

# *No Fear of Heights*

*by Frederick Wickert*



In July of 1947 I was at the school with my dad. Dad was a vocational agriculture teacher and unlike most teacher positions, it was a year around job. There was no summer off for him.

When we had arrived at the school that morning, we encountered the bus mechanic and helper as well as the two custodians of the building. They were discussing the painting of the school flagpole, which Haid, one of the custodians was planning on doing that morning.

Dad asked how he planned to do that. In those days the man-lifts and bucket trucks that are so common now, did not yet exist. Dad knew there was no safe way to prop a ladder against the flagpole. Haid just smiled and said, "Oh, I'll manage. Nothing to it really."

We went on into the school building to do some work in the shop. The vo-ag teacher had additional responsibilities as shop teacher and some of the benches and tool handles needed repair before the coming school year.

Later, it was time to go on a farm visit and as we left the building the bus mechanics helper said to Dad, "there's a bird out there on the flag pole that wants to see you." We walked around to the front of the building and there was Haid at the top of the flagpole painting it from the top down.

A rope stretched from the school roof twenty feet away, to the top of the flag pole where it was secured at the base of the brass ball on top of the pole. Haid had rigged a boatswain's chair of rope and was comfortably swinging in it. It was arranged so that he could lower himself as he painted the pole. When he was finished, he returned to the roof of the school and retrieved the rope.

When asked where he had learned to do something like that, Haid told us his story. He was a Scandinavian. When he was twelve years old, he got a berth on a merchant sailing vessel as a cabin boy and went to sea. He sailed all over the world, working his way up from cabin boy to deck hand, and as such he learned to work high in the rigging of the ship, handling the sails with ease.

After seven years at sea, his ship docked in New York Harbor and he decided to leave the ship there. He knew no one and had no place to go in particular. As he was walking the streets of New York, he came on some men who were discussing how they were going to get some work done in a high steeple of a cathedral. He stepped up and offered to do the work if they were willing to pay him for it.

Pay for doing that was quite handsome compared to other working wages of the time, so he took the job and performed it using his knowledge of rigging ropes. When that job was finished, he found work in the high steel structures of skyscrapers being built. It was not easy to get men to do the high work. Most of them were Native Americans. Insurance companies refused to sell life insurance to those workers because the job was just too dangerous and a number of men lost their lives doing it. The work paid better than most and Haid felt at home with it.

By the late 1920's, the City of New York was going to build a dam for a water supply reservoir in Gilboa in the Catskill Mountains. Hayward Regular, known as Haid to most had met a Scandinavian girl he wanted to marry and decided to bring his new bride to Gilboa and took work on the dam.

He built a small home in Gilboa and he and his happy bride raised a family there. In the mid 1930's the dam was completed so Haid took a job as the school custodian and worked there until his retirement. He and his wife were well liked people. Their children left the area after they grew up and they lived out their lives together in Gilboa, content to remain there in the mountains.

When I made my first overseas trip in the military, I was going to cross the Atlantic on a troop ship. I was concerned about seasickness and while home on leave before going. I asked Haid if there was a way to prevent seasickness. No one knew about Dramamine back then.

Haid told me the best thing to do was keep your stomach full. He said get a few boxes of crackers and keep munching on them between meals. While on the ship I followed his advice. I took crackers in my duffle bag. The ship had a canteen and I bought plenty of crackers. We got into some rough weather, and I was one of the very few people aboard that ship that did not get sick.

I was always thankful to Haid for that advice. Oh yes, not only did I not get sick, I gained ten pounds on that voyage.