

Excerpt of a letter from Harold Staggs to his son, Steven, Feb 5, 1977

This winter with the deep snows and zero weather makes me think of winter mornings and the clothing I used when I was ten years old.

Our home at that time was the 2nd floor of a two-flat house in Chicago. It was heated by two coal stoves and lit by gas. This meant that in the winter it was warm in the kitchen and living room and freezing elsewhere. Also, you had to keep a quarter on hand at all times. On winter mornings, we kids would wake up when we heard Dad shaking the grate in the stoves. This is the first step you take when bringing the stoves back to life. After that he would open the dampers and pour coal from the coal bucket onto the live coals left as a result of the stoves having been banked the night before.

In a short time the fire would start to roar and the big stove in the living room would get a red belly.

We didn't have to look out the window to know it was cold. The fact that we couldn't see through the ice on the window was proof enough.

So when mother called, Bob and I would grab our clothes and run like mad for the kitchen. Richard and Bill would be using the stove in the living room.

When we reached the kitchen, Mom would open the oven door and we would fight for dressing room.

It would be on a day like this that Ma would tell us it was time to start wearing our long-handled underwear. We, of course, would argue and claim that we didn't even feel the cold. We weren't sissies! But, as always, Ma had the last word.

Then I had a problem. Remember we were in knickers and that meant socks up to our knees. Socks were O.K., they did show off my manly legs, right? The problem was—how can you show a manly leg while wearing long-johns? The first thing to remember is that when you pull your long-johns on, your feet stretch the ankles and legs all out of shape. The second thing is that no one wants to look like he is walking around on legs that look like they were the property of a very old elephant.

So, I would carefully fold the loose material of the leg and hold it in the back of my leg while inching my stockings up over it. When I had finished, the front of my leg looked great. But, drat, by the time I walked to school the whole thing would have come undone and there I was with my underwear in ridges and bulges up and around my shins. The shame, the shame.

One great convenience old long-john had was the “scoop,” also called the “drop seat,” alias the “barn door.” I had the popular three-button model. A very fine style, but on freezing days one just didn't take time to button more than one button when in a hurry to leave the gentlemen's

reading room. So when sitting in school there were always some of us that did a little squirming around. Sitting on folds of old scoop was uncomfortable.

Are you still wondering why we kept a quarter handy? Well, as I've said, we had gas lights so when the lights went out, one of us would run down to the basement and put the quarter in the gas meter. This turned on the gas again until that quarter was used up. All good things come to an end and so it was for the knickers. And when the end comes, my dears, it's a day to remember.

It was my bar mitzvah. Today I'd be a man and wear my first pair of long pants. I remember how I took a deep breath and stepped out the front door heading toward school at a carefully rehearsed saunter.

The Indian youth went forth to fast during his quest for religious strength and a totem sign. The Eskimo boy suffered freezing cold and tortured muscles as he crouched over a seal's breathing hole praying to his gods for his first kill.

We didn't have it so easy. We had to run the gauntlet of rude jest and coarse laughter from our peers.

My test began when I met some friends at the corner. Their hoots, hollers and thigh-slapping began as soon as I was sighted. Then the tribe chant started: "Give a look and give a glance, here comes Harold in papa's pants." And it was repeated again and again and again for the benefit of every new boy we met.

If that wasn't bad enough, what about the shout they gave whenever we met girls on their way to school? All together now gang: "Heaven help the poor working girl." The girls put their hands over their mouths and giggled while I simpered, blushed and perspired. It was going to be a long, long day—but no more elephant legs for me!