

WISDOM & WAYS

Sling Shot Memories

By Jim Casada

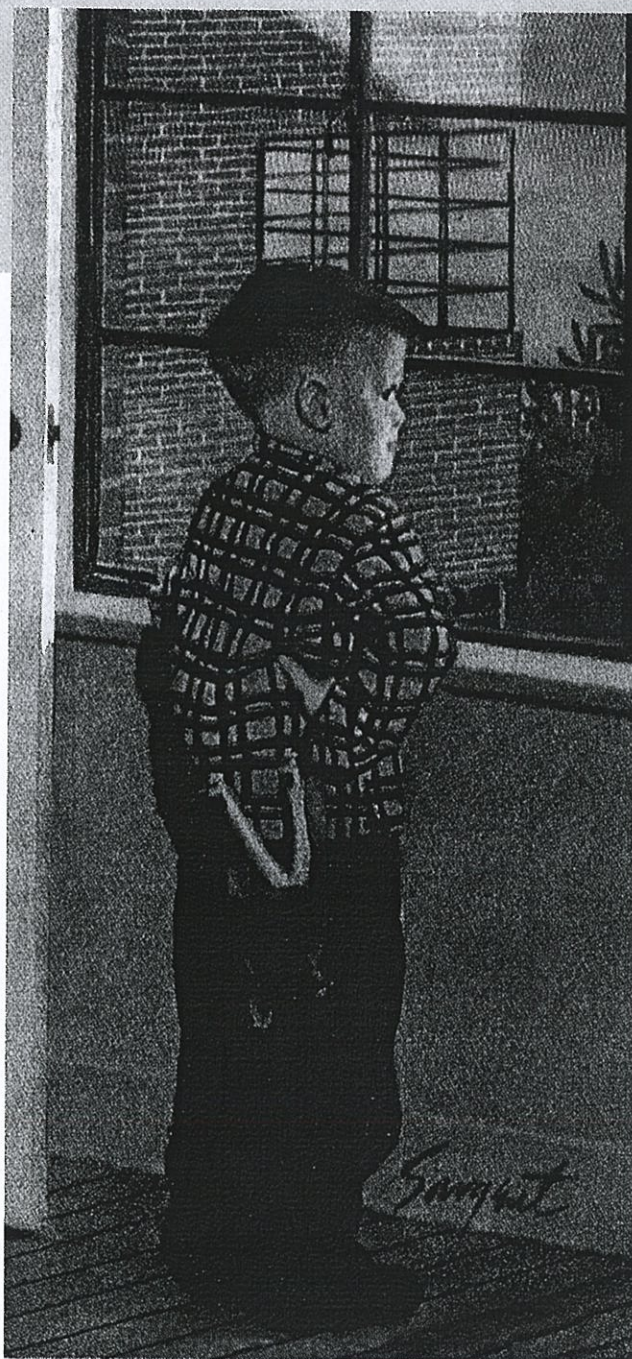
Recently a friend shared with me a nostalgia-laden song from the late Randall Hylton that includes the haunting line: “Where is the boy with the sling shot who guarded the homestead back then?” It set me to thinking about sling shot days and boyhood daydreaming from my High Country youth. That in turn engendered all sorts of fond reflections of a toy which, in the right hands, became a deadly tool; for at one time the humble, home-made sling shot (or flips, as they were sometimes styled) was a staple in the back pocket of every red-blooded American boy.

A standard springtime activity for mountain kids growing up in the 1950s was spending considerable time making both toys and practical items for their own use during the coming summer. Obviously I have little personal insight when it comes to girls, but for them, activities ranging from corn shuck dolls and hand-sewn doll clothes to items of personal attire such as dresses figured in the mix. For boys, most anything which could be made with a pocket knife—flutter mills, crude spears, bows and arrows, corn stalk catapults, and wood carvings—held a prominent place in leisure activities.

Notice how potential “weapons of war” figure prominently in this list. The boys were sons of those who eventually came to be known, and appropriately so, as “The Greatest Generation.” Moreover, not only were they born during or just after World War II, they grew up during the Korean War. It should come as no surprise that G. I. Joe was an immensely popular toy and that forts, talk of marauding Indians or renegades, and games of “war” figured prominently in youthful play sessions. Certainly such was the case with me and my closest friends in those carefree years when we were old enough to run through the woods and play by ourselves yet not quite old enough to hold summer jobs, become preoccupied with girls, or assume the false sense of dignity which comes with being a teenager.

For all the crafting of weapons, building of forts with pine logs we cut, digging of caves as retreats, and scheming about secret hideouts, no matter was approached with greater care or more meticulous planning than sling shot making. In my case, at least, it was a project (or rather, a series of them, because I averaged making about a sling shot per spring for several years) which involved a fair amount of adult input and supervision. Dad offered advice and the wisdom born of having considerable experience with sling shots, while Grandpa Joe was an integral, important part of the actual process.

The first step in making a sling shot was a crucial one deserving of a great deal of care and plenty of field research. This involved finding and cutting the fork of wood which would form the frame for the sling shot. It had to be “Y” shaped and of appropriate dimensions, with each fork of the limb being



Dick Sargent, *The Saturday Evening Post* (March 7, 1953)

the same size as well as the space between the forks being just right. Dogwood was the material of choice, although other tough, tight-grained woods such as persimmon or hickory would have served quite nicely.

During my boyhood though, Grandpa and I focused our searches exclusively on dogwood trees. As we walked through the woods, checking each dogwood we spotted, Grandpa would comment: “Dogwood is about as tough and durable a wood as a man could want.” Invariably he would then reminisce about a time when mountain folks used wedges made from dogwood, as opposed to metal ones, to split firewood.

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