

Recess Games of the Old Country School

**By
Tom Isern**

The consolidation of Kansas schools, by which the one-room country school gave way to the graded town school, was among the most important transitions in the cultural history of the state. Arguments for and against consolidated schools were emotional and often specious on both sides, and in the end, they were moot. What accomplished consolidation was not that one side prevailed in the debate, but that rural population diminished so disastrously as to destroy the viability of the rural independent school districts.

There has been little informed post-mortem comment on the relative quality of the educational experience provided by the town schools as compared to that offered by the country schools. Modern school administrators, in line with their professional training, have assumed the superiority of their schools and espoused a gospel of progress. The only serious historian to examine the question, Wayne Fuller (in *The Old Country School: The Story of Rural Education in the Middle West*), has weighed the virtues and defects of the old system and concluded that it worked rather well---educating the children, providing a locus of community, and breeding pure democracy. Perhaps, Fuller writes, more has been lost than gained.

Among the losses, too, are the traditional games played during recess at the country schools. These games stood in contrast to those played today in the town schools, which largely represent homogenized, urbanized, supervised American popular culture. The country school recess games represented rural folklife.

The contrast is both apparent and profound. Children in town schools today associate and play only with children their own age. At recess teachers supervise pupils playing the organized sports common to

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American popular culture--soccer, softball, and so on. The schools have spacious playgrounds and ample equipment. Children in the old country schools all played together, grades one to eight. Games had to be so designed that all sizes of pupils could take part without dismembering one another. Teachers rarely supervised play; most had work to do during recess, and some younger ones joined in the games, but in either case there was no referee. The players had to be self-governing. Equipment was scarce. Children had to do without or make use of junk (sticks, rocks, tin cans) and fixed objects (fences, trees, the schoolhouse) in their games. Instead of existing in an illusory world where everyone was the same age, pupils in the country schools became accustomed to competition and cooperation with comrades of various ages. In settling their own disputes they learned basic fairness--not that fairness always ruled, but they recognized it even when it was violated. They learned to improvise in the absence of resources.

Moreover, the games played were different in basic ways from sports such as soccer or softball. In such sport contests there are two teams, and one defeats the other. In most of the country school games, the winning parties absorbed the losing ones into their own team rather than defeating them. Thus the games in the country schools informally taught ideals of community and citizenship profoundly different from those of the town schools.

It is probably impossible to re-establish this fusion of recreation with democracy for today's pupils, but if they are to understand the cultural influences of earlier generations, it is desirable at least to re-create it for study. Presented with these games, children still play them with enthusiasm. Unfortunately, few know how to play them without initial help. Hence this article, designed to encourage perpetuation of traditional country school recess games as living documents of cultural history.

Presented below are instructions for and comments about four common country school recess games--"Annie Over," "New York and Boston," "Dare Base," and "Fox and Geese."

Annie Over

This favorite recess game (known also by “Andy Over,” “Auntie Over,” and other variant names) required two pieces of equipment----a ball (which might be improvised of string or cloth) and a building with a single gable (such as was common with country schoolhouses).

This game, like most others, began with choosing sides, whether by captain’s choice, by numbering off, or by some other method. One side then took a position on one side of the schoolhouse, the other on the opposite side. One of the two sides had the ball.

A player from the side with the ball then tried to throw it over the schoolhouse, crying at the same time, “Annie Over!” If it fell short and rolled back, the side called out, “Pigtail!”, and tried again. If it cleared to the other side, someone there would catch it.

The chase, which was the heart or most recess games, then ensued. The side that had thrown the ball had to circle the schoolhouse and return to its own side. The side that had received the ball tried to hit players from the other side with the ball as they passed. Strategy was important here: the side with the ball might put it into the hands of an older kid, who was fleet and a good thrower, or it might place it with a younger kid who might not be suspected of having it. Hiding the ball and feinting were good tactics.

Anyone hit with the ball was taken into the receiving team. Next that team threw to the other, and so on, repeating until all the players were on the same side.

New York and Boston

“New York and Boston” (also known as “New Orleans”) combined creativity and exercise. It required no equipment, although fences and similar fixed objects were useful as bases. After the two sides were chosen, they each established a home base, the two home bases being a reasonable running distance apart. Then one side left its home base and approached the other, stopping at a designated line in front of the opposing side.

A dialog ensued, the approaching team initiating it.

- “Here we come!”
- “Where you from?”

- “New York.” (Or “Boston,” or “New Orleans.”)
- “What’s your trade?”
- “Lemonade.”
- “Show us some, if you’re not afraid!”

The approaching team had agreed earlier on an activity, animal, or concept to act out to the waiting team. If they had agreed to act out “bears,” for instance, then they would begin making bear--like motions. The waiting side tried to guess the charade. As soon as one of them called it out correctly (“Bears!”), they chased the actors back toward their own home base.

Anyone caught became a part of the chasing team, which next became the approaching and acting team. The process repeated until everyone was taken into one side.

Dare Base

“Dare Base” (also known as “Prisoners Base”) was the queen of the recess games. It began with choosing sides, after which each side designated a home base, a prisoners base (or “stink base”), and a dare base (see diagram).

A player from one side coyly approached the dare base of the other side. He finally touched the dare base, whereupon he ran back toward his home base, players from the other side in pursuit, attempting to capture him by slapping him on the back. If they caught him, they took him to their stink base, and he had to stay there.

That was simple enough. A complication was that any player who left his home base could be pursued by a player from the other side. The rule was that any player who left his home base could be captured by a member of the other team who had left his home base at a later moment.

One more complication: players could free teammates stranded on the other team’s stink base by touching them. Of course, players attempting to liberate their comrades from the stink base were liable to be caught by opposing players who subsequently left their home base.

DARE BASE



queen of the recess games

Several distinctive aspects of this game are obvious. First, it emphasized cooperation. Team members rescued one another from the stink base. The rescuer had to risk his own status for a teammate; the prisoner had to concede his own helplessness and await aid from a comrade. Second, there were laurels to be won. The player who freed a number of teammates from the stink base was the hero of the moment. Third, the game was full of strategy. As the action unfolded, team members decided among themselves who would pursue members of the other team, who would stand watch over prisoners, and who would attempt to liberate captured teammates. These arrangements had to be adjusted as more people were captured or freed. And finally, dare base was a game rife with dispute. The great point of contention was the provision that the player who left home base later was eligible to capture an opposing player who left home base earlier. It was hard to keep track of who left home base when. Arguments were frequent and punctuated with the cry, "I had the base on you!"

Fox and Geese

No other recess game stirs such fond memories as does "Fox and Geese," because this game built upon the excitement engendered among the children by new-fallen snow, which the game required.

The players first tramped the snow in an open place into a pattern

resembling a wheel with a hub and four spokes. If there were many players, the wheel might have two rims to accommodate them.

Most of the players then were designated “geese” and congregated in the hub. One was called the “fox” and roamed about the spokes and rim of the snow-packed wheel. The idea was for the geese to run from the hub out the spokes, around the rim, and back another spoke to the hub, the fox in pursuit. The hub was a safe area for the geese. If the fox caught a goose, then the goose became another fox, and so on until all were caught.

(Portions of this essay are adapted from the book, *Plains Folk: A Commonplace of the Great Plains*, by Jim Hoy and Tom Isern, published by the University of Oklahoma Press.)



View of a student standing at a chalk board working on arithmetic, between 1890 and 1920.
Courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society, Kansas Memories.