Go-Carts and the Inventors of Avalon Park

By Anthony Stanford, Aurora, Illinois

IN EVERY south-side Chicago neighborhood of my young years, boys pushed, pulled, carried or rode contraptions. Modified pogo sticks, scooters and wagons filled parks and streets, while the high hopes of fathers and sons were tied to colorful kites and a finicky summer wind.

But that year of 1963, with our imaginations in overdrive, my friends "Buzzard" and "Toboggan" and I moved beyond predictable summertime fare.

Our adventure began when Buzzard scavenged a lawn-mower engine from discards that he found left in an alley.

Over the next few days, with some help from my father, our trio determinedly set out to build a go-cart.

We searched high and low for parts, shamelessly rambling through piles that had been left for garbage collection. Neighborhood girls teasingly called us garbage boys, until we chased them, screaming, from the alley.

"Hey, look what I found. Will this work as a steering wheel?" Toboggan asked.

Buzzard then anxiously inquired, "Hey, Rickets, do you think your father will help us mount the engine?"

"I'm sure he will," I yelled, walking toward my house. I smiled, picturing my father sorting through his collection of bolts and nuts.

Dad came carrying his steel toolbox, his face as serious as a

surgeon's. After a few probing questions, he told Buzzard to hold one side of the go-cart, while Toboggan and I firmly gripped the other. He drilled holes into the wooden board and lifted the engine into position. Using several shiny bolts from his toolbox, he secured the engine to the board.

We were all impressed by Dad's skillful use of tools and tried not to giggle when, with his every move, there came a grunt. After a few adjustments, he stood, declaring the go-cart roadworthy.

Beyond question, Toboggan would take the first ride. A natural-born daredevil, he had acquired his nickname by being the first to slide down a large mound of snow on a small piece of cardboard.

When I pulled the starter cord, the engine sputtered, choked and released a puff of black smoke, then died. Pulling a screwdriver from his pocket, my father convincingly announced that the throttle needed adjusting.

On the second try, the engine started and settled into a steady purr. We straightened the go-cart and gave Toboggan the all clear, and off he went.

At first we kept up, but he sped away, leaving us squinting in the sunlight. The sound of the engine faded with his image. Snapping to our senses, Buzzard and I raced back to the other end of the alley, where Toboggan waited with an enormous smile.

My father stayed for a time, watching and smiling as we took turns riding the go-cart. Other people stopped to watch, including the girls we had chased away earlier that day.

When daylight slipped away, we reluctantly pushed the go-cart into my backyard. Settling onto my back porch, we drank lemonade and bragged about our new status: the great inventors of Avalon Park.