The Early Years

David Perlman's Memoirs

A Preamble of Sorts

My first attempt to write a personal history was in the summer of 1944. I had just turned 20 and the 99th Infantry Division was preparing to leave its Texas training camp for a still unknown combat mission.

While I would have been grievously disappointed not to have been part of my generation's great adventure, a young person going off to war understandably wants to leave some record of his tenure on this earth. My 15-page "autobiography" – partly typed, partly handwritten – sought to assure that the tree would not fall in a forest where there was no one to hear the sound.

In writing this memoir, I can hardly claim the same justification. In my adult years, I have left a cluttered paper trail to testify that "Kilroy was here" as a ubiquitous bit of World War II graffiti proclaimed.

I excuse my self-indulgence by suggesting that my children and grandchildren – perhaps future generations also – will find this account of some interest, as I would have been interested in the personal histories of earlier generations of my family.

My narrative covers the years in which I grew from childhood to maturity and ends with my marriage. It is a companion volume to Laura's own memoirs, "Growing Up in Florida: Depression Years and Beyond." As with so many American families, different paths led to the same goal.

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Beginnings

In 1924, the year I was born, Congress granted American citizenship to American Indians.

In 1925, a young Tennessee teacher was charged with violating a state law that made it a crime to teach the theory of evolution in public schools.

In 1926, Robert H. Goddard launched a rocket that traveled 184 feet in two and one-half seconds. His experiment fueled the imaginations of a generation of science fiction writers--and readers.

In 1927, Charles A. Lindbergh flew alone and nonstop across the Atlantic Ocean. It took him 33 hours and 39 minutes.

In 1928, when I was starting to be aware of such things, Herbert Hoover was elected President, Babe Ruth hit 54 home runs and the New York Yankees won the World Series by beating the St. Louis Cardinals in four straight games.

It was a time of relative prosperity for the nation. My parents and I lived in a solidly middle class apartment complex in the Bronx, within walking distance of Yankee Stadium. My proud possession was a child's pin-striped Yankee uniform with "Mascot" stitched on the shirt. I treasured the shirt even after I had outgrown it.

My mother, Sarah, was a social worker and sometime teacher. A matronly Mrs. Beardsley looked after me during the day. At a nursery school, I learned a few words of French. My father, Harry,

was a sales agent for the Metropolitan Life Insurance Co. and a bringer of presents. Never again would he or we be so well off.

My parents were second cousins. My father, about five years younger than my mother, was born in New York. He was one of eight children of Jacob and Rachel Perlman, who had come to the United States in 1882. That was early in the great wave of Russian Jewish immigration. The 1900 census records list Grandfather Perlman's occupation as "fruit peddler."

My father left school after the 8th grade, not uncommon at the time, and served briefly in the Navy in World War I. In his later years, he would find a degree of economic security in a low-level clerical job with the government. But during the lean years of the 1930s, my father was one of millions of Americans who sold door-to-door and office-to-office for small commissions because there are no jobs to be had.

My mother was born in Minsk, a regional capital that was one of the centers of Jewish life in czarist Russia. She was next to the youngest of the eight children of Aaron and Rachel Rubin. Large families were the social security of that era.

When the older boys were of age for military service in the harsh and hostile army of the Czar, the family emigrated, stopping briefly in England before crossing the Atlantic. My grandmother and most of the children, including my mother, came to New York in 1901 and set up housekeeping in the teeming lower East Side. The following year, my grandfather joined them. He had an eye infection that might have caused him to fail the feared Ellis Island medical examination. He and his youngest son, Jacob, sailed separately to Canada and then slipped across the border to reunite with the family.

My grandmother has operated a small dressmaking business out of their home in Russia. My grandfather was a grainer, skilled in a specialized form of painting in which cheap soft woods are

"grained" to look like rare, expensive woods. At least three of his sons followed the same trade.

Let me tell you something more about my mother, Sarah. She was 12 years old when her family came to America. Her sister, Mary, was about four years younger. She had five older brothers--Henry, Meyer, Louis, Benjamin, Jacob, and an older sister, Dora.

In the sink-or-swim challenge of school, my mother proved to be a swimmer. Sarah Rubin entered the fifth grade of Public School 13, in Manhattan's lower East Side. Like most of her classmates, she spoke Yiddish at home but English among her friends.

Eleven years later, my mother graduated from Hunter College, at the time primarily a teachers' college. In high school and college, she studied Latin, French and German and earned expense money teaching Hebrew School classes.

Despite these formidable accomplishments, a New York school examiner failed her on the oral segment of the city's strict teacher's examination because he detected the trace of a foreign accent--a disqualification in those days. She had no discernible accent in my memory. Nevertheless, with a substitute's license, she was able to get a job teaching a remedial class of boys with failing grades.

Social work soon became her field. For a time, she worked out of Rochester, N.Y., traveling the state to find foster homes and farms for orphans being helped by the Federation of Jewish Charities.

In 1918, she crossed the continent to take a job in Portland, Ore. There, the old-stock German Jewish community wanted a social worker of Russian immigrant background to help a new flow of immigrants become Americans. These were Jews who fled Russia's post-revolutionary civil war by way of Siberia and China, and entered the United States from the West Coast.

When my mother announced that she was going to take a job in Oregon, my grandmother asked in Yiddish, "You are going to Oregon? Where is Oregon?". My mother showed her on a map. My grandmother worried, "So close to Siberia."

My mother returned to New York in 1923 and soon thereafter married my father. I was born a year later. Their marriage was something of a mismatch. While my parents did not dislike each other, they had little in common and divorced after I graduated from high school. But that is a later part of the story.

In 1929, during the last months of prosperity, we move to Los Angeles. Our new home is in a rental bungalow court. My father is selling vacuum cleaners, as I recall. I don't think my mother is working.

To my disappointment, I sleep through an earthquake. I get lost on a kindergarten class trip to the zoo, and one afternoon I am disturbed and confused to find my mother crying.

My father is not with us when my mother and I move to Long Beach. We have a small apartment in a wonderful turreted house near the ocean, with a round room that enables a six-year-old boy to look out and imagine that he is captain of a ship.

There are castles to build in the sand, the fascinations of a boardwalk. It is a child's delight. I start the first grade.

San Francisco, our next stop, is a different story. My mother takes a live-in job in an orphanage and must leave me in a boarding school where I am the youngest child. No one is unkind, but it is all strange and unsettling. I look forward to Sundays, when my mother picks me up for a day's outing. We especially like to watch the seals on the rocks of San Francisco bay. One Sunday, she cannot come until afternoon. I am taken with the other boys who have no Sunday visitors to a church service, which I find bewildering.

Finally, there is a train ride back East. My mother and I are in the coach section, but a kindly stranger tips a porter to allow us to use a vacant sleeping car compartment at night. I am delighted with my upper berth and during the day run happily through the train chatting with the passengers.

It is evening when we arrive in New York, to a confusion of lights and noise. We take a taxi to my grandmother's house, at 60 Second Ave. An open-cage elevator slowly takes us to the top, the fifth floor if I recall correctly. The rooms are large and musty, a creaking sliding door separates the living room from the dining room.

Snapshot: It is the depth of the depression, but I am only seven years old and my concern at the moment is to shape the handful of dough my grandmother has given me into an airplane of sorts.

My grandmother, a tiny, wrinkled woman of 80, knows only a smattering of English although she has lived in the United States for 30 years. I recognize only a few words of Yiddish. Yet we can communicate, after a fashion.

Satisfied, I hand over my crude sculpture. Carefully, my grandmother places it in the oven along with the loaf of twisted bread--the traditional challah--that she is baking for the Friday night Sabbath dinner.

The building's tar-covered roof, with its rusted iron rails and pipes, is a fascinating playground. On one side, the view of a great city. On the other, the backs of tenements are linked by pulley-manipulated clothes lines. On the hottest summer nights, my mother and I bring bedding to the roof to sleep in the relative comfort of a faint breeze.

Background: Living with my grandmother are three of her eight grown children, including my mother.

There is my Uncle Louis, ailing and kindly. He has only a year

to live. But he teaches me to play checkers and lets me win nearly half our games. And there is my Aunt Mary, who is to become such a strong influence in my life.

At the time, Mary is a Communist. Each month, she brings me a children's magazine that features moralistic stories and comic strips of kids who help striking workers fight back against the bosses and outwit the police. In the summer of 1931, she sends me for two weeks to Camp Kinderland, where counselors talk to children about social injustices.

When she's not marching for radical causes, Mary keeps the books for the shirt manufacturing firm founded by a brother-in-law whose household is an island of relative prosperity in the hard years of the 1930s.

Some more about Mary: She hitch-hiked across the country in the 1920s, when even long distance driving was an adventure. She attended the University of Missouri graduate journalism school without ever having been to college, worked briefly for a Socialist newspaper--and learned bookkeeping to make a living.

In Boston, where she lived for several years in the 1920s, she was office manager for a local union of telephone operators and wrote some highly imaginative fiction for the union magazine. Later she would go to agricultural school to learn chicken farming.

Mary never married and, with some justification, considered herself a co-mother to me.

At school I am something of a teacher's pet, obedient and bright. My mother uses her social work connections to arrange for me to take a series of tests that move me a full year ahead of my class. The downside is that I will always be younger than most of my classmates. With my first library card, I work my way happily through the unabridged text of Pinocchio.

The East Side is an adventure for a seven-year-old. Chasing a playmate across the street, I am knocked down by a car. But I am only bruised and run away when someone asks my name. At a neighborhood public swimming pool, my shoes are stolen and I walk home barefoot on the hot city pavement.

I collect sticks for a gang fight between our block and an enemy block. The older kids engage in bluster confrontation and indecisive combat. We bring up the rear and add to the noise level.

A man who knows my name stops to talk to me on the street. It is my father, but he has grown a mustache and I don't immediately recognize him.

My parents are reunited. In the summer of 1932, we move to an apartment in Brighton Beach, near Coney Island.

Left alone during the day, I spend happy hours fishing for small mackerel at Sheepshead Bay.

My mother is now working as a home relief case worker for the city. One day, I see my father selling beach balls and enthusiastically join my voice. But the beach ball he gives me as a reward has a leak. My cousin Wynn spends some weeks with us as sort of an in-city vacation. He is two years older and I much admire him. He and his younger brother, Arnold, are children of my mother's favorite brother, Jake.

A magazine sales manager recruits me to sell a woman's monthly magazine, Delineator, in the streets and from door-to-door. I work hard and earn nearly 50 cents the first month. After school, before going out to sell my magazines, I carefully pour into the sink a glass of milk my mother expects me to drink.

For the Thanksgiving charity food baskets that will be given to the needy children in the school, I buy an impressively large bagful of potatoes for 10 cents.

Growing Up

In the summer of 1933, shortly before my ninth birthday, we move to Borough Park, a quiet residential neighborhood in Brooklyn. There, no longer a nomad, I grow from child to youth.

Borough Park is overwhelmingly Jewish, but the influx of Hasidic Jews and their institutions is still 30 years away. My upbringing is secular but I never question my identity as a Jew. Two boys of similar age on my block quickly become close friends; several others are available for team games. One boy's older sister occasionally plays with us.

Our block is tree-lined 47th Street, between 15th and 16th Avenues. The street is our playground, by choice rather than necessity. Only occasionally do we have to stop our game--most often non-contact hockey on skates or a passing-only form of football--to allow an automobile to get through. The automobile age has not fully arrived in a city with five-cent-fares on subways, buses and trolleys.

Home is a pleasant one-bedroom attic apartment, reached by a staircase at the side of the house. I have the bedroom to myself; my parents sleep on a sofa bed in the living room.

Our home entertainment center is the large Philco radio that stands in our living room. Weekday afternoons, I listen to Buck Rogers in the 21st Century, the first science-fiction radio program. I stay up past my usual 9 p.m. bedtime on Thursday nights for Death Valley Days, my favorite program. Sunday evenings, we are among millions of families tuned in to the Jack Benny and Eddie Cantor comedy shows.

Most families have refrigerators, but our apartment has only an ice box. Twice a week the iceman stops his horse-drawn cart in front of our house. While he carries a large 15-cent chuck of ice in his tongs up two flights of stairs to our apartment, kids playing in the streets run to his cart, lift up the heavy canvas covering, and grab some ice chips to suck on.

We do most of our shopping at Sam's grocery store, half a block away on 16th Avenue. Sam waits on all customers; there is no self-service. We sometimes charge our purchases and Sam writes down the amount in the account book he keeps at the counter. Meat is bought at a butcher store, fish at a fish store. The A&P--America's first chain store--has not yet come to our neighborhood.

The family that owns our home lives on the second floor and rents out the larger first floor apartment, which has a porch. We pay $25 a month rent for our attic apartment, a modest amount even in those days.

My mother earns about $100 a month as a social worker for the city's welfare program. My father makes the rounds of downtown office buildings soliciting orders for a small office supplies store owned by one of his brothers. In a good week, he may take home as much as $15 a week in commissions. Usually it is less.

A publisher who is a regular customer sometimes gives my father a copy of a new book. It is added to our eclectic home library, which includes a set of children's stories that I treasure but am starting to outgrow.

