

When Newspapers Were Toys

by Carolyn Wilhelm, December 2014

Late to school, I stood in the living room, crying. "I have to leave now!" I said. My coat was on, I was ready to walk the mile to school in the spring sunshine after going home for lunch. Third grade was important and I was worried about being in trouble.



Bag full of Möbius strips

"I'm not ready. Your teacher is going to LOVE this!" my mother said as she cut strips of newspaper and used cellophane tape to fasten the ends together. She was filling a bag

with such strips. She couldn't drive me to school as she didn't drive, typical of many mothers in our 50's neighborhood.

I think I cried off and on all the way to school. I could take no short-cut for fear of Officer McCloud (the Minneapolis school safety policeman). He would publically announce our misdeeds through the loud megaphone on top of his car, and make us go back and walk again. I didn't have time for a lecture. I thought it would be the end of the world when I arrived to hang up my coat in the full class coat closet, but funny thing, the teacher was smiling when I presented the bag of newspaper strips to her. I wasn't in trouble that day. Now, thinking back, my mother must have called school on our telephone's party line ahead of my arrival.

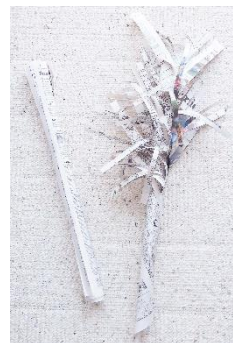


Apparently these strips were something good, in the teacher's eyes. I didn't know what the big deal was, we were always

playing with newspapers at home. That is, on the days my father a printer at the Star and
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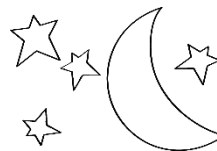
Tribune was able to bring home extra copies due to some grammatical error in the printing. He showed us many tricks with the newspapers. If there was a single copy, it was treated with the utmost respect. Many times, a letter to the editor with my father's name, his pen name, or the name of a willing neighbor who would be proud to sign it was in the editorial section.

We thought misprinted newspapers were toys. First, there was the Möbius strip that my teacher liked. The Möbius strip was a one-sided surface obtained by cutting a single paper strip, one end twisted twice, and taped closed. When cut down the middle, magically two circles appeared chained together. It was some kind of math, but I didn't understand that at all.



Other tricks Daddy showed us were how to grow a tree out of newspaper. Rolling up a few pages, and tying a string around them, he cut strips at one end. When he pulled, a tree "grew" right before our eyes. Sometimes he folded the paper in to

hats, boats, or other items.



My father didn't just bring home newspapers. He was very interested in science and math, and would check out the telescope from the

Minneapolis Public Library. When he brought that home he would show us stars and planets. He taught us about telling time with the stars.



He would do science experiments and ask me to explain what happened. A cold, empty, glass pop bottle was used in one such experiment. My father would put a dime on the

top and say magic words. The dime would click as the air warmed and would escape a little. He would say, "Abracadabra," and names of exotic places as if they were magic words while the dime performed.

As a graduate of the University of Minnesota in geography, my father demonstrated

cartography to us. He made his own invention to copy a map from a picture in a book, something called a pantograph. You could trace and enlarge or reduce, creating an exact resized copy of a map. There was life before copy machines!

We actually had few toys as was fairly common then, but he showed us many ways to entertain ourselves and learn without much money. When I became an elementary teacher, I demonstrated some of his experiments to my students. I appreciate them more as time goes by.