

COLLEGE DAYS (AND NIGHTS)

By John S. Halbert

In the early-to-mid-1960's, social norms at colleges in the South differed considerably from those of even a few years later. For example, when I was a freshman in the fall of 1963, women students at Florence State were forbidden to appear on campus wearing shorts unless they also wore a raincoat or trench-coat. Violators of this rule faced severe punishments, including being confined to the dorm, or forbidden to leave campus. This onerous policy (particularly for male girl-watchers) was in force for several years. Especially on weekends, with all the raincoat and trench-coat-clad females around, the place looked like a spy convention.

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The topic of student sex wasn't discussed much in those days, and when it was, it was with a good deal less sophistication compared to a few years later. Of course, there was the standard necking we all did on dates, but, for many of us (with some notable and unforgettable exceptions), that was about as far as it usually went. We even had a derisive term for campus girls who slept around: "Community Chests."

One time, I overheard a very popular coed who was engaged and soon to be married, talking to a friend as they walked through the Amphitheater. From her comments, I gathered that she had recently been reading a marriage manual. "They do *that*?" I heard her gasp. "You mean, people actually *do those things*?"

It was, indeed, a different era.

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In due time, I discovered that things were perhaps not so straight-laced as everyone was letting on. As part of a Psychology course, I wrote a research paper on the emotional aspects of prostitution. To augment the research materials I found in the library on the subject (that I had found to be dull and completely out of touch with reality), I discreetly let it be known around the campus that I wanted to interview a prostitute. To my amazement, several coeds returned my queries through indirect routes I had specified to maintain their confidentiality. After I promised not to reveal their actual identities, each girl told me her story,

There were some astounding revelations. I learned that several women students were involved in a local call-girl operation that catered to traveling salesmen. A striking blonde who happened to be in one of my classes said when she needed money there was always prostitution. Although she was vague on details (there was probably a lot more to her story than what she told me), she left no doubt that she had been a professional in the past and had kept up her connections to The Business.

I also found that, almost without exception, those who became prostitutes had suffered traumatic experiences in the past that had left them with low personal self-esteem.

Some of the stories the girls told me---involving rape, incest and violence---were startling. A

slender, extremely attractive brunette, a sophomore, wept as she told me how she had been molested by an adult neighbor for years, and considered herself unworthy of anything other than The Profession. However, she had graduated from a local high school's advanced program with honors, and had excellent college grades that suggested she had underestimated herself. Could she have benefitted from a change of location and a fresh start? It was an intriguing question to which there was no answer, as I never again had the opportunity to speak with her on the subject.

Looking at these beautiful and bright young undergraduate women, no one would have ever suspected that, apart from school, each also lived a hidden double-life. Furthermore, from what they told me, it appeared that, once a girl embarked on the course of prostitution, if, in the future, she wanted to get out of The Business, marry, and have children, the lure of the big money, complicated by certain unsavory pressures to return, were often irresistible.

The paper I wrote, *THE MIND OF THE PROSTITUTE*, created a sensation, and I was invited to read it to several of the Psychology classes.

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By the mid-'sixties, there were many indications that American society as a whole was undergoing a fundamental change. The Vietnam War and the draft affected everyone's thinking. Why wait for marriage when you might soon be called-up for military service? "Get-it-on-now" became the bywords. The result was a general relaxing of the societal codes, even in Florence.

One of the first---and most noticeable---changes on campus was the ending of the oppressive raincoat rule, along with liberalized dormitory hours. It was a whole new world, abetted by the increasingly activist (and aggressive) "Women's Lib" movement that promoted with enthusiasm female equality, bra-burning and other measures that would soon bring about vast changes in relationships between men and women. Many girls began to wear shorts to class, and some adventurous coeds even went braless---heady stuff, indeed, for Florence State.

My first encounter with this new order of things came one Saturday evening during the summer of 1967 (still fondly remembered by many as "The Summer of Love"). When I picked up my date at her dorm, she came down to the lobby wearing a sundress and sandals. Imagine my surprise a while later at a drive-in movie theater (called the "Joy-Lan", an appropriate name for such a place if there ever was one), when I made the discovery that the sundress and sandals were *all* she was wearing! Several of the other guys told me (rather excitedly) that they were having similar experiences with their dates, as well.

