

“It was about 3 inches by 5 inches...” by Tom Spofford

It was about 3 inches by 5 inches but for a boy growing up in a small town named Wenham it was as big as the world.

This brown card was granted to me probably about the time I could write down my own name. It was an exciting day when the librarian, Miss Duffy perhaps, slipped that library card across that high counter and into my hands. I'd watched my older siblings carting books home from some mysterious place and now I could do the same.

I was in the club!

Since that day was over fifty years ago now, I don't recall what I first checked out but I'm sure it was a nice little stack of books. My mom was a big reader and was a great influence to all of us in the family. She surely coaxed me to take out anything I wanted that day.

I can still remember, year after year, walking into the library through the foyer with it's display case. One year we got a call at home on a saturday morning asking whether I was going to get the display case finished. I had forgotten about signing up to set it up for that month. My mom raced down Larch Row with me and we got it done together. I think it was themed Birds of The North Shore and it turned out quite well. I still do my best work under pressure.

Once inside the library there was the librarian's area straight ahead and to the left, study tables, short shelves and wall shelves. To the right were the stacks, more study tables, some comfy chairs for adults, a magazine area and LP records. It was a very small library compared to most but what it had was perfectly fine for a book-hungry kid.

The librarians had special date stamps that fastened onto the ends of pencils. They would ink them up and stamp the book card and your library card with the due date which I think was two weeks.

Fines were imposed for late returns and of course our family of 8 had a few over the years. We had a window sill in our den where we stacked books ready to return. I'm not sure how my mom juggled most everything around raising six children including getting books back in time. Maybe we packed into the station wagon once a week and headed downtown for another night at the library.

It would be fun to be able to look back at some records to see how many books I took home over the years. I checked out books for school reports, read the entire Matt Christopher youth sports series and took home quite a few record albums that weren't in the best condition but I enjoyed them anyhow. The Wenham library was a treasure for me and I have used public libraries ever since.

Across the parking lot from the library was Burnham Hall where each tuesday night during my fifth and sixth grade years I put on a coat and tie and was dropped off at ballroom dancing school.

For years, Mr and Mrs Warburg taught young Wenhamites to do the foxtrot, waltz, cha cha and more. We'd be instructed to pair off. Most of the time boys asking girls to be their dance partner but once in a while there was a switch of these traditional roles. The girls and boys who were "couples" at grade school peeled off quickly to the dance floor. Other brave boys would pick a girl which usually left me and one or two girls depending on if someone was sick that week. It was almost always the same girls and so eventually

I was more comfortable dancing with them. Once in a while we were instructed to change partners mid-lesson which really threw a monkey wrench into the process. The Warburgs would demonstrate the dance steps and then watch over the kids as they stepped on each other's feet with Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head on the record player.

At the end of each lesson we would have some type of dance contest, such as dancing musical chairs, with the prize being a gift certificate to go over the town line and have a milkshake at the Hamilton Pharmacy.

After the lesson which seemed to last hours but was maybe an hour and a half, we would all head out to wait to be picked up. The "couples" would go to a dark stairway on the back side of the library and kiss until the cars started pulling up.

Credit goes to my mom who sent all six of us over the years. She was very slyly exposing us to some basic etiquette that would serve us well throughout our lives. I actually liked dancing school even though none of my school buddies attended and my shyness was being tested. Unlike Little League or Boy Scouts which were both very competitive and youthful, dancing school was for me, a glimpse into the grownup's world for ninety minutes.

When school finally let out for the summer there was 'Playground', a morning program on a small lot behind the Tea House. Weekdays from 9-noon there were all sorts of fun things to do for youngsters from simply playing in a sandbox to learning to serve in tennis. A few adults were in charge and high school kids were the counselors.

The best part was that it was all outdoors.

The sandbox was close to the entrance and there were toys scattered through it. Big picnic tables were lined up by a stone wall where leather crafts were taught. There were notebooks with examples of things like coin purses, coasters and lanyards. You'd pick something and be given what was called gimp. You'd sit somewhere and weave the gimp, a plastic coated flat string, through holes punched in the leather. With your name on the back you'd pass in your project and get it back the next day with a critique of spots where you got the gimp twisted or forgot a hole.

Beyond that area were swingsets and painting easels. Parents donated old shirts to be worn as smocks and the young artists would be given a brush, small jars of paint and a blank sheet of paper. The artworks hung to dry overnight in the storage shed destined for refrigerator doors all across the town.

A beanbag game was perilously close to the painters and surely a few accidents happened.

There was a tall slide, monkey bars and a merry go round. Through some trees there was another table for yarn and weaving crafts.

Down a hill was a field where softball, kickball and capture the flag games could be played and a quick walk through some woods brought you to the tennis courts where you could get lessons and eventually face off in a summer's end tournament.

As I got older I was allowed to ride my bike to the playground. On the ride home I stopped at Chadders Market and for about 50 cents I had my favorite summer treat, an Italian Ice.

I graduated from painting sailboats and playing kickball to being a counselor which meant setting up, breaking down and still playing a lot of kickball. I was also the go to guy for pushing the merry go round.

Looking back I feel fortunate to have grown up in Wenham. We were close to the bigger towns to go to a mall and a short drive or train ride into Boston to see the Red Sox or go to a museum. But back in Wenham we could enjoy the small town benefits of neighborhood friendships, skating on ponds and bike riding everywhere.

So many people come together to create a town and a lot of them are the townspeople. From librarians and clergy to Scout leaders and bus drivers, they all serve the citizens young and old.

The teachers and police, school cooks and firemen, snowplow operators and swim teachers along with so many others, paid or volunteer, who kept and still keep the town active and functioning deserve our thanks. Many work quietly in the background, on committees or at desks in the town hall, patching potholes in the street or at the voting booths while others risk their lives going into burning buildings, climbing ladders to repair a steeple or rushing to a car accident. There are librarians or shopkeepers who smile at you every time you walk in, a couple who year after year teach the foxtrot or maybe the piano and a kind person at a summer playground or after school program who tells a child his painting is perfect. The efforts of every single one of these people has for 375 years added up to shape the sweet town of Wenham which will always be my hometown.