

Saving For Wheaties

Jack Armstrong, the All American boy, was one of my childhood heroes, and I listened to his radio show each night before I had to do my chores. The program was on at 5:15 PM and I would play after the bus brought me home from school until then, listen to the fifteen-minute show and then gather eggs and throw hay down from the hay mow for the cows to eat after they were milked, and put straw in the covered barn for their bedding. I was about ten at the time and hadn't been assigned the tough jobs at that point, but these chores would take me about one hour each night.

During the commercial for Jack's show on one particular night, the sponsor, Wheaties: The Breakfast of Champions breakfast cereal (I ate this cereal because I wanted to be a champion like, among others, Rev. Bob Richards, one of the stars pictured on the box), announced that listeners who already had the secret decoder ring, might want to purchase a simulated airplane cockpit to practice their flying skills. Yes, I had already purchased my decoder ring with four box tops and a dime, and listened during each program to write down the encoded message for the day.

Usually, the twisting of the ring setting would spell out some message like, Buy War Bonds, or Help with the Family Garden, but I tried to never miss one of the secret messages. Once the airplane cockpit offer was announced I set my heart on getting my own cockpit. Only, four box tops and one dollar and the cockpit would be mine. The dream

would not have to be put on hold for long because I already had seventy-five cents and three box tops!

The following Monday was the beginning of Vacation Bible School and this year it was to be held in Vanlue, a small village about seven miles from our farm home. Vanlue had about two hundred and fifty residents, a hardware store, a grocery store and an Evangelical United Brethren Church. This church was a sister church to the Mount Zion Evangelical United Brethren Church, the church about a quarter of a mile down the road from our house where we attended.

The weekend before Vacation Bible School started, I lobbied my mother to buy another box of Wheaties (for that last box top), but was informed that the box we had, one of those large economy sized boxes, would probably not be empty by the time she did her weekly grocery shopping on Friday, so that I would have to wait for almost two weeks to get that needed last box top! When you live in the country, five and half miles from the nearest grocery store, you learn to wait for the things you might like to have. Oh well, it would take just a bit longer than I had planned.

My mother drove the bible school car pool the first day and as I was getting out, she said that the information she had received from the teacher said that we would be provided the morning snack and lunch, but would need to have five cents each day if we were to buy an ice cream cone or a pop cycle from the nearby grocery store for our afternoon snack. She gave me the five cents and off I went to school. The first

day was uneventful, but I kept thinking about my Jack Armstrong cockpit, and hatched a plan. I knew from the price on the box of Wheaties that the cost was twenty-four cents. I figured that if I saved my nickel each day of the five-day school, I would have enough money to buy my box of cereal and have the needed box top. I figured I could do some extra work for my father or mother during the next few days to earn the twenty-five cents I still needed, and the cockpit order could be placed by the weekend.

I didn't realize how hard it would be to be the only kid not having a treat each day and almost gave in several times to temptation. Kids would tease me about not having a pop cycle, but that only seemed to steel my resolve. I didn't tell anyone why I didn't have the money, or about my plan to buy the cockpit. Each night, I put the nickel in my sock drawer, in my decoder ring box.

When Friday afternoon break finally arrived, I marched down to the store and purchased my box of Wheaties, for twenty-three cents, I might add! The grocer put it in a bag and I couldn't wait to go home to show my Mom. When Mrs. Roberts dropped me off at my house that afternoon I raced into the house ready to unveil my purchase, but before I could even take the Wheaties out of the bag, I noticed a box of Wheaties setting on the kitchen table. Mom had purchased the box of Wheaties I had wanted! When I showed her the box I had bought, she felt so bad that I had not had a snack all week that she purchased my box from me for the twenty-three cents it had cost me! I now had the box top AND the twenty-five cents I needed...four box tops

and one dollar. I quickly added the money and box tops to the order blank I had already completed and took it to the mailbox...about twenty hours before the mailman would be arriving.

It took nearly eight weeks for my cockpit to arrive, although the commercial said it would be there in four to six weeks. At the four-week mark I started greeting the mailman every day to see if my shipment had arrived, and when the package finally came, I think the mailman was as glad to see it get there as I was. I quickly took the package inside and assembled the cockpit. It turned out to be a cardboard instrument panel with dials and gages printed on it, and a stick (with which to pilot the plane) and several cardboard ailerons and rudders.

I was to place an aileron on each side on me on a table and weight each down with a can of soup, or the like, to hold them in place and place the rudder behind me on a stool and weight it down in a similar fashion. Then I was to connect the stick to the ailerons and rudder by strings (not included) in such a way that when I would pull or push the stick back and forth, the rudder would go up and down, and when I moved the stick from side to side the ailerons would move up and down so as to make the "plane" roll around it's axis. It took about forty-five minutes to put the cockpit together and it was fun because I was anticipating all the "flying" I would soon be doing. When I started the actual "flying" I found that to be fun too...for about half an hour. Nothing really happened and the ailerons kept falling off of the table. This lessened the illusion of flying I noticed! After about an hour and a half, most of the

fun was over and I never reassembled the cockpit again, except for one time to show my cousin, Bobby, and he said it was “looked dumb.”

I kept using my decoder ring, I didn't hate Jack Armstrong, I still ate (and eat Wheaties...because I still have the dream of being a champion!) but I learned to lower some of my expectations when promised certain things. That has been a lesson I have had to learn over and over in life. I have tended to be too optimistic (naive?) about promises/advertisements/agreements and have learned to lower my expectations so I won't be disappointed as often.

I do things now because I want to do them and not because I have an expectation of an equal return. If I mow someone's yard all summer because they are sick, I use to think they might mow my yard sometime...but I now mow the yard because it seems to be the right thing to do, and have no expectations other than the good feelings I get from helping others. This way, any time someone “mows my yard” it is like a gift one receives at a surprise party.

My advice to the young would be to save your money and buy cockpits...some will disappoint you, and others will turn out great...just like everything else in life.

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