

Cottonwood Winter (Pages 78-80)

Forrest Street Sledding

Sledding is a major winter activity for families living in Riverton. And those living on Forrest Street are blessed with their own sledding hill.

FORREST STREET SPANNED TWO distinct topographical areas. The south section of the street, terminating at New Albany Avenue, was extremely flat. So the sidewalk in front of our house was absolutely level. The north section was altogether different.

These areas were separated by a huge cottonwood tree growing right out of the middle of the sidewalk. During the Great Depression, Works Progress Administration (WPA) sidewalk construction crews didn't have the heart to cut down the magnificent old tree, so they simply built the sidewalk to butt up against the tree on both its north and south sides. This act enshrined the cottonwood as a neighborhood institution and meeting place for Forrest Street children.

Once Grandpa Compton had told me that the Chippewa Indians believed, if a man told a lie under a cottonwood tree, serious consequences would befall him. To keep all parties honest, Chippewa treaties and other agreements were always sealed under the spreading boughs of a cottonwood tree. Following that tradition, all important meetings of the Forrest Street Guard, including swearing in ceremonies for new members, were conducted under our neighborhood cottonwood tree.

Just a few yards beyond that cottonwood, Forrest Street took a nosedive. It sloped rapidly downward past the swamp and ultimately ended at the Chippewa River. This long slope made Forrest Street an ideal and popular sledding hill each winter.

Lighter traffic in the north section of our street contributed immensely to its desirability for sledding. This resulted from two factors. First, many families living there, like the Zeyers, didn't own cars. Instead, they relied on city buses to take them to and from work and shopping. Second, there was no cut-through traffic from New Albany Avenue because our street dead-ended at the river.

In the winter, the few cars traveling our street's icy snow-covered north section, whether going up the hill or down, drove very slowly. The street was never plowed, so it remained quite treacherous all winter long. One false move could put a car into a skid, over the shoulder, and into the swamp. A swampy ending to a winter car trip down Forrest Street was extremely unfortunate because there were few dollars for towing fees in our neighbors'

modest budgets. And there were even fewer tow truck drivers in Riverton daring enough to risk pulling a car out of our swamp.

This sparse and slow-moving traffic made the hilly end of Forrest Street a sledders' paradise for about a third of the year. At the season's first snowfall, the neighborhood children, and even some mothers, took to the street. From that day until spring, cars no longer owned the street. Sledders did. These sledders raced downhill in the middle of the street, uninhibited by traffic. As they dipped down through the swampy lowlands, they built up speed and propelled themselves out onto the level flatness just short of the river. Speeding sledders maneuvered around each other and around any cars foolish enough to risk traveling the nerve-racking hill.

Slow-moving cars, attempting this long perilous climb, obeyed the unwritten neighborhood law requiring them to haul all sledders up from the bottom to the top of the hill. This agreement was not easy to implement. Drivers couldn't stop to allow sledders to hook up. They had to keep moving, at a slow and steady pace or they'd never make it up the hill.

To hook up, a strong and experienced sledder, usually a teenage boy showing off for his girl friend, ran along side the passing car, belly-flopped down next to car's left rear wheel, and steered his sled under the car's bumper. He quickly grabbed the bumper with one hand and held on for dear life.

Other sledders ran behind the first sledder, belly-flopped down along side and grabbed his runner, his trousers, his boots, or whatever they could use to link themselves to the train. As the car and attached sledders passed those who were walking back up the hill, one-by-one, they belly-flopped and connected themselves to the ever-growing train of sleds. By the time the car reached the top, two dozen or more Forrest Street sledders trailed behind it.

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