

"WE ARE 'GALD' TO ADMIT YOU . . ."

"It is, sir, as I have said, a small college, and yet there are those who love it."

---Daniel Webster---

By John S. Halbert

Summer, 1963:

Following high school graduation that had taken place in early June, 1963, after a few weeks of standard teenage celebrating, I made plans to try to attend Florence State College, in Florence, Alabama, across the river from Sheffield, my hometown. But I was concerned as to whether or not I would be accepted by the school to the Freshman Class, as my high school grades were not exactly distinguished. For example, it had taken more tries than I cared to discuss to get through two courses of Algebra. Many times during that summer, while awaiting the school's decision, I nervously dragged-out my final high school report card from its hidden place in the bureau drawer and stared at the incriminating grades.

Only a few days before the start of the Fall Term at Florence State, a letter from the Registrar arrived in the mail. With a dry mouth and racing pulse, I stared at the envelope. What if they said "No?" What if the "Committee on Admissions" decided I was not smart enough to go to college? All sorts of dreary thoughts rolled around inside my head.

S-l-o-w-l-y I slit open the envelope and withdrew the contents---

. . . I was accepted! Then, I looked more carefully at the letter and noticed a peculiar spelling of a certain word. The sentence stated, "We are gald to admit you to the Freshman Class."

"*Gald?*" Was it a "Freudian slip"? Did they really mean "galled?" *Were they "galled" to admit me to Florence State?* I looked at the oddly-spelled word again and decided (hoped?) that it was probably a typographical error and it was more likely that they were "glad" to admit me to the Freshman Class. I certainly hoped so. But I wondered if perhaps they had really meant it when they told me how "gald" they were that I was coming to their school

Regardless of the oddly-spelled word in the letter, my immediate task was to get organized for the start of the first semester, which was only a few days away. First on the agenda, according to the enclosed information, was the "Freshman Orientation" that would happen just before the registration for classes..

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One of the benefits of going to college was the opportunity to meet fellow students from other local high schools, from other parts of the country, and from around the world

During the orientation that lasted several days, in my group was a girl I had not seen since the first grade. When our family had moved from 24th Street to High Point, I transferred to the Atlanta-Annapolis Avenue School for the second grade. In doing so, I lost contact with some of

my former classmates. Therefore, it was a pleasant surprise when a petite, brown-haired girl came up to me and introduced herself. "Remember me?" she grinned. I'm 'Amanda Bloss', and we were in the first-grade together in Mrs. Creel's class at Blake School!"

"Well, I'll be doggoned! Of course!"

Amanda Bloss had been a perky little snippet of a girl who had sat across the aisle from me in that long-ago Mrs. Creel's first-grade class in Sheffield. And, here she was---all grown up and in my group at Freshman Orientation! She was as cute as a button and still had that impish smile I remembered from a dozen years earlier. She told me she had moved to Florence while still in elementary school which was why I hadn't seen her since first grade..

As it turned out, our college careers were quite different socially (and intellectually) at Florence State. Because of a hectic start-and-stop college career (I dropped out of school and re-started several times for various reasons), I managed to cram a four-year course into thirteen years(!) Amanda, on the other hand, was "Miss Florence State" her senior year, and was selected to the college's "Hall of Fame". What made this even more remarkable was that she was in a very serious automobile accident in about her third year at the school and lost several months and an entire academic year while recuperating.

A few years later, the phone rang---it was Amanda! "Hurry over to my mother's house in Florence!" she said in her bubbly voice, "I have some big news!" When I got there, she met me at the front door, handed me a Coke and came right to the point: she was getting married!

She told me the story: While traveling in England she came down with an aggravating skin problem, and had to go to a doctor. The physician, a young, single, "Dr. Kildare"-type, not only cured her condition, but was smitten by the same qualities that had so impressed everyone who had known her back in the 'States. After she and the doctor (who was actually American on an assignment) tied the knot, she told me, they planned to stay overseas.

I read poetry at their wedding ceremony, which was the last time I ever saw Amanda.

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But for now, I had to concentrate on getting oriented to college. They separated the freshmen into groups of thirty or so and took us around to all the places on campus with which we would need to become familiar. In retrospect, they probably overdid it at times; nevertheless, it was helpful in getting us frosh indoctrinated to college life.

