

# **Retta, Mongo and Me**

**Misadventures at their finest!**

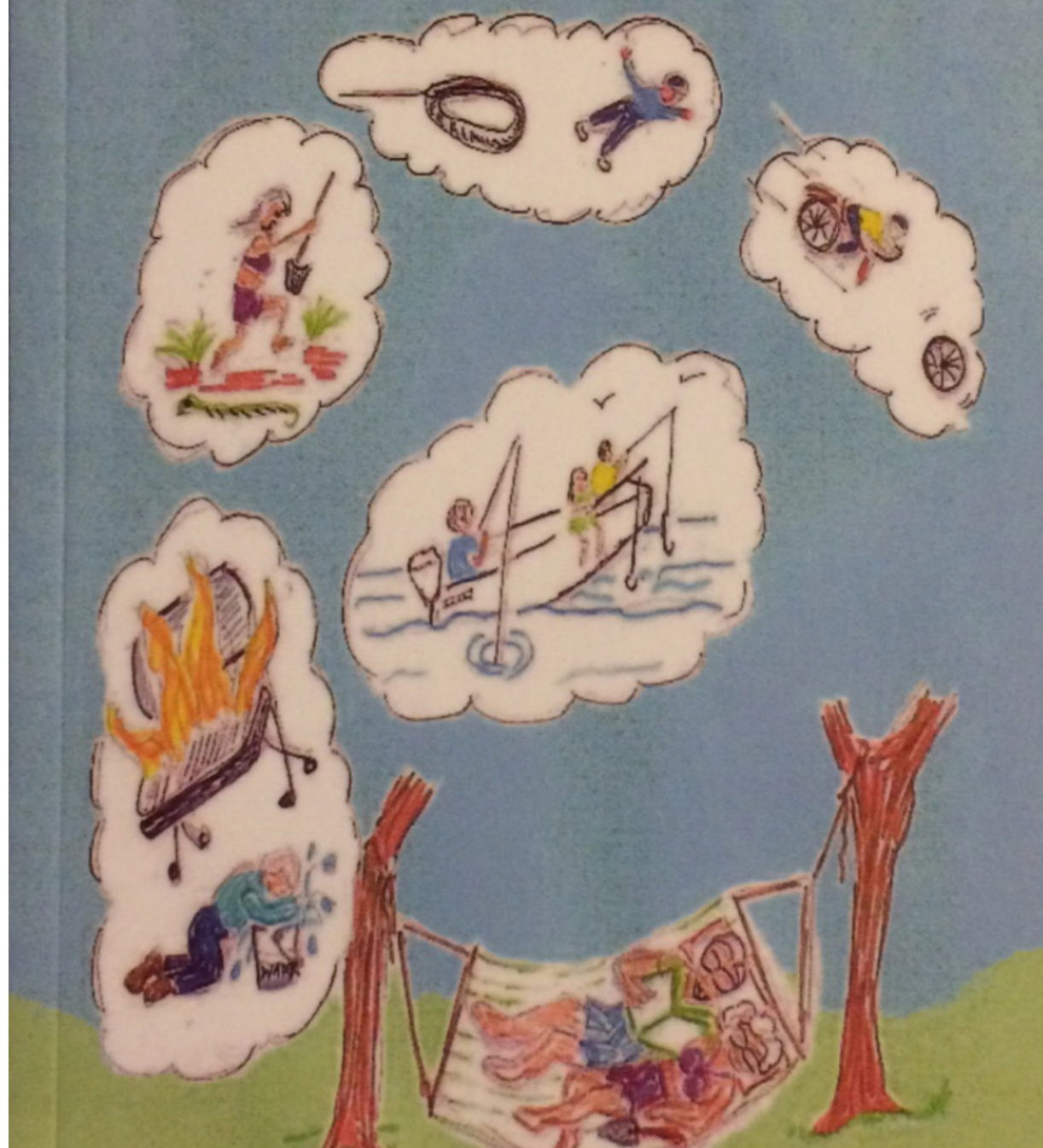


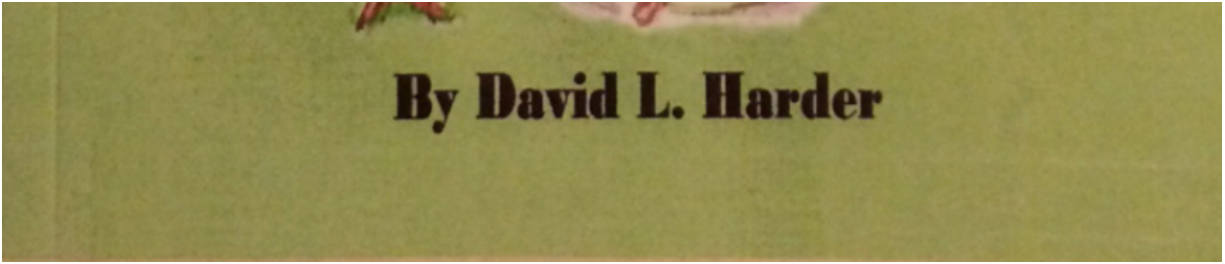
**By David L. Harder**



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My heartfelt thanks go out to my lovely wife, Retta, and to Mongo for making the events in these stories possible. Without your help and assistance (or were you just getting in the way?) the subject matter would not be there. Thanks also to my wife for indulging my hours at the computer getting these stories down on paper. Also, and most of all, I thank God for all the blessings in my life including these misadventures!

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## **Title Page**

# **Retta, Mongo and Me Misadventures at Their Finest**

By

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Cover artwork by Elaine Garrett

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## **Acknowledgments**

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## **GROWING UP**

I grew up in a small town. This small town also happens to be in Kansas. This may automatically paint a picture in some peoples' minds about my character, how I grew up, and my whole environment. Some of these thoughts may even be very true. It is true for instance that the community was based around agriculture. Farming was the biggest industry in the area and affected all the other businesses in town in one way or another. People who have traveled across the Great Plains may have seen one of the signs reading "Every Kansas farmer feeds 128 people - and you." It is also true that the town only had two traffic lights. In reality, these traffic lights were probably not necessary because nobody drove at a speed faster than a brisk walk, but at the same time the lights gave the downtown a special ambiance. It is true that many businesses were mom and pop operations and they knew you by name. The friendliness in conducting business with one of these small town merchants is something that is missing from the big city hurry-up-and- make-a-buck malls and department stores. It is also true that we only locked the doors to the house when we went to bed. A small town offered a safe and secure environment in which to grow up.

