

At recess and noon times on cold winter days, when we were tired of playing the usual games outside, or when we were just plain sick of the boys in school, the girls in the upper elementary classes usually took out their jacks and found a free spot on the classroom floor or at the end of a hallway. The boys, for some reason, had no interest in jacks, so they left us to our game and disappeared to pursue some interest of their own.

I found my jacks today. They were in a drawer in the desk, hiding behind some scotch tape and note pads. I took them out of their little cloth sack and looked them over. I had some inside jobs to do, but I procrastinated, not wanting to start cleaning the closet or straightening up the book shelves. So, I looked further in the desk and found a bouncy little rubber ball. I sat down on our hardwood floor all by myself, and I went through the old routine. All I lacked was a little competition. No matter how many mistakes I made, I won every time!

Jacks, when spun, make fine miniature tops. Cats enjoy playing with these small metal objects, and they can provide a great deal of exercise for the person who steps, barefooted, on an errant one inadvertently left on the floor after a game. Hopping around on one foot can be strenuous. Stepping on a jack can also make a person's vocabulary more colorful than usual.

I suppose there were many variations on the game of jacks. In our school, we played a particular set of games in a certain order. And we had rules. Touching a jack which was not supposed to be picked up at that time meant an end to one's turn. Dropping a jack or the ball had the same result.

We always began with "Babies." This was the easiest set of the game, the one through which all of us progressed rather quickly. "Eggs in the Basket" followed "Babies," and no one had much trouble with them, either. When one person missed, either by failing to catch the ball one handed, dropping it completely, picking up the wrong number of jacks, or breaking the rules in some other way, the ball and jacks were passed to the next girl in the circle. Each time a participant's turn rolled around, she started where she had left off at the end of her last turn.

But, then came "Grabs." This was the hardest set of all, because one had to progress all the way through without a miss or on the next turn, begin all over again. "Grabs" also involved holding all the jacks and the ball in the same hand as one progressed. My cousin, Karen, was the best jacks player of us all, mostly because she usually could get through "Grabs" on one try. She had long fingers, the ability to play the piano, and was generally agile-handed.

Beyond "Grabs" came "Double-Bounce," "Double-Bounce Pat," "Upball," "Downball," "Uppball Pat," "Downball Pat," "Pick A Cherry," "Pick a Cherry Pat," and, "Pigs...In, Under, Around, and Through the Fence." Finally, "The Cow Goes Around the Moon" was the last set. If we had decided on a game that went on from day to day, starting wherever we left off on the previous recess, we sometimes progressed to each girl playing with her less dominant hand. That provided a whole new set of problems.

I don't suppose girls play jacks any more. I wish they did. If I can keep the cats from chasing that rubber ball, I might get some of my old expertise back. I wonder if Runo would like to learn.