

**TRADITIONAL CHILDREN'S GAMES
IN HISTORIC OBSERVANCES**

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**The value of historic children's games, and how to use them in schools,
summer camps and historic observances.**

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ORIGINS OF THIS CELEBRATION

Historic observances have become part of the social life of many communities today. Holidays such as the Fourth of July, Memorial Day and Columbus Day bring forth parades, pageants and recreations of days gone by. Historic battles are re-enacted over and over again. In Plattsburgh, New York, there are a number of such celebrations, including the Battle of Valcour Island, at which Benedict Arnold in 1775 delayed the British in their attempt to sail south on Lake Champlain to capture our troops. Another important event was the Battle of Plattsburgh, which took place on Plattsburgh Bay on Lake Champlain on the morning of September 11, 1814. Commodore Thomas McDonough defeated the larger number of British warships and drove the enemy back to Canada, which effectively prevented the British from later claiming for the Crown all of Northern New York State and New England at the Treaty of Ghent in December. This event is celebrated by the Plattsburgh community each year with re-enactments, historic displays and parades.

Up until 1999 these celebrations were largely adult affairs. There was scarcely anything for children to do, except to be passive observers of the parades and re-enactments. My wife Chris and I, selling celebration buttons in 1999, received queries by parents as to what there was for children to do. Chris and I wanted to provide children with an opportunity to participate in the celebration by teaching today's youngsters the games that children were playing in the years 1800 to 1814. We approached the Battle of Plattsburgh Celebration Committee, headed by Christopher ("Kit") Booth, and were subsequently appointed co-chairs of the Childrens Games. Our public library and the Internet, plus our extensive home library, furnished us with a wealth of material and instructions. As we were both librarians, we used the resources at our command to find games appropriate for children. Having attended a one room school in rural Connecticut, I recalled the many games we played in the pasture and the dirt road adjacent to our school. Chris and I came up with forty games. We also prepared instructions and directions for playing each game and the variations on each game. These were helpful for volunteers and for teachers.

We were not only interested in providing historic games for children to play during the local celebrations, but we anticipated that these games would fit into the New York State Education Department's curriculum. The fourth grade includes a unit on the local community; the seventh grade studies New York State history. The games would fit both areas nicely, and we planned to encourage the teachers in our local schools to learn these historic games and pass them on to the students as part of their classroom activities.

What is the role of historic children's games today? How can games of 200 years ago have relevance for today's children?

Games played in 1800 can be used to help children understand his or her role in society today. Posing the question, "What is my role in society today?" can lead to comparisons with children of long ago and also lead to discussions of "How am I connected to the children who lived 200 years ago?" Children today are apt to think only of television, telephones, videos, movies and other technological advantages they take for granted. They should be looking beyond the technology to the elements of their society and their community.

VIRTUES OF TRADITIONAL GAMES

A. IN THE PAST

1. Each child is an integral part of his or her community, and they were even more so in days long ago. They were expected to function in the life of the community, to participate in it, and to contribute to it in as many ways as they could. Parents depended upon their children to carry out necessary jobs for the family and the community. Children of long ago were expected to care for younger children, sit with aged parents, help with farm work or chores, and to help prepare food and to spin or do needle work. Clothes needed mending often, and the samplers they learned to sew in school taught the girls and sometimes the boys to mark the family initials on sheets and other linen and to sew and embroider cloth for the family to

use or to sell. Children were expected to take an active part in the social and religious life of the community. Many of their games contributed to this life.

2. Children were expected to develop mental and physical skills needed to live in and be a part of the community. Children were expected to work with sharp tools, such as axes used in splitting wood or kindling, and with knives and saws. Almost every boy carried a jackknife for use around the farm, for whittling, or for playing Mumblety-peg. Children had to be able to balance themselves, especially when walking along high haymow beams, and to develop skills in handling and manipulating their bodies. They needed to be able to throw with accuracy, to run easily and swiftly, to climb trees, often to harvest fruit, and to overcome the usual obstacles to daily living. They were expected to work out mental problems and puzzles, such as how many measures of grain to feed the cows and how much corn to feed the chickens. Older children were taught to shoot guns and to hunt and to fish, so as to help provide the family larder with meat.
3. Children of the 1800's were expected to develop a sense of cooperation and fair play, to share possessions with siblings and friends, to help neighbors and friends who were sick, and to take turns in group activities. Religious teachings bolstered this sense, as in learning "The Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."
4. Children were expected to learn to work with others, to contribute toward common goals, and to help pull the load as part of a team. Older boys helped their fathers and other adults to build buildings, to help at barn raisings, and to help get in the hay.
5. Children were expected to learn active pursuits to enable them to amuse themselves, such as with puzzles, hoop rolling, top spinning and with other solitary pleasures.
6. Children were able to create their own games, using their imagination and such items as were readily at hand. They could take hoops and create new ways of playing with them. They could design variations on old games, such as new ways of playing tag.