After the two-day orientation, the actual registration process began. In those days, the college library was re-configured into a registration assembly line. Hundreds of underclassmen had to stand in a long line outside the side entrance, sometimes for hours. Periodically, someone appeared and took up about thirty or so students' class schedule cards that they had already filled out. After what seemed an eternity, (in the winter, this meant sometimes standing outside in the snow or rain), they returned them to us, marked with our new grade-point average, at which time they finally allowed us into the building. From there, we went from section to section, where tables were set up for each department. We handed our class schedule cards to faculty members at the appropriate tables, where they officially added us to the class rolls.

Unfortunately, sometimes classes were full by the time we got there, which usually meant a complete re-arrangement of our schedules. This was more of a problem for underclassmen than for seniors, who registered first and had the best choices of classes. One time, an instructor actually laughed at my request for a class. As I moved away, disappointed, I overheard the man snicker to another teacher, "He's only a sophomore, and he thinks he can take 'Advertising!'"

(Later, I had several successful jobs in radio and television advertising. I showed HIM!)
After spending many hours in the winding lines, most of us had workable class schedules.

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Along the way, I treated myself to two courses in "Social Dancing", which satisfied of my Physical Education needs in more ways than one. All those "Joseph Paul Dancing Studio" lessons I had taken back in the eighth grade now gave me a running (dancing?) start on the actual dancing part, so I concentrated on the girls in the class. It was a unique opportunity for me---a practically anonymous freshman---to hold tightly in my arms some of the most beautiful and desirable girls on campus--AND, get academic credit! "Social Dancing" was a far cry from sweaty outdoor activity classes---so air-conditioned, so cool, and so much fun . . .

With the new friends, the girls, the classes (especially the dancing classes), and the radio show, life was suiting me just fine. As long as I could keep up my grades, which, fortunately, I managed to do, it was just about the most sublime existence imaginable.

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From the start, I discovered that many of the professors, assistant professors, associate professors and instructors (going down the hierarchy of teachers) were academic individualists who marched to the beat of their own intellectual drums. Some of them could have been described as eccentric. (One or two were probably even "neurotic".)

At the first class meeting of Freshman English, while we were sitting in our seats, drumming our nervous fingers on the desktops while waiting for the teacher to arrive, a *head* suddenly appeared around the door frame.

"Hello, there!" the head said.

Then, the head entered the room followed by the rest of a middle-aged lady carrying a bulging satchel of books. "I just wanted to get a peek at my new class before you saw me!"

Compared to high school, where the classes tended to be rather conversational, college courses usually meant sitting in a classroom or lecture hall and listening to a . . . lecture. One discovered rather quickly how good (or not-so-good) were his note-taking skills. Once, I stayed after class to ask a biology Assistant Professor a question, and he refused to speak to me. "Refer to your notes!" he snapped, turning away.

Later in my college career, someone suggested to me to type each day's lectures and keep a running file on the notes. He said that if I referred back to them every day, my grades would dramatically improve. I tried it, with great success. In no time, I went from being an average student to one whose grade-points placed me on the "Dean's List". By looking at the notes every day, by test-time, I not only had them practically memorized, but I could even visualize how the words looked on the pages. After that, taking the test itself was almost an anti-climax.

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A young man arrived on campus in that Autumn of 1963 who was destined to go down in history as the first black (as we called "African-Americans" in those days) student to attend Florence State. His appearance marked the first time I had ever gone to a school with a minority student. (This was, after all, the South, in a time of great unrest concerning school integration.)

Wendell Willkie Gunn was a handsome, intelligent student who attended to his affairs in a low-key manner and was generally thought of highly. Furthermore, he was in one of the more rigorous courses of study, and by dint of hard work he gained the respect of everyone, students and faculty alike. The desegregation of Florence State was therefore a relatively smooth process. Before long, a veritable crowd of intelligent, ambitious African-American students appeared on campus, and as far as integration went---that was it. This was in sharp contrast to the unruly and widely-publicized struggles experienced by some other Southern colleges and universities.

Students came from all over the world to Florence State, and in no time, I had a rousing circle of new friends. Some came from high schools that only a few months before had been our own high school's rivals.

Classes, as it turned out, proved far more flexible and easier to manage than had been the case in high school. For one thing, a particular class ordinarily met from one to three times a week, for an hour. Oftentimes, there were several hours between classes, which usually meant large crowds in the Student Union. It was there, around the tables in the Snack Bar, that many new friendships were forged.