When I was five years old and about to start kindergarten, we moved from a house that adjoined the grade school property to a house on the other side of town. The presumption was that with my younger brother on the way we needed a bigger house. In reality, it was probably just so I had to walk a mile to school. This experience would allow me the opportunity when I had children to tell them how tough life was when I was a child, walking uphill to school and back home through blizzards and torrential rain storms, and actually have a small amount of truth behind the story. The house we moved into was a large older house,

with a narrow but very deep lot that had a creek as the back border. This was prime exploring territory for a five-year-old boy. The only problem was that the back half of the lot was brome grass and it was about as tall as I was at the time.

A large pile of old bicycle parts and pieces stood beckoning from the very back of our lot. The pile was under a cluster of trees growing along the fence that divided our property from the neighbors', but the bicycles were on our side. Even at my young age, I knew that meant we owned them. For a kid who didn't own a bike, this was just too tempting. Imagine the type of bike I could build out of all those parts. It would be an awesome creation. Because we had just moved in and with dad working fulltime and doing all the things required when locating to a new abode he thought he didn't have enough time to go drag all those junky bicycles, as he called them, up to the house. I asked many times and when it appeared that the only result I might obtain would be an unpleasant one, I dropped the subject. Dropping the subject didn't stop me from dreaming though. Every day I would stand in a high part of the yard where I could see those bicycles and hear them calling to me. One day I could stand it no longer. I grabbed my red wagon and headed to the pile of bicycles to claim the great treasures I knew were there. Navigating through the tall grass could at best be called difficult. The seed heads were about at my eye level and I had to peer over the grass while standing on my toes just to see the clump of trees in the distance. After traveling about twice as far as I probably had to, due to weaving here and there, I arrived at my goal. Only a slight tinge of disappointment filled me as I realized the assortment of older bicycles and parts in no way resembled one of the gleaming new models in the Sears catalog. The condition of the bicycles also explained why someone piled them out there in the first place.