No doubt about it: even in Florence, Alabama, Times Were a-Changing.

I never saw much evidence of drug use at Florence State--either I just wasn't in the drug crowd, or there wasn't much of it around in those days. As far as I knew, there were only a few Florence State students who were into the drug scene, and they were mostly on the fringes of campus society. On the other hand, at a number of well-known universities, such as at Berkeley, and in bigger cities, primarily on the West Coast---most notably in San Francisco, with its "hippies," the "flower children" openly practiced free-love, fueled by drugs. Taking to the streets and airwaves were "Counter-Culture" figures such as Timothy Leary, the guru of LSD, whose slogan, "Tune in . . . turn on . . . drop out---" entered the vernacular. Popular music glorified the cause, centered at "Haight-Ashbury" in the *'City by the Bay'*. There, it really was sex, drugs and rock-and-roll in that hot, hormone-driven summer of 1967. It would be incorrect to assert that none of this had its effect in such a far-removed place as Northwest Alabama. There may not have been an open drug culture at the college, but the societal attitudes and mores were,

nevertheless, becoming more liberal---even in our little towns.

In our area in those days, for those who were into that sort of thing, the local drug of choice was alcohol. As all the counties in Northwest Alabama were officially "dry"---meaning sales and even *possession* of alcoholic beverages could result in jail time and seizure of property, including vehicles---the nearest watering holes were located just over the state line in Tennessee, only a few miles north of Florence. There, a multitude of beer stores---some almost straddling the state line, shoulder-to-shoulder-like---functioned as a vast reservoir of suds for thirsty North Alabamians. One place even claimed to have "The World's Largest Beer Cooler!" Especially on weekends, the roads north of Florence were clogged with students and townspeople alike, all making their way to "The Line," the collective term we used for the package stores, honky-tonks, beer joints and so-called "Clubs" that made up the drinking establishments.

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For me, aside from going to college, the underlying theme of my life was the radio career that fueled so much of my high-octane social life. Sometime earlier, while I was still in high school and just starting in radio with the part-time weekend FM music show, I had had an interesting conversation with a well-known local disc jockey. He told me that being on the air was terrific for one's social life, and he was absolutely right. During my college days, there were many times when the mere mention of my on-air job at the radio station brought me instant attention, and it was particularly satisfying if the attention came from adoring, attractive college girls.

Margaret, a beautiful brunette and a very popular senior, frequently called from the dormitory with requests for particular songs, and I was flattered by her attention. From our telephone conversations we came to know each other fairly well, although we didn't cross paths very often on campus, as she was far more socially prominent than I was. After some time, though, it dawned on me that her interest might have gone beyond the music when I detected a pattern to the songs she wanted me to play for her---the titles and lyrics all seemed to be subtly telegraphing me to ask her out! But by that time, she was about to graduate and move back to her hometown in New Jersey. Had I unwittingly missed my big opportunity with her? It was a tantalizing question to which there would never be an answer, as I never again saw her after she graduated.

Once or twice, however, the adulation got out of hand. I asked Liz, who sat across the aisle from me in Sophomore English, to go with me to hear the popular singing group, "Jay and the Americans," who were performing at the Coliseum. But when I arrived at the dormitory to pick her up, she asked if I'd mind if some of her friends came along with us. Before I could reply, five giggling girls popped through the doorway and I was stuck with them. On this date, I had six girls! Liz squeezed my arm and told me she just *knew* I wouldn't mind, since, on the radio, I sounded like such a really great guy! But for that night, at least, it put the brakes on any "social" involvement with Liz.

One of the more intriguing aspects of being on the radio was that you might be very popular on the air, but pretty much anonymous out in public. There were a few times when somebody would recognize my voice and make a comment, but radio was (and still is) a perfect vehicle for anyone who would want to be both popular and unknown at the same time. As strange as it sounds, it can be done.

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Early on, when I was a freshman, I had intended to major in Business Administration. However, my chronic struggles with math caught up with me in an Accounting course. In no time, I had tangled the debits and credits into what an Accounting professor described as "a complete mess." Things didn't improve when I took an Office Machines course. As the most complicated office machines in those days were room-rattling mechanical rotary calculators and huge posting machines that looked easy to master (at least, at first), I had figured the course would be a snap. However, since I had no aptitude for anything even remotely connected with mathematics, even there I promptly fell flat on my face.

