

[Fill it up, Sir?]

Roaldus Richmond Recorded in Writers' Section Files

TE: AUG 23 1940 Men Against Granite

FILL IT UP, SIR?

The yard was a brilliant area in the long busy main street. Red-capped arc-lights shone upon red-and-white gasoline pumps standing in a double row. The place was clean and attractive. The smell of gasoline and oil was pleasantly diluted by the keen autumn air. The attendants, in blue uniforms with red piping and letters, more young men with fresh faces. Their voice were cheery as they said: "Fill it up, sir?". The family question that is heard all over America, and a decade ago was answered, "Sure." Nowadays the general reply is: "Make it five."

The interior of the station was bright too, and warm. Three attendants lounged about, smoking cigarettes and arguing which was the best football team in the country: Cornell, Tennessee, Southern California. . . "Tennessee didn't play anybody this year," protested one. "They had too soft a schedule." Another said: "I saw Cornell at Hanover. They've got a great club." After a time the talk turned to the war in Europe: "Germany's sure raising hell with England. Hitler's going to lick England without ever fighting an land." Another heated but good-natured argument started, went an for awhile, and was dropped.

Bill Maitland, the assistant manager, sat on the edge of the flat-topped desk swinging his legs, inhaling deeply on his cigarette. Attached to his belt was a change-making apparatus 2 such as streetcar conductors wear. He tapped this with long stained fingers as he talked. He was a tall dark young man of perhaps thirty, slender and lithe, with a lean face and

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rimless glasses. When he moved he was quick and energetic. There was a hard quality of independence in him. Only when he smiled was his dark harsh face agreeable.

"I've been down here about three years," Maitland said. "I come from the northern part of the state — Newport. I was born up there. My folks had a farm on a hill over the west side of Lake Memphremagog. Nice view over the town,, and you could look straight up the lake for miles. That's some lake. Wild looking with the islands and wooded headlands and mountains beyond. Owl's Head can be seen from quite a distance. Supposed to be named after an Indian chief. It's a mountain on the Canadian side.

"We had a swell place there. Guess I was happier there than I'll ever be anywhere else. Didn't know it at the time, of course. Thought I had to get away from home the first thing I did. I was brought up to work — and work hard. Started doing farmwork when I was a kid. Can't say I really liked it. But it was a great place to live. They call it Maitland Hill. My family had been there a long time. But we sold the place after my dad died. The last few years we were there my mother took in tourists. I didn't like that much. Don't like tourists. But I didn't have to see much of them. I was working in a service station in Newport then. You see enough tourists in this business, too.

"I remember the family reunions we used to have there on 3 the hill. [And?] how I hated them. Real big old-fashioned family reunions, you know. Picnic lunch on the lawn; everybody taking snapshots; all that. I used to run away and hide in the barn. We had a big haybarn. After the hay was lowered a ways you could take some awful leaps from the high beams. Us kids played there all the time. Had secret hideouts and everything. We had a pretty tough gang of kids on the West Side. Once during a family reunion I brought the gang up to hide in the barn. Then I got some of my sissy cousins out there to play. We did a job on them all right! One of them was named Alfred and played the flute. I hated that family stuff. But it meant a lot to my folks. Now that I've grown older I can understand. And they were all fine folks. Regular old clan stuff, you know.

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“I went to high school in Newport. Played basketball and football. I wasn't any star but I played. We had pretty fair teams too. When I went to the University of Vermont for a year. I didn't want to go there. Wanted to go out-of-state somewhere. But Vermont was my mother's school — she's a house mother at her sorority there now, and my older sister went there too — she's a nurse now, in New Haven. So they sent me to Burlington. And I busted out. I didn't study at all, didn't even try to get by. Don't know what was wrong with me. That ended my college career. I can see what a fool I was, now. I thought they'd send me somewhere else, but Dad said I'd had my chance and passed it up. I could go to work.

