

# My Last Barefoot Day

***Even if the shoe fits, you don't have to wear it all the time.***

*By Richard Murphy*

When I was growing up in the little East Texas farm town of San Augustine during the 1930s, most grade-school boys could hardly wait until spring to start going barefoot. By the time school was out in early May, many of us had been traveling shoeless for several weeks.

There was nothing like the sense of freedom and relief a boy got the first time he shucked those confining clodhoppers and felt the cool spring grass tickling his toes. Our feet were always a little tender at first, and we stepped gingerly for a while, but by the middle of summer, our soles were so tough that we could walk on gravel and traverse hot concrete without flinching.

Economics played a minor role in explaining why so many Southern kids shed their shoes in the summer back then. It was the middle of the Depression, and I guess there were a few folks who could not afford shoes, but most of the kids I knew went barefoot by choice. We could run faster sans shoes, and it was easier to climb trees. And who wanted to wade in the creek with their brogans on?

Going barefoot was fun, but there was a downside. While wading in the creek, we had to watch out for snakes, crawfish and broken bottles. In the fields, we tried to avoid prickly pear, stinging nettles and fresh cow patties. In town, the biggest hazards were discarded (but still lit) cigarette butts. Many times I was sent into an agonized war dance by stepping on a smoldering cigarette.

But it was neither snakes, nettles nor cigarette butts that brought an end to my barefoot days. It was music and grass burrs.

In the summer of 1939, when I was 11, a man came to our town and announced that he was a high school band director and that he had been hired to organize a school marching band. Mr. Lowrey, a tall,

bony man who walked with a pronounced limp because he had an artificial leg, had his work cut out for him. The only music we farm kids knew about was the kind we heard at church or on the radio. Few of us had ever seen a trombone, saxophone or flute.

Still, at Mr. Lowrey's urging, a number of parents were persuaded to scrape up enough money to buy used instruments. By the middle of July, our band, composed mostly of grammar-school and junior high students like me, was practicing three times a week in the gym. Each

student was obliged to practice an additional two hours a day at home. My parents, poor souls, were almost driven to distraction by the sour squawks from my used Sears-Roebuck alto sax.

Mr. Lowrey concentrated on one tune, *The Victory March*, and made us play it over and over until we had it down fairly well. Then we gave our first public concert. On a hot August afternoon some 68 years ago, 20 bedraggled students stood in the middle of the courthouse square and played *The Victory March* about a dozen times.

The Saturday crowd did not seem to notice our limited repertoire. Several hundred farm folks crowded around us so close that we barely had breathing room.

"What's that thang?" an old farmer asked me during a pause.

"This is a saxophone," I said, feeling important.



The farmer stared in bug-eyed fascination at the strange instrument.

“A sack of *what?*” he asked with a frown.

After we had played *The Victory March* for the 10th time, Mr. Lowrey and several helpers went through the crowd and collected donations to purchase band uniforms.

At this first public concert, I performed barefooted and wearing my usual cutoff overalls. But my barefoot days were numbered. Soon after our one-tune concert, we learned to march. By the end of August, we were drilling daily in the field behind the school, and I had trouble from the start.

The field was infested with grass burrs—the big purple kind that are a barefoot boy’s worst nightmare. I was constantly hopping on one foot or breaking ranks to remove the painful stickers.

That afternoon, our band director laid down the law: Henceforth, all band members would be

required to wear shoes. And that, as far as I can remember, was the last day I ever went barefooted in public.

Nowadays, one rarely sees a barefoot boy. Kids who might have once romped barefoot now sport canvas Nikes or \$100 Reeboks. Those lads, alas, will never know the sensuous joy of running sans shoes through cool clover or squishing their toes in warm mud.

But you cannot entirely take the country out of the boy—or the man.

Even though I am now a senior citizen and it is probably undignified, I like to come in after a day of gardening or working in my yard and just plop down in my easy chair, take off my shoes and socks and spend a few minutes wiggling my toes and letting my feet breathe free.

There’s *still* nothing like the feeling of relief you get when you cast off those old clodhoppers! ❖



Facing page: A caricature of himself drawn by the author. Above: The author walking down Columbia Street in San Augustine, Texas. This photo was taken by FSA photographer Russell Lee, April 1939.