

Chapter 36

1950 – 1957

Stirling / Bannockburn

Home, School and Play – 1956-57 (vi)

Autumn 1956 in Bannockburn not only changed the pattern of my journeying to and from school in Stirling, but also offered, a greater variety of places to visit, more numerous shops in the historic village to explore, and plenty of opportunities to form new acquaintanceships out-with my previously somewhat limited school, cricket and tennis ‘circles’.

Home life too was a good deal noisier, as, apart from the accustomed sounds of children’s voices that come from living in a schoolhouse within school precincts, our front door was then a mere ten yards from the busy trunk road running from Edinburgh to Stirling. However, a compensatory factor was that I could, on school days, almost fall out of bed onto the bus-stop and catch one of three suitable double-deckers going into Stirling the 8.28 a.m. Cowie to Dunblane, or the 8.35 a.m. Polmont-Stirling, or the 8.40 Bannockburn-Cornton Crescent, Bridge of Allan, or, (last chance to make school by c. 9 a.m.!) if ‘sleepy-heid me’ missed all of those, the hope of finding standing-room on the always jam-packed single-decker 8.45 a.m. Edinburgh-Callander that I knew my cousin Marion Telfer always used to get from Falkirk to reach the private Beacon School that she attended in Bridge of Allan. Then, as the provision of school meals never bore any comparison to what Mrs McQue had ready at home, I used to sprint out of school at a quarter to one, run pell-mell down Spittal Street and King Street to the bus station, catch the five to one Stirling-Polmont, arrive home at ten past one, gobble the lunch provided, and then catch the one thirty-five back again. As others who also did this kind of to-ing and fro-ing used to say, “It was maitter o’ ‘gittin’ intae the hoose, dichtin’ yer feet, rinnin’ roon the table, kickin’ the cat, an’ then speedin’ awa’ oot agin”! I often felt a few years later that my stomach never really recovered completely from these daily scrambles.

Of course many of the pals that I made on these journeys were also of the feminine gender, and three of the ‘fairly’ innocent liaisons that I fondly recall developing from there [before, inevitably with flirtatious me, they faltered], involved a Sheena S., a Nancy G. and a Mary G. The first two ladies were not only comely (as was Mary!), but they also attracted me because of their respectively, beautiful contralto and soprano singing voices. I can still hear very clearly today, both Sheena’s memorable ‘One Fine Day’ from ‘Madame Butterfly’ performed in a Spring 1957 school concert in the Little Theatre, Stirling, and Nancy’s moving ‘*When I am laid in earth, May my wrongs create, No trouble in thy breast; Remember me, but ah! forget my fate.*’ in her sensitive interpretation of the tragic climax to the opera ‘Dido and Aeneas’ that we senior pupils performed in the Museum Hall, Bridge of Allan in the late summer term of 1957.

When, in September, 1956, I joined the kirk choir, the Sunday School teaching staff and the youth fellowship at the Allan Church, I met some interesting people of my own age, and slightly older ones too. Of these I recall, with perhaps greatest pleasure, Adair Anderson and his wife-to-be Moira McWattie, Christine Ferguson and Catherine Brodie. And indeed they in no small measure were responsible for my commitment the following year to seeking and gaining full membership of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland. Adair and Moira also introduced me to the mid-week winter evening Church Badminton Club. Being too much of a tennis player, I was pretty hopeless at this sport but their company, and that of others, was great.

Among the men there, was a Billy Moir and a Billy Rankin, whom I soon learned were leading figures in the local soccer club, Bannockburn Amateurs F.C. I expressed an interest in going to their winter indoor-training sessions in the town hall, and, lo and behold, after one such attendance soon after, I was invited to play as a 'trialist' in a league match at outside-left, on 'provisional signing-on forms'. The actual match, played at the King's Park in Stirling, was abandoned at half-time because of heavy snow but not before I had clearly convinced the management of my potential, because, immediately after the game I was asked if I would be prepared to sign for the club. As I was only seventeen and a half then, my parents' permission had to be obtained in writing for this to come about. However, I knew my dad, as a former left-half in the Vale o' Bannock side of 1924/25/26, would be absolutely delighted to accede to my request ... and that he did while mum in the background just shook her head and said, "John, there are just not enough hours in the week for you to do all you must do, as well as all you would like to do ... but like father, like son ... you'll try to anyway."

