

TUMBLING ALONG WITH THE TUMBLING TUMBLEWEED



IT WAS IN THE 1920'S WHEN NEIGHBORHOOD CHILDREN WERE RIDING STICK HORSES. These we made from the tall horse weeds that grew in the fence corners or any area that could not be easily mowed. We stripped the leaves from the long pole-like weed, leaving only the blossomed top, which made a nice swishy tail in our own imaginations.

Finer still than the horses were the tumble weed dogs. To make this undoubtedly pedigreed animal, I selected a large thistle, dried and strong of root. To the root I tied a long length of binder twine. My dad taught me how to make a slip knot, which kept my animal safely on its leash.

Some of the neighborhood kids also had tumble weed dogs, but I believe mine was the first in our neighborhood. Perhaps my dad suggested it, for he was very apt at creating games from nothing.

My tumble weeds were always named "Sandy" for the dog in the Little Orphan Annie comic strip, then called the funny papers.

In the strong western Nebraska winds, we were pulled along by our tumble weeds, and I often believed that my feet were not even touching the ground. Miles we ran across the broad and often barren fields and returned home joyous but breathless.

During the 30's, the lands were really barren, for the rains did not come in those years. A smaller variety of the tumble weed, the Russian thistle, thrived among the scattered stems of alfalfa.

Though alfalfa was deep rooted, water was now far below the ground. Farmers put up the young Russian thistle for hay. It was not nourishing hay, but the farmers said, "It holds apart the ribs of the hungry livestock."

Each spring, the fence rows were full of these rolling weeds, often pushing against the fence with such force from the high winds that the posts broke loose at the bottom. This caused the fence to sag, and livestock could walk over it.

The coming of spring meant burning out the tumble weeds that formed great walls along the fences or any place that had the strength to restrain their travels.

On a spring evening, there was little chance of strong winds coming again that day. Dad would choose this as a time to burn out a fence row if the breeze was in a favorable direction. He would crush a couple of weeds so that they would hold flame and light this with a match, the mass extended on the end of a pitchfork.

As it burned, he proceeded perhaps 40 feet further on and started another fire. The brittle weeds burned out so quickly that no harm was done to the fence or the post unless the post was splintered. For this, we took along a 5-gallon cream-can of water and bucketed it over the post to put out the little flame. Occasionally, one was missed, and late at night the glow flickered until it burned itself out, while I enjoyed the tiny glimmer.

Entering stores today and seeing the aisles of toys, I wonder. Are kids happier now with this vast array of technical marvels? Will they remember as I am remembering? Even now as we drive along a road on a windy day and a tumble weed crosses our path, I say to myself, "There goes a Sandy", and again I am windborne down the dusty road back home and feel the strength of my childhood toy.

- Mary Beam
Fremont, NE