

CONSTANT VIGILANCE

As a child I lived on a gravel road called Buckingham in a developing suburb named Westchester. We lived in a square mile of nothing but prairie and forest, with a few houses on our street and a few on the next. I lead a boy's life, like Tom Sawyer or Huck Finn, thinking I lived in endless, open country. But I believed what I saw, having no idea that my open country was simply an undeveloped suburban anomaly surrounded by burgeoning development.

Our little gravel road was a narrow dead-end, unimproved, with a one lane bridge between us and 31st Street. The little bridge was only wide enough for one car. It was constructed of ancient rough-cut wooden planks with safety rails made of flimsy two-by-fours. The gravel met the bridge on each side and was often strewn across the planking and pot-holes would take shape where the bridge met the gravel road. But the rickety old bridge was a haven for neighborhood kids. In the fall and winter, the dry run beneath the wooden bridge was a great place to hide, hang-out, or play army. In the spring and summer, we would wade in the waters, float on inner tubes or leap off the rails, catch frogs, and, once, we even caught a bunch of skunks. (After a bath with some powerful soap we burned our clothes in a pile out in a weed patch.)

The bridge was often broken, but then always got fixed quickly. Cars would bounce their way across the bridge and if a big old car bumper caught the safety rails, the 2x4's would spring loose, or snap in two. But in short order it was always repaired. Sometimes, car wheels would catch a plank end and the lumber would pop loose opening a hole in the bridge. Bits of gravel would pour through the crack and sunlight would stream through and light up the gravel dust and the kids in the shadows below. But again, it was never long before repairs were made and planks re-nailed and gravel shoveled into pot holes. Sometimes, even when the bridge wasn't broken, it looked like someone came by and cared for it. I was glad that some village crew kept our bridge in good shape. It was our fort, our playground, and the only way out of our street.

One late warm afternoon I was lying on the roof of the back porch reading comic books. (How did I survive childhood?) I must have been about twelve. It had been awhile since I played under the old bridge. But it was still there and it was still well maintained. Down on the ground, my younger sisters were running through the dry laundry that Mom was taking off the line. The sun was low in the sky and everything had a golden color around the edges. Out of nowhere, there appeared Dad walking up the driveway squinting into the sun. Where was his car? His tie was undone and his white shirt had fresh multi-colored ink marks. (Dad was in the printing business. It must have been a busy day.)

“Hi dear,” said Mom. “Where's the Buick?”

“I left it down the road. The bridge is broken again. When I cleaned out the car last week, I forgot to put my bridge tools back in the trunk.”

I watched Dad enter the garage and come out with a long handled shovel and a tool box that rattled with the sound of nails. And off he marched, shovel over his shoulder and tool box in hand, I guess to go fix the bridge! I was stunned. It wasn't a crew from the village; it wasn't some burley guys with a bulldozer and a big truck; the guy who fixed our beloved bridge was Dad!

I slowly climbed down from the porch roof. When I hit the ground, there was Dad returning in the car. I ran to the driver's door. Dad's face was white with gravel dust and his hands were streaked black from handling greasy nails and spikes. He looked so heroic as he emerged from the car. Dad made the bridge safe both for

the kids who played under the bridge and the neighbors who drove over the bridge. Wow . . . what a guy! I looked at Dad, but covered my admiration, and spoke as if I always knew he was the caretaker of the bridge.

“Fixing the bridge again, Dad?”

“Oh, yeah.” He drew a deep breath. “Constant vigilance, son.” I must have looked puzzled because Dad explained, “If I don’t take care of the bridge, then who will? It’s the way to work, it’s the way home. Besides, I wanted to make sure you kids were safe.”

I had no idea that Dad had put so much thought and effort into the old narrow bridge. I was amazed and full of gratitude.

Now I told you that story to tell you this: Your own Guide or Princess tribe requires constant vigilance. Without care and attention, tribes wither and disband. We’ve seen it happen this very fall. There were two tribes who vanished from sight. They just fell apart for want of attention. It’s a shame. Here’s how to prevent it.

Take ownership in your Tribe.

You don’t have to be the Tribal Chief to exert some creativity and lead your tribe. Accept responsibility for your tribe’s success. Host a meeting without being asked. Take a look at your tribal property and pick a craft to boost your tribe’s display. Sit down with your kid and invent the next cheer. With your child’s help, think of a fun tribal activity, plan it and run it. You can easily add to the quality of your tribe’s life.

Add new members every fall (and even during the year).

A tribe whose membership is shrinking is a dying tribe. You should always be adding new members and replacing members who make Passage. You can add new members any time of year. I’ve seen some huge tribes who actually wanted to shrink and they say no to new members and hope for attrition. That’s dangerous management. Shrinking can be hard to stop. It’s better to add another Assistant Chief than say to no to new members. Keep an open door. Recruit and welcome new dads and kids.

Be an honor tribe.

Let’s be serious about fun. If you achieve Honor Tribe status it means you have an active tribe. It means you do things together, as a tribe, and participate in the life of our Federation and in the life of our community. Also, the Honor Tribe patch is important to our kids. They think it’s great! And remember: report your honor points. It’s easy. Go to the website (YIGP.org), click on Honor Points and click on the email link to the Honor Points Nation Chief.

Take pride in your tribe. Give it the attention it needs and be a hero to your kid, even when you’re busy. Your initiative will make your tribe an enriched group of dads and kids. Your individual attention will inspire others and keep your tribe alive and well. And if your kids don’t appreciate it now, some day they will and maybe surprise you with a story about their dad’s heroics.

Peace,

John C. Lorenzen
Federation Chief Keokuk