Sledding recaptures winter memories

It was the Christmas holiday circa 1969 and our family had traveled from our home near Milwaukee to visit relatives on the farm, which six months later would become our permanent residence.

I had just turned 6 and my brother Kevin was 9. There was snow on the ground and we decided to go sledding.

The snow was covered with a glaze of ice. Combined with our plastic saucer, it was the perfect recipe for speed. We skimmed across the crusty surface, rapidly shooting down the hill.

At the bottom of our sledding hill was a woven wire fence, but we didn’t come close to hitting it during our many trips, as we were always thrown off by bumps.

That is until the last ride, when Kevin fell off and I held on for dear life before running face-first into the fence.

I was left with a bloodied and broken nose and, as Kevin still says 55 years later, “a face that looked like a waffle.” It was the first of at least four nose breaks in my life and was my first visit to the clinic in Black River Falls.

Good thing the fence wasn’t barbed wire.

When we wanted some serious sledding, we’d make the trip to the steeper hills across the creek. Sometimes we’d be joined by cousins and we’d pile as many as we could onto the  six-foot toboggan, a jumbled mass of crossed arms and legs.

There were a few trees and grassy hummocks, but we managed to avoid them and try to coax the sled a little further with every trip. We didn't head for home until we were exhausted, wet and cold or until the short winter day came to an end.

Thoughts of those days came to mind recently when the grandkids did some sledding the day after Christmas. The hill was pretty close to the scene of my 1969 episode, but the fence is gone.

The grandsons – ages 13, 11, 9 and 5 – rode the toboggan together and tried the plastic sled and the metal saucers. Our son Ross joined in. Even I took a couple of trips, which were pretty slow as my weight pushed the sled deeper into the wet snow – heavy butts are not built for speed.

Metal saucers and heavy butts brought back another distant memory from the late ‘60s. Dad had taken us sledding to Whitnall Park in Milwaukee. To show us “how it’s done,” he took the saucer over one of the sledding hills and came down with a doink. His butt cheeks were perfectly molded into the saucer and our sledding day was over.

After the sledding our grandson Samuel – the youngest – and his father Ross built a snowman. Charcoal served as eyes and a nose, with baby carrots as teeth. I found a couple of orange marker flags for the arms.

It was the perfect ending to the holiday and brought back memories of the scent of wet wool from mittens and caps drying out by the wood stove or over floor registers.

Those were simpler days when we had no video games, no computers, no smart phones, no recorded movies and only two channels on TV. The snow meant outside fun with sledding, building forts and engaging in snowball combat.

I hope my grandchildren will have similar memories someday when they reminisce.

*Chris Hardie spent more than 30 years as a reporter, editor and publisher. He was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and won dozens of state and national journalism awards. He is a former president of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association. Contact him at [chardie1963@gmail.com](mailto:chardie1963@gmail.com).*