

village view

by Andrea Leonard

If there are children in your family, you already know but anyone with a television set finds it easy to learn what kinds of toys children yearn for. All that's needed is to watch a few children's programs to see what toy manufacturers are offering to entertain youngsters.

The TV itself, of course, has become the primary source of child entertainment, but the varieties and sophistication of toys today is bewildering to the Golden Age set, those who remember when toys were inanimate.

Until recent years, toys did not move, speak, nor exert influence upon children. It was the children themselves who were active, not the playthings. And to breathe life and action into inanimate objects required only the child's imagination.

In every household where children live today, toys buzz, run, light up, make noise, use batteries or must be plugged into household current. Modern toys are energy-consumers. What happened to blocks?

If I could count the hours my brothers and I played with blocks, I'd be a mathematical whiz - which I'm not - but blocks were usually the foundation of our play.

When we were small people, our toys were kept in a piece of dining room furniture our parents referred to as the sideboard. The sideboard was made of mission oak; it looked like a large commode. Below the waist-high top surface were two drawers where table silver was kept. A third long drawer below held linens.

Under the drawers, two doors swung open to reveal a wide cupboard ideal for storing children's toys. Its close-to-the-floor level made it inconvenient for other storage, but well-suited to our purpose. There was more than adequate space for our big boxes of wooden blocks and the assortment of other paraphernalia with which we played.

The boxes themselves would probably be precious antiques today. Approximately 15" square, and as deep, they were well-built of sturdy pine. The corners were dovetailed, the sides and bottoms splinter-free, the top edges sanded smooth or so worn from use they were rounded.

Filled to the brim with blocks of wood, the boxes held a treasure-trove of entertainment. Some of the blocks were cubes with letters of the alphabet, designs, and pictures painted on their six sides; some were plain rectangular blocks sanded and shellacked to keep soil from penetrating the wood.

These, together with miniature iron replicas of various vehicles, created the world of make-believe in which we played.

With these relatively few and admittedly simple toys we combined whatever else came to hand; a table leg was sometimes a lookout tower, sometimes a flag pole. A shoe box cover atop block walls made a good roof; the shoe box itself, with a few scissor snips, could be a house, a covered bridge, a business block. We built houses and forts, railroad stations and shops, garages and barns. Trees and bushes cut from magazines and supported by glued-on cardboard braces could be arranged and rearranged to suit.

Streets lined with two-dimensional shade trees were sufficiently realistic to satisfy us. Whatever was lacking was imagined. The toy vehicles in wide variety and sizes ranged from horse-drawn wagons to automobiles and trucks, from fire engines to road-building equipment. All had wheels that spun, but none was propelled by any other power than a child's hand.

Our towns and villages, our forts, too, were people with the little iron soldiers and sailors that sold for a nickel apiece. They fit. Unlike near-life-size dolls or stuffed animals, the toy

soldiers didn't overwhelm buildings of blocks and shoe boxes, or the diminutive trees and shrubs.

There were marching soldiers, running soldiers, soldiers carrying rifles at the ready. There were sailors, arms akimbo, and sailors down on one knee, steadying their weapons. There were the rank and file and the officers.

The dining room carpet, its pattern repeated every yard, provided the background for our bird's eye view. The rug's border served to delineate boundaries as highway traffic lines do for motorists. The shapes of woven leaves and flowers disappeared as we piled our blocks to leave lanes of neutral surface making streets and roads.

Little metal cars and trucks trundled merrily along, pushed by chubby hands; audio suited to the occasion came in childish motor-noises. These varied considerably with the hum of a passenger car out-shouted by the va-room and siren of a fire truck.

Often there were accidents, just as in real life. Then the sounds reached crescendo, cars crashed, buildings tumbled, trees were ruined. Such incidents often resulted in battle amongst us, for one child's auto accident could destroy another's afternoon of work on house, farm or fort.

That each day's creation was destined to end up back in the jumble of blocks in the box, put away in the sideboard before Dad came home for supper, was forgotten. The attack was what mattered. Usually, before we came to blows, Mother intervened to suggest we pick up and put away our toys and get washed up for the evening meal.

The little metal cars have rusted away. The sideboard's long-since replaced. The rug wore out years ago. The toy soldiers and sailors, collector's items they've become, have disappeared. Even the boxes are gone.

The blocks, though, are still available at Great Grandmother's house to the third generation of children who haul them out during every visit.

Wooden blocks still entertain children even though the paint's worn from the surface and pictures and letters are almost indistinguishable after their years of use.

Wherein lies their charm? It's called creative play.