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After big build-up, kids declare peace

Much-anticipated children's war game with Chinaberries ended quickly, and that was just fine with all concerned

By Karen Whitehead

For FLORIDA TODAY

I was born in New Orleans during the Second World War.

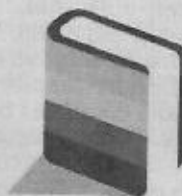
We lived in a developing area out toward Lake Pontchartrain. After the war, our neighborhood was filled with kids.

I mean kids were everywhere. Mostly, we were outside: biking; roller skating (every kid had knee and elbow scabs); playing Not It, Hide and Seek, Cowboys and Indians, Pirates, dodgeball, softball, hopscotch; climbing trees; chasing fireflies; and just twirling around until we got dizzy and fell down.

Seems like the only time we were in the house was to watch "Howdy Doody" or meal times. We stayed out 'til dark, when our mothers called out the doorway for us to come home.

Spain Street ran along the side of my house. The street was not paved yet, just covered in crushed oyster shells. All along both sides of Spain, a row of trees was growing. We kids called them Chinaball trees. Much later I learned they were named Chinaberry trees.

These trees used to put out huge numbers of seeds, which were the Chinaballs. I remember these as being green,



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about the size of a marble, with a stem. Well, we liked these Chinaballs. But what could we do with them?

One day a brilliant someone came up with the idea of having a war. Oh, this was a great idea. Remember, this was right after WWII, and the war was still fresh in everyone's mind — even the kids.

So we decided that the kids on one side of the street would be against the kids on the opposite side of the street. The kids, ranging in age from about 4 to 11, vowed not to tell their parents, of course, because parents would forbid the war.

We set about amassing great amounts of Chinaballs to throw across the street at the enemy. We stored them in brown paper sacks and hid the sacks in an empty lot. We collected Chinaballs for about a

week, or maybe more, as I remember.

Finally came the day of the war. We grabbed all our sacks of Chinaballs and positioned ourselves behind the trees for protection. Then someone yelled "Go!" We all yelled and dug into our sacks to grab a big handful of Chinaballs to fling at our enemy.

Suddenly, people started screaming, crying, moaning, wretching and throwing up. The Chinaballs had rotted into a horrible, disgusting, smelly, sticky, brown slime that got all over our hands, arms and clothes. The war immediately dissolved when all the kids ran home yelling and sobbing.

Interestingly, I don't think anyone got in trouble with their parents for the war. And nothing was ever spoken among us kids about Chinaballs thereafter.

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MALCOLM DENEMARK/FLORIDA TODAY

Karen Whitehead of Melbourne Village writes about the great "Chinaball war" in her childhood home near New Orleans.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Born and raised in New Orleans, Karen Whitehead lived in New Jersey for five years before moving to Brevard County in 1969. She has lived here since, except for a two-year stint in Bavaria, Germany, in the early 1970s and a two-year stint in Hermosa Beach, California and Colorado Springs in the late 1990s. She has lived in Melbourne Village since 1987. Between the two of them, she and husband Bill have six children and three grandchildren. She belongs to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Brevard and is a member of the Space Coast Progressive Alliance. Her hobbies include acrylic and pastel painting; gardening; reading; watching Sunday night programs on PBS and reruns of "Castle" on TV; and traveling in the United States, Canada, Scandinavia and Europe.