Other books that I remember include a bulky, one-volume set of Shakespeare's works that my mother had received as a school prize, an Old Testament Bible, an early Modern Library volume of Gilbert & Sullivan, a beautifully printed and illustrated book of Russian folk tales, a jingoistic boy's story of the U.S. Marines fighting in Nicaragua in the 1920s and its ideological opposite, a book Aunt Mary had given me in which Robin Hood is portrayed as the leader of a revolutionary band of workers and peasants resisting oppression.

I read everything, even parts I don't fully understand. The nearest library is a 20-minute walk, and I visit it often since it lends only two books at a time. More fun is the second-hand bookstore that my friends and I make into our personal library.

Here's how we do it. We buy a used book--perhaps one of the Baseball Joe series, maybe a World War I adventure such as The Boy Allies at the Battle of Jutland, sometimes a Tom Swift invention story--for 20 cents. After each of us has read it, we sell it back for 10 cents. Magazines are even cheaper, and we discover the garish-covered early science fiction magazines and the wartime flying adventures of G-8 and His Battle Aces.

At home, my parents buy the Saturday Evening Post each week. It's the nation's most successful magazine, a bargain at 5 cents.

Later, I will have to force myself to slow my reading speed for more serious studies. For now, I gorge on the printed word.

It is a happy time. Money worries are for grown ups. There is always 15 cents for a Saturday afternoon movie, an occasional nickel for an ice cream. A Coney Island family outing will include a hot dog, a large 5-cent mug of root beer, a frozen custard, perhaps even a 10-cent ride on the bumper cars. We wear our bathing suits under our clothes. Sometimes I go to Coney Island on my own, spend all my money, and approach a passer-by with the story that I have lost my subway fare. Eventually, someone will give me a nickel.

When school starts, my mother arranges for a delicatessen near the school to serve me a hot lunch every day although there is a school cafeteria where sandwiches, milk and fruit are sold. Surprisingly, another boy has the same arrangement and my circle of friends expands beyond my block.

Many Sundays we exchange visits with relatives or family friends, usually on my mother's side. But my father's sister, my Aunt Rose, and her family live within walking distance so we see them frequently. My cousin Beverly, nearly two years older, dutifully invites me to birthday parties. When she is in her early teens, I feel awkwardly young as Beverly and her friends play giggling kissing games.

Elementary schools in New York are on a track system at that time, with the three or four classes in each grade representing different levels of presumed academic ability. I take it for granted that I will be in the top class every year. After the sixth grade, most of us in the class go into the rapid advancement program of junior high school where three years of school are compressed into two years.

My writing aptitude helps ease my way through the non-demanding elementary school curriculum. In the sixth grade, after having seen the movie of David Copperfield, I volunteer to write a stage version for our class to put on. My weekly episodes are read aloud in class, but its completion is too ambitious a project for a 10-year-old.

I have decided that I will become a scientist. My favorite book is Microbe Hunters, by Paul de Kruif. My career choice is reinforced by the fascination of a chemistry set, upgraded each Christmas to a more advanced level.

When a junior high school science course proves a struggle, my career resolve weakens. It will be abandoned when I come close to failing a high school physics course.

I muddle through junior high school, enjoying only my English class and quickly losing interest in Latin, which I have chosen for my first language. Better will be French, which I will start in high school. A girl invites me to a party and I accept. But too rapid a pace through school has its price. I am always among the youngest in my grade level and feel socially backward.

The dull school cafeteria is no competition for a crowded lunch counter across the street. Nearly every day, my lunch is a chow mein sandwich, which is served on a hamburger roll and costs 10 cents, and a small ice cream soda for eight cents.

Election days are fun when poll workers allow me to help pass out political leaflets. The political icons of the era are President Franklin Roosevelt, Governor Herbert Lehman, both Democrats, and Fiorello LaGuardia, the colorful reform mayor who was elected as the Republican and Fusion Party candidate.

New York unions have formed the American Labor Party, which endorses liberal major party candidates and runs its own slate in the complicated proportional representation elections for City Council. I identify with the ALP, especially since the newspaper we take at home, the World Telegram, regularly assails the city's Democratic Party organization.

Picture a 12-year-old passing out campaign literature near the polls and telling an indifferent Democratic campaign worker about the misdeeds of Tammany Hall.

But my summers are no longer spent in the city. Not since my Aunt Mary made a mid-course career change that introduces me to a different way of life.

Chickens and Kids

How do you learn to farm? For city-bred Aunt Mary, it means studying chicken raising at an agriculture school in Farmingdale, L.I., circa 1934.

The $3,000 that Mary raises with a bank loan and money borrowed from friends and relatives pays for a century-old farmhouse, with barn, sheds and 60 acres of land off a dirt road near Taunton, Mass.

The farm has no electricity. Water from the well, cold and pure, is pumped by hand at an outdoor trough and at sinks in the kitchen and in the toiletless bathroom. The toilet is a two-seater outhouse about 50 yards down a well-worn path. Hot water is heated in kettles on the wood-burning kitchen stove. In the living room is a huge, wonderful fireplace. Kerosene lamps are lit at night.

The farm's most valuable asset is a most remarkable Yankee master of all trades, John Nason, my aunt's working partner in the enterprise.

John is a veteran of the Spanish-American war, a homespun radical and a brick mason by trade. Newspaper clippings from 1921 testify to his leadership in organizing a cooperative of union building trades craftsmen in Boston that contracted to build private homes.

Later in the decade, he managed an experimental cooperative farm. That, too, was short-lived. But Mary, who lived and worked in Boston during the 1920s, knows him from those days.

John can keep an ancient tractor running and get additional years of life out of an old second-hand car that has to be cranked by hand to start. He can shingle a roof, build a porch, sing IWW labor songs in a reedy voice and cook a chicken dinner for 20. He also has an obstinate faith in Soviet Russia.

From 1935, when I turn 11, until 1941, I spend most of each summer at the farm. Chicken raising soon becomes a sideline and the old farmhouse is filled with children of Mary's friends and relatives. The mix might be five or six boys, usually including my cousins Wynn and Arnold, and one or two girls.

Often there is an adult or two relaxing on a week's farm vacation. On weekends, several families from Boston come for the day or overnight. Then, two sittings are usually needed at meals even though the large wooden dining table that John built can seat 14.

Mary's rates are low, even for that era, and barely token for family members. But all the kids are expected to put in at least half a day of farm work or chores before setting out in the afternoon on the quarter-mile walk through the woods to a small beach John has cleared at the edge of a lake.

We pitch hay, weed the vegetables, dig up the new potatoes. We carry water and feed to the chickens, and collect eggs from their nests. When prodded, we clean out the smelly chicken houses. We wash our clothes weekly, scrubbing them in buckets of soapy water.

More fun is picking wild blueberries that Mary bakes into a pie. Most mornings, several of us will walk a half mile down the road to a small dairy run by a Polish couple. Mrs. Tokas, who speaks only a few words of English, fills sterilized bottles from a large container of unpasteurized milk. Later, we will have our own cow.

During the hot months, ice is delivered to Mary's farm. At other times, perishables are kept in a cool cellar, reached either through an outdoor entrance or from a trapdoor in the pantry.

A bin of home-grown potatoes lasts through most of the winter. The pantry is lined with rows of home-canned vegetables and jams in glass Mason jars. But in the summer, vegetables are eaten fresh from the fields. We pick and shuck corn just minutes before it goes into the pot.

Garbage is dumped on the compost heap behind the barn to become fertilizer for next spring's planting. Nothing usable is wasted.

It's not my favorite chore but by my mid-teens I am able to catch a chicken destined for Sunday dinner, stun it with a blow from a mallet, put it on the chopping block and cut off its head with a single swing of an axe. Later, Mary will plunge it into boiling water so that its feathers can more easily be plucked.

Many years later, when she is living on a slim budget in a public housing project, Mary will pay premium prices for range-raised chickens rather than buy cheaper mass-produced commercial brands she considers tasteless.

Weekend visitors often buy cartons of eggs to take home. In the winter, Mary and John sell their excess eggs at a farmers' auction.

Rural mail delivery brings us the Boston Herald and the Communist Daily Worker; the Readers Digest arrives each month.

We play horseshoes and word games, sometimes softball with weekend guests. Adults and young teens mingle comfortably. Several times each summer, we take a day off for a picnic at the lake with a rented rowboat and home-made fishing poles. If it has been raining for several days, we may go into town for a special treat of a movie and ice cream cones.

There are always two or three dogs and several generations of cats at the farm. It is from memories of more than a half-century ago that my ideal of perfect relaxation is to sit comfortably in front of a fireplace on a cool evening with a shaggy dog at my feet.

Summer ends with an overflow of guests on Labor Day weekend. Any kids who haven't yet left give up their beds to weekend visitors and take blankets to the hayloft in the barn. We look forward to it, although the anticipation is more fun than the reality of scratchy hay and mosquitoes.

I especially relish staying on after Labor Day, enjoying the relative solitude for a few days before school resumes. When it is time to leave, John drives me to the train station at Providence, about 40 miles away. The tang of autumn is already in the air.

High School and Politics

Back home in Brooklyn, my choice of high school is impulsive. The nearest school is undistinguished and an older boy on the block, whom I admire, attends Boys High School. It is located in the Bedford-Stuyvesant area of Brooklyn, then not as solidly black as it will later become. Boys High draws students from a wide area because of a dual reputation for sports and academics.

There are several single-sex schools in New York at the time. At age 13, that is not a major drawback. More troublesome is the distance. It's nearly an hour from home to school, including walks to subways and a change of trains. But my mother never complains at rising before the sun on winter days to fix a hot breakfast for me.

Boys High excels in football and basketball, track and fencing. Its math team is formidable in academic competition. There are honor classes in major subjects, so I compete with the brightest in English and history courses while taking science and math with the less talented. A tradition dating from the turn of the century is the annual Declamations contest, an evening of dramatic recitations by students that always draws a capacity audience to the school auditorium.

While I join the staff of the school newspaper and the Debating Club, I soon become deeply involved in an organization that is not sanctioned and is forbidden use of school facilities.

I am not quite 14 when I accept an older boy's invitation to an off-campus meeting to establish the Boys High School chapter of the

American Student Union. The ASU is a left-wing activist group with members at many of the nation's college campuses and a scattering of big-city high schools.

An influential minority of ASU members are also members of the Young Communist League, especially at the college level. But until the Soviet-German non-aggression pact brings disillusionment, Communist influence appears marginal and non-threatening.

In the late 1930s, Communists are leaders in the wave of industrial union organizing. They attack discrimination against blacks and Jews, demonstrate against Hitler's Germany and assail fascist Italy's support of Franco's rebellion in Spain. From their ranks come most of the volunteers who fight and die for the Spanish Republic in the Abraham Lincoln battalion of the International Brigade.

Communists demand jobs for the unemployed and press for expansion of New Deal social programs.

Later I will meet people of my generation who had been part of the democratic left, including the Young People's Socialist League, and who never had any illusions about the nature of Soviet Russia or the subservience of U.S. Communists to the twists of Soviet policy. But that is a position I will have to arrive at by a more circuitous route.

My parents are benignly indifferent to my political development. They probably would agree with one of my high school teachers who told his class: "If you are radical when young, you'll be liberal later on. If you are liberal when you're young, you'll be conservative in later life. But if you start off conservative, there's no hope for you."

Our high school principal makes clear his hostility to the ASU. We are barred from distributing leaflets within a block of the school. Still, we sign up some 35 members and take part in various citywide activities and rallies.

In school, we ignore the principal's ban and circulate petitions demanding that blacks be allowed to play on major league baseball teams. Graduation thins our leadership ranks and I am elected president of our chapter in my senior year.

My closest friends are fellow ASU activists. Billy, about my age but a year behind in school, impresses me with his sophistication. He has attended progressive camps, calls his parents by their first names, and has the Songs of the International Brigade recordings made by German Communists fighting in Spain.

Our chapter establishes a social link with the ASU unit at Girls Commercial High School. One of their members is a stunningly beautiful Italian-American girl who, unfortunately, is 17 when I have just turned 15. I settle for the younger of two sisters for my first real date--a picnic along the New Jersey Palisades, reached by a ferry ride across the Hudson.

By now, I am smoking regularly although not heavily. In the culture of the era, smoking is considered harmful only to growing children and athletes. A candy store near the school illegally sells students cigarettes from an open pack for a penny each. We commonly buy two or three to take to school. At the time, major brand cigarettes are priced two packs for a quarter.

Academically, I remain among the top students in English and history, my honors classes, and continue to do well in French. But barely passing grades in physics and declining grades in math drop my average below the brightest of my classmates.

The non-aggression pact between Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany on the eve of World War II splinters the Communist-influenced left. Now, of course, I am chagrined that I was not among those who broke away, disenchanted. But at the time, I join in the party-line "stay-out-of-the-imperialist-war" position that Communist-influenced groups hewed to until Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union turned them overnight into super-hawks.

When at the age of 15, I travel by chartered bus to the ASU convention at the University of Wisconsin during the Christmas recess, it is to vote with the Communist-aligned majority for anti-war resolutions. While I am too young for membership in the Young Communist League, I consider myself ideologically a part of the movement.

