

Blue Moon, Ricky Raccoon, and UNO: St. Croix Summer Adventures

It was June, 1981. Son Adam was about 2 years old. He and I needed an adventure together. Younger son, Seth, was not quite a year old, and needed time alone with Mom. So Adam and I packed his booster seat in the car, put in our camping gear and some food, and headed for Lake St. Croix in Solon Springs, WI. It was just father and son -- our first overnight camping adventure together, and Adam's first time away from Debbi, home, and little brother for more than a few hours. We older King guys were heading out!

We drove south from Superior to our camping spot near Lake St. Croix to pitch our tent, hike the trails, swim, build a campfire, and just have fun. By the way, camping or trail hiking or lake swimming or having a forest campfire with a not-quite-two-year-old may not involve the standard definitions we usually hold for these activities. Nonetheless, we were off to have our first “just guys” adventure together, and were enjoying each other’s company in the car.

As we drove south on Highway 53, I tuned the radio to an oldies station. The doo-wap song “Blue Moon” was playing. Adam and I bounced on down the road to it. I sang along, and he listened. After the song ended, I continued to sing “Blue Blue Blue Moon, dip di-dip di-dip...”

I was lost in my doo-wap world when Adam cut in. Using his most severe two-year old voice, he chirped “Stop that Music!” He jolted me back to semi reality, and we drove on to Solon Springs, only listening to the radio.

As we neared our camping spot on a village back road, we saw a large raccoon cross in front of us. I slowed the car as we watched him amble into the woods where we would camp. I believe that was the first larger wild animal Adam had ever seen.

The two-year-old voice asked, “Who is that?” Interesting how Adam said “Who”, not “What”. That is how we have always thought of other critters. Picking up on his cue, I responded, “That’s Ricky Raccoon.”

“Where’s he going?” came the little voice again.

“He’s going into the woods to see his friend Malcolm Mole.” I posed. That seemed to cover the matter.

When we set up our campsite, Adam became interested in the tall red farm pump we used to get our water. It was too big and took too much strength for him to use at that time. But he was fascinated by the motion and sound of the pump, and the flood of clear, cold, deep Solon Springs water it delivered each time I filled our buckets for cooking and washing. Our campout was great, and we packed up the next afternoon to go home.

As we drove back to Superior the next day, I again started singing “Blue Blue Blue Moon...” Adam quickly gave me a sharp sideways glance, and in a playful way, said “Stop that music!” I got the point.

Then Adam asked me to tell him a story. I made up this one as we drove home. It became a favorite of our young sons, and was retold by Mom and Dad at hundreds of bed times -- and for years on every camping trip to Solon Springs:

Ricky Raccoon and Malcolm Mole were playing in the woods where we camp. They got really thirsty, and tried to work our pump to get a drink. Ricky, the bigger animal, hopped up on the pump handle. He went down-and-up, down-and-up, down-and-up, down-and-up many times, but the water wouldn't pour out of the spout.

Ricky said “Malcolm, can you crawl down this pump spout, and see what's wrong?”

Malcolm said, “OK!” and he crawled into the pump. Inside, he found leaves and sticks had blown in during a storm. They blocked the water.

Malcolm Mole pulled the sticks and leaves out of the spout. He dropped them on the ground. Then he said “OK, Ricky!”

Ricky pushed the handle down-and-up, down-and-up, down-and-up, down-and-up -- and water gushed out of the pump!

Ricky Raccoon and Malcolm Mole got a good drink. They were very happy!

Epilogue: Over the next few years, as our preschool boys learned colors and numbers, and how to play with us and with each other, we would often play the simple family game “UNO”, with numbered, multi-colored cards. The rules say when you have your last card, you must yell “UNO” so the other players know you are down to one card. Whenever I got a final card that was blue, I would sing “Blue Blue Blue UNO, dip, di-dip, di-dip...” and so on, in my best doo-wap voice.

Until Adam was about 5 or so, with a twinkle in his eye over our inside joke, he would immediately say, “Stop that Music!” and give me that sideways glance he used on our first camping trip. It became a running joke between us, and lasted several years -- until his father matured.

We built our compact, permanent, “always campin' out” home at our camp site in 2002, and walk by our Red Pump many times every day now. It is part of our lives. We think always of Dr. Adam, immersed in his distant, demanding urban life, and of those quiet, simple St. Croix summer adventures we had so many years ago. The Red Pump is a good reminder. I savor these memories, and write this so they may last.