

## Homemade Toys & Pranks

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### From Jim Klein

In the process of writing down some family history, I recalled a story my Ger-Rus grandfather told me over 40 years ago. The story was about the pranks he and other youngsters would play upon people in the Bowdle, South Dakota area in the 1890's.

The problem is, I can't remember the name of the homemade toy they used, so I will describe it and hope that someone can name it.

A knife is used to cut a sequence of teeth and notches around the rims of both ends of a large wooden spool of thread that has been used up. A stick is whittled to form a smooth dowel that fits into the hole of the spool with enough clearance to freely spin the spool. Then an arm's length of string is wound around the spool.

Pressing the spool with the dowel next to an outside window and then quickly pulling the string will cause a loud racket as the spinning teeth chatter against the window pane.

My grandfather said that he and 3 or 4 older boys would sneak out at night and quietly surround a house. Each would take a different window, and when the ringleader started his noisemaker all the others would simultaneously spin their's startling the people inside with noise coming from all directions. Of course the boys would then flee into the darkness and regroup to hit up the next house.

I don't know if this noisemaker was wide-spread among American youth at that time or if it was peculiar to Ger-Rus youngsters. Either way, I would like to know the name of this toy and anecdotes from others.

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### From David Easterday

In the 1940s my brother and I found plans for the window rattler you described in some main-stream publication. It may have been a cub scout handbook. You would never find it there today. We made them to use on Halloween. When our father saw what we were up to (He was born in Salina, Kansas in 1901 of German-Russian parents) he told us what they used to do on Halloween.

Two nights before Halloween was "corn night." The pranksters would fill their pockets with dried, shelled corn and throw it at peoples windows to frighten or more likely annoy those inside. The next night was gravel night and they did the same thing with gravel or chat. Halloween night was also know as outhouse night on which they went around turning over outhouses which were not always empty. They did not "trick or treat" on Halloween. None of the above can be considered ethnic in character. However, on New Year Day the children in his family would go to the homes of their German-Russian relatives and neighbors and ask the parents or other elders of the household for their blessing which was always given.

Then they could perform a skit or sing a song and be rewarded with candy or other treats much like trick or treat is practiced in some localities today. I think that is a German tradition.

Nobody asked, but my grandfather's favorite comic strip is said to have been the Katzenjammer Kids.

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**Electronic mail message from Mary Ellen Lanigan Reisenauer, San Bruno, California**

My late father in law once told me of the toys that he and his siblings had. My late father in law was George Reisenauer who was born in North Dakota in 1920. His father was Ignatz Reisenauer who had been born in Russia. The children didn't really have toys and dad told us that they collected various size rocks and pretended that they were their toys. It was all very sad to me but, I do know that a lot of people would think this a funny story. When George grew up, he bought lots of toys for his children and also for himself. He just couldn't get enough of these. He did collect horse figures and all the family bought him horses to add to his collection for all occasions. Besides being a farmer, he was also a great carpenter and made a lot of his own furniture and well as doll houses for his kids, and grandchildren. My daughter, has a victorian doll house that she will be handing down to her daughter Amber Lee Maguire. It is almost 4 feet high! I also have a jewelery box that George made for me. He also made his wife and other's these boxes as gifts. He was really a great carpenter, and a great person. He will always be remembered through not only these great gifts that he made but, also in our hearts. Hope you enjoyed this story.