At an American Youth Congress demonstration in Washington, several thousand of us crowd into the White House grounds on a rainy Saturday afternoon to hear President Roosevelt chide us for turning away from our former commitment to collective security. Later we enthusiastically applaud John L. Lewis, the colorful Mine Workers president, who sprinkles his isolationist rhetoric with quotations from Shakespeare and the Bible.

Yet, growing up isn't all politics and ideological battles.

Thanks to extra tickets provided by Mollie Richman, a childhood friend of my mother, I attend several operas at the Metropolitan Opera House.

With one or both of my parents, I see a modern-dress production of Julius Caesar with Orson Welles and more traditional performances of Hamlet and Henry IV featuring Maurice Evans, the leading Shakespearean actor of the time.

We also take in several plays produced through the WPA theater program, a New Deal project to put unemployed actors to work. Balcony tickets for WPA shows are only 25 cents, while comparable tickets for commercial productions range from 55 cents to $1.10.

I attend most Boys High football games, occasional track meets and some basketball games. Apart from assigned class texts, I read with enthusiasm all of Carl Sandburg's poetry.

Our family still listens faithfully to the Sunday night comedy programs on the radio. My New York Yankees continue to dominate

baseball and I follow the World Series avidly. While I daydream about sex, there's not much I can do about it beyond hiding an occasional erotic magazine in my closet. Masturbation is a release.

By my senior year in high school, I accept matter of factly that I will be attending City College. Columbia would be my first choice, but there are brighter kids to fill its quota of New York Jews. In any event, the tuition is beyond my means. CCNY is an acceptable alternative and its admission standards are the highest of New York's City's tuition-free public colleges.

From time to time, the principal has lectured me about my involvement in the ASU. Now, some weeks before graduation, developments take a more serious turn. There are blacks on virtually all of our high school sports teams. One exception is the swimming team. A friendly teacher confirms for us that the team practices in a YMCA that does not allow Negroes to use its pool.

The leaflet our ASU chapter distributes outside the school is headed: "Jim Crow Joins the Swimming Team." It calls on the student government to insist that the swimming team find a different and non-discriminatory practice pool.

The principal accuses me of trying to start a race riot and suspends three of us from classes. To get readmitted, we each must bring a parent to school. But that has its amusing moments.

One boy's father, a house painter with a heavy accent, is a follower of Jay Lovestone, a former head of the U.S. Communist Party who was ousted after falling out of favor with the Kremlin. The principal, a Dr. Tausk, is bewildered when the man he can barely understand proudly displays a scrapbook with newspaper clippings showing "how the Daily Worker attacked me."

Billy's father looks and sounds like the prosperous real estate broker he is, with no hint of his radical views. The principal is impressed. Perhaps, he suggests, Billy could be encouraged to get

into some other activity such as the Junior Red Cross. And my mother, indifferent to ideology, berates the principal for daring to keep her son out of classes.

I am the only senior in the group and my moment comes at the graduation ceremony.

As we walk across the stage of the Brooklyn Academy of Music to accept our diplomas, the principal keeps me for a few seconds for a final lecture on how I almost let the diploma get away. While he is talking to me, some classmate friends start a round of applause.

It is a thoroughly satisfying conclusion to my high school years.

The Lean Years

Again my mother puts my interests first. We move to an apartment house on 142nd Street in Manhattan so that I can be within an easy walk of City College. My parents are now separated. But because of the cost, a divorce will have to wait.

My mother has another temporary city job, this time as a social worker with the school system, but she still lacks the relative security of civil service status.

While college is tuition free, I need to earn money to cover my personal expenses. So for two hours each afternoon and for about 10 hours on Saturdays, I deliver dry cleaning and do minor chores for a neighborhood tailor. He pays me only $2 a week, but I make about $3 additional from nickel and dime tips.

I can do homework between deliveries and I earn another dollar for the fun chore of taking "Baby" out for a romp each afternoon. Baby is a large German shepherd dog who belongs to a woman who sings with one of New York's minor opera companies.

A distantly related family that left Danzig (now the Polish city of Gdansk) before the German invasion lives in our neighborhood. A son, about my age, speaks fluent but accented New York street English and becomes an occasional companion.

Together we learn to bowl and acquire the rudiments of billiards. At a neighborhood pool hall, our mentor is a friendly, chunky youth. (Some years later, when I happen to run into him, he will greet me with the expansiveness of a minor racketeer with a full wallet and invite me for a ride in his expensive-looking car.)

At college, I struggle with required math and science courses and my grades as a 16-year-old freshman are mediocre. More interesting is the political life of City College.

I am especially impressed with the articulate students who congregate in the alcoves that line the gloomy, basement-level cafeteria. By custom, certain alcoves are taken over during non-lunch hours by various politically involved campus organizations, and members with free time between classes make up a revolving cast.

Tables intended for cafeteria trays become soap boxes for speakers; supporters, hecklers and the simply curious make up the changing audience.

Followers of Leon Trotsky taunt orthodox Communists with barbed questions and are heckled in return. Other alcoves are bases for the variety of campus Zionist groups. In this era, most CCNY students are Jewish.

Until the USSR is itself invaded, Communists demand that the United States stay out of the "imperialist war." The organizations they still influence, such as the American Student Union, echo the party's slogan, "The Yanks Are Not Coming." I chant the words, but am starting to have doubts.

The party-line abruptly changes on the June day of 1941 when Germany attacks Soviet Russia. With Great Britain and the Soviet Union now allies, a Communist Madison Square Garden rally opens with a band playing the jingoistic "Rule Britannia, Britannia rules the waves."

So much for the onetime imperialist war. Finally, too slowly certainly, I start to realize the extent to which the Communist line is dictated by the national interests of the Soviet Union.

After an abbreviated vacation at the farm, I register for my fall semester classes. But when my mother loses her job and has to resort to typing envelopes at home, I see no alternative to looking for full time work and taking college courses at night.

The job I get through the state employment service pays only $15 a week--the minimum wage of 37 ½ cents multiplied by 40 hours. A small business that specializes in bookstore window displays needs another "boy" to run errands and to construct oversized replicas of new books. Another youth and I paint and nail wooden frames to which we staple glossy cardboard blowups of book covers. Then we pack the displays in cartons and push them to the post office in a hand truck.

When my mother takes a live-in job with an orphanage in Cleveland, I move into a YMCA and, at 17, begin life on my own.

My job is menial and routine. My room at the "Y" is a cheerless cubbyhole, but I spend little time there. On a typical day, I work from 9 to 6, bolt a cafeteria supper and rush to the subway to get to a 7 p.m. Introduction to Philosophy course, followed by Sociology and French classes. At 10 p.m., the extracurricular life of a City College evening session student begins and it is nearly midnight when I get back to my room.

I join the Sociology Club, with a vague thought that I may someday follow my mother's path into social work. But it's more interesting to be the club's representative on the Student Council.

While I have become more skeptical of the twists and turns of Communist policy, political functions make up most of my scant social life. Beer or a wine punch will usually be served at a Saturday night party, but drinking is light and drugs unknown.

Again, I am almost always the youngest. Night session students are older than their daytime counterparts and some are married.

Fast food chains have not yet come to New York. But nearly every neighborhood in Manhattan has an inexpensive cafeteria and, as a more leisurely alternative, a low-cost Chinese restaurant. At a Chinese restaurant, I can order either an American dish--typically a breaded veal cutlet with mashed potatoes and a vegetable--or the chow mein that passes as a Chinese meal in that era. A dinner of soup, a main dish, tea and dessert can be had for 35 cents plus a dime tip.

Meals and snacks average about $1 a day. After paying for my room, cigarettes, subway fare and newspapers, I seldom have more than pocket change left by payday.

When a rather pretty girl I had met at Mary's farm writes that she is coming to New York for a few days, staying with relatives, I scrimp to save money for a big date. A Chinese restaurant near where I work is the only "tablecloth" place I can think of within my budget, so we eat a desultory dinner there. More satisfactory is Radio City Music Hall, where I have splurged on reserved seats for the movie and stage show.

It's blustery outside, but when she suggests a taxi back I can only mumble regrets as we head for the subway. A perfunctory goodnight kiss at her aunt's apartment puts a period on the evening.

Pearl Harbor is bombed, the Philippines invaded, and my Europe-oriented world is thrown out of kilter

Despite its sporadic war on China, Japan is still associated with cheap toys and trinkets copied from American products. When Germany and Italy declare war on the United States as allies of the Japanese, we are suddenly part of a global conflict.

Life goes on. A Christmas morning phone call from my mother's friend, Mollie, spares me a lonely day and I am not too proud to accept the last-minute invitation to dinner.

At work, I tell my boss that I will have to leave if I don't get a raise. His indifferent reply: "When are you leaving?"

I give two weeks' notice and cast around for another job. Political connections get me to the hiring hall of the Fur Workers union, whose president is an avowed Communist. But even under a union contract, my unskilled job with a shop that sells silk used to make linings for fur coats pays only $18 a week. Still, that's $3 more than I had been making. My union dues, based on 10 percent of one week's pay, are $1.80 a month.

Pushing a two-wheeled hand cart holding bolts of silk, I accompany a salesman on his calls to the small manufacturers whose shops and show rooms make up New York's fur district. At his nod, I awkwardly spread out the silk for him to display. Later I will steer the hand cart through crowded streets to make deliveries.

At noon, all work stops as workers and bosses alike rush to small delicatessens and cafeterias, perhaps for a sandwich and glass of hot tea with lemon, and then overflow into the streets to "shmooze" for the rest of the lunch hour. This is the non-stop talking, arguing and gossiping that is part of the tradition of New York's fur and garment districts.

I'm not very handy at my tasks. But when I stay past 6 p.m. to tidy up, one of the owners shoos me away because, "We'll get in trouble if the union business agent comes by and sees you're still here."

To cut costs, I switch to a furnished room in a walkup tenement near City College. The motherly woman who is renting out the room her son used before he joined the Marines insists on washing my socks.

Wartime opens up government jobs in Washington and my mother leaves Cleveland to become a secretary in a federal housing agency. When the spring semester ends, I join her.

Since I have been off work my last week in New York, the $10 my mother sent me for travel expenses is almost gone.

I hesitate to spend more than a nickel for a snack the night before I leave, although I am hungry. After pondering the choices in a neighborhood store, I choose Yankee Doodle cupcakes, which come in a package of three for a nickel, instead of the tastier two-for-a-nickel Hostess brand.

I leave for Washington on a Saturday morning, and my mother is waiting at the train station to take me to the Connecticut Ave. apartment she shares with an elderly woman, and where I will stay.

Culture Shock

Not knowing how easy it is to find a low-level job in wartime Washington, I am elated to be hired at the first agency I try--the Library of Congress. Later I will realize that shopping around could have gotten me a job with a higher starting rate than the $1,080-a-year that the Copyright Office paid its mailroom messenger--the lowest pay level in government. Yet it is more than I was earning in New York, and I am to start work the next day.

My mother and I are proud of my success.

Racial segregation in the nation's capital is a cultural shock. The District of Columbia still is very much a southern community, even though there is no segregation on buses or trolleys and cafeterias in government agencies no longer rope off a separate eating area for Negroes.

It is natural for me to identify with blacks encountering discrimination. The pogroms of Russia are fresh in the memories of my parents' generation. In my own time, since Hitler came to power, Jews have been forced to wear yellow stars, ousted from professions and beaten by taunting mobs--preludes to the Holocaust.

Even in the United States, social and job discrimination are commonplace. I recall an employment agency listing for a low-paying job as an office boy that was barred to me because the employer specified a Protestant. The term "restricted" in advertisements for resorts is clearly understood by everyone to mean that Jews are not

welcome. Private universities and medical schools have unofficial quotas limiting the percentage of Jewish students.

Black Americans do not have to wear a yellow star. The color of their skin serves the same purpose.

At work, as I wheel my mail cart from office to office, I meet the agency's only two blacks -- off in a small unit by themselves. The older man is in a mid-level professional grade; I become casually friendly with his younger assistant. Their work involves a large amount of correspondence but, because of the wartime staffing shortages, only the agency head has a personal secretary. Others with letters to dictate send for a stenographer from a secretarial pool.

All of the secretaries are white and custom assures that they will not be required to take dictation from the black professional. Instead, he writes his letters in longhand and sends them to the steno pool to be typed and returned for his signature. So is southern womanhood preserved. Yet this is at a time when the Library of Congress, which includes the Copyright Office, is headed by Archibald MacLeish, a distinguished poet of impeccably liberal views.

My mother and I now live in a boarding house that is close to the division between Washington's white and black neighborhoods. An episode at a nearby drug store sears my conscience.

The counter waitress is black and the Negro woman who sits down on a stool probably doesn't even notice me finishing a milk shake at the other end of the counter. She asks for a coca cola.

"To go?" the waitress asks with barely a trace of a question mark in her voice.

"No," the woman replies casually. "I'll have it here."

"I'm sorry," the black waitress says softly to the black customer, "but we don't serve colored." The customer didn't catch what she said. The waitress must say again, louder this time, "We don't serve colored."

"Oh," the woman replies, and leaves.

I am horrified. How can I somehow distance myself from this cruelty? I imagine vividly how demeaning it would be for me to be forced to say, "I'm sorry, we don't serve Jews." I choke out a few words, pay for my milk shake, and escape.

