

With all the snow we have now and the fun we are having skiing and enjoying this good winter, there doesn't seem—on the surface—to be any reason for thinking about mud. Not even a January thaw disturbed our cold season. But, mud is on my mind for another reason. I wonder if children are interested in mud pies anymore. Do they even know of the existence of this wonderful source of entertainment? As few youngsters as one sees playing outside any time of the year, I suspect that this is a pastime that has largely disappeared during the last couple of generations of little kids.

I loved mud. I played in the mud and with the mud. Mud pies were included, but just walking through mud puddles barefooted, mud squishing up between my toes, and the sight of mud under my fingernails—these are visions of the past that are still intriguing.

There is a picture of my sister and me with our mother that is—even in black and white—perfectly descriptive of the situation. My mother, probably in her mid thirties, is sitting on a cement slab outside the kitchen door. In a striped dress that was, in my memory, black and green on a white or beige background with buttons down the front, she has one leg crossed over the other knee, her dark hair is perfectly curled, and she is wearing some kind of pumps. I think we had company that day, and our mother was, as always, well groomed.

Then, there is my sister. Her dark blond hair is in neat braids, and her bangs have been curled. She is wearing a cute outfit of shorts and blouse that our mother had sewed. She does have some dirt—or maybe a skinned place—on one leg, but she looks like a child who is normally concerned about cleanliness and order. She is standing alongside our mother, leaning her arm on our mother's knee.

Then, there is the little girl in the picture. I was probably about four years old. My hair is also in braids, but it is very messy. My face is downright dirty. My feet are bare, and the little dress I am wearing was, no doubt, clean and ironed when I put it on that morning, but by the time this snapshot was taken, it had obviously seen a lot of action. I am holding my mother's hand and quite probably trying to look innocent about something that I had surely been guilty of doing. I looked like a dirty little pig.

We did not go to bed dirty at night, but it must have been a chore for our mother to get me cleaned up each evening. For one thing, I had a fit if anyone tried to clean my fingernails. I believed that the black—from my adventures in the mud—was especially attractive, and I resisted all efforts to remove it. I still don't mind it all that much. During gardening season, my fingernails defeat all attempts to make them presentable.

I still do not hold with the old saying that "cleanliness is next to godliness." And, I think our underlying prejudices against people that aren't quite as clean as we think they should be is a rather sad commentary on the principles that we live by. I don't want to be filthy dirty like I aspired to as a child, but a little dirt doesn't hurt. I have always felt like Pigpen in the Peanuts cartoons who has this cloud of dirt hanging over his head all the time. If there is dirt or some kind of staining material in the vicinity, it will land on me. And,

I don't much care.