

## Excerpt from *The Marble Hunt*, 1955

In the fall of 1955, the school year began on a Monday in late August just like it did in so many American communities. It hadn't been like that in years before. Perhaps since the Alabama public school system was formed or maybe since the end of the Civil War, the term started in late summer and then recessed when the cotton crop ripened so that farm children could help with picking for a few weeks. The recess was known simply as "cotton picking" and was bittersweet since we had to start school early, and then just about the time we settled into a routine—vacation again! But with the advent of mechanical harvesters, the need for cotton-picking vacation vanished, the schools abolished it, and we moved a notch closer to urban America with a typical school year.

Our classes were not grouped in the common four-year Junior High School and four-year High School. We were in "Grammar School" during grades one through six, "Junior High School" during seven and eight, and in "High School" during nine through twelve. Grammar School occupied one building, and Junior High and Senior High shared a second building. Thus, all the kids in grades seven through twelve could interact at recess if they were so inclined.

Eli Stonecipher graduated the previous spring and went off to college at Auburn. Jack Stonecipher, Eli's brother, was in the ninth grade, I was in the eighth grade, and Kavanaugh was in the eleventh grade.

On the first day of school at morning recess, Jack started at the Junior High end of the building and went down the hall handing out a mimeographed<sup>1</sup> leaflet. I can't reproduce the true appearance of a mimeographed page, but here is more or less what it looked like and what it said.

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<sup>1</sup> A mimeograph is a machine that prints multiple copies of a page using a master copy of waxed mulberry paper. One side of the page is covered with ink, but the ink cannot penetrate the wax. If the waxed sheet is struck by a typewriter key or marked with a pointed tool, the metal cuts through the wax and ink can flow onto the printed copy only where it was marked. A freshly printed page brought with it not only the information printed on it, but also a pungent smell from the ink solvent that was considered by some as very pleasant and by others as abominable. The people with the page held over their faces and inhaling deeply were the ones who liked it.

A Treasure Hunt for  
All Frog Level Adventurers!

All the best of Eli Stonecipher's marble collection has been hidden somewhere in the Sipsey Swamp. Clues to the location of the marble collection will be issued once per week on Friday. The clues will be sold for \$1.00 each to those who wish to hunt for the collection. The marble collection will belong to the finder.

Included in the collection is Old Bessie, over 20 display-quality taws, and Eli's finest agate, cat's eye, and special playing marbles.

Sale of clues is final. No refunds will be given

The usual chatter and shuffling died out as he passed and a murmur punctuated by “Wow,” “Cool,” and other exclamations replaced it. Soon the whole school focused on this unprecedented coming event, and even teachers joined the discussion clusters forming in the halls and classrooms.

Perhaps you might think I’m exaggerating the unanimous dramatic reaction of the whole school. If so, you don’t understand that nearly everyone in Frog Level played marbles at some time in their childhood, or you fail to appreciate how fondly most of us held onto our collections long after we no longer knelt in the dirt and shot for keepsies. Maybe you don’t understand how famous Eli’s marbles career had been and how renowned his collection had become. Eli was so much older than I, and our childhood society so stratified, that I wouldn’t dare ask him to show me his collection; instead, I begged Jack to show it to me even before I’d begun to compete.

I especially wanted to see Old Bessie. She was a copper-nickel alloy marble about one-and-a-half inches in diameter. One of Eli’s kinfolk had worked on construction of the Tennessee Valley Authority electrical network. He salvaged Bessie from some discarded electrical equipment and gave the treasure to Eli. Jack made me wash my hands before I could touch her. She was as beautiful as I had heard she was. I could hardly see the copper color at all. It was overlaid with translucent layers of black, green and silver. The layers seemed to vary in thickness and the resulting overall color swirled around the surface. I can think of no better thing to compare her to than a pearl: a huge, perfectly round, multicolored pearl.

I have not exaggerated.