It will be another 10 years, in 1952, before I find the appropriate response. That will be when Laura and I, recently married, respond to a phone call from a friend and join a sit-in organized by the Committee on Racial Equality at a drug store near Dupont Circle.

Again there is a black counter waitress under orders not to serve black customers. This time, however, the whites who fill up most of the seats at the counter refuse to order until the black members of the group are served. The seats are filled in shifts by CORE supporters until closing time. But management does not give in and another decade will have to pass before similar protests across the South help bring about the Civil Rights Act.

Returning to the time frame of this personal history, I am a willing, conscientious worker and wartime labor shortages open up opportunities for fast promotion.

Copyright Office pay grades are low compared to the newer agencies. But it takes me only about nine months to move up three grades, to mail clerk, then senior mail clerk with two people under me, and to the more challenging job of search clerk, which involves tracking down missing correspondence and documents that have gone astray. It pays $1,620 a year, which is what my mother is earning.

I become moderately active in a federal employee union and take a night class in psychology at George Washington University. But my real interest now is writing short stories and sketches, which I eagerly show to anyone expressing an interest. They are not nearly as good as I think and I collect rejection slips from magazines such as the Saturday Evening Post and Colliers.

The people I meet at work are congenial and one becomes a special friend. Celia, a bright and popular member of the steno pool, is the only other Jewish employee of the Copyright Office.

Celia is two years older than I, so we don't really date although we occasionally go places together. She types my stories for me and several times brings me home to dinner with her family. Her father is a waiter, her younger sister is taking a stenotype course. Her mother is warm and hospitable.

The boarding house where my mother and I live is run by an elderly Irish woman who proudly lends me a book containing the speeches of Charles Parnell, the 19th Century Irish nationalist. We have breakfast there, but usually choose to have dinner at a cafeteria or a modest restaurant. Weekends, we often take in the movie and stage show at one of several large Washington theaters that offer vaudeville entertainment as well as a film. With the city crowded with government workers and military, the ticket lines often stretch around the block.

My mother and I see several plays at Washington's only legitimate theater, the National. Later, it will close for several years when Equity, the actors' union, refuses to let its members perform before racially segregated audiences. In the summer, we enjoy the low-cost Watergate concerts on the banks of the Potomac.

I am impatient to get into the war so I ask my draft board to move me to the top of the call-up list. In April 1943, I get my wish.

The Army Way

Camp Lee, adjacent to the Civil War battlefield of Petersburg, Va., is a gentle entry into the army. New soldiers are tested, outfitted and given rudiments of military drill before being sent to one of the army training centers. Civilian background occasionally determines whether you train as a tank driver or a cook. But most assignments are random, dictated by the army's needs of the moment.

My poor eyesight, although correctable with strong glasses, puts me in the limited service category and supposedly bars me from combat duty. I am assigned to a Transportation Corps training center in Louisiana, tantalizingly close to New Orleans although weekend passes are rare.

We are there to learn longshoreman skills, and I dutifully practice hand signals to guide a crane operator lifting cargo from dockside to ship's hatch. Military training is secondary. On a hike along the Mississippi River, we are urged to sing with gusto (and a straight face) this Transportation Corps song:

We load the ships, we load the trains,
So that the other lads can load the guns and planes.
When you hear a mighty roar, it's the Transportation
Corps. We're the men behind the men behind the guns.

Fortunately, for I cannot quite picture myself as a

Fortunately, for I cannot quite picture myself as a longshoreman, I come across a bulletin board notice of an army program to train engineers and language specialists in accelerated programs on various college campuses.

Qualifying tests for the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP) are given at Louisiana State University. I apply for the language program but discover, when I arrive at the Baton Rouge campus to be tested, that only engineering applications are being accepted. Despite my poor aptitude for math and science, I somehow qualify. In 18-months, supposedly, I can earn the equivalent of a college degree in engineering.

At LSU, we live in a dormitory built into the football stadium, and share our rooms with some of the world's largest cockroaches. I help Al Sito, one of my roommates, with English composition; he assists me in trigonometry and physics.

Saturday evenings, at the Heidelberg Hotel bar, I decide that whiskey sours are my drink of choice. We sometimes sing a self-mocking song that concludes with this refrain::

So take down your service flag, mother,
Your son's in the ASTP.

Three months later, when the Army sensibly discontinues the entire program, we are all dispatched to the recently formed 99th Infantry Division. Our training camp is near the small city of Paris, Texas.

This, finally, is the army. The training is rugged although not Marine Corps brutal. Our non-coms are mostly career soldiers from the peacetime army, but some come from one of the Pennsylvania, West Virginia or Kentucky National Guard units that form the nucleus of the division.

Surprisingly, I do well on the rifle range. The "expert

infantry" badge I earn adds $5 to my $50-a-month pay. Later, a combat infantry wreath will add another $5. Besides learning how to lunge with a bayonet while intimidating the enemy with a fierce yell, I absorb the odds and customs of poker and dice. I hold my own at poker but soon discover how quickly money can be lost shooting craps.

I also learn the etiquette of the "prison-chasing" guard duty we draw from time to time. Soldiers in the stockade, serving time for such military offenses as being absent without leave, must be guarded when on work assignments. By common consent, little work gets done. The prisoners post one of their number as a lookout so that if an officer come by, everyone will be hard at work under the eyes of an alert guard.

We drink quantities of 3.2 percent beer--the low-alcohol brew sold at military installations. Paris is in a "dry county" of Texas, where liquor is illegal although available. The city's coffee-shop restaurants serve gravy-drenched chicken-fried steaks; a dreary USO club for soldiers offers little distraction. Radios pour out country music and wartime pop songs. The unforgettable gem, however, is this singing commercial:

Cock goes the rooster,
cackle goes the hen,
Rooster snuff is just the stuff
for women folks and men.

Training exercises send us crawling on our bellies while machine guns fire live ammunition over our heads. On an overnight mission, I lean against a tree and try to catnap while a torrential rain pelts my steel helmet and lightning streaks the night sky.

I endure, but I'm really not much of a soldier. One night during maneuvers, I lose my way returning from a perimeter guard post to my platoon. First in a whisper, then louder, I call out helplessly, "Sgt. Schroyer, where are you?"

Our squad includes Howard Stein, a student at Swarthmore before he was drafted, whom I seek out as a friend. It also includes Cal, a genial tobacco-chewing coal miner from West Virginia who can't read or write, has a cackle of a laugh and an awesome capacity for liquor. He carries the heavy BAR, the Browning Automatic Rifle that gives an infantry squad extra fire power.

Our squad sergeant, older than most of us, had been in the Civilian Conservation Corps--one of the most successful of President Roosevelt's New Deal experiments--before joining the peacetime army. We are all part of the first platoon of Company C, 394th infantry regiment.

When training ends, a 10-day furlough allows a last visit home before our division ships out to some still unknown overseas destination. I travel from Texas to New York in crowded railroad coaches, changing trains in St. Louis.

After visiting with my mother, I go on to Massachusetts for a long weekend at Mary's farm. It is unchanged, but now adjoins Camp Miles Standish, recently built by the Army as a temporary holding area for units waiting to board troop ships in Boston Harbor. The Army bought 10 acres of Mary's farmland to include in the camp grounds and John Nason had worked as a construction crew foreman when the camp was being built.

Dorothy, a girl close to my age whom I recall as an occasional Sunday visitor with her family, is staying at the farm for the week. We take a blanket and books to a meadow but soon impulsively reach out to each other to kiss and embrace. It is merely an episode, and though we will correspond for a while, neither of us anticipates a lasting relationship. But at 19, going on 20, it is my closest approach to a sexual experience.

Back in Texas, our division prepares to go overseas. At headquarters, someone notices that my service record is marked limited service. I am asked if I want to transfer out of the infantry.

No, of course I don't. So I will stay with my unit and go overseas as a rifleman.

As our division boards troop trains, I amuse myself by pretending inside information that we are headed for Camp Miles Standish. Astonishingly, that is our destination. My friends are impressed, I am elated.

The night we arrive, I am assigned to guard duty at a headquarters building that I recognize as the former home of a neighboring family. The camp is fenced off by loosely strung barbed wire. The next afternoon, a Saturday, I slide under the fence in a remote section of the camp and dash across the dirt road. There, shielded by a tall hedge, is a familiar meadow. I am on Mary's farm.

It is a glorious adventure. The next day, a Sunday, I even bring a friend with me. After dinner, John Nason scouts the road to be sure there is no one in sight as we dash back into the camp.

We are allowed a one-day pass before we ship out, and I go into Boston to meet Dorothy. We are joined at dinner by Theresa, an older farm acquaintance with whom I have been corresponding for several years. After she leaves us, Dorothy and I sit and kiss on a park bench until it is time for me to get to the bus station.

Two days later, in Boston Harbor, the 99th Infantry Division boards the troop ships--converted from freighter duty--that will take us across the Atlantic.

Under Fire

Crossing the Atlantic in a troop ship is not a cruise. We are sardined in layers four hammocks deep in the cargo hold of a merchant ship. Most of us are seasick at least part of the 11-day voyage. When we are allowed on deck, in shifts, the damp chill blowing from the ocean is at least a respite from the stink of vomit and sweat below.

Periodic rumors that enemy submarines have been reported in the area add an occasional touch of excitement but the voyage is uneventful and frequent lifeboat drills are the only tangible evidence of the sea war.

At Southampton, Britain's principal port, English Red Cross women hand us mugs of milk-laced tea as we board waiting railroad cars. Our company is billeted in a small village near the English Channel, within walking distance of the town of Bridport.

It's mid-September 1944, more than three months after D-Day, and our stay in Britain is brief but pleasant. The training schedule is light, our evenings mostly free. The blackout is strictly observed. As we walk along a country road towards town, voices in the dark greet us with a cheery "Good Night."

A pub scene snapshot: an elderly man holds out a bite of food to his well-trained dog who growls and turns away when the owner says "Hitler's grub." But the dog eagerly accepts the morsel when the message is "Churchill's grub."

A few weeks later, we board troop ferries for an overnight crossing of the choppy English Channel. At the port of Cherbourg, we pile into waiting canvas-covered trucks that are the infantry's chief means of transportation.

Our first night in France is spent in a muddy cow pasture. The next day takes us into Belgium, where we camp on the outskirts of a farming village. We pitch our pup tents in a cold drizzle and line up with our mess kits and canteen cups at the outdoor chow line. The weather clears somewhat and discomfort gives way to the excitement of a new adventure.

A few friendly villagers stroll down to our area, and my school-learned French is adequate to strike up a conversation with a girl in her young teens. She soon returns with an invitation from her parents to visit their home. My platoon lieutenant is dubious but finally consents, telling me to be sure to take my rifle because "you can't trust anyone."

My welcome is friendly and my halting French sustains a conversation. Reassured that I am a respectable type, my hosts pour out small glasses of brandy and I offer a somewhat flowery toast to an early end to the war.

Our destination is the Ardennes, a lightly wooded area near the Belgium-German border. There, our untested division is spread thinly over a quiet section of the front. A blanket of snow is on the ground as we struggle to dig the two-man foxholes that are both living quarters and battle stations.

Rifle shots crackle through the woods and we dive for cover. Our platoon lieutenant hits the ground so hard he breaks his arm. The rifle fire, we learn, is from soldiers in an adjoining company shooting at a deer bounding through the woods.

The lieutenant is taken to a field hospital, our first casualty.

For reasons never explained to us, we move to new positions every week or so. At each new location, we use the small steel shovels we carry in our packs to dig foxholes and the slit trenches that serve as open-air toilets. Howard and I usually team up to share a foxhole, although my loyalty is tested when I happen to be paired with Cal, the former coal miner. With Cal, our foxhole is finished before most other teams are half done.

The sounds of war are a distant background. Occasional rounds of incoming artillery are aimed to our rear, and are matched by the closer boom from the guns of our regiment's Cannon Company. Occasionally, a defective round falls uncomfortably close. I am nervously on edge when our squad is sent on a patrol to probe beyond our lines, but it is uneventful.

A kitchen crew in a jeep brings us one or two hot meals a day. We eat squatted on the ground and then swish our mess kits in a 30-gallon can of soapy water followed by a clear rinse. Our other meals are usually K-ration cartons that typically contain a small can of chopped pork, a package of crackers, cocoa or lemonade powder to mix with water or snow, a sample-size packet of cigarettes and some folded toilet paper. Our steel helmets double as washbasins when filled with water.

The greatest hazard is trenchfoot, the loss of circulation in the foot from prolonged exposure to cold and wet. We get two pairs of clean sox each week, but other clothes are changed only during rare trips to a rear-echelon hot shower tent. When the weather is at its coldest, we will wear all the clothes in our backpack to stay warm. Two pairs of long woolen underwear and two woolen shirts are commonplace.

After nearly a month on line, I am euphoric when my turn comes for a two-day pass to a village used as the division rest area. There I sleep on a real cot--never mind that it is dormitory style--and drink beer in front of a fireplace. A hot shower and clean clothes are pure bliss.

Thus far, my experience as a combat soldier has been more discomfort than danger. But it becomes grimmer when, in December 1944, the Germans launch a desperation offensive that will be known as the Battle of the Bulge.