As it turned out, my wagon wasn't as big as it had seemed originally, and I couldn't possibly haul all of them in



the wagon at one time. In fact, it took all my strength to untangle one of the skeletons from the pile and actually get it into the wagon where it would hopefully ride. It wasn't the one I really wanted, but I figured I would need parts off of it anyway, and I wasn't going back empty-handed. After all, I had to start somewhere and I'd be back again. I headed toward the house, following the winding road I had already carved into the tall grass, looking down to avoid getting seeds in my eyes. About halfway to the house I noticed a big stick laying across my path. I didn't remember crossing over the stick on my way to the bike pile, but that didn't really register with me at the time. Being a boy, I just had to stomp on it. I had expected to hear a loud cracking sound as the stick broke in two from my mighty stomping blow, but instead, the stick coiled up and slithered off from under my foot, disappearing into the tall grass. It was a snake! I made it to the backdoor of the house in less than a second and I must have been traveling several feet off the ground, because there was not a path in the grass or a swath through the garden, even though my straight line of travel went through it all. This experience probably influenced the opinion I have of snakes to this very day. Frankly, I don't like them!

Nothing could make me go back and retrieve my wagon loaded down with bike parts. When dad got home I breathlessly explained this amazingly terrifying horror story to him and told him how I was lucky to still be alive and not be inside of that giant snake. He felt sorry enough for me that he retrieved the wagon and all the other bike parts as well. When all the parts and pieces were laid out in the yard beside the house and I could see what was useable, I knew how the bike would turn out; it would be so awesome--and it would be mine. This bicycle I would create would be the envy of every boy in town. Unfortunately my imagination had not yet been trained by reality and the finished product only resembled my vision in the fact that it had two tires,

something that resembled a seat, and a rusty and bent excuse for handlebars. At least I had a bike. After learning to ride it, I traveled all over town on this homemade creation. Traveling all over town was possible because of that small town environment.

Yes, growing up in a small town had many aspects that were wholesome and memorable. The values of small town life were certainly admirable to say the least. As a young boy, I found it wonderful to have the freedom to travel around on my bicycle without a worry. The slower pace of small town life made summer days last longer in a small town than days did in the hectic-paced big cities. Small town life had pressures, but in reality, they were minimal compared to pressures in the big city. Small towns had a friendly, neighborly atmosphere that made it possible for almost any occasion to become a potluck dinner. Our church had a lot of potluck dinners. There were potluck dinners for each change of the season, one to celebrate birthdays where everyone sat at a table based on their birth month, and dinners at most of the major and minor holidays. The church women could organize a potluck dinner in less than a day. If the phone started ringing on Saturday afternoon, it was a good bet that there would be a potluck dinner after church the next day. These were fun social events and the variety of food was great. Women shared recipes and sometimes this meant a new favorite food dish came into our household. It also meant that after a number of years, every mother was cooking the same dishes as all the other mothers. I really believe that while I was growing up I ate potluck dinners more often than kids today eat fast food.

Growing up in a small town also had its drawbacks. The school principal was a friend of my dad and this made every day at school a stressful occasion. A kid was either cool or a nerd; there was no real middle ground. Bullies and victims were defined very early on and remained constant until high

school graduation. I fell into the second category in both cases.

Everybody in town knew everybody else, which was not necessarily a good thing. No matter where I went in town, someone would wave and call me by name. This meant that I could not do anything even remotely ornery anywhere in town and get away with it. For instance, even in a case of mistaken identity, if someone thought I was the one shooting off firecrackers in the mean old lady's trashcan, I only had one chance at survival. I would have to pedal my homemade bike at supersonic speeds, crash in a bloody heap in my front yard, bolt through the front door, possibly even opening it first, and hopefully arrive before my mother found out. Even if I could get there before the mother network had delivered their all-points bulletin, the end result would be there no matter what. That end result was my mother's ace, her trump card, and the ultimate child behavior adjustment tool. That end result was a simple statement. "Just wait until your father gets home!" That statement has caused more boys to shake to death than all the other threats that have ever been delivered throughout the history of the world. I personally shook so hard on occasion that I had to pick up some of my fallen body parts and keep them in a dresser drawer until I was calm enough to reattach them. This usually happened about every weeknight during the summer.

