

The Job Jar

One of the earliest memories of my childhood is of my mother attempting to teach my brothers, sisters, and me the importance of work, cleanliness, and thrift using a job jar. Every Saturday morning it seemed when I was ten, my mother would set the job jar on the breakfast table and require the older children to each select five slips of paper from it. Each slip had a task written on it like, "sweep the kitchen floor" or "empty the trash". The three oldest children, Billie, Steve, and I were required to spend most Saturday mornings performing these jobs, for which we were given a weekly allowance. The younger children were not required to select jobs from the jar until they were about five years old.

I hated the job jar! Saturday morning was when all the good programs were on TV. We didn't own a television, but I had a friend next door who did. It was a small, four-inch set. About ten of the neighborhood kids would gather on his back porch and watch Superman, Sky King, Roy Rogers, or my favorite, the Micky Mouse Club with Annette Funicello. We would all gather around the miniature TV, our faces pressed to the screen, barely able to see or hear what was being broadcast. If I hadn't finished my tasks from the job jar by about ten o'clock I would miss most of the TV shows. You would think this would have been enough incentive for getting the jobs done, but the jobs had become so onerous that I frequently didn't finish until after noon.

I remember that some of the Saturdays got tense. We kids didn't want to do the jobs and my mother wouldn't relent. It became a contest of wills. She would marshal her work crew in the kitchen of our old, four-story home in St. Louis and direct us to the various corners of the house. The jobs extended from the basement to the attic. Most of the time I got the job to empty the clinkers from the coal-burning furnace and shovel the stoker full of coal. My sister generally got the job to load the dishwasher or iron the shirts. My mother had received an Iron Right ironing machine from my dad for Christmas one year. It was a small version of a commercial steam iron with a hot plate and a large roller which was controlled by knee pedals. My brother got to empty the trash. He liked this job because he got to

burn all the excess paper and cardboard in the trash barrel in the back yard. He was already an amateur arsonist.

My mother spent most of her time traveling from one part of the house to another monitoring our activities. I suspect it would have been much easier and quicker for her to have done all the jobs herself, but she was committed to our learning responsibility. Of course, we fussed and complained and often did a poor job. When she left the room, we would sit down on the job or find something else to do. She would threaten us and make us do poorly-done jobs over again. It was not a pleasant experience.

On Saturday night we would receive the wages of our labor. Each child received a different amount based on his age. I received a dollar, my sister fifty cents, and my brother 20 cents. We were also instructed in how to distribute our earnings in envelopes -- 10% for church, 20% to savings, and the remainder for whatever we wished. The next day we would take our 10% tithe to church and place it in the offering plate. The 20% savings would be stored in toy banks my parents had given us for Christmas. But the remaining 70% never seemed to last long.

Many Mom and Pop stores existed in St. Louis in the 1950s. These stores, typically located in corner buildings throughout the neighborhood, were most often owned by older married couples who were retired and lived above their store. When you walked into the store, a small bell would ring above the door alerting the owners that someone had entered. Along one wall of the store were glass cases filled with all kinds of goodies such as packets of chewing gum with baseball trading cards inside, toy rockets which held explosive caps, water pistols, kites, etc. On top of the display case near the cash register were large jars filled with various kinds of candy, jaw breakers, and Pez dispensers. Along the back wall of the store were refrigerators with soda, sandwiches, milk, and eggs. Shelves and racks in the middle of the store held canned goods, dry goods, and comic books. The owners would stand in the shadows behind the glass case watching to see that none of the children stole any of the items.

There were many things on which to spend my allowance. My favorite type of soda in these stores was IBC Root Beer. It was good-tasting, foamy, and bottled

in long-neck bottles to look like real beer bottles. I would often buy a bottle of IBC Root Beer and stand outside the store leaning nonchalantly against the building or lamp post acting as if I was drinking the real thing. I kept expecting a policeman in a patrol car to pull over to the curb and say, "Hey, kid! What do you think you're doing, drinking that beer? Get over here and pour that bottle down the drain!" But, I was always disappointed. It never happened.

I especially liked to buy comic books. Some of my wealthier friends and relatives had been given subscriptions to comic book series which they received through the mail, but I always bought mine one issue at a time at a store. I particularly liked Donald Duck, Mickey Mouse, and Goofy. When I see comic books with weird monsters on them today, I wonder, "What happened to our culture?" Comic books in my childhood were light and fun and simple. They weren't dark and scary.

On Saturday nights after working during the morning and playing most afternoons, the family gathered around our old console radio after dinner to listen to adventure programs and variety shows while my parents distributed our earnings from the job-jar work. My favorite radio programs were Wild Bill Hickok, Gunsmoke, Dragnet, and Sargent Preston of the Yukon. I can still remember the wind whistling through the speakers as the announcer introduced King, the wonder dog, and the sound of Quaker Puffed Oats being shot from guns. The programs were particularly spooky on fall or winter evenings when it was rainy or stormy outside our large brick home.

The living room where we listened to the radio was on the north side of the house where the wind tended to whistle in harmony with that on the radio. The room had 14-foot ceilings, a fireplace, and three large windows which rattled in the breeze. If the large paneled sliding doors to the front hall were left open the whistling from the front door would also contribute to the wintry ambiance. But, if the doors were closed and a fire was burning in the fireplace, we felt quite snug sitting on a rug in front of the radio. As we listened we would be encouraged to place our savings in our banks and seal our money for church the next day in offering envelopes.

As much as I hated the job jar and what it stood for at the time, it contributed much to a growing work ethic and sense of order in my young world. It provided the justification for an allowance which, in turn, provided the means of learning the proper disposition of monetary resources. The meager allowance permitted me to purchase some of my most cherished play things. Fortunately, later in life, I've not been blessed with a honey-do jar!