Our company is on what could loosely be described as the front lines, in that there are no other American troops between our outpost and the German positions. But the only contact has been occasional patrols and our platoon has put up a log cabin shelter in the woods just behind our defensive line of foxholes. At night, only every other foxhole is occupied, while half the unit spreads sleeping bags on the pine boughs that cover the dirt floor of the shelter.

At dawn on Dec. 16, 1944, Howard and I are in our foxhole when a heavy artillery barrage sends the men who had spent the night in the platoon shelter scurrying to their holes. One GI squeezes into our two-man foxhole rather than run a gantlet of bursting shells to reach his own position. We don't mind having an extra body to shield us from shrapnel.

When the barrage ends, we gingerly climb out. Less than two feet from our foxhole is a huge, unexploded shell--much larger than the German's basic 88-millimeter artillery weapon. So does chance determine life or death.

Off to our right, where Company B is positioned, we hear machine gun fire and the frightening rumble of tanks. Our company outpost pulls back and word spreads of our first combat death. But we are genuinely happy for an older soldier whose thigh wound takes him out of the war. He is the infantry's equivalent of a senior citizen--an ancient 33 years of age, married with two children. Much too old for combat, we 19 and 20-year-olds agree.

The battle swirls around us. Our platoon is relatively unscathed but two platoons that were dispatched to help beleaguered Company B suffer heavy casualties. German tanks break through thin defenses to attack our division's rear echelon headquarters.

Late that afternoon our company gets orders to pull back and link up with the remnants of the battalion. Howard and I are part of a small rear guard left behind to hold off any advancing Germans as long as feasible. We are given extra grenades and I feel caught in a poor movie melodrama when a casual acquaintance grips my hand in a choked farewell before moving on with the main body. But no Germans come our way. When the time is up, we move quickly to catch up with our company before the mid-December dusk turns into darkness.

Years later, I will learn from military history books details of the German attack and the many minibattles in which units of our division were engaged. At the time, as facts and rumors merge, we hear tales of courage against odds--and of a battalion commander stripped of his duties when he proposed to surrender his command to the advancing Germans. Our own battalion later will be awarded a presidential citation for its role in slowing the German advance.

The following day, as night falls, our decimated battalion moves cautiously and as silently as possible through terrain the Germans had already overrun. Two German prisoners who were captured the previous day are put to use as stretcher bearers for a wounded American soldier.

We are moving through a valley, on the wrong side of the constantly shifting front line, in an area where American artillery is randomly shelling roads and trails likely to be used by German troops.

A barrage catches the front of our column. In the brief pause before the next round smashes in, we hear the moaning of wounded soldiers. My face is pressed to the ground. As the shells move closer, the ground quivers and an explosion's flash seems just feet away. Then the shelling stops.

Medics stay behind with the wounded men. We whisper encouragement as we step carefully around them. It is another hour

of stops and starts before we reach a village held by units of the veteran 2nd Infantry Division.

The veneer of civilization is thin in war. Some 2nd Division troops tell us they'll take our two German prisoners off our hands. They march them around a corner. We hear a burst of gunfire. "Poor sons of bitches," someone mutters.

Our battered 99th division takes up a defensive position on Elsenborn Ridge, with occasional forays to take prisoners. In the long, winter nights, I worry more about the tanks we sometimes hear in the distance than the occasional shelling. We beat back two German attacks and I fire my rifle for the first time. Our artillery keeps the enemy at bay.

On Christmas Day, a kitchen truck lumbers close enough for us to have a rare hot meal. Our battalion commander, a lieutenant colonel, drops in on our foxhole to chat and give share his bottle of Scotch.

The bitter cold and snow that swirls around us is also our enemy. Howard has been sent to a hospital with trench foot, a common front-line malady. Soon after, I am among a group temporarily assigned to the regiment's intelligence and reconnaissance platoon to replace men who fought heroically to stem the German advance before they were all killed or captured.

It is a a relatively quiet period and my most frequent duty is as part of a two-man observation team located in the relative comfort of a roofed foxhole. Our job is to radio in the location of any enemy artillery fire that lands in our vicinity. One night the snowfall is so heavy our replacement team has to dig us out.

A cold and high fever has about run its course by the time I get sent back to a base hospital for a three-day stay. On the way back to my outfit, during a stopoff at division headquarters, I manage to get a temporary assignment that takes me out of active combat. I am detailed to help the division's two-man postal unit deal with a

mounting backlog of letters and packages. Incoming mail must be checked against lists of dead, wounded and missing soldiers. Company rosters change frequently as replacement troops are assigned to units.

We work long hours at this unglamourous task, and sleep on mail sacks in the workroom. But there are no shells falling and the small Belgium city of Verviers where our division rear echelon is located has a civilian life that I relish. My scanty French helps me make friends with two Belgian families. Despite food shortages, they invite me to Sunday dinners.

When our division goes on the offensive, our headquarters units leave Verviers to keep up with the advance. As we climb into trucks for an early morning departure, one of the Belgium couples is there to hand me a sandwich for the journey.

The war is in its last weeks when I finally rejoin Company C. I get a friendly welcome from those who were with the company when I left it more than three months earlier. There are many missing faces.

The formality of peace, almost an anticlimax, finds us in a Bavarian village. We celebrate, more with relief than exhilaration, at a beer tavern that the Army has taken over.

Victors and Survivors

World War II continues in the Pacific but in Europe, where it all started, the guns are silenced. My time-blurred recollection is of relief rather than elation.

In the final months of the war, the allied advance has uncovered the horror of Germany's death camps. From the news photos of emaciated survivors, we start to comprehend the enormity of the evil we have been battling. My own tiny role in this long and tragic war has certainly not been heroic; my absence from the conflict would not have left a ripple on the course of events. But the occasional risks and more frequent discomforts I encountered during my time in uniform at least ease my conscience.

There are times, thankfully rare, when war is a more civilized response than peace.

Our division is among the many in Europe that will be disbanded. A few in our ranks have sufficient service, enhanced by bonus points for wounds, to qualify for immediate discharge from the army. Those with the least service--the newest replacements--will be sent to the Pacific in preparation for what is expected to be a massive and bloody invasion of the Japanese homeland, comparable to D-Day in Europe. Most of us are to be reassigned to various army of occupation tasks.

I am in a group from our division sent to a replacement center in France for reassignment. We are feisty combat veterans, not about to take bossing from rear echelon non-coms or officers.

Snapshot: We are lined up in miliary formation and told to count off. "One," the first soldier in line dutifully calls out. "Two," the soldier next to him continues. But when the count reaches 54, all of us shout "some shit!" The camp commander ignores our rowdiness rather than risk a more serious challenge to military discipline. We learn solidarity pays off.

Of the options available as we await reassignment, I choose a three-week clerk-typist school located less than 20 miles from Paris. There, I dutifully practice touch typing but find that the half-glancing system I normally use allows me to meet the modest speed and accuracy requirement of the training course without unlearning bad habits.

Our Sundays are free but there are only a limited number of passes to Paris. So we practice typing skills by copying the passes and forging the signature of the commanding officer.

Paris snapshot: A middle-aged couple stops to ask if I have any cigarettes to sell. The black market is a fact of life in post-war Europe. I look at the man, smile, and say "mazel tov," the first Yiddish phrase that comes to mind. When he asks how I know he is Jewish, I reply in my school French, "Tu resemble a` mon oncle Jacques." Indeed, he looked much like my Uncle Jake. I give them my half-pack of cigarettes and wish them well. They are survivors.

Another snapshot: At the Louvre, not a high priority for American soldiers on pass, I get into a friendly conversation with a lieutenant. Ignoring the military-imposed social gulf between officers and enlisted men, we go out for drinks and then to dinner in an elegant civilian restaurant. Because meat is rationed, the only entree is fish, to which I am allergic. The waiter brings me instead, in a silver-covered serving dish, an order of asparagus with a remarkably good sauce. It is delicious with a shared bottle of a champagne.

After passing my typing test, I am assigned to the American military government command in Berlin. Each of the four major powers--the United States, Britain, Soviet Russia and France--controls a segment of Germany and is responsible for a sector of Berlin. Together, they are supposed to coordinate policies affecting the industry, agriculture and political shape of post-war Germany. I am too far off on the fringe of events to be aware of it, but the seeds of the cold war between East and West have already been sown.

My first headquarters job is routine but I manage to transfer to the office of a friendly first lieutenant who is the public relations officer for the Economics Division of the U.S. occupation command. Nick Leary, my new boss, is bright but sometimes drinks too much. When I tell him of my interest in journalism, he lets me write routine press releases, such as news features for hometown newspapers about soldiers in the unit.

Soon, still only a PFC, I am involved in shaping a politically sensitive report on the breakup of the I.G. Farben industrial cartel. It is prompted by criticism in Congress of the slow pace towards the goal of downsizing the industrial base that had made Germany a military power. I learn a cynical but useful lesson that quite different conclusions may plausibly be reached by selective use of available data.

In Berlin, I share a comfortable apartment with two other soldiers in a compound the American military has taken over. A nearby subway provides easy transportation to other sections of the city. We are bemused that the station is named Onkel Tom's Hutte (Uncle Tom's Cabin) for the pre-Civil War abolitionist novel by Harriet Beecher Stowe. The subway takes me to the opera house and the concert hall. It also takes me to the Tiergarten, the park where Berlin's zoo was once located and now the site of an international black market.

American soldiers sell cigarettes at the equivalent of $10 a pack in the inflated occupation marks printed by the allies. The German civilians get the marks by selling watches and cameras to the

Russian soldiers who have large amounts of printing press marks to spend. The British and French military units in Berlin are smaller even though the city is under four-power control.

Cigarettes are the hard currency of occupied Berlin. The English-speaking German secretary in our office, a timid, middle-aged woman, waits until Nick and I are away from our desks to carefully collect our discarded cigarette butts from the ashtrays. Later, the tobacco from the ends will be used to roll new cigarettes. On the street, a soldier smoking a cigarette will be followed by scroungers who will pounce on the butt when he discards it.

Our cigarette ration of a carton a week is enhanced by occasional packages from home. I trade cigarettes for a bicycle and a camera. With money from cigarette sales, I buy a puppy from a German woman in the Tiergarten. When the chain slips off my bicycle as I am riding it to work, I beckon to a passing civilian who willingly puts it back in place for the tip of a few cigarettes. So are we all corrupted.

I become good friends with Ernie, who came to the United States as a Jewish refugee from Germany. I discover an acquaintance from my American Student Union days also working at the military government command. And to my delighted surprise, Howard Stein, my foxhole buddy, also turns up in Berlin.

Some odds and ends that I recall:

* At the opera, taking special delight in seeing Hansel and Gretel. In the United States, it is an occasionally performed children's opera. Here, it is part of the repertoire and features two of German's leading singers.

* A Passover Seder conducted by an American army chaplain and attended by Jewish soldiers and by the scattered remnants of Berlin's once large Jewish civilian population. It is the first public Seder since the Hitler era and I am deeply moved to be part of it. But most of the civilians present, who survived the Hitler years by

concealing their Jewish roots, impatiently begin eating whatever food is on the table before the ceremony is over.

* An attempt by an American special services officer to organize a sports competition with the Russians. "Do the Americans have a chess team?" the Russians ask. A match is arranged, but the hastily recruited U.S. team loses all its games.

* A wonderful overheard conversation in which an American soldier tells a friend how he had stuffed an empty cigarette carton with paper and traded it to a German for a bottle of cognac. But the cognac turned out to be merely colored water, he complains bitterly.

During my stay in Berlin, I twice get to take low-cost vacations available to American soldiers. Both are memorable.

Nice, on the French Riviera, is several days distant by train, the normal means of travel. I take my chances with an unofficial alternative, hitchhiking rides on military planes. At Berlin's airport, I catch a ride on a Paris-bound cargo plane.

A flight to Nice is unlikely, I find. But the day saved in travel from Berlin isn't wasted. I find a room in a small, somewhat rundown hotel. On the door to my room is a notice which, translated literally from French, reads: "Dogs are not permitted in this hotel. But if they are introduced by surprise, a charge of 10 francs a day will be made."

That evening I go to Pig Alley, as Place Pigalle, the red light district of Paris is known to GIs. I leave Paris the next day by train, no longer a virgin. The city of Nice is more wartime shabby than a glamorous Riviera resort and it has been largely taken over by Americans on furlough. Still even a taste of civilian Europe is enticing.

A winter vacation in Switzerland is a thorough delight. At Basel, where our soldier group has an overnight stop, an elderly Swiss man treats me to an evening at a student wine cellar.

"Gottfried Keller used to come here," he tells me proudly on the erroneous assumption that I have heard of the Swiss poet.

Our holiday destination is the ski resort of Pontresina, and I join other beginners taking ski lessons on a gentle slope. Later, we warm up with hot chocolate and pastries at one of the town's bakery cafes.

In March 1946, when I am eligible for military discharge, I take advantage of an opportunity to stay on in Berlin in the same job as a civilian government employee. My new boss, Art Settel, is more a displaced civilian than an army captain, and we have a good relationship. When his wife and small son come to join him in Berlin I go to some trouble to locate an old tricycle as a present for the boy.

