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## Back to School: Trails around school put him on a path to young adventures

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By Dale Abraham

Some kids rode the school bus to elementary school, while other kids rode in a car. I walked "The Path."

The path wasn't a commuter train from New Jersey. It was simply a dirt path, the walking route through the woods from our house to Johnston School in Upper St. Clair.

The path (that's what we always called it) began in the back end of our neighborhood. It rose steeply. At the top was the back of the school, which seemed like a hulking citadel.

The front of Johnston School was much less threatening. The level lawn and circular driveway looked pleasant, actually. But the rear approach felt much more imposing, especially to a kindergartner.

It was about a half-mile from home to school, and next-door chum Tommy and I walked the narrow path starting in kindergarten (without supervision). The path originally meandered left and right (and up and down) on its way up the hill. Then, in about second grade, it was upgraded to rough gravel, widened and straightened. It was the difference between the Lincoln Highway and the Pennsylvania Turnpike.

I did so much more on that path than just travel to school. Walking our wire-haired terrier, Gwen, often included a trip up the path. She sniffed every weed on the path with vigor, as if her quarry were hiding behind every thistle.

It took a hard yank to coax her farther up the path, then four feet later she settled in for more sleuthing. Sometimes we never did make it all the way to Johnston School.

In third grade I purposely tried to miss the summer camp bus from the

school to South Park by sitting down on the path. I just didn't want to go. I figured if I sat there long enough, the bus would leave without me.

Not this time. I forgot that one of the camp teen counselors also walked the path to catch that bus. When I saw him ascending the path, I knew that my brilliant plan was foiled. I got up and caught the bus. Fortunately, I contracted a case of poison ivy a couple of days later and missed the rest of summer camp.

I remember my companion Tommy wrecking his bike on the path. I think the brakes failed and he ended up in a heap very near the bottom, sustaining various bloody cuts and scrapes.

And from that day forward I knew the wisdom of making sure I was wearing proper underwear in case I got into an accident. Why that incident brought about that revelation, I don't know.

In fact, there were all of four paths descending from the back of Johnston School. One of the others dropped drastically down to Weston Drive. Kindergarten classmate Robert (not Bobby or Robbie - "Robert") got to take that path.

Classmate Susan walked a third path that descended a gully and then soared ludicrously up the other side to Huntington Drive. I learned years later that this gully was really a remnant of the Pittsburgh Railways Interurban line that once reached Washington, Pa. I wish I had known that then.

**The best path was the fourth.** At the top was an area where kindergarten teacher Mrs. Collins took our class to pick violets. There were plenty for everyone. We picked enough to fill our hands and then took them home.

I imagine that these flowers were limp and ratty by the time we arrived, hiding them behind our backs until whirling them around to

surprise our mothers, but it hardly mattered. The excitement was in the giving.

That fourth path was also our bike raceway: all downhill, with twists and turns that rattled my Rollfast's fenders. This path even passed the rusted remains of a 1940s automobile sitting in the woods a quarter-mile from any roadway. All that remained was the body and chassis. No motor. That car gave me the creeps.

And whenever I was biking on that path with a group, we all usually did a naughty thing to that sedan. Let's just say that we, we, we, we ... get the idea? Such an odd, mischievous thing to do.

All these memories from four simple paths! Johnston School hasn't been a school for decades, and at least three of the paths no longer exist, as the wooded areas were cleared for more houses.

Too bad the kids living in them today don't know of the paths.