

A Nose for Crime

By Audrey Corn

A kid can like something too much. That's how it was with me and Black Jack chewing gum.

I grew up in Brooklyn, N.Y., in the 1940s. A package of licorice-flavored Black Jack cost a nickel. A nickel was a lot of money then. But one Sunday, Grandpa gave away three nickels: one nickel to me, another to my sister, Jennie, and a third to our older cousin, Emmy.

I knew right away what I would do with my nickel. Monday, on my way to school, I bought a package of Black Jack.

Now, gum was strictly forbidden at school, and kids who got caught often ended up in the principal's office. But I wasn't worried; the Black Jack would stay safe in my pencil box till 3 o'clock. The school had no rules about chewing on the way home.

My intentions were honorable and I held out until 10:15, when I opened my pencil box to get my fountain pen. The wonderful smell of licorice wafted up to greet me. Breakfast had been at 7 a.m. Lunch wasn't until noon. I was hungry, and I adored Black Jack chewing gum.

I checked to see if Teacher was watching. She wasn't. I unwrapped a stick of gum and popped it into my mouth. I'd just keep the Black Jack in my cheek and enjoy the flavor. If I didn't chew, I reasoned, I couldn't get caught.

But Teacher had a nose for sniffing out

crime. Along about 10:30, she told the class to line up for recess.

"No talking," Teacher reminded us.

I wasn't talking, so I wondered why Teacher stopped me when I passed her desk.

"Empty your mouth," Teacher said.

"I didn't chew! How could you tell?" I blurted out.

"Black Jack has a distinctive odor," she explained, almost smiling.

End of mystery. But not end of punishment.

"Give me the rest of your package," Teacher said. She put the four sticks of gum in the bottom drawer of her desk. By the end of the day, my Black Jack would be joined by a homemade slingshot, half a Hershey bar and a well-thumbed comic book. The next morning, Teacher's drawer would be empty. It always was.

Time flies and the world changes. Now that I'm older and can afford a nickel for Black Jack, wouldn't you know, the manufacturer has quit making it.

I've told my grandkids about Black Jack.

"Licorice-flavored chewing gum?" My grandson sounded surprised.

"Yes, licorice-flavored," I said.

"Boy, you sure were lucky, Grandma!"

Yes, I was lucky—lucky to have grown up back in the Good Old Days. ❖

