

FOR WHOM THE WHISTLE BLOWS

Don't you hear the whistle blowing?
Rise up so early in the morn.

--"I've Been Working on the Railroad"

Life in small-town America marches to the beat of a different drum--or should I say whistle?

It was the fwee of the whistle at the Pennsylvania Railroad repair shop that determined the cadence of everyday life in Renovo. In the morning, as the fog blanketed the Susquehanna River valley, the whistle signaled the start of another workday for dads and roused kids out of bed for school or for summertime play. In the late afternoon, it marked a temporary halt to the backbreaking work of repairing freight cars and locomotives--and told moms that it was time to start preparing the meatloaf or the stuffed green peppers or the pork, sauerkraut, and dumplings for supper.

But when I hear the shop whistle in my mind's ear, I hear it blowing at noon on a summer day. We would have been playing baseball for a good two hours by then, always using an old ball until the sun burned the dew off the grass. The whistle, obviously no fan of sandlot baseball, would interrupt our game in the late innings, just as it was getting good.

At the sound of the noon whistle, we instantly dropped bat, ball, and gloves on the field and made a beeline for home to eat lunch with our families--our whole families (the dads, too, went home at noon to eat). There was never a moment's hesitation, no debating whether we should continue to play baseball after the whistle blew, and no second thoughts about leaving the equipment behind, either.

The only real ambivalence anyone had about leaving the ballfield, especially if one happened to be on the team that was ahead when the whistle blew, was the worry that the other team would conveniently develop amnesia during the noontime hiatus and return after lunch with a completely different version of how the game stood when we left. The upshot of that was, the players on the leading team would scream reminders about the state of the game--the score, how many outs there were, how many runners were on base, who was at bat--to the members of the trailing team, even as everyone was hustling to get home.

It never did any good, of course. There was always a postlunch brouhaha over some point. (Whether those disagreements were precipitated by the oft-served mind-fogging lunch of creamed chipped beef on toast or by feigned loss of memory is still an open question.) And no matter how the rhubarb was resolved, we knew that the truce was only temporary because there'd be another set-to after the shop whistle blew at noon the following day.