When a father walks through the door after a hard day at work, he expects a scene from "Leave It To Beaver". But instead of June Cleaver, he sees his wife with her distorted face and bulging neck veins, and hears her speaking in an ominous voice he has never heard before. At this point, he may be in such fear for his own life that out of sheer survival he will knock a few other parts off the condemned boy. A kid might as well save a little time by adding these parts to the dresser drawer and then put them all back on at once.

Fathers would often say, "This will hurt me a lot more than it will hurt you". Any father that says this must never have been in trouble when he was a boy, or he has forgotten how a leather belt feels as it breaks the sound barrier and then stops abruptly about two inches inside his back pocket. One thing was for sure though, this punishment kept you from going around town doing ornery things, at least for a little while. There was no way a kid could sit on a rusty metal bike seat for a week or two after that, and walking was definitely out of the question.

After one of these incidents, there was only one other option available to me at that point, and that was to find interesting things to do around my house or immediate neighborhood. Because I had a younger brother and sister, some fun activity could always be invented. This usually ended up with my brother or sister, or even both of them running to mom screaming, mom's face and voice transforming into something hideous, and me spending another afternoon in my room shaking to pieces while waiting to talk with my father.

## THE TIRE SWING INCIDENT

Little brothers are nothing but trouble. They may seem like the perfect ready-made playmate, or a great semi-willing subject for an older brother's scientific experiments, but in the end, they are nothing but trouble. A good example of this would be the tire-swing incident.

It started out as a perfect summer day. Birds were singing all around, the smell of freshly mowed hay filled the air, and the sound of playing children could be heard in all directions. This was a glorious day right in the middle of the three-month reprieve from school that children call summer vacation. This was a time for playing, relaxing and adding to my list-of-things-never-to-do-again. In the end, this list turned out to be more important to my overall development and education than anything the public school system ever hoped to lodge in my brain. If I had known how educational the list was, I would have avoided it like a bath, but at that time in my life, it was simply a basic part of my existence.

The tire swing was in one of the large walnut trees in our back yard and consisted of a standard car tire tied with rope to a fairly horizontal branch of the tree. The limb was about fifteen feet above the ground. Our dad had tied the rope in such a way that the bottom of the tire was about three feet off the ground. This gave plenty of clearance when swinging, but made it a challenge for the smaller kids to get into the tire. I would either boost my little brother Gary into the swing, or find some suitable wobbly object for him to climb on when mounting the tire.

The ground around the swing contained many whole walnuts and various sharp pieces of walnut shells, so falling off the swing was always an experience. I think that the squirrels purposefully dropped walnut shells everywhere we played and then sat high in the branches and watched the



action, chuckling and elbowing each other every time we had to remove a walnut shell fragment from some part of our anatomy. Anyway, I boosted Gary up onto the tire swing and this time he decided to stand on the tire while holding tightly to the rope. This was an interesting way to ride, but it also required that someone push him. Being an inquisitive twelve-year-old who was interested in the sciences, I realized that this was the perfect opportunity to do a study on trajectories and gravity. I volunteered to push him.

He was enjoying the gentle arc of the swing, the spinning of the tire, and the wind rushing past his face. This was all fine and well, but I wasn't getting any good data for my experiment, so I pushed him a little higher. The noise he was now making was not quite so joyful, and the casual observer might have misconstrued this to be a sign of fear on his part. Having known him all his life, I knew that what he really wanted was to go higher, so I pushed him some more. This brought more strange sounds out of him, and if he would have known how to swear, I'm sure he might have deemed that to be a fine time to practice the skill, but all he managed to do was call for Mom. I knew now that my experiment was coming to an end, but I knew I could get one more good push in before he got the volume up to a level where Mom might actually hear him. I grabbed the tire as it passed over my head, ran at full speed, and threw with all my twelve-year-old might.

I found myself face down on the ground, and because I did not want to miss any relevant scientific data, I quickly rolled over just in time to see that the rope was no longer tight, but it was hanging in a long loose curl. For the first time this summer, Gary was totally quiet. My twelve-year-old scientific mind told me that the best thing for him to do at this point was to hold on tight, but because he had not acquired this knowledge at his young age, he let go. He was lying in the air, just as if he were in bed, staring straight up to the sky. I had been a good student the year before in my