7. Children learned to compete and to excel at games in which they had an aptitude, such as sack races and potato races, which required a sense of timing and balance. They also learned games which were non-competitive, such as how many times they could run around a spinning hoop, or how high or how far they could jump.
8. Children learned history through games and activities, such as being in a parade based upon previous historic events, creating historic flags, and learning about guns used in historic battles by their fathers, uncles and brothers. Another was to listen to stories told by relatives who were participants in historic battles.

B. PRESENT DAY APPLICATIONS

Children can learn how children spent their leisure time then and now. The games and activities in olden times often related to adult work, such as handling wood, making playing hoops from barrel hoops, or making skiis and sleds from barrel staves, after the day's work was done. Whittling was a way of creating toys for younger siblings, or making sap spiles to use in tapping maple trees. Children in the olden days were very active physically and worked outdoors much of the time, such as helping to plant and weed and harvest the family garden.

1. Children can learn how to make choices through games, deciding which games to play, and in using judgment in how to play the games. They can choose what games to play depending on the ages of the children in their group, such as electing to play "Statue" with younger children.
2. Games can be related to the history of the community, the state and the nation. Some games were played by ethnic groups; some were handed down from generation to generation, and some were related to the local area. In each community there were variations on games. Children learned pride in the ways in which their community approached its games. This led to a feeling of community, of security, and belonging and to a satisfaction with the child's place in the community.

IMPORTANCE OF CHILDRENS GAMES

Games are an important link of the child with the community. Games help our children know the roots of their family's culture and of American culture. Games help children explore the different traditions in America. Games also help children to understand historic events and show how people lived, worked and used natural resources in the past. They also help children understand and know the customs and traditions and practices of different cultures.

Games help children recognize simple patterns, sequences and relationships, and are an aid in learning to read. Games help children to be creative and to use their imagination, especially using new patterns of play and alternative forms of games. Games help children to create works of art, from sand castles to snow men. Games help children work with shapes and ideas and recognize art works from other diverse cultures. Games help with physical well-being of children, so that they can do the work expected of them in their community.

Games help with intergenerational understanding. Many games were taught to children by their parents, grandparents or others in the extended family. It is very satisfying to watch grandfathers show their grandchildren how to play marbles, or demonstrate the finer points of spinning tops.

YESTERDAY – “THE CHILDREN OF 1800”

The children of 1800 lived in a largely rural environment. Classes in rural schools were smaller. In the one room school I attended in rural Connecticut in the late 1930's there were only two or three students in a grade, fourteen in the whole school. We children became used to playing games for two or three children rather than playing team sports or playing in large groups. We were also playing games which involved several age groups.

Many games of long ago were learned from the Native Americans and incorporated into the daily children's games. Tug of War was especially popular. Native Americans also used hoops, often teaching their children how to throw spears through small rolling hoops in order to improve the

accuracy of their spear throwing. This was important for hunting. Children today can make a game of throwing beanbags or balls through a rolling hoop.

Seasonal games were also popular. In winter, the wheel shapes for Fox and Geese could be tramped out in the snow, and it was a favorite recess game in our rural area of Connecticut. Another winter game we played was Snow Snakes, played by the Native Americans and adapted by rural children. A long straight course was made in the snow with a stick, then coated with water and left to freeze to form an icy bed down which a long, smooth sapling, spear or "snake" was thrown. The stick which slid the longest distance was the winner.

In the Fall, children could "twitch" apples, as a way of helping their fathers. In rural areas, where cows were out in the pasture, apples dropped from wild apple trees presented a problem, since cows might eat the rotten apples, which spoiled their milk. Children would break off a three foot length of apple tree or find a long, supple stick, stick it in an apple and throw it over the fence, using a twitching motion. This sent the apple far away, and the children would try to see who could send the apple the farthest. Thus a chore became a game.

THE CONTEMPORARY CELEBRATION

Chris and I were given a budget of four hundred fifty dollars to purchase the old time games and to pay for the bagpiper. We have continued to work with a budget of three hundred dollars, largely used to replace broken puzzles or stilts. Many of the games, such as the tower puzzles and the whimmy-diddles, we made ourselves to add to a few commercial ones.