Along the way, I had always slipped-in an extra history course whenever I could, and after several semesters I had accumulated enough credit hours to qualify for a Minor in History right then and there. I decided to scrap Business Administration with its incomprehensible (to me) accounting courses and the tyrannical office machines, and go full-steam-ahead toward a regular History Major. Some people thought I had made a huge mistake---wasn't the big money to be had out there in a *Business* career? My standard reply was that John F. Kennedy had been a History major, and *he* had done all right, hadn't he?

As I had done well in the basic Speech course everyone had to take, I decided to work toward a Minor in Speech and Dramatic Arts. Fortunately, Florence State was blessed with a renowned drama coach, a consummate professional whose name was Gladys Shepard. Miss Shepard had had any number of former students go on to fame and fortune in the entertainment world, including George Lindsey, who played "Goober" on television's *ANDY GRIFFITH SHOW*. Others had made their mark as professional writers, producers and directors in television and motion pictures. As Miss Shepard was known far and wide as a superb classroom teacher and an unparalleled drama coach, aspiring young actors and actresses came to Florence State from all over the country to take her stage courses.

I signed up for "Play Production," Miss Shepard's course that put on each semester's stage play. At the initial cast and crew meeting, I felt uncomfortable and insignificant among all those who had already been in several of her big productions, as they seemed so much more confident and knowledgeable than I was. But during the pressure-packed auditions, I found to my relief that Gladys Shepard gave everyone an equal chance, and I could hardly believe it when she tapped me for a role in *THE MAN WHO CAME TO DINNER*, the upcoming production. Although I had harbored secret doubts all along as to whether I was actually good enough to take on a speaking part---a major role, as it turned out---without prior college stage experience, Miss Shepard assured me that I would do just fine, and happily for me (and the audience), she was right.

At first, I was concerned about learning my lines for the part---but I needn't have worried---with all the drills and rehearsals, before long, everyone knew each other's lines and cues for the whole three-hour-long play. Miss Shepard drilled us at a grueling pace at least five nights a week for two-and-a-half months, as she whipped the production into shape.

Right from the start, Miss Shepard demanded exacting efforts from the cast and crew. There were a lot of touches---some obvious, others more subtle---that were the hallmarks of her productions. For example, all the movements and all the steps in every scene of *THE MAN WHO CAME TO DINNER* were done to a rhythm that matched the spoken dialogue, often in time with music. The musical score was a clever, modern-style adaptation of some Mozart stuff done by a harpsicord and oboe, and included a long overture before the play began and shorter pieces that

bridged the three acts. Since we were completely familiar with the music after all the weeks and months of rehearsals, (I used to dream at night to the musical score), each of the bridge pieces also functioned as a backstage count-down as we readied for each upcoming scene.

Gladys Shepard's productions were beautifully thought-out, complex undertakings with tight coordination between the actors and the stage crew. Our movements and positions were carefully "blocked," that gave each scene a continuous, visually-balanced onstage effect. Some of my most vivid moments of the play were of listening for my entry cues in the darkened backstage wings or behind the door at the top of the spiral staircase that was the centerpiece of the elaborate two-story stage set.

Each night when the show was over, the cast lined up outside the stage door and greeted patrons and guests. In *THE MAN WHO CAME TO DINNER*, I played a "heavy" type of role. After one of the performances, a little girl came up with her parents, grabbed her mother's skirt (*for protection?*), and pointed up at me, wide-eyed. "Ooh, Mommy---look! It's the 'Mean Man!'"

My role also required me to have gray hair, which meant I had to spray on the coloring before each performance, and wash it out afterward. It was such a hassle, that after one of the performances I decided to leave it on and go to school the next day with gray hair. Everywhere I went, much to my embarrassment, people pointed at me and whispered to each other about my hair color. I overheard one of the college's football players tell one of his buddies, "Man! John must be having a really tough semester---look at his gray hair!"