I was fortunate in the fact that I was joining one of the top amateur clubs in the Stirlingshire League, and thus it was a real pleasure to play alongside so many skilful players. My assets were sharp acceleration, good tactical vision, and the two-footedness that I had inherited from my ambi-dextrous dad. My comparative weakness in close-ball control was played down by our coaches as they sought more to exploit my strengths as 'a boy amongst men'! Matches were played on Saturday afternoons ... with additional mid-week encounters played after Easter until early June. Thus I had a very demanding schedule during the school rugby season, where I was also captaining the 1st XV each Saturday morning which remained unbeaten throughout the season



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T.G.B Dow, J.M. Bremner, J. Henderson, J.I. Watson, K.J. Marshall

Home morning inter-school rugby matches provided few obstacles to my getting to an afternoon soccer venue in time, but when such morning activities involved my getting back from Fife or Perth or Glasgow or Edinburgh in time for 2.15 p.m. kick-offs, dad's kindness as chauffeur was often needed ... but, on reflection, it was always so willingly given. In these days, forty-eight years ago, there was no substitution for injured players. Thus I often felt that I was a bit of a liability to the 'Amateurs' when, towards the end of the gruelling rugby season, I invariably took cramp during the last ten minutes of the afternoon second forty-five. But Bannockburn had a hospital orderly, 'wee Alex Beedie', on their volunteer 'medical' team. He had emaciated hands from previous work in the pits. But these hands were the most effective massage 'implements' that I have ever had the good fortune to experience, as he got to work on me in these bouts of 'rigor' on the touch-line, and he never failed to get more vital minutes of running out of my over-worked legs. Anyway by late April 1957, we had finished top of the Stirlingshire League, just pipping Grangemouth Railway Athletic FC for the title. Then we won the Stirlingshire Knock-Out Shield in May. By early June, only the Buchan Trophy competition lay between us and a clean-sweep. But being a participant in this final was not going to be for me, as, in the semi-final against Fallin Church Amateurs at Causewayhead Park, (a mere stone's throw from my birthplace about eighteen years before) I sustained a nasty injury from a reckless sliding tackle that tore most all the ligaments of my right ankle and instep.

That signalled the end of both the soccer and cricket seasons for me that summer as 'wee Alex' almost daily treated me freely with his 'lamp' and his magical hands in his own home during his off-duty evenings. Such un-paid servants of sport and sports-people like 'wee Alex' are the 'salt of the earth'. Within two weeks, he had me walking again. But I did not return to full fitness until about September 1957, just before matriculating to start studying for a BSc at Glasgow University. My previously unchallenged place on the left wing had been more or less permanently lost to another before my 'come-back'. But ironically I got back in the team on my weaker flank, at outside-right! A good run for us in the Scottish Cup to the sixth-round attracted national press interest and most of the younger members of our side, including me, were given trials with various professional clubs. Mine were with Stirling Albion and Third Lanark. But both of my trials came to nought, and I soon retired from soccer in February 1958, partly from the after-effects of an emergency appendix operation, and a real need to concentrate on catching up with my degree studies in Mathematics, Natural Philosophy and Chemistry.

If I did not become a soccer player destined for greatness from the sharp learning curve of these two seasons, what I did see, and learn a bit more about, was adult life amongst 'real working men'. And I look back with gratitude at the blessings I received from the camaraderie of these folks:

Pat Hooks (Manager), Tommy Todd (Selector), Willie Toon (Goal-keeper), Alex 'Rumba' Thomson (Right-back), Tam Nisbet (Left-back and local policeman), Billy Rankin (Right-half), Harry Bruce (Centre-half), Billy Moir (Left-half and Captain), Angus Kerr (Outside-right and a fellow student), Johnny Grant (Inside-right), Drew Rogerson (Centre-forward), Bert Ivatt (Inside-left) and 'Yours truly' (Outside-left).