For the Battle of Plattsburgh Celebration we were provided with a large tent, set up next to City Hall in Plattsburgh. The street in front of the tent and the City Hall was closed to traffic. The street was marked with a chalk stick to designate areas for hoop rolling and hoop trails to follow, for Duck on the Rock games, and for hop-sotch and for jump rope use. On the grassy area beside the tent, lines were drawn with white flour and set up for sack races and potato races. Another area was reserved for the Game of Graces, a popular 1800's game in which a beribboned ten inch wooden hoop was

propelled between two players by using crossed two-foot wands. At 6 a.m. Chris and I were unpacking the boxes of games and setting up the playing fields. It took three hours each day to get ready for the opening of the games at 9 a.m. It took about an hour after 5 p.m. each day to close up shop. We had to carry all the games home each night and set them up again the next day.

The first year, 2000, for the winners of races and competitions, we offered small prizes like toy harmonicas and puzzles purchased by the dozens from Oriental Trading Company. We found that the games themselves were enough to interest the children, so we stopped offering prizes. No one missed them.

THE CHILDRENS GAMES

Inside the tent at six picnic tables covered with white posterboard, tops were spun, flags were colored, and other games were played, such as checkers, Jacob's ladder, tower puzzles, and cup and ball games. Smaller children enjoyed tossing beanbags through holes in a board or trying to throw rope rings around a stake or quoit board. Other children found pleasure in making "hummers" out of buttons and string and learning how to twirl and pull the string to make the button revolve.

From time to time we and the volunteers taught other games, such as Duck on the Rock, using beanbags instead of small rocks. We did not choose to play Mumblety-peg, a fond game of my youth, as it required the use of pocket knives. The 400 apples we used for the wet and dry bobbing for apples had been washed to ensure their cleanliness. Wet bobbing required a pan of water to duck for the apples, and we changed the water frequently. The dry bobbing required that an apple be suspended from the tent edge by a string.

Chris also purchased two hand looms and taught children to make small pot holders and rugs for doll houses. We may do more with hand looms in the future, as these were important in the early days of our country. To do an eight inch weaving takes a few hours of concentrated work.

Another game we provided was a large sized checkers game, popular with fathers and sons as well as children. We decided that chess would take too much time to play, as we wanted quick

turnover so the children could experience a variety of historic games. Jackstraws, or pick-up-sticks, was another popular old-time game the children enjoyed.

Chris wanted to teach children how to plant marigold seeds, and we were given much help by Sally Booth, a local gardening enthusiast. We showed the children how to plant the seeds, three to a small cup filled with potting soil. These were watered and then sealed in a plastic zip-loc bag to act as a green house, until the seeds had sprouted and had grown several inches, enough to be transplanted. Instructions were given out with each cup. Bulk seeds came from Seeds of Change.

A Children's Parade was held each noon on Saturday and Sunday, led by a bagpiper in kilts, Gerald Tetrault, followed by the author in his 1812 costume carrying a large Star Spangled Banner flag and followed by two dozen children each proudly waving a paper flag or shouldering a wooden musket and wearing a triangle paper hat made from a folded newspaper. The parade marched around the nearby Trinity Park block and took about half an hour, including a pause to allow the delighted parents to take photos of their marching children. Thus the children had their own Children's Parade, similar to one which the grownups would have later that day.

The games were held on Saturday and Sunday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Helping us was from twenty to thirty volunteers, many in costume. Some of our volunteers came from Plattsburgh State University, some were Girl Scouts, with their leaders. We trained all of them to play the games, then encouraged them to teach the games to the children. We had hundreds of children who came to play the games, too many to count. They went from one venue to another to try out each of the games, then stayed to play their favorite game, often the Game of Graces, hoop trundling, or stilt walking.

THE GAMES THAT WERE PLAYED

1. Sack Races, with burlap bags purchased from Agway farm store. Participants stepped into the burlap bag, then hopped from one flour line to a line forty feet away, then hopped back as fast as possible.

2. Three Legged Race. Old colorful cloth men's ties were used. The tie was fastened around the opposite ankles or knees of participants, making three legs to run the race.
3. Wheelbarrow Race. One contestant picks up the ankles of another, who walks on his or her hands as fast as possible to the line. The contestants change places and head back to the starting line.
4. Hoop Trundling. Wooden hoops are trundled using a one-foot dowel or stick to propel the hoop by stroking it along the top.
5. Run around the Hoop. This is an individual game in which the child sets the hoop spinning, then tries to see how many times he or she can run around the hoop before it falls down. Another game is to use the hoop as a hula hoop, rotating it around their waist.
6. Hoop Races through Gates. A chalk trail is drawn on the road passing through narrow spaces, sometimes two stones. Follow the trail and go between the gates all around the course to the starting point.
7. Potato Races. Small red potatoes are placed in six plastic buckets at the starting line. Six children, at a signal, grab a potato and run eight feet to a marked spot, place the potato on it, come back for another potato, run to a further marked spot and so forth. A follow up contestant runs to the first potato and brings it back to place it in the bucket, then returns for another until all the potatoes are gathered.
8. Potato Spoon Race. A potato is balanced on the bowl of a six inch iced tea spoon. The child runs to the distant line and back without dropping it, as other children try to do in the race. Placing the potato on a marked spot with a spoon can also be done, as in no. 7.
9. Statue: Children of any age come up to an older child, who grasps their hands and swings them around to deposit them gently on the grass. The child tries to assume a ridiculous posture, with limbs all askew and head cocked, with tongue out, etc. After all children have