“I tried quite a few things and finally landed with Standard Oil. I've been with them ever since. I worked about three 4 years in the Newport station. Then I got transferred here. We had a nice station at home and a good bunch working there. Not so much competition there. We did a wonderful business in the summertime. We all got bonuses. But there are too damned many stations everywhere today. Look at this town. Look at this main drag. Every other place is a gas station. The ones in between are beer gardens. That's all they have in this town. Filling stations — for cars and people.

“In thirty-six I went to California. Drove out with a couple other fellows. It was a swell trip. We went out the southern route. The Texas Centennial celebration was on that summer, you know. We took that in. It was some show. California's a great place too. Like to live out there. The other boys stayed. I'd still be there if Mother hadn't called me home after Dad was hurt. He was gored by a bull and he never recovered from it. Suffered like hell, I guess, although he never said anything. Dad was a fine man. Slow-talking, slow-moving, easy-going; quiet and deep. Maitland traits — that I didn't inherit. Everyone in Newport liked and respected him. We couldn't keep the place after Dad went. Mother wanted to get away. So we sold. When I go back to Newport now I don't go near the hill. I just don't.fool like seeing the place — with somebody also living in it.

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“Out on the Coast I had a good time You'd be surprised how many Vermonters have gone out there to settle down. I've got relatives out there, quite a few of them. They're all doing well out there; living pretty high. Seem to be more opportunities there than back East here.

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“My wife's a California girl. Met her when [I?] was out there. She came East and we were married. She's been working in a band here, an that [helps?]. These jobs don't pay much, you know. Some of the boys were kind of sore when I got the assistant manager's job. They'd been here a lot longer than I had. They lived here and I came from outside. Most of them are pretty good fellows. We get along o.k., and have some good [times?] together. But there's jealousy here the same as everywhere else. Jealousy, hypocrisy, politics; backbiting. I guess you can't get away from it, no matter, what you do.

“I think I'm going to get a station of my own before long. In New Hampshire. It'll be tough going though. Competition's awful keen. New stations going all the time. There ought to be some retriction, some way to limit them, it seems to me.

“I've got un old Ford to bang around in. I'd be lost without a crate of some kind. Always had a car to drive at home. Delivered milk with it mornings' took the fellows, or a girl, out nights. We always had a lot of fun around Newport. During prohibition we were up over the border half the time, drinking that canadian ale. I go for that stuff. We had a speedboat on the lake, too. [Memphremagog's?] a great place for boats.

“used to do a lot of skiing, all the winter sports. Used to play a lot of golf and tennis, too. But you don't have much time for that on a job like this. About all we do is go out dancing and drinking beer, go to a show, something like that. In the summer we go swimming a lot. Some of those old abandoned quarries make perfect swimming places. They fill up with spring water, you know, hundreds of feet deep some of them.

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All kinds of diving places from the sides. The water is nice and clean. We used to go up every afternoon or evening after work. Take a few bottles of ale along. Lay around on the granite blocks. Just like a private swimming pool. Hell of a lot better than those public places. We used to go to Little John quarry, up on the Hill, but they drained it and started working it again this last summer.

“Some of the boys working here are college graduates. You find a lot of college men in service stations these days. I guess it helps — a little. But not a hell or a lot. Not as much as it should. It's kind of discouraging to go four yours to college and then have to pump gas for a living. But it's getting so they figure they're lucky to find any kind of work. And I guess they're about right.

We don't get many stonecutters in here. Most of them drive cars though. They probably patronize their own countrymen who run stations. Can't blame them for that. We get more tourist and through trade, I think, than local. Of course we do have our regular local customers.

“Some of the people are pretty decent. Some of them are snotty as hell. Order you round like a dog. You know. Until you feel like cracking a wrench over their heads. Once in awhile you pick up a good tip. For changing a tire, or a grease job. But not so much nowadays. And some stations don't allow tipping.

“The hours are long, but you got some time off every week. The night hitch isn't bad in summer, but these winter nights are long and cold and empty. Nobody stopping in. Nobody going 7 by. Well, it's a job. And that's about all you can say for it. It's a living — and that's what we have to make.”