High as a Kite

By Bob Griggs

When you're 10 years old and you're living in Medford, Ore., at the end of the Depression, and your dad has a job but it's with the state, and you're the oldest of four kids, money can be a problem.

Since I was 10, my allowance had been raised to 10 cents—a month, that is. So when kite-flying season came on, I had a tough decision to make. I could use a month and a half's allowance to buy a kite, or I could spend it on a Megow model airplane kit and a tube of airplane cement. I agonized over that for days before the model airplane won out.

That, of course, left me with no kite. My buddies Georgie and Jerry each had one, but they weren't big on sharing. I did get to study theirs pretty carefully, though. One was red and the other blue, and they weren't really very complicated.

There were just two thin pine strips, one longer than the other, held together in a long cross shape by a couple of turns of string. Another string was set in notches cut into each end of the pine strips, giving the kite its traditional shape.

The covering was a piece of heavy tissue paper, folded over the strings and glued at the edges. A third piece of string went into the notches at the end of the cross strip, bowing it.

The kites weren't supposed to need a tail, but most kids made one anyway—another piece of string with bits of rag tied every six inches and attached to the bottom of the kite.

Kite string was plentiful. Practically everything perishable you bought in a grocery store was wrapped in paper and tied with string. Every household had a ball of it, carefully wound up and saved. The pine strips? Orange crates were free for the taking, and with some inexperienced sawing with Dad's handsaw and a little cleaning up and smoothing with the ever-present pocketknife, there you were.

Next, the paper. The store-bought kites were marked "Made in Japan," where they apparently had an inexhaustible supply of tissue paper. We didn't, so I had to settle for the Sunday funnies and flour paste. When I finished my kite, it didn't look too bad, although it was about twice as heavy as Jerry and Georgie's kites.

I'm still surprised that I didn't run my skinny, long legs off trying to get my kite into the air. But one day, a good breeze came along, and there I was, up in the air with my buddies. It felt good.

Flushed with success, I got fancier. One of the neighborhood teenagers had a box kite, and I was determined that that would be my next project. I won't go into the particulars, because if you're reading this, then you probably know what one looks like. Suffice it to say that it was bigger and a whole lot more complicated to construct.

A properly breezy day came along for its maiden flight. There were several large mounds of heavy sand down by Bear Creek, courtesy of the highway department. Georgie climbed to the top and held the kite up as high as he could. When a good gust came along, he gave a yell and let go, and down below, I started running. To my (secret) amazement and delight, my kite lumbered into the air and soared out above the creek. And then disaster struck!

The one thing I hadn't thought of was that the many pieces of string I'd knotted together were weaker than the force of the wind and the weight of the kite. There was a snap, I fell on my butt, and the three of us got to watch as my big, beautiful box kite flew right into the top of the tallest cottonwood tree on the other side of the creek.

Well, it still was a triumph of sorts. My kite actually had flown; I had to be content with that. And the frame was still hanging up there when we moved.

Strangely enough, more than 20 years later, I happened to be driving through Medford. I went by the old house, and then I found myself looking up at the old cottonwood. The kite was gone. ❖

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