

## Growing Up In Gaithersburg

By Marien Helz

### Sugarloaf Mountain



Since our town was a small farming village when we moved in, there were no playgrounds. Most parents, when I was growing up in Gaithersburg, had come of age and been searching for jobs during the depression, so a frivolous waste of money on numerous toys was not something that they were about to do. One of my father's favorite methods of entertaining us was to take us out to the mountains and let us explore the woods. Sugarloaf Mountain was our destination on many Sundays. Some of my earliest memories are of times on Sugarloaf.

One of those memories is of the time we went on a picnic with a family from my father's work. I remember nothing about the family except that they had a first aid kit when my parents didn't. That was memorable because when it was time to leave and both families were packed up, my folks suddenly realized that my brother was nowhere around. He had to have been about four years old at the time, so there was controlled alarm at his having wandered off. Then I saw his face appear as he pulled himself up over a boulder, and the face was crying. When the full brother appeared, so did blood running from a gash beside his left knee in several rivers down into his sock. He has carried a thick, four inch scar from that time on.

On another occasion when I was around three years old, we had gone shortly after I had once again cut my bangs—something I had a compulsion to do. I'd get the bench by the bathroom sink when I managed to be there with no one else around, climb up, get the scissors out of the medicine cabinet, and cut. Boy, did that make my parents mad. At any rate, we were at Sugarloaf after one of those bangs cutting episodes, and my father was taking pictures of everyone as he always did. I sorrowfully told him that he never took any pictures of me. "Well," he responded, "you look so ugly with your bangs cut, that I didn't think you'd want your picture taken."

He wasn't from the *Be Gentle* school of child rearing.

None the less, he got his camera ready, and told me to run since that was what I was always doing. The picture that he took then was one of my parents' favorites even though it wasn't that clear a photograph.

By the time my brother and I were nine and ten years old, we were allowed to go off hiking on our own. I had the choice of going with my brother, or staying with my parents and getting nagged every minute. Not a choice. My sister didn't mind staying alone with the parents since she was *the baby*, and things were different for her. My brother was glad to have me along since he would not have been allowed to go alone because our instructions were always to stay together so that if one got hurt, the other could get help. The last thing my father always said was, "Don't take any chances."

The problem was that my brother was bigger than I was. Obviously along with the height advantage, there was an additional reach advantage. That meant that what he could reasonably manage could be tricky for me. On one memorable rock climbing trip, he had picked a route that threaded up a series of boulders forming a considerable cliff. He got to the top, but although I was only a short distance behind him, I could not reach the holds he had used. Not only was there no crevice to put my fingers in, there was not even a dimple in the rock that I could reach. He was crouched at the top trying to



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tell me where to grab hold. He looked very small and very far away.

I looked below, and there was a vertical drop of boulder after boulder after boulder. I knew that I could never climb back down. Difficult as it had been getting to this point, returning while not being able to see where I was going, would be fatal. It was unlikely that I would be able to hold on where I was for long enough for my brother to go bring help.

With an extraordinary force of sheer will, I grabbed a small crease, hoping that my hands and feet wouldn't slip, and pushed myself to fight to the top.

On our return, the first thing my father always said was a stern, "Did you take any chances?"

I never answered that question. I let my brother speak for us, and he always replied, "No."

He may not have, but I had taken chances. I had taken a big chance of smashing my skull on rock thirty feet below.

Since my brother's interest in rock climbing never waned, he must not have felt in danger despite the fact that my feelings were the stuff of nightmares. In his initial semester at Princeton, he immediately joined a mountain climbing club involving in the real thing. He learned how to rappel—dropping down cliffs by dangling from ropes. At Christmas break, when our parents were otherwise occupied, we went up to the attic where he fastened a rope to one of the supports, and harnessed himself up to rappel out of the attic window. I watched as he used his feet to spring away from the brick wall in large bounces down. But the rope had gotten away from him and he fell two thirds of the drop, clearly out of control. He managed to regain mastery of the technique, got safely to the ground, came in the kitchen door and up to the attic where I was waiting.

"Now it's your turn," he said. "Do you want to do it?"

For the first time to my brother, I said, "No."



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