An anecdotal aside: During a trip in which I am escorting a Chicago Tribune reporter through some agricultural areas of Germany, we stop at Nuremberg for a brief look at the war crimes trial of the Nazi leaders. We stay the night in a castle that is being used as the press center, and I somehow find myself as the lone American in a drinking party with a group of British officers.

As we happily toast various prominent people, I propose that we drink the health of Harold Laski, a prominent Socialist intellectual and chairman of Britain's Labour Party. "I say," said one of the bemused Britons, "you're a bit of a pink, are you?"

I celebrate my 22nd birthday in Berlin that July but I have decided to return to the United States and finish college.

In late August, after a champagne and hot dogs farewell party, I board a troop ship at the port of Bremen.

As a civilian, I have officer privileges and share a cabin with an army chaplain. This time, there are no blackouts and journey's end brings us ceremoniously past the Statue of Liberty to dock at a Staten Island pier. My mother is waiting at the dock.

Back to School

Veterans are entitled to tuition as well as basic living expenses at any college that will accept them. But I am content to return to tuition-free City College. My pre-war college grades are too low for a transfer to Columbia or a comparable high-prestige college and I consider CCNY superior to alternatives such as NYU. With my assorted college credits, I enroll as a junior.

My mother, who had been working in Providence, moves to New York to be near me. After a brief stint at a Brooklyn orphanage, she is hired by the school system to teach children with severe physical handicaps in their own homes. Apartments are scarce, but she finds a furnished room with kitchen privileges in a walkup tenement about a block from City College.

My new home is Army Hall, across the street from the campus. It had been the Hebrew Orphan Asylum in its pre-war existence. Now it is pressed into temporary duty as CCNY's first dormitory and also houses a scattering of Columbia and NYU students.

While the years may have softened memories of the inevitable bumps and scrapes, I recall my final two years of college as a delight. With most required subjects behind me, my schedule has room for a smorgasbord of both writing and literature courses. I am fortunate in my teachers, and quite idolize Theodore Goodman, a witty, opinionated and perceptive English professor.

Living in a dormitory adds an extra dimension to City College life. Friends are more easily made than in a classroom setting and the mix of students is more exotic than the inbred CCNY stereotype.

A next door neighbor and sometimes chess partner, a Columbia student, is an Egyptian-born Jew whose native language is French. Down the hall is a minister's son from Kansas who was a merchant seaman during the war--a most unlikely CCNY student.

One of the two blacks on my floor is a suave graduate library student at Columbia; the other a reserved and diligent CCNY student of West Indian background who works at a part-time job when he isn't studying.

My own roommate, younger and one of the few non-veterans, was brought up in New Orleans. But most Army Hall residents are native New Yorkers taking advantage of the opportunity to live on campus rather than commute by subway. Both Leroy Stone, who becomes my closest friend, and Bernie Radack, who in later years will be a neighbor as well as an old college friend, are in that category.

I discover poets and writers. The erudition of a French-educated classmate makes me aware of the gaps in my own education. While Pierre doesn't live at Army Hall, he accepts my invitation to come to my room to talk to a group of interested friends about the existentionalist philosophy reflected in the currently popular books, plays and essays of Jean Paul Sartre.

Our small playwriting class subscribes as a group to one of New York's repertory theaters.

City College, previously an all-male institution except for its downtown business school and evening session classes, now has an education school at the main campus and there are women in nearly every class.

While I occasionally date a fellow student, my emotional commitment is to Celia, still in Washington although no longer working at the Copyright Office. When she comes to New York for a visit after my return from the army, I splurge on a dinner and theater date. It is a delightful evening. We kiss and cuddle in the cab back to her aunt's home in Brooklyn. I happily decide and proclaim to my friends that I am very much in love.

In another era, I probably would have fallen in and out of love several times before reaching the age of 22. But the war years were not a good time for gradually growing up.

Celia is affectionate, fond of me, but not swept off her feet by being romanced by a younger man with college still to finish and a career to start. We write, occasionally visit. She lives with her parents, and there is always a couch for me in their home .

I visit the farm of course. When John Nason dies after a stroke, Mary stays on alone for another year before selling the property for a modest price and moving to a friend's home in Boston. Just months earlier, ironically, the electric company finally extends its lines. So on my final visit, electric lights burn brightly but harshly in rooms once lighted by the soft glow of kerosene lamps. Only a few chickens are left to peck around the yard.

As in pre-war years, national political currents affect City College clubs, organizations and publications. In the context of the prevailing liberal-left spectrum, I am a centrist of sorts, reluctant to align myself with any political bloc.

When I was in Berlin, I had joined the newly-formed American Veterans Committee, attracted by its Citizens First, Veterans Second slogan. Now, both nationally and in the relatively small City College chapter, the AVC is split between a left faction benignly neutral to the participation of Communists and a more mainstream caucus actively hostile to Communist influence.

I am elected chairman of the CCNY chapter as a self-proclaimed independent and try to steer through factional shoals with a relatively non-controversial agenda. The anti-Communist liberals, whom I later endorse, will eventually win out but it will be a hollow victory. After a few years, most of us will stop thinking of ourselves as veterans and the AVC will shrink into insignificance--pure of heart but irrelevant.

In the summer of 1947, at the end of my junior year, I impulsively decide to hitchhike across the country and back. I buy a backpack and sleeping bag, take out a membership in the American Youth Hostel, collect some addresses, chart a tentative itinerary.

My Odyssey starts by subway--to the end of the line at 242nd Street in the Bronx. A trolley and a White Plains bus carry me to the limits of public transportation and I start thumbing. A ride with a traveling evangelist who leaves me with a "Message from God" pamphlet gets me to Hyde Park, my first-day destination. With other reverent tourists, I visit the home and grave of Franklin D. Roosevelt, President of the United States from the time I was a boy of eight until I was a man of 20.

At a nearby state park that night, I heat a can of franks and beans in a fireplace, use the convenient washroom and spread my sleeping bag under the stars.

The next evening, at a small town in upstate New York, a friendly caretaker has no objection to my spending the night in a corner of his well-trimmed cemetery, the only level land in the vicinity. In the morning, I freshen up at the washroom facilities of the Greyhound bus station in nearby Binghamton.

Youth hostels near Ithaca and in Rochester are on my route, and the host families make me welcome.

A pencil-filled notebook contains a diary of my six-week trip. But for this narrative, a few snapshots will suffice:

* At a state beach between Niagara Falls and Buffalo, a policeman reluctantly lets me spend the night on the beach. "What time are you getting up in the morning" he asks.

"About 6:30," I reply without much thought. Another policeman has the morning shift at the beach, but the room service message has been passed on. The voice behind the hand that gently taps my sleeping bag says, "It's 6:30. I was told to get you up."

* Not all policemen are concerned with my comfort, however. In Cleveland, I decide to save the few dollars it would cost me for a room at a YMCA or a comparably cheap hotel. Instead, I check my backpack in a train station locker and look around the city. Towards midnight, I stretch out on a hard wooden bench in the station to catch some sleep. I am awakened by a policeman's club firmly tapping my shoes.

"Get up and walk around," he tells me. Groggily, I do so and then return to the bench to nap for another hour. Again the tap on the feet and the bored voice saying, "Get up and walk around." Another hour's nap; again the same directive. The next morning, tired and dirty, I go only as far as nearby Toledo where I take a room at the 'Y' for an unscheduled day of rest and recuperation.

* At Ann Arbor, I spend a couple of days at the University of Michigan with Ernie, my Army friend from Berlin. In South Dakota, I learn about the problems of wheat farmers from a Farmers Union official who gives me a ride after I have spent the night sleeping on the athletic field of the University of South Dakota.

* A ride with a congenial chap about my age on his way to a job in Seattle turns into a shared experience of camping together in Yellowstone Park, turning a flashlight on a bear rummaging too close to our sleeping bags and sharing a dingy hotel room somewhere in Wyoming. Our paths divide as I head towards Portland, approaching it from the impressive beauty of the Columbia River valley.

* My mother had given me the address of two elderly sisters in Portland and my phone call brings an invitation to lunch. They had known my mother when she had come to Oregon as a social worker after World War I. My hitchhiking trip was just the sort of thing Sarah would have done, one sister said of my mother. "She always was a bit of a wild one."

* People who give me rides are friendly. One man drives considerably out of his way to show me a lumbering operation close up. A truck driver buys me a beer.

After spending the night in a redwood forest, I get a ride all the way to San Francisco where, as in other big cities, I had planned on staying at a Y. Instead, the man stops in front of a house in a residential area and asks me to wait. He is back a few minutes later with a "bring your stuff and come on in" message. He drives off with a wave, leaving me at his parents' home. It is near supper time. "Do you like borscht?" his mother asks. I am their guest for three days.

* In Las Vegas, on my way back East from Los Angeles, I spread my sleeping bag in a field at the edge of the city. I am awakened at dawn by a friendly Dalmatian who is standing over me and licking my face. In Utah, a Republican politician who gives me a ride complains that you can't get ahead if you're not a Morman. And at a Denver YMCA, a Hispanic youth who hopes to get work picking cherries asks me wistfully what college is like.

* In Kansas, after I am stuck without a ride for more than four hours on a hot Sunday ad the edge of a small town, a big Cadillac stops for me. The driver is friendly, asks my name.

"Perlman," he acknowledges. "Are you Jewish?" Then as I prepare to bristle, he explains "I've always admired people who can make money." I am sweaty and dirty. But my benefactor stops at his country club where I take a welcome shower.

As he buys me a drink at the bar, I marvel at the persistence of stereotypes.

I ride through West Virginia with a sailor who is returning to his base in Philadelphia. When his old car breaks down, we push it to the side of the road and hitchhike on together.

My last ride takes me across the George Washington bridge as the lights of New York are starting to come on. I complete my journey as I started it some six weeks earlier, by subway.

Back at college, I earn some extra money in my senior year as a twice-weekly tutor-companion, hired by the mother of a probably brain-damaged man close to my age. Despite his learning difficulties, Henry composes simple musical pieces on the piano. When I arrange to get one of his compositions copyrighted, he stutters proudly that it is the happiest day of his life.

As an outgrowth of my AVC role, I become active in the Student Council and serve as managing editor of a new weekly newspaper established by the two college veterans organizations to compete with Campus, the official CCNY paper.

Our newspaper, Observation Post, suffers from an excess of democracy. Its policy is determined by an editorial board of three persons representing AVC, three from the separate Veterans Association and three elected by the newspaper staff. Any three members have the right to equal space to dissent from an editorial. Only at CCNY!

We do not always take ourselves quite as seriously as this account may suggest.

I recall a Student Council session tied in parliamentary knots over a motion to censor a member who referred to the president of the Student Council as a "shmuck," a Yiddish vulgarism.

After some debate as to whether truth was a defense for the unflattering personal reference, a back-of-the-room huddle shapes a compromise. The offending member agrees to apologize to the

"office of the president" but not to the "individual who holds that office." By now it's too late to get any other council business done so we all go out for pizza and beer.

As for OP, the vets newspaper, our great moment comes in an April Fool issue. General Eisenhower has recently become president of Columbia. Our tabloid front page is dominated by a wartime photo of a doughty General MacArthur wading ashore in the recapture of the Phillippines. The headline that he has been chosen as CCNY's new president is quite convincing at first glance. To top it off, a purloined galley proof gives us an advance look at the rival newspaper's less imaginative April Fool effort and an opportunity for a put-down story.

So much for college joys. I am now 23, and it's time to start thinking about the future. At Celia's suggestion, we have gone for several months without seeing each other or writing. I go on once-a-week dates with an attractive young woman who is taking some business school courses, but we really have little in common.

Gradually, Celia and I resume our affectionate friendship but my ardor has cooled somewhat. When she tells me that she has become engaged to an Israeli working in the United States, my best wishes are deeply sincere and only slightly tinged with regret.

Getting Started

A light drizzle turns to rain as the City College Class of 1948 lines up awkwardly for the march into Lewisohn Stadium, scene of outdoor summer concerts, student protest rallies--and now commencement.

Here stand the engineers, over there the science graduates. There is a short line of those who will get arts degrees, longer lines for social science and education degrees. As we shuffle into the stadium and take our seats, my mother rushes up to hand me an umbrella. She is not the only one to so embarrass her graduate, I am relieved to note. The rain comes down harder and the obscure commencement speaker mercifully cuts short his address.

Now to find a job. I should have started earlier but there was a newspaper to get out, Student Council controversies, an American Veterans Committee election I considered important.

From the telephone book yellow pages, I compile a mailing list of public relations firms and the stack of 200 resumes I had reproduced dwindles.

The trickle of replies is discouraging similar, "Thank you for your letter of application. Unfortunately, there is no suitable opening in our organization at present."

I am still living at Army Hall. Instead of student subsistence payments, I now collect $20 a week in unemployment compensation that is available to job-seeking veterans for up to one year. My no-frills living expenses run closer to $30 a week.

An older cousin invites me to lunch. He and his brother now run the shirt manufacturing business their father started. The kindly offer: "Would I be interested in coming into the business?" My 'no' is not too emphatic. But it is a 'no.'

