

# Free to roam, with or without money in your shoe



"You travel, slip a few bucks into your shoes," my dad told us. "Never know what might happen."

"Okay, Dad," my siblings and

I would say, shaking our heads when he wasn't looking, never knowing from where this advice emanated. I never witnessed Dad stick money in his shoes, and I never have done so, but it became family lore.

"Got money in your shoe?" we'd joke before a trip.

Years later, at Dad's funeral in Normal, Illinois, one of his lifelong friends told the story of how in 1937, when they were 13, they went to Chicago, a 130-mile journey, to a round-robin basketball tournament featuring Notre Dame and DePaul. They stayed at the YMCA in downtown Chicago, arriving on a Friday night and returning to Normal on Sunday. "We couldn't afford train tickets," he reminisced, "so we hitchhiked. When we got to the Y we thought better of leaving the few dollars we had in the room, so we slipped 'em into our shoes. We figured if we got robbed we'd empty our pockets and still have money."

My siblings and I exchanged glances, smiles and sighs. Finally, the genesis of the "money in the shoe" legend.

Surrounded by Dad's friends, folks who grew up during the Depression, the fact that two 13-year-old boys hitchhiked to Chicago and stayed at the Y passed without comment.

Perhaps, because Dad's peers survived Depression-era childhood and plunged into World War II as teenagers, adulthood knocking at an early age. No twenty-something, extended adolescence, "helicopter parents" a notion as foreign as tapping home equity to take a vacation.

Dad's trip came to mind when I first heard the term "Free-Range Kids." Now, I doubt that even Free-Range parents advocate that 13-year-olds hitchhike to a major city for a weekend. But they may name my grandmother, Alta Pemberton, a strong-willed widow who raised her only son on her own and approved the Chicago trip, a patron saint.

On her website, "Free-Range Kids," Lenora Skenazy, also known as the "World's Worst Mom," according to her critics, says: "Free-Range Kids is a commonsense approach to parenting

## About Voices

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in these overprotective times. A Free-Range Kid is a kid who gets treated as a smart, young, capable individual, not an invalid who needs constant attention and help."

Media coverage, 24/7/365 reports of crimes against children occurring all over the world, feeds paranoia, according to Skenazy, making "parents think that no child is safe doing anything on his own anymore."

Thus, helicopter parents and the imprimatur of an ever-growing nanny state where people call 911 and kids are detained by police for walking down the street or playing at a park unac-

companied by an adult. If unfamiliar, Google the Meitivs' case in Maryland or the shift-working, McDonald's mom in Florida.

The facts are, however, that crimes against children, like all crime, have steadily declined since 1993. According to the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire, juvenile homicide is down 36 percent from 1993 to 2005 for kids under age 14 and down 60 percent for ages 14-17. Other categories like forcible rape, sexual and physical abuse reflect similar downward trends.

That said, while I never felt threatened as a kid growing up in the '60s and '70s in Normal, my free-ranging ways were not without incident. We were run off neighbors' yards, broke windows with errant baseballs, dodged cars when playing on boulevards, crashed bikes, hopped slow-moving freight trains for short trips, and more than one merchant ran us off for lingering too long.

In grade school, my older sister, Amy Jo, and I tried to dig a hole to China in the backyard fire pit of a home three blocks from ours. The husband asked what we were doing and smiled. His

wife soon returned with lemonade, tunneling to China a thirsty task. Heck, the adults in our neighborhood seemed to be in more danger from us kids than us kids were from them. But other than trespassing, no crimes were committed and any damage was repaid after a come-to-Jesus meeting with our parents.

Last Christmas, my older brother Tim's wife, Carolyn, asked if Tim and I biked from our house in Normal when we were kids to our Grandmother Alta's farm near Funks Grove.

"Yep," I said, "in the summer. It was about a 15 mile hike, I guess. We'd ride our bikes out in the morning, explore the farm buildings, play cards with Gram, stuff like that. She'd feed us lunch and we'd be home before dark. Why do you ask?"

"We didn't believe your folks would let you do that."

My folks not only allowed it, they encouraged it. Only thing Dad might've got after us about is we never slipped any dollar bills in our shoes.

**Mike Pemberton, a novelist and English teacher with Danville Area Community College, lives in Hoopston and can be contacted at [www.mikepembertonbooks.com](http://www.mikepembertonbooks.com).**