- been served, the swinger decides who has won the statue contest. That person then serves as the person who swings around the other children in the next game.
10. Rock or Base Tag. In a rocky pasture, or on a lawn with placed stones, children each choose a rock to touch or stand on. At a given signal all children have to leave their rock or base and go to another one, only one child to a rock. The person who is "It" tries to catch them before they can touch the rock.
 11. Shadow Tag. This is good with small children. On a sunny day children try to step on each other's shadow.
 12. Fox and Geese. Single Rim. A wagon wheel design is tramped out in the snow. The one who is "It," the Fox, stands at the center, the other children, the Geese, around the edge. At the signal, the Fox tries to catch the Geese, who must run only along the lines or spokes or rim of the wheel. The one who is caught then becomes "It".
 13. Fox and Geese. Double Rim. The same as above, except that there is an additional rim tramped out half way up the spokes and around the circle.
 14. Hunt the Fox. The wagon wheel is set up as in 12 above. In this game the roles are reversed. The Fox at the center is chased by the others, the Hunters.
 15. Leapfrog. A line of children is formed, with each child leaning over, propping himself or herself up by hands on knees. The first child leaps over the second child's back, legs spread apart, then over all the others. At the end the first person stays to become an additional "Back."
 16. Leap and Crawl. The leapfrog line is formed as above. After first leaping, the first child then crawls between the legs of the second child, then leaps over the back of the third, etc.
 17. Duck on the Rock. Originally played with rocks, in a dirt road. Now using beanbags, a wood pedestal or object several inches high is placed at a distance of twenty feet. On this is balanced the beanbag of the one who is first to be "It". Players stand back of the line and

- toss their beanbags at the Duck hoping to knock it off. When this happens, all the players who have tossed try to run up and retrieve their beanbags before the one who is "It" has replaced his or her beanbag and sought to tag another player.
18. Beanbag Toss. Players toss beanbags at a distance through a hole in a wood panel. If there are several holes, each can be given a numerical value, to see who can reach the score of 21.
 19. Game of Graces. This popular game has all but disappeared. Players with crossed two foot wands propel a beribboned ten inch wooden hoop toward each other, trying to catch it on their wands. The wands are drawn rapidly apart to propel the hoop toward the other player.
 20. Jump Rope. Either a rope for one person or a longer rope for two persons to twirl, while players try to jump into the rope and hop up as the rope is swung.
 21. Quoits. Quoit rings may be made from $\frac{1}{4}$ inch manila rope and masking tape to tape the ends to each other. A box with various length upright dowels, or several dowels hammered into the ground can form a quoit field. Players stand at a distance and try to throw the rings over the dowels.
 22. Hop Scotch. A prepared mat can be used, or a hop scotch field can be drawn. Players throw their marker on to a numbered square in sequence, then hop up to retrieve their marker. Many variations are available in the library or on the Internet.
 23. Spinning Tops. Some tops can be twirled with the fingers. Some tops can be wound with string, the string pulled and the tops thrown on the ground. Other tops can be set in motion with the fingers, then kept going by whipping the sides with a leather thong attached to a short stick.
 24. Stilts. This age old game can be played with stilts of any length. Stilts are long poles with wooden blocks fastened from ten to twenty inches high on each one. Balancing on the two stilts takes care. Younger children will enjoy short stilts made from no. 10 cans with ropes through to tops for the child to hold on to.

