

The Fort

John R. Cionca

This unpublished article was written in February, 1985

“Hey, Dad, why can’t we build a fort?”

“What kind of fort, Ben?”

“The kind that we can play in, and even sleep in.”



Flashback. It seems like only yesterday I was asking my father the same question. Then I remembered the two-story house that Wayne and I built in my backyard. All together it wasn’t more than four and a half feet tall, but it was great. We even had a secret panel where we kept the pretzels.

“Sure, Ben, I think we can build one together. Mr. Hanrahan told me that he found some good boards in the dumpster at the new housing development. He said the construction superior said anything in the dumpster was free for the taking. Let’s go check it out.”

Ben and I were expecting to find some scraps – what a shocker! Bonanza! There were 2 by 4s, 2 by 8s, 6 inch siding and even pieces of plywood. Sifting through our new treasure, I would hear: “Hey, Dad, here’s a beauty!” or “How about this one?” We loaded the car, we couldn’t believe our “find”.



At home we began by laying out the boards that would form the walls. Ben and Betsy measured two feet between the studs, and then I began nailing them together. By 9 PM we had three walls built; on Saturday we tied them together and supported the structure with cross pieces until we could find more

siding.

A second trip to the dumpster produced more 2 by 4s for the roof, and some additional siding. The construction resumed. I started the nails for the siding and Ben and Betsy drove them in. Sure they missed often and scarred the wood, but it was their idea and their fort. Before long, Betsy’s friend Michelle, and Ben’s friend

Joel, were helping with the project. “Why play when we can build something” was the pervading neighborhood attitude.

The kids especially like nailing down the plywood roof. Two 4 by 8’ sheets of purchased wood would have made the job easy, but I fitted our “free wood” together so that each rested securely on at least three studs. The gang members poked their heads up through the open spots in the roof to hammer more nails.



Painting was also a blast! Rolling was more popular than brushing, but with each stroke the children could see what they had accomplished.

Though we had to buy some trim, screening for the windows, hinges for an old door, and two gallons of paint, our investment was small compared to the fun we had. For less than \$60, we had a kid size, two-story home.

The fort has provided many days and evenings of fun. Each overnight in “the loft” was a special time. When older, the children may primarily remember the popcorn and the privilege of staying up a little later than normal bedtime. I hope they’ll also cherish our conversations, the singing of choruses, and our retiring prayers.



I wish I could say that I spend a lot of time each day with my children. Daily I struggle with the pace and race of life’s demands. But in addition to daily moments, projects like the fort have been special to our family.

In nine years Ben will be in college; the following year Betsy will join him. Maybe then the fort will be a storage shed; maybe I’ll just leave it as it is, along with the porch swing grooved with Ben’s one-year-old teeth marks.

Whether the fort stands or falls, my children and I will always have the memories of this experience together.

The cost was nominal; the time we minimal; but the experience was tremendous.

Thanks, Ben, for asking if we could build a fort. Thanks God for really neat children.