**What toys and games did you play with as a child?**

As I look back to the earliest toys I can remember playing with, I am appalled at how many were guns of various kinds. There were even toy hand grenades, as well as toy soldiers. It seems to me the Greatest Generation was trying to tell its sons something in the 1950s and 1960s: Get ready to be drafted into the military just like our fathers were. I think most of us resisted the brainwashing.

It would be hard to exaggerate how popular Western movies and television shows were at the time. Shows like Roy Rogers, Davy Crockett, and the Lone Ranger were all extremely popular. And kids back then did not start school until they were five. There was no such thing as Pre-K. So kids were given a toy six-shooter and gun belt at a very young age and told to go outside and play “Cowboys and Indians.” The Cowboys imitated the Lone Ranger and the Indians imitated Tonto with his pidgin English.

As a small child I remember strapping on that gun and going outside (we weren’t allowed to shoot them inside). Many of the guns shot caps and so made a loud noise when the trigger was pulled, adding authenticity to the play carnage. I still remember the smell of those caps. And in the summer, we had water pistols. The theme of gunplay for fun continues today in our violent shoot ‘em up video games whose designers probably played with these toy guns. So not much has changed.

We also had some flying toys like kites and balsawood airplanes. And there were lawn darts that you threw into the air. But most of the outside toys involved balls of some type. We played a lot of sandlot baseball. If we didn’t have access to a real field we played in the street. In that case, the game was often Wiffle Ball.

But probably my favorite ball game involved just one 50-cent pink rubber ball made by the Spalding company (which everyone called a “Spaldine”) that could really bounce high. The game was simply throwing the Spaldine against a step and having the other team try to catch it. If you threw the ball just right and it hit the point of the stairs, the ball would go soaring over the heads of the defense and would be called a home run. Singles and doubles depended on where the ball was missed.The Spaldine was a very versatile ball and you could also use it to play stickball in the street if someone could borrow a broom handle from their house. We normally played on side streets where the traffic was light, but the game had to pause every time a car came along.

Other very popular outside toys were yo-yos and tops made by Duncan. We spent hours learning to do tricks with these very simple toys. We also played games without equipment such as hide and seek and tag.

Inside the house we had electric trains and Slinklies and Silly Putty. We had games such as Monopoly, Uno and Twister, which twisted bodies into strange and often painful contortions, and Mouse Trap, based on the cartoons of Rube Goldberg.

When I was a teenager I got a chemistry set that I was only allowed to use in our stone basement. It was fun to make things explode or burst into flames. I guess my parents were hoping I would become a chemist. But after high school chemistry I knew that wasn’t for me.

However, there was one toy that my parents got me that actually did play a part in my future. It was a toy printing press called The Big Press. It came with ink and with rubber type and artwork so you could actually print a page of a junior newspaper. It didn’t take long until I spilled the black ink on the living room carpet. The stain never came out, and my brother thereafter called the toy The Big Mess. It was quickly abandoned. But I think it sparked the idea of a career in newspapers a few years later.

The 1960s were a decade before the first personal computers, but we did have these giant IBM and Univac computers in the world. So it was not surprising that a toy computer came on the market and my parents bought it for me. It was called Mr. Brain, and it was simply a plastic machine into which you inserted punch cards with questions and answers on them. The questions covered many educational subjects like geography, history and science. So Mr. Brain would ask you a question and provide four possible answers and you had to choose which one was correct. Mr. Brain would then tell you what the correct answer was. It was high tech education in the 1960s.

But despite all the store-bought toys and games available to us, I think we played more with that Spaldine ball than with anything else. In addition to stepball and stickball, the versatile Spaldine also could be used to play “hit the stick,” a game whose aim was self-explanatory. It was played on any sidewalk while we waited for enough kids to congregate to get a stickball or Wiffleball game together.

In the fall and winter we played touch football with a little rubber Pixie football. And if someone in the neighborhood had a basketball hoop we played that as well.

This was time when television was mostly in black and white and limited to maybe six channels. There was no internet, Netflix or cable. The only movies on television were second-rate films from the ‘30s and ‘40s. So if you wanted to watch a more recent movie, you had to go to a movie theater. Because television was not the entertainment choice it is today, and videogames didn’t exist, I think we played outside at least 80% of the daylight hours. We got lots of exercise and fresh air and life was pretty good.