

The Sucker Garden

by Harry Swanson



Harding Cabin



SafTPop

As we USAFSS types (and all those of her descendant Commands) age, we come face-to-face with second and third generation child rearing expertise as grandparents and great grandparents. While this circumstance is mostly a joy to us, it tends to be less direct contact than the act of parenting our own children; consequently, we sometimes forget just how very important our own kids were to us during their early years. There are few things appreciated more, at least long-term, by Silent Warriors than the innocence of little children. When we were young fliers, many of us did not yet have families of our own, so the kids of our colleagues served as surrogates to satisfy the human urge to cuddle and train small children. Those of us who had small children were grateful for the attentions supplied by the pre-father types we worked with. Sometimes, because of flying and TDY schedules, we fathers were often called upon to nurture the young children of our

brothers who had been called away, a good thing for our own children by providing them with playmates.

Despite the noble philosophy addressed above, it sometimes happened that being forced to care for another's young children was more of a burden than desired. Accordingly, those of us thrust into that undesired circumstance could often become sarcastic rather than supportive, vindictive rather than understanding. I hate to admit it all these years later, but I have succumbed to the baser attitude; but I quickly learned that the virtue of kindness pays greater dividends than selfishness. Let me explain.

This story, as do many of my others, involves Elwood "Butch" Sadowski, possibly because we both enjoyed having a brew or two, and likely because we both had recreation cabins on the roadway to Harding Lake. Butch and I, along with our workmates, spent many enjoyable hours "recreating" at our cabins during down time. Butch had a propensity for drawing out the best in those around him because he made us all feel superior. He, just like another comrade, Jim "Squirrel" Miller, was always "stepping in the doo doo." If you got a call that someone was stuck in the mud (as in the photo of Butch below), lost, or broke and facing an angry bartender with an unpaid bar tab, you automatically knew it was either Butch or Squirrel.

Sorry for vamping on Butch and Squirrel (RIP both of you) but it kind of sets the stage for my story about Butch's then 5-year old daughter. (Lord, please forgive me, for I have forgotten her name over these past 43 years. For this purpose I will refer to her as Lisa Ann.)

I was sitting in my screened-in porch, trying to avoid the mosquitoes, drinking a Coors brought to Eielson by a TDY C-135 tanker (which we paid \$42 per case for in those days). I had just finished planting the small vegetable garden plot on the inside bend of my small circular driveway in front of the screened-in porch and was nursing a



Sadowski Cabin

sucker with a continuous loop handle melded into the sugar treat. Yes, suckers, especially orange flavored, and Coors go very well together, thank you very much.

The screened door flew open and in traipsed Lisa Ann, all happy and giggly. I truly believe she was proud to have walked the 1/2 mile from her dad's place to mine independently; really quite a feat for such a little girl out in the Alaskan wilderness. The screened door slammed shut, propelled by the tension spring, and Lisa Ann kicked over my Coors. "Sorry," she quickly said. She lost her jovial happiness and started to whine, so I tried to comfort her.

"That's OK honey. I know you didn't kick my beer over on purpose, but you really must look where you are going. Like my mamma used to say, 'money doesn't grow on trees,' so I'll go get another one, but be careful."

"Where does money come from?" Lisa Ann asked.

I was feeling snippy, so I answered, "I guess it grows in the garden like my potatoes and onions will. See the work I did out there?" I pointed through the screen to the newly worked ground.

"Yes, I see it," she said. "What do you have in your mouth?" she asked in a sniveling, hinting way.

There I was, sucking on a Safety Pop, caught in the act, as it were, by a 5-year old. "That's my favorite sucker, an orange one," I replied without the offer of sharing with her.

"Can I have one too?" she whined.

I couldn't be the stingy old man I wanted to be, so I got her a sucker and a 7-Up as I got myself another beer. In no time, she had chewed the sucker up, rather than sucking it slowly, and had gulped down her soda pop. "Like father, like daughter," I thought.

"Do suckers cost money too? Can I have another one?" Lisa Ann queried.

"They sure do!" I said with unnatural vigor. "So does soda pop. but I don't have any more of either, and I don't have any more money yet. Remember what my momma said? " (Of course, I was lying to this overly bright little sniveler.)

"How do we get them then?" she asked.

"We have to plant the sucker string and pop can in the garden to grow new ones," I lied, very proud of myself for this believable little fib.

"Can I plant them in your garden?" asked Lisa Ann

"Sure you can. I'll help you, so you don't dig up the potatoes I just planted, but then you need to hike back home. OK?"

"OK," and the screen door slammed as she ran out to the garden.

Together, chatting up the great garden we were going to have, we planted the rope loops from the safety pop suckers we had eaten, plus a couple more she found in the driveway. She also planted the empty 7-up can, along with my empty Coors. (Might as well try that too, right?)

"When will they be ready?" she asked.

"Who knows. It might be a long time. We will need to have rain to get things started. Head on home now. Be careful. See you later," I promised.

I watched her as she left. then sneaked through the trees out to the road to watch her get safely home. It was just a short way on a seldom traveled gravel road, but she was very little and alone. Still, I was glad to be rid of her and her constant questions and begging. Right away, I put some new, wrapped suckers in the garden, with their paper loop handles sticking up, in case she came right back.

Late the next day, I heard this awful scraping and glass tinkling noise. I stepped out on the porch to discover what was making such a racket. Struggling down the driveway, pulling a gunnysack nearly as big as she was came Lisa Ann, followed by her dad, Butch.

"Lisa Ann has been going up and down the ditches on both sides of the road to get what she calls 'seeds' for your garden. She tried to tell me something about growing things when you don't have money, but I don't get it," said Butch.

I told him, and he backed up my story, but all three of us spent the next couple of hours digging and planting cans and bottles in the

garden. Of course, Butch and I had a couple of brews, so all was not lost.

Now I need to make a commissary run for Safety Pops and several varieties of pop and beer. You've got to plan ahead when you are telling tall tales to a 5-year old.

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