

Tobogganing at Glen Ellyn

by
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I engaged in one other physical activity while in the seminary at Glen Ellyn-tobogganing. Like most Catholic educational institutions of the era, Maryknoll in the 1960s subscribed to the ancient ideal of *mens sana in corpore sano*, a sound mind in a sound body. Physical exercise and sports were thus an integral, if informal, part of the curriculum.

A couple of my classmates took this injunction to rather extreme lengths. One guy, for example, spent much of his free time in the field house at the back of the seminary property whaling away at a leather punching bag suspended from the ceiling. Another, coming from somewhere out west, devoted himself to repeatedly flicking a long rawhide bullwhip he'd brought with him from home.

I threw myself into tobogganing.

Exactly how or why Maryknoll acquired a wooden toboggan, launching platform and slide, and toboggan run are questions that never occurred to me to ask. But I took advantage of these throughout the long, cold, windy Illinois winters.

The set-up was practically Olympic in scale. Set in the middle of a copse of evergreen trees at the top of a long slope was a wooden structure, rising perhaps ten feet above the frozen ground. This was the launch site for the toboggan run. Wooden steps perpendicular to the slide led up to a platform about 25 feet square. From there riders clambered down onto a four-man wooden toboggan held in place-

how, I no longer recall—at the top of a 15-foot long slide comprised of a series of steel rollers affixed to a frame. The online archive maintained by my classmate, Ray, contains a marvelous picture of four of us guys in bulky winter coats and hoods sitting on the toboggan just after it has left the slide and started on its downhill run. I am sitting third from the front with my arms awkwardly around the guy in front of me and showing an expression combining uneasy anticipatory excitement with sheer incredulity at the folly of what we were doing.

What followed would have been a barely-controlled careening down a track worn in the deep snow, punctuated by whoops or, on occasion, screams, coming from the riders. Most of the time the toboggan made it all the way to the bottom of the 100-yard slope, usually stopping perilously close to the DuPage creek that ran across the bottom land. But there was always the possibility that careless steering, unbalanced seating, or some unevenness in the track might cause the toboggan to tip over suddenly, ejecting its riders into a confused pile of bodies half buried in the snow. I had this exhilarating but frightening experience more than once. The anticipation, even the expectation, of such an event produced in me and, I assume, in my fellow riders, a *frisson* of tension that added to the thrill of the ride.

After the toboggan came to rest one way or another, the riders grabbed the rope that had been tied to either side of the upturned front end, dragged the board around to face uphill, and then hauled

it back up the slope to be positioned for the next run.

Although a generally serious young man supposedly preparing for a religious career, on the toboggan I was a little kid again, shrieking my head off in delight along with my fellow riders. Thoughts of missionary work in the steaming jungle of Bolivia did not enter my mind.