The veterans in the cast and crew laughingly told us newcomers that working with the "Rehearsal Club," as the production group was called, meant "No Sleep, No Sex, and No Social Life!" Sure enough, the play soon began to completely dominate our lives. As Opening Night loomed ever closer---with longer and more involved rehearsals that usually included weekends---it became a struggle to keep up with other classes and obligations. On top of all that, I had to juggle my radio shifts in order to keep up with Miss Shepard's brutal pace. Early each evening after the radio show, I raced back to Kilby Auditorium for the rehearsals. Fortunately, the radio boss was understanding, and as thanks for his patience with me, I gave him free tickets to the play, and was pleasantly surprised when he and his date (he was single) actually used them.

THE MAN WHO CAME TO DINNER had a four-night run in April and a month later we took the production to Fort McClellan, an Army base about two hundred miles from Florence. There, we gave a performance to a packed house at the Officer's Club.

There were some interesting moments on that trip. In the group was a particularly buxom actress who was quite proud of her physical attributes. As we rode along, a stagehand stood up at the front of the bus. "I have an announcement---" he called out, as we turned in his direction. "Jane is going to entertain us--- all right, Jane . . . inhale!"

Perhaps the most satisfying part of the play was the closeness the cast and the crew developed toward each other, and toward Miss Shepard, and I was sure she felt the same for us. Over the years, a legion of students who had "Play Production" and the other courses under the legendary Miss Shepard, came away with a wonderful appreciation of the art of the stage. For us, the Rehearsal Club was an unforgettable time in our lives, in which we learned much about relating to others within an intense, ongoing, common experience. After *THE MAN WHO CAME TO DINNER*, never again would I be nervous before an audience. I learned that preparation was the key to success onstage and in the other endeavors of life. For that, and for many other reasons, I owed much to Gladys Shepard and to my fellow members of the cast and crew.

A huge, ultra-modern Fine Arts Center replaced tiny, venerable Kilby Auditorium in the late-'sixties, and marked a giant step forward in the theater program at the school.

With the new facilities, one of the finest in the whole country, the college began a series of "Summer Theater Workshops," that brought famous-name actors and actresses to Florence State to work with us students. Many who attended the summer sessions came from large, prominent universities around the country, which said a lot about the high quality of the Drama Department's program. Some of the professionals included Gale Storm ("My Little Margie," "Oh, Susannah!"); Broderick Crawford ("Highway Patrol"); Lyle Talbot, a veteran of many movie and television roles; Peter Breck ("Bart Maverick"); Peggy Cass, and Mercedes McCambridge (whose throaty voice would later chill audiences in "The Exorcist")---all big names at the time. A Broadway actor named Sal Mineo performed in Florence one summer and in a strange twist, was mysteriously murdered only a few days after he returned to New York

Gale Storm, who had starred in her "My Little Margie" and "Oh, Susannah!" television situation comedies, was as perky in person as she had appeared in her TV roles. In my opinion, she was a fine lady and a great talent---when she arrived from California she had already memorized her lines for the play. The famous actress joined us around the table in the Student Union Snack Bar, where, over Cokes, she entertained us with stories and anecdotes about her career in Hollywood.

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Every class period started with the roll-call. Some (usually English teachers who, for some reason, were the fussiest), kept meticulous records of their class attendance. Others believed that going to class was strictly the student's responsibility---since we had already paid our tuition in advance, if we didn't want to go to class---well, the school already had our dough. As far as they were concerned, if we wanted to give the college our money (actually, daddy's money), skip class, and fail the course---that was *our* tough stuff; certainly not the school's problem. A few of those teachers didn't seem to care if any of us *ever* came to class, as long as we passed the one or two major semester tests. Some instructors called out the student's whole name and expected a proper "Present" in return. (Again, mostly English teachers.) Others just mumbled under their breath, which brought forth only sporadic responses from those who happened to hear their name. Still other professors merely glanced around the classroom, made a couple of notations in their roll book, and that was it.

One Economics Assistant Professor, who had a breezy style that often brought chuckles, used only last names in class and for calling the roll. Sometimes he started at the top of the alphabetical list; other times he began at the bottom. This teacher always opened with some laconic comment that was our cue to listen-up for the roll call. He would say something like, "Wilson, did you see fit to join us?"

Once, he began with, "Bailey, are you with us today?"

"PPLLEBBHH!"

Someone in the room broke wind with a loud, distinctive noise, in addition to other atmospheric developments. As everyone cringed, the unflappable professor blinked at us over his reading glasses.

"Bailey, are you *STILL* with us---?"