By late September, still jobless, I am willing to consider almost any type of temporary work. Macy's department store turns me down for a sales job with the honest explanation that I am "overqualified" and "probably wouldn't stay."

Finally, after answering a newspaper ad, I start selling the 27-volume Encyclopedia Americana on a commission basis. From telephone lists provided by the company, I make calls each day to try to set up evening home appointments with people I have led to believe that they may be given a valuable set of encyclopedias "without the usual cost" as part of a sales promotion.

In some two-and-a-half weeks of very diligent work, I make four sales, earning a $30 commission on each. But I am uneasy preying on the gullible--even the pompous Republican official who preens after I explain that this opportunity to obtain the encyclopedia at so modest a cost is only made to a people who have been identified as community leaders.

Rescue comes in a telegram replying to my job wanted ad in Editor & Publisher: "Have opening for reporter who can spell accurately and is not afraid of work. $40 a week. Jennings Daily News, Jennings, La."

The World Almanac identifies Jennings as a city of nearly 10,000 people, the county seat of Jefferson Davis Parish. A map locates it in southwest Louisiana, a dot on meandering Highway 90 between the larger cities of Lafayette and Lake Charles.

I wire back, "Airmailing resume. Can leave three days after receiving confirmation."

A week later, I board a train at Pennsylvania Station. Clothes and books compete for space in my suitcase.

The Jennings Daily News, circulation just over 2,000, is published Monday-through-Friday afternoons and usually consists of only eight full-sized pages. Its editor and publisher, Franklin Hildebrand, is a genial though sometimes pompous businessman in his fifties. Mr. Hildebrand takes me out to dinner when I arrive and suggests a rooming house run by an elderly widow. It's inexpensive and I move in.

The next morning I meet the paper's only other full-time writer, Louisiana-bred and about my age. He will soon move on to a larger paper in Opelousas, where local farmers grow yams rather than rice. But for now, he is my guide to Jennings.

I learn to decipher the misspellings of police reports and drink ritual cups of dark-roast coffee several times a day with the sundry "news sources" of a small town.

Although I had never written a sports story, I now spend several evenings a week covering high school basketball games, usually doubleheaders involving both boys and girls teams. With no nearby colleges, high school sports are a community event.

Other community events introduce me to the gumbo suppers, barbecues and jambalaya dinners put on my various organizations. Nearly all the farmers and many of the city people are Cajuns, descendants of the French settlers the British expelled from Nova Scotia two centuries before.

With the departure of my predecessor, I inherit the title of city editor and write a column three days a week as well as covering nearly all the local news and sports. As a part-time stringer for the New Orleans Times-Picayune, I average about $10 a week in space rates for sending occasional local stories for its state edition.

The News is very much of a shoestring operation. The paper's bookkeeper doubles as "society editor," filling columns with reports of weddings and meetings of church groups and fraternal organizations. The two Linotype operators are a young veteran getting government-subsidized on-the-job training and the elderly widow of the man who started the paper as a weekly early in the century. A skilled pressman and his part-time assistant tend the old flat-bed newspaper press and a smaller press used for commercial printing. An advertising salesman, who also brings in commercial printing business, and a young circulation manager complete the staff.

Mr. Hildebrand writes editorials, edits wire service copy to fill space not needed for local news, and writes most of the headlines, with an assist from me. All of us, including his wife, help wrap up bundles of papers for the afternoon mail train.

My radical background has sensitized me to race discrimination. But in 1949, before the civil rights revolution, I find in Jennings indifference rather than hostility towards the several hundred blacks in the city and its surrounds. They are viewed benignly as a source of maids and low-paid labor. My Indiana-born publisher tells me he enjoys hearing "darkies" sing.

I do a front-page story that, perhaps too cautiously, points out that children at the Jennings "colored school" don't get the state-subsidized low-cost lunches available to most white students because their school lacks kitchen facilities. But there is no follow-up by our paper, no editorial pressing for change. The black principal answers my questions but clearly doesn't want to make waves.

The big news story during my six-month stay is the campaign by local business people to raise money to build a hotel, primarily by selling stock to each other. A professional fundraiser has been brought in and I regularly cover the weekly pep meetings of volunteer stock sellers. Led by the fund raiser, they open each meeting by singing with gusto a song that begins:

We'll build a hotel, women and men,
And people will say, they've done it again.

I make a few casual friends about town and sometimes go places with an English teacher from a nearby town who doubles as basketball coach and helps me cover sports. On a trip to Lake Charles, where I happily discover a bookstore that carries Modern Library editions, I am startled to discover that he has never heard of T.S. Eliot.

In Jennings, I am attracted by a flirty drug store counter girl--until she mentions with a pretty pout that she didn't like her last job, at the local jewelry store, because the owner was "a Jew."

Christmas Eve of 1948 finds me at a hotel in Lafayette because all the restaurants in Jennings will be closed on Christmas Day and I didn't want to risk not getting a last-minute dinner invitation. When I check into the hotel, I decline a bellhop's offer to find me "a nice girl." Lafayette has a bishop and therefore a cathedral, and I attend midnight mass.

My living expenses are modest so I am able to splurge on a weekend a month in New Orleans, where a good dinner with wine in one of the best French restaurants can be had for less than $5.

On New Year's Day, a press pass I had printed for myself gets me into the stadium for the Sugar Bowl football game. It doesn't let me in the press box but no one questions me as I go down to the playing field with pad and pencil in hand, following the game from the sidelines.

After nearly six months in Jennings, it is time to move on. My ad in Editor & Publisher leads to an interview and job offer from the Beaumont Journal, in a Texas city of nearly 100,000 not far from the Louisiana border.

Mr. Hildebrand is sorry that I didn't stay longer. But he gives me a good recommendation and leaves me in charge of the paper while he and his family take a two-week vacation. After breaking in a successor, I leave Jennings--on good terms with everyone but happy to be on my way.

Moving On

Beaumont, my home from April 1949 through August 1951, is where the Texas oil boom began soon after the turn of the century. While only a trickle of oil is still pumped from the original Spindletop field, refineries are the biggest employers in Beaumont and nearby Port Arthur. The Oil Workers union is politically influential; Jefferson County's sheriff is benignly neutral during strikes.

Rare for Texas, the editorial staffs of the two Beaumont newspapers work under a union contract. The Newspaper Guild's bargaining rights date back to the 1930's, when depression era pay cuts widened the gulf between the higher-paid union printers and the unprotected reporters.

I work on the afternoon paper, the 23,000-circulation Beaumont Journal, which publishes three editions a day Monday through Friday and a single edition Saturday. The Enterprise, published mornings and Sunday, has about twice the circulation. Both papers are under the same ownership, share printing facilities and advertising, but have separate and mildly competitive editorial staffs.

Eager for a place of my own, I rent a semi-furnished apartment over a garage. My first non-essential purchases are a small tabletop phonograph from Sears and a recording of Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue.

My regular news beat includes the Chamber of Commerce, a major source of stories in a culture that venerates business success, and the various federal offices. I go out to coffee with the local Boy Scouts executive to get material for a weekly Scout column and I cover occasional farm news by asking the county agricultural agent questions until I understand the answers.

A fringe benefit of my beat is free lunches at the Kiwanis Club on Mondays, Lions Club on Tuesdays and Rotary on Wednesdays. The pecking order of the three businessmen's clubs is clear to me: the City editor belongs to the Kiwanis Club, the managing editor is a Lion and the editor is a member of Rotary.

An early copy deadline happily allows me to avoid listening to the speaker. Instead, I corner him beforehand, take a few notes on the points he intends to make and scurry back to the newspaper office after lunch to write my story in the 15 minutes before deadline. There is a separate club of business women; its coverage is relegated to the "Society" section.

The editors consider me a good feature writer and frequent special assignments are a welcome break from routine. Thus, I roam the county fair with a photographer, looking for and finding the unusual. I interview prominent basketball and football coaches brought in to teach a statewide high school coaching clinic. And I write about calves raised by farm kids and the wives from foreign lands brought home by Beaumont's World War II veterans.

Saturdays, when we work only half a day to produce a single edition, I move to the rim of the copy desk and write headlines. The four hours of Saturday overtime bring my weekly paycheck up to $82, quite adequate for a single person.

With my union orientation, I soon become active in the Newspaper Guild local. But without a union shop--illegal under the Texas "right-to-work" law--the Guild has only a bare majority at the two papers. As I learn at the bargaining table, management doesn't have to make concessions when a union is too weak to strike.

Despite my union activism, I am personally friendly with the managing editor, a veteran of Chicago newspapers who chaffs under an editor seemingly mired in the 19th Century. Some of the editor's dictums are outrageous.

On the Journal, although not on the Enterprise, photos in which a black person appears can be used only in the sports section. I discover this on a routine story of a training session for census takers, when I notice that my photographer is trying to arrange his pictures to avoid showing any of the black participants. Later I am startled to learn that the Journal's women reporters may not smoke in the news room, even though men are free to puff away. When I raise the double standard issue at a Guild bargaining session, I am told that the editor is concerned that some visitors would be offended to see women smoking in public.

Fortunately, there is life in Beaumont outside of working hours and I become part of a clique of irreverent younger reporters from the morning paper who drink and party together. Bill Greeley, who got his newspaper start in Minnesota, shares my left-liberal point of view and becomes my guide to the seamier side of Beaumont.

This unreported Beaumont includes gambling and prostitution carried on with the help of police payoffs and political contributions. Within a few blocks of our newspaper, you can quite openly place a bet. Sin is decorous in the Dixie Hotel, the local whorehouse. The police assure that there is no street solicitation or free-lance competition.

Then there is black Beaumont, largely invisible to the white majority except as a source of cheap labor.

I am able to make a small breakthrough in the two-way wall of segregation as a result of a casual conversation in a roadside tavern with three black musicians who have been playing the type of soft jazz I enjoy. They invite me to join them for an after-hours drink at a Negro jazz club.

It will be another 14 years before the Civil Rights Act strikes down state and local segregation laws, so my presence is technically illegal. My new friends advise me to identify myself as a radio station disc jockey if a policeman should come by and question my presence.

However, I am not challenged, then or in later visits. I discover and relish a vibrant musical scene kept going largely by amateurs playing for the fun of it.

Over time, I get to know some of the musicians and jazz buffs. A bass player's regular job is sweeping up at the pool hall near our newspaper. A trumpet player teaches at Beaumont's black high school but pressure from his conformist principal may force him to choose between his music and his teaching job.

I buy my first car, a 1941 Buick that has about 60,000 miles on it. Now I have mobility. I drive 90 miles each way to Houston for an evening at a ballet, and I drive across the Louisiana border to try my luck at a relatively lavish gambling casino.

Closer to home, I spend many summer evenings watching Texas League baseball. Reporters get free season passes and our local team is a farm club of the New York Yankees. The legendary Rogers Hornsby is its manager.

Sometimes I visit family-oriented colleagues, especially the Journal's news editor and his hospitable wife who live down the block. My first Christmas in Beaumont, in sharp contrast to the loneliness of Jennings, finds me laden with presents for the children of the reporter-photographer who has invited me to dinner. There is even an occasional evening of bridge.

My modest record collection tilts from classical to jazz, especially Louis Armstrong. It includes folk song albums and two records of Edith Piaf singing her bittersweet French songs. I subscribe to two magazines--Partisan Review, about as highbrow as you can get, and Astounding Science Fiction.

On vacations, I take a train back to New York to see my mother and a few college friends such as Lee Stone. My father, now remarried and living in Kansas City, makes a trip to Beaumont to visit me. I buy a cot to provide a guest bed for his three-day stay. He is well meaning and I try to be a considerate host although we are almost strangers.

My friendship with Bill Greeley includes his girl friend, Peggy, perky and good fun although their marriage lasts less than a year. In that time I manage to fall in love with her, helped by the fact that--at Bill's suggestion--I have been her occasional escort for an evening out while he worked the night hours required by a morning paper.

I admit my feeling when they break up and she tells me gently that of course she has been aware of it. She is fond of me but not ready for a rebound romance.

I grieve when she leaves Beaumont. Men aren't supposed to cry so I create a dream in which I have gone blind. I awaken with tears in my eyes.

Yet soon after Peggy has left, Bill and I move in together in a relatively modern apartment complex. Actually, we hardly see each other except on weekends since I work days and he works afternoons and nights. But occasionally I recklessly stay up most of the night for after-hours partying with the morning paper staff.

A new friend is Nathan Broch, whose journey to Beaumont is a 20th Century Odyssey.

Nathan is a German-born Jew whose family moved to Belgium after Hitler came to power. He attended college in the Netherlands and ended up in Australia during World War II, writing for a Dutch news agency. Later he reported from Saigon, when Vietnam was still a French colony. Nathan's mother and brother are now in New York and he came to Beaumont after working for several years on a Birmingham, Ala., newspaper. He speaks profanity-sprinkled colloquial English with a German accent and writes fluently.

Returning from a vacation, I find that Bill has brought a somewhat exotic waif into our circle.

Cathy's last regular job was at a Port Arthur whorehouse. She plays a good jazz piano, sings in a throaty voice and once toured with

a minor band in the dual role of singer and the girl friend of the band leader. She is hooked on dexedrine tablets, a stimulant supposedly dispensed only by prescription but sold with no questions asked by a local pharmacist.

