

## COWBOYS AND INDIANS

by Doug McLaughlin

During the summer of 1957 eight of us boys got together to hang out, play baseball and basketball, have bike races, go swimming in the creek, throw water balloons, skip rocks, and explore vacant buildings—I got caught once. No girls were allowed. But the most memorable were the battles between the Cowboys and Indians. This happened three times during that glorious summer. We couldn't let anyone, outside our select group, know about our battles. If any parent found out, the Cowboys and Indians would cease to exist and our arms would be confiscated.

It was shortly after my February birthday of my fifth grade year that the idea came into being. All eight boys went to the Saturday afternoon matinee to see the movie, *Little Big Horn*. Going to a movie was a lot cheaper then. For a quarter, I got in, had a coke, and a small bag of popcorn. It was after the movie that Gary Jefferies, the leader of our group, said, "I think we should play Cowboys and Indians when it gets warmer." We all agreed with him.

Carl Cunningham asked, "How are we gonna do that? None of us has a bow and arrows."

Gary said, "We don't need them. Indians used rifles too."

I asked Gary, "We're gonna shoot each other?" The group waited for our leader's answer.

"Yes...we are." All eyes opened wide and focused on Gary. "But we're gonna use bb guns."

Steve, the wimpy one of the group, asked, "Wouldn't that hurt?"

A confident Gary answered, "Na, my cousin from Edwardsville told me about havin' bb gun fights with his friends and how much fun it was. So, who's in? Who wants to have fun?"

All hands immediately shot up and I said, "I just got a bb gun for my birthday! Let's do it."

The group sat together during the school lunch hour discussing how we would choose sides, where to have the battle, and not to tell anyone, even our other friends. Deciding who would be a Cowboy or Indian was easy, we devised a number system. Eight pieces of paper with a single number written on each piece. All the odd numbers were Cowboys and the even numbers Indians. The battle site was a little harder but we came to an agreement and chose a large piece of vacant land covered with trees and prairie grass. I practiced shooting my new pump bb gun every chance I got.

The group showed up for our initial battle the first Saturday after school let out. I was the only one with a pump bb gun; the others had those wimpy Red Ryder models. I drew my piece of paper, number three, a Cowboy. The Indians left first to wait in ambush. Five minutes later the Cowboys went into attack mode.

My first shot made history. The Cowboys decided to break up in two teams. My partner and I were creeping through the tall grass when he whispered, “Look, look at that tree, ain’t those legs?” They were legs—legs of Cunningham, the Indian, about ten feet up the tree. We inched closer but the Indian saw us, let out a war cry, and shot. He missed. We were too far away. My partner shot but his bb hit at the base of the tree. He said, “We need to get closer.”

I said, “Let me try one.” I took aim, his stomach was in my sights, and shot.

We heard a scream of, “Ow.” I shot again, his arm this time. Another yelp, “Ow, that hurt.”

My partner slapped me on my back and yelled, “Do you give up, Indian?”

A defiant, “No.”

This time I shot and hit his hand. He dropped his Red Ryder and yelled, “I give up, don’t shoot me anymore.” Defeated, he came down from the tree and left the battle zone hand rubbing his stomach. We continued hunting.

All the Indians surrendered within one hour because of our secret weapon—my pump bb gun. It shot further, straighter, and it hurt a lot more than those girly Red Ryders.

All the Indians had small welts on their arms and Carl Cunningham said, “No fair, that gun hurts. You can’t use it anymore.”

I replied, “What if we’re on the same team next time?”

Carl said, “I never thought of that. Okay, you can use that gun. We better be on the same team through.”

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We played twice more than summer and my team always won. The games came to an end because Mr. Wimpy, Steve, betrayed our oath of secrecy. He and I were on the same team until the final round. I waited in ambush behind a large oak tree and Steve and his partner walked past. They were no more than fifteen feet away when I jumped out and said in my best Indian voice, “Stop or I’ll shoot.”

They turned to face me and Steve’s partner threw his weapon on the ground and raised his hands in surrender. Steve didn’t. He hip fired his Red Ryder and missed, then he ran. I took aim and shot a little high, hitting him in the head. He fell to the ground screaming and holding the back of his head. Between tears he said, “Please don’t shoot me.”

It was the next day my mom received the call that ended the games. Steve told his older sister about our Cowboys and Indians. She in turn told her mother who in turn called my mother who in turn took my pump bb gun away. It was time to start playing football anyway.