a Madison resident), Amos and Andy (none of us had ever seen an African-American), and many others, including Charlie Chan, Superman and Batman later on. We waited with eager anticipation for every installment.

Following the kids' programs came the news. By this time the entire family was involved in listening over supper. Gabriel Heatter, Drew Pearson, and from overseas, Edward R. Murrow kept us up to date on how the European War was progressing. Franklin Roosevelt occasionally provided us with a Fireside Chat, and for the Finns, Onnie Laine was the broadcaster sponsored by Occident Flour every morning.

The radio was a constant source of up-to-date information on World War II, with special reports to bring us up to date on victories and setbacks. It was heavily patriotic and propagandistic, but it was welcome nevertheless. As a result, the kids were patriotic and enlisted in one of the armed services as soon as they were 17 years old.

On Saturday night we listened to Minnie Pearl and other National Barn Dance singers and musicians. There was the Breakfast Club on WGN in Chicago. Later in the evening, Chesterfield sponsored a musical program, Bing Crosby was on the air weekly, and let us not forget Fibber McGee and Molly.

On Sunday morning we had a choice of religious programs to listen to. Gospel singing was an integral part of our lives in those days, as was Sunday school at Mrs. Croft's on the North Shore. It was staffed by eager young women who looked after our souls, and we were regularly saved, making them very happy. We were mostly nominal Lutherans, but our parents sent us to a variety of churches, hoping some good would come of it.

Most of us had no telephone; our only choice along the Homestead Road was a creaky party line out of Two Harbors. If anyone got a call, the phone rang at every house, and other people would get on to get whatever bad news was being provided. Sometimes there were so many listening in that a person had to ask some of them to get off the line to provide enough power to hear the phone.

In those days, a source of entertainment in a family was music. Lots of the kids took some training in a musical instrument. Guitars, fiddles, accordions, mouth organs and saxophones were commonly heard. Western music was favored, but waltzes and schottisches were the most common at Duluth Town Hall dances. Group singing was part of many family's lives when they got together.

On weekends and when company came, games were often part of the scene. Monopoly, checkers and various card games were common. Cribbage tournaments could get exciting. Sometimes we watched the adults play poker, but none of us had any money to gamble with.

On weekdays bedtime came at 8:00pm. Our parents worked hard; the men mostly had jobs in town if they were employed, and the women had a heavy workload. During the War, a lot of men worked in the shipyards, the steel plant, the grain elevators, and the railroad, and overtime was common. All had to be up again at 5:30am for the next day's chores, so the evening was short. But while awake, we had plenty to keep us entertained.

I'm not saying that our quality of life was better than compared to now, but we stayed thin and since television had not yet become common, we did okay.