25. Jacob's Ladder. This is an illusion that is fun. Six small square blocks are fastened together with sets of ribbon so that the blocks can appear to tumble as you tilt the top block back and forth.
26. Jacks. A dozen small metal jacks are set on the floor. A ball is bounced and the child tries to pick up as many jacks as possible before the ball hits the floor again.
27. Marbles. Clay or glass marbles are propelled by the thumb toward other marbles in a circle or pit. The player keeps the marbles he or she can knock out of the ring. There are many variations. Ask your grandfather!
28. Hummers. These are simple to make. Take a two or four hole button and thread a string or carpet weight thread through two opposite holes and fasten the ends together. Holding the string so that the button is in the middle, swing the button around and around, then pull the string loops so that the button revolves first one way, then the other. After a rhythm has been established, pulling the string harder each time will make some buttons hum.
29. Tower Puzzle. This game, called the "Tower of Hanoi," is not as old as the others, but is still much fun. Six or more graduated disks are placed over one of three spindles fixed to a short strip of wood. The object is to move all the disks to the opposite spindle, moving one at a time, and never placing a larger disk over a smaller one. There is much about the "Tower of Hanoi" on the Internet.
30. Ball and Cup. This game is centuries old. A small ball affixed to a string and a short stick is swung up and attempted to be deposited in a small cup at the top of the stick. A variation on this is the "Bilbo stick," in which the ball has a small hole in it, and the stick is pointed to catch the ball in the hole. Very popular with children and adults.
31. Color Your Own Flag. We made two sided 8 ½ by 11 inch Star Spangled Banned Flag designs on paper for the children to color with wax crayons. The Star Spangled Banner has

- 15 stars and 15 stripes. The colored flags were taped to an 18 inch dowel for the children to carry in the Children's Parade.
32. Mumblety-Peg Demonstration. The point of a pen knife is flipped up and into the ground with the front, then the back of the hand. The point is next placed on the wrist, elbow, shoulder and head and back down and flipped so that it always sticks in the ground. If you go up and down your body flipping the knife successfully, you then must have your knife "jump the fence" of your palm and stick it in the ground. We did not play this game.
 33. Make Your Own Hat. From Rey's "Curious George Rides a Bike" picture book, which shows how to fold a newspaper so that it makes a boat. We stop the step before this, which makes the newspaper into a hat. We then tape two strings to the bottom so that the child can tie the hat to his or her head, especially important if the day is breezy!
 34. Chalk Drawing on the Sidewalk. Special chalk is available for drawing on sidewalks. It washes off after the next rainstorm. Have contests!
 35. Gee-Haw Whimmy-Diddle. This is a southern game, but fun for children. It can be made at home. A short stick is notched with a file to form a strip of notches. A small propeller is made and stuck in the end of the stick. The propeller must move freely. A squared stick is rubbed vigorously along the notches to make the propeller spin. "Gee" is left and "Haw" is right. These are oxen driving terms. A secret: Rubbing your thumb along the stick helps to make it reverse.
 36. Feather Game. Fun for groups of small children. Sit the children in a circle and release a small chicken feather (check your bedroom pillows). The object is to keep the feather in the air by blowing up on it. Play this out of breezes and drafts!
 37. Horse Shoes. Two stakes and some rubber or metal horse shoes make this a good game to play. See horse shoe rules for definitions of "leaners" and "ringers" and so forth.

38. Planting Marigolds. Marigolds were not only grown in the early 1800's they were nibbled as well! Marigolds are not poisonous, which makes them good for children to grow. (The movie "Monsoon Wedding" shows people eating marigolds.) Plant three French Marigold seeds in each of three 3 ounce paper cups filled with potting soil and watered. Place the three cups at the bottom of one-quart zip-loc plastic bags and seal, making it into a miniature greenhouse. Place in a sunny window and watch them sprout. Keep there for several days until the marigolds are large enough to transplant into a larger pot. Will bloom in several weeks.
39. Bob for Apples. Wet: A favorite game for Hallowe'en also. Take a dishpan and fill close to the top with warm water. Place about a dozen washed small Macintosh or other apples in the water and place on a low bench. You can try to bite the apple. No hands! If you bite it, it is yours. Try for only one apple. Best results come from sticking your head right in the water all the way to the side or bottom. Have towels handy to dry off the children!
40. Bob for Apples. Dry: Suspend small apples by string attached to the stem and tied to a branch, tent edge or pole so that the apples are strung at varying heights. Rules are as in wet bobbing above. No hands. The apple you bite is yours.

CONCLUSION

The Childrens' Games were very well received by the community, and hundreds of children participated. The parents were delighted that their children were participating in active games instead of watching television, and many parents joined us as volunteers. After the two days of games were over, we brought home those games needing repair. We transported the games which were still playable to the local Kent DeLord House Museum for storage and for use during the year when classes of school children came to visit the Museum. Thus the community got to use the games at times other than the Battle of Plattsburgh Celebration. Teachers could also borrow the games for classroom demonstration, and I was occasionally booked to show classes how some of the games were played in

the early 1800's. We were pleased that our community now better understands the importance of childrens games in historic celebrations.