

## EARLY DAYS



hen he was 14 or 15 my younger son asked me how he would know when he was grown up.

How DO you know when you're grown up?

My response was "I don't know son, I'm still waiting for it to happen to me." I'm still waiting, but I think I'm getting the hang of it.

I grew up in Moody's Avenue, a quiet suburban street in Whangarei. We were surrounded by young families, and kids. School was less than a block away. There was no television, no Playstation. We had radio and Dad's wind-up gramophone, which scratched its way through old records – "Betty Coed", "Wagon Wheels", "Rose Marie" and a collection of Maori songs.

We kids made our own fun, and some of it was pretty hairy, two notables being The Great Hanging Experiment and The Gunpowder Plot.

One of the boys had seen a lynching in a cowboy movie and decided to try it out. They got a rope and found a tree – in my back yard, fortunately. They stood their subject – me – on a chair, placed a noose around my neck and pushed me off. And when I went blue in the face, making strange noises and thrashing about, like true friends they took to their scrapers.

My mother, working at the kitchen sink, saw it happen and cut me down and revived me, thank heavens. I met one of the perpetrators at a school reunion 60 years later, and he reminded me of the near-disaster. "Shit," he said, "we thought we'd killed you."

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The Great Gunpowder Plot was almost as dangerous. Somewhere, maybe Boys' Own magazine, we found a recipe for gunpowder, and decided to make some. It wasn't complicated – 75 parts saltpeter, 15 parts of charcoal and 10 parts of sulphur – so we mixed up a brew. In lieu of charcoal (I don't think barbecues had become popular at this stage) I reached up my Dad's chimney and scooped a few handfuls of soot.

We reasoned that if you're going to have a bang you might as well have a decent-sized one, so we mixed up a lot, probably half a bucketful, and poured it onto a board in my backyard, saving a cupful or so to be the fuse (just like the cowboys did). We left a trail maybe 20 feet long, across the lawn, along the path and around the corner of the house.

Picture, if you will, four or five excited, wide-eyed youngsters peering round the corner of the house as the fatal match was struck. The fuse performed perfectly, flaring up and racing across the lawn. On reflection, we'd mixed up enough gunpowder to shatter every window in the neighbourhood. But one thing was missing. The recipe didn't tell us that the bang would be the result of an immense buildup of pressure within a pressure vessel, followed by rupture of said vessel.

Our gunpowder was simply poured onto a plank. We boys watch. Breathless, as the blazing fuse reached the plank, followed by an anticlimactic ffffffffffffffffffffffffff as the gunpowder burned away harmlessly.

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Yachting was a passion of mine from age 15 or so, even when we moved inland to Wairarapa 35 years ago. I raced a trailer-sailer with friend Merv Wilson until the club went into recess 15 or so years back.

But my interest in boating goes way, way back, to when I was 7 or 8 years old and living in Whangarei. The harbour was a couple of miles away from home, but there was a much closer option, Kennett's Pool, buried in bush behind the Kensington Park racecourse and sports ground and just a mile or so away from home.

Memory suggests the pool was huge, but realistically it was probably no more than 20 x 15 metres. There was a rope dangling over the pool, from which the brave would launch themselves out over the pool. Not me, I was (still am) a poor swimmer and rather timid.

Anyway, a group of neighbourhood kids decided to build a boat, a rectangular structure perhaps a couple of metres long and a metre wide. Planks were purloined from one Dads' shed, hammer, saw and nails from another's. We laboured over our boat for weeks, all our spare time after school, during the holidays and at weekends. We got blisters, cuts and bruises. And we went to sleep dreaming of the great journeys we would undertake when the boat was finished.

There was one immediate problem, even to our untrained eyes. Because the undressed wooden planks were butted against each other, there were large gaps all over the place. No way could the water be kept out and there was no way we could bail fast enough: the holes just had to be filled.

Those Northland summers were very hot, often over 100 degrees Fahrenheit, and as a consequence the tar on the road would melt and run into the gutter. Perfect, just the thing for calking our boat. But tar being tar, and small boys being small boys, we got ourselves in a heck of a state doing the job. Dad's can of petrol in the shed was put to frequent use for hand-washing but there was no saving our clothes – or Mother's fury when they saw the state of the boatbuilders' clothes.

We had to go further and further afield to get our tar, but finally we reckoned she was watertight. A broomstick mast was added and a condemned sheet from the ragbag was hung from another broomstick for a sail. (Why we wanted a sail is beyond me, because there was absolutely no passage of air through the bush at Kennett's Pool). The last remaining problem was the mile of travel between home and the pool. By this stage the boat probably weighed at least a hundredweight, and we were just a bunch of kids.

One of the boys (I don't think girls had been invented in those days, but if they had been we certainly would not have associated with them) had a pair of roller skates, so we purloined one of them. Together we lifted one end of the boat while the skate was placed in the middle, under the boat. Red-faced, we lowered the boat onto the skate and we were finally mobile.

We pushed and pushed and pushed, stopping frequently to let admirers see our work (and catch our breath!) It must have taken half a day to get around the racecourse to the bush where Kennett's Pool lay hidden. And then we had to manhandle (well, boyhandle) it along a bush track to the pool. The big moment. We didn't say a prayer – Sunday School didn't cover occasions like this – we simply pushed it down the bank into the water. It landed with a huge splash and kept on going, straight to the bottom. We were stunned. Weeks of work gone in a flash. All that hammering, sawing, all that tar, the cuts, the blisters, all those ruined clothes, all for nothing.

The adult me hopes we removed the mast – the image of a young swimmer leaping from a rope and impaling himself on a broomstick doesn't bear thinking about. Perhaps our boat is still down there, preserved by tar, more than 60 years on.

Maybe somebody will dig it up and wonder what it was all about.

They say you're not learning if you're not making mistakes. If that's the case we did a hell of a lot of learning in the back yard of 3 Moody's Ave, Whangarei, all those years ago.

And, on reflection, a lot of growing up.