Cathy's contribution to our vocabulary--a word we happily adopt--is "boomchuck." It carries the connotation of bourgeoisie and Cathy uses it as a disparaging description of people who are uptight and always conventional. She shares a furnished room with Annie, a plain and friendly girl trying to escape small town America.

When the two girls decide to try their luck in Houston, we wish them well. But a couple of weeks later, while Bill is off on vacation, I get a plaintive call from Annie. A hotel room party apparently got rowdy and they have been arrested on a vagrancy charge. They need $25 each for bail.

I don't have $50 to spare, and Annie asks me to call an aunt she had been living with in Mississippi. Her aunt, taking a chance on a stranger, wires me $100. I telegraph the bail money and drive to Houston after my Saturday morning stint at work.

There I find Annie quite ready to go back to Mississippi; Cathy would like to try Chicago. I phone the police reporter of the Houston Chronicle, introduce myself and explain my mission. He meets me at the central police station and passes me on to a macho police lieutenant who shows off to an out-of-town reporter by insisting on driving me around town on a tour of the city's bars.

When we get back, the lieutenant instructs a clerk to "nolle pross" the case--withdraw the charges.

I buy bus tickets for both girls, give Cathy money to get her through the first few days in Chicago, and see them off.

By 10 p.m., I'm back in Beaumont, frankly sort of proud of what I had been able to accomplish in an afternoon.

Beaumont has its fun times but I decide that I don't really want to make it my home. And covering the county fair or the Neches River Festival loses its novelty the third time around.

It's time to move on.

I put together a photocopy brochure of a sample of my Journal stories, set aside part of my pay each week to finance a job hunt and give a month's notice. In late August, I stuff my clothes, books, phonograph and records into the old Buick and head East.

Fate Throws the Dice

What if? What if there had been a job open on a New Orleans newspaper. At the time--August, 1951--it seems the most cosmopolitan of southern cities and I can see myself settling there. But our lives are shaped by chance as much as choice, and the inevitable "what if" questions are unanswerable.

What if the shell that landed on the edge of my foxhole in Germany had not been a dud? But the artillery shell didn't explode and there is no job for me in New Orleans. I move on.

There is no job for me on the newspapers of Birmingham or Atlanta. In Richmond, an Associated Press bureau chief would like to hire me. But, he explains, a tight budget compels him to look for someone with less experience who could be paid the starting rate under the Newspaper Guild contract. Ironic. Where was he when I was looking for my first newspaper job?

I also have to watch my budget. When I reach Washington, I economize with a bathless room in an old hotel near the railroad station. It may take several days to canvass the city's many news organizations. If I come up empty, it will be on to Baltimore, Philadelphia and New York. I haven't yet thought beyond that.

Resumes and letters of recommendation in hand, I knock on doors in Washington's National Press Building. On the 12th floor, I find

Trans Radio Press, a news service for radio stations. It is a relic of the 1930s when the major newspaper wire services looked on radio stations as competitors rather than customers.

Dick Wilson, Trans Radio's Washington bureau chief, tests me with a wordy press release to be boiled down to a newsy paragraph. His job offer is coupled with an apology for the low pay. It's less than I earned in Beaumont, but I am elated. I rent the first furnished room I look at, make a weekend visit to my mother in New York and report for work.

Trans Radio, I discover, is struggling to stay in business now that most radio and television stations subscribe to the Associated Press or one of the other newspaper wire services. Its main office in New York is supplemented by our Washington bureau of six writers and editors plus a part-time teletype operator. A lone reporter is based in Chicago and we draw on the British-owned Reuters news service to cover world news.

I enjoy writing for radio, shaping news stories to be spoken and heard rather than read. Trans Radio, though understaffed and underpaid, is a fun place to work.

Snapshot: A San Francisco radio station wants to "recreate" a baseball game between the New York Yankees and the Cleveland Indians. In that era, local radio announcers sometimes simulate on-the-scene broadcasts of games being played in other cities. They use play-by-play reports tapped out by Western Union telegraph operators in baseball parks and add to the illusion with sound effects of bat hitting ball and crowd noises.

The game is being played in Cleveland and Trans Radio's part-time teletype operator telephones a friend there. The friend agrees to turn his radio on to a local station's broadcast of the Yankees-Indians game. Then, sitting in our Washington office and listening on the phone to the radio in Cleveland, our operator teletypes a pitch-by-pitch report to San Francisco.

Our bureau covers Congress, the White House, the State Department, the Pentagon and major stories such as Supreme Court decisions. When the teletype operator isn't on duty, we punch out our own copy on a teletype to New York, where it is meshed into the main news wire.

As the lone staffer on duty one night, I am included in an after-hours conference call the White House press secretary places to the offices of all the wire services to dictate the text of a major presidential announcement. To avoid being beaten by the newspaper services, I break into our main news wire to tap out a bulletin.

I leave my furnished room to share an apartment with three other young men above a clothing store near George Washington University. The bedrooms are tiny but, as I soon discover, a quite large living room is a good setting for parties.

When calls to assorted acquaintances bring enough acceptances to assure a Saturday night party, I am dispatched to provide promised transportation for Laura Lee Butler and Jean Douglas, two young women from Florida who share a walkup apartment.

It is a fine party. Twice the police politely knock on the door to ask us to make less noise, even though we have no neighbors to disturb.

I gravitate to Laura and drive her home. We stay for a while in the car, to talk and kiss. I invite myself over for a Sunday brunch, which becomes a leisurely get acquainted session. With her roommate, Jean, and a friend, we play word games and talk politics. Both women are in the Young Democrats as are a couple of my housemates.

Our relationship develops comfortably, and Laura and I soon take for granted that we will spend most of our free time together. Jean considerately tries to give us as much privacy as a shared apartment allows. My anemic $60-a-week paycheck leaves little for dates but there are a city's resources to explore.

We go on picnics, bike rides near the Potomac River, and to the free Sunday evening concerts at the National Gallery of Art. When I am not working late, I often show up at the apartment at dinner time with a modest bottle of wine as my contribution.

But life still has its bumps. One November day, when I am starting a new beat covering the Senate, a phone call brings me back to the office. Trans Radio, trying to stave off bankruptcy, has to reduce its already barebones staff. The two of us most recently hired are reluctantly let go with warm letters of recommendation.

It's back to the job hunt, much sooner than I had anticipated. As a precaution in case the search should be lengthy, I sign up for Christmas season work in the Post Office.

A small break comes my way. An interview at the Washington Post--and perhaps the fact that City Editor Ben Gilbert is also a CCNY alumnus--leads to a temporary job, until a reporter on sick leave is able to return to work. But it provides only a brief respite.

Most of my few weeks at the Post are spent sitting at a city room desk, trying to look busy while waiting for snippets of story assignments. Meanwhile, Trans Radio calls it quits. The night editor of the Post, who has been through a few newspaper closings himself, lets me leave work early to attend the wake. The final Trans Radio news report is transmitted, hugs are exchanged, drinks are poured and the partying begins.

My liveliest assignment at the Post turns out to be a non-story. Late one Sunday afternoon, I am sent with a photographer to look into a report that a runaway bull is on the median strip of Virginia's busy Shirley Highway, a menace to traffic. It is dusk when we spot the bull, and we worry that a camera flash might cause it to bolt from the median into the traffic stream. So while the photographer looks for a phone to call the state police, I am left to keep an eye on the bull.

As twilight deepens into night, visibility decreases and stalking a bull seems much less like a game. Finally the police arrive with a sullen farmer who puts a rope around the bull and leads him back across the highway after the police stop traffic.

This is hardly a story for a major metropolitan newspaper. Still, before going off duty, I turn in a modest little feature about the hazards of stalking bulls on the Shirley Highway. By now, it's past the first edition deadline and it is unlikely the story will make the paper. But that I will never know because late that night, after I have left work, the bull escapes again--this time into the path of a truck. It makes a brief story for the final edition of the Post, but someone else writes it. So much for my venture into big city journalism.

My job hunt resumes when the Post reporter whose slot I am filling returns to work. I am promised consideration for the next vacancy, but just now I need a paycheck. Within a week, I find a job with the Machinists Union.

I don't know it then but my career has taken an important shift. For the rest of my working life, I will be using my writing skills as a part of the trade union movement.

Ending and Beginning

Some historical background: Union membership grew rapidly from the mid-thirties through the World War II era. The National Labor Relations Act gave workers a legal right to be represented by unions of their choice. America's mass production industries, including the giant auto and steel companies, were quickly organized by the new industrial unions that broke away from the craft-dominated American Federation of Labor.

During World War II, when factories and shipyards worked around-the-clock, membership of both AFL and CIO unions expanded with the workforce. But this heady period of growth was over by the time I signed on with the Machinists. The Taft-Hartley Act, passed by a Republican Congress over President Truman's veto, gave employers new tools to resist union organizing.

While AFL unions had about twice the membership of unions in the Congress of Industrial Organizations, neither federation was growing.

The International Association of Machinists was an AFL union with a membership elite of skilled machinists and toolmakers. But its big growth was in the aircraft industry generated by World War II. By 1952, it was almost as much an industrial union as the CIO United Auto Workers, its chief rival.

The logical step of a merger of the AFL and CIO is still three years off. Meanwhile, unions continue to raid each other's membership and waste organizing resources in a costly rivalry.

The IAM has a first-rate weekly newspaper, The Machinist, staffed and edited by newspaper professionals. But the union's immediate need is for someone to handle writing and publicity assignments on organizing campaigns. After getting field experience, I can expect a headquarters job with the newspaper.

By this time, Laura and I are committed to each other. We seal our engagement with an inexpensive zircon ring, all I can afford. I move in with Laura when her roommate, Jean, goes home to Florida for Christmas. We will be married in the spring, after I return to Washington. And we will plan our own simple wedding.

Laura's father is adamantly opposed to his daughter's marriage to a Jew. My mother is happy that her son was getting married, but she clearly would prefer that it be to some "nice Jewish girl."

Laura and I are untroubled by our different heritages. Together we scout an Ethical Culture service in Washington and agree that its liberal agnosticism may be a suitable alternative to a civil ceremony.

On New Year's Day, 1952, I set out for Atlanta in my 1941 Buick with its Texas license plates. My first assignment is a union representation election at the Lockheed Aircraft plant in nearby Marietta, Ga. The IAM has a strong claim because it represents workers at Lockheed's parent plant in California. The CIO has strength because it had represented workers at the Marietta site during World War II, when it was operated by a different aircraft company.

I am strongly committed to the union cause, and my introduction to the Machinists Union has been favorable. But I am not comfortable with a role in which the "enemy" is another union.

On the plus side, Machinists President Al Hayes tells me that he wants to get away from the name-calling and smears that too often mar union campaigns. I soon find, however, that not everyone I work with agrees with his goal. The IAM's regional vice president in Atlanta, for one, grumbles about "fighting with one hand tied behind your back."

In addition to the Lockheed campaign, which the Machinists will eventually win, I work on organizing assignments in Birmingham, a mere hour's commute from Atlanta by plane. Later I will work on campaigns in Wichita and in a pair of dingy industrial towns in Ohio. I write leaflets and help pass them out at plant gates and parking lots. I buy radio time and newspaper ads, and write copy for them.

I meet dedicated union people, some with the IAM and some from competing unions. And I meet others whose loyalty is for sale to the highest bidder. (Still, I can't help laughing at the chutzpa of the manager of a women's softball team made up of Lockheed workers. After getting the IAM to pay for his team's equipment, he brings his team to the playing field outfitted in CIO T-shirts.)

Internecine warfare is not what the trade union movement is supposed to be about, and several years later I will be elated when the AFL-CIO merger takes place.

Laura and I write to each other, of course. A generation later, we would be talking on the phone regularly. But in the era in which we grew up, a long-distance call is for emergencies.

In Newark, Ohio, at a J.C. Penney store, I buy a dark blue suit with a wedding in mind. Finally, the time comes when I can load my belongings into the aged Buick and point it towards Washington. Fatigue forces me to pull into a roadside motel somewhere past Richmond. But the next morning, a Sunday, I am breakfasting with Laura and Jean.

Considerately, Jean decides she should go to church that day. Laura and I turn to each other. I am home.

Laura and I are late to our wedding; we had to stop on the way to pick up a corsage at a florists. But the guests wait patiently at the home of the Ethical Culture leader who will perform the ceremony.

A college friend, Bernie Radack, has offered us the house he shares in Chevy Chase for a wedding reception. The previous day, I had brought over a dozen bottles of champagne and we drink from rented glasses. We carve the wedding cake, Jean takes snapshots, some of my friends sing "Wedding Bells Are Breaking Up That Old Gang of Mine."

* * *

And so they lived happily ever after. Well, no one lives quite that long. But happily. Maybe not 100 percent heavenly bliss every moment of every day. But in human terms, quite happily. "Yes," he said. "Yes, indeed."

David Lawrence Perlman

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and afterwards...

My manuscript ends on our wedding day, May 18, 1952. For the next 49 years and until Laura's death on October 1, 2001, it would be our story.

OURS as in Laura and Dave...

OURS also as in Linda, Laura, Arthur, Jeremy, Jason, Claire and Dave...

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