There were some interesting connections. A new friend from a nearby town, who was from a well-off, socially-prominent family, became interested in a winsome freshman girl from a much lower economic situation. But he was taken by her and when she didn't come back to school the following spring semester, he was very unhappy. "Where's Kathy?" he asked, as we sat around the Snack Bar table. No one knew, but someone recalled that the factory where her parents worked was on strike, which gave a clue for her absence. My friend bolted from his seat, dashed out to his sports car, and was on his way to her town to find her. I never did learn how that particular story turned out, but it demonstrated how it was possible for attachments to develop when the people involved left their back-home influences and entered a new, more democratic environment where intellect and hard work were usually the main determinants of success.

Another of my friends, who attended Florence State on a football scholarship, became involved with a willowy brunette from down-state. It was another of those situations in which he came from a much more prosperous background than the girl. But she was exceptionally attractive and had the brains to match. For much of the first semester, she admired him from afar for his football playing, flair and verve; for my friend was a right debonair fellow as well as an all-conference football player. Finally, someone introduced them, and they hit it right off. Turned out, *HE* had noticed her as well, but was too involved with football at the time to make a move. Nuptials for the pair followed their graduation.

In a variation on the theme, a popular and attractive Florence girl asked the group around the Snack Bar table what to do about a fellow she described as a "loudmouthed bore" who kept pestering her for a date. She said his unpolished manners turned her off---she preferred men who were better socially-connected than he was, with plenty of money and with big, expensive cars. One of the other girls suggested that she go out with him and then make it clear to "the bore" that she was not interested in any further dates.

She went out with him, all right, but made the unexpected discovery that "the bore" was an interesting, amusing, warmhearted guy whose nervousness around girls caused him to sometimes speak loudly and act a bit foolish. In an amazing turnabout, the two eventually became engaged, and after graduation, they tied the knot and moved to a large city where he got his '*Doctor of Divinity*' degree. Years later, he became the Senior Pastor of one of the largest Baptist churches in the United States!

And there was the couple we called "Popeye" and "Olive Oyl." Dave was from a fair-sized

city on the other side of the state, and Amy came from a small town closer to Florence. They met in Freshman English class during the spring semester. Amy, tall and gawky with short, black hair, indeed resembled the cartoon character, although she was actually quite pretty. Dave, with a little muscle development in his forearms, and with a pipe and sailor's cap, could have passed for the other cartoon character. They sat across from each other in class and at first, it was difficult to gauge their relationship. He spent the first half the semester kidding her---the nickname "Olive Oyl" was *his* description of her. Sitting just behind both of them, I observed an intriguing attraction gradually develop between the two. After a while, Dave asked Amy out. Years later, when I again saw them, they were married to each other.

And then, there were the almost-but-not-quite-relationships. A fellow in our group had two girlfriends in widely-separated towns to whom he had evidently made some specific promises---without much intention of keeping them. He figured that as long as the two girls lived far apart and didn't know about each other, he was home-free. However, without telling him, they both enrolled at Florence State *the same semester*, intending to surprise him. By a huge coincidence (and this is true), both were named, "Barbara."

We were gathered around the big table in the Student Union Snack Bar one day at the start of the semester, when the two girls happened to step into the place at the same time. Someone called out, "Hey, Barbara's here!" whereupon the hapless fellow spun around in his seat to face *BOTH* girls standing beside each other, looking down at him! At that point, the young ladies caught on that there were actually *TWO* Barbaras, and . . . and . . .

***(THE FOLLOWING SCENE HAS BEEN CENSORED
DUE TO SUBJECT MATTER, VIOLENCE,
AND LANGUAGE CONTENT.)***

* * *

In our Freshman Class was a girl who had taken the campus by storm. A graduate of Sheffield's long-standing rival, Coffee High School in Florence, in the first semester Kay Gaither had won just about every beauty and popularity contest on campus: "Queen of Beauty"; "Miss Charming Court"; "Circle-K Sweetheart"; "ROTC Battalion Sponsor"; "Yearbook Beauty"---even "Homecoming Queen".

The girl was so stunning that even the very word "beautiful" fell far short. For a guy with no more campus status than I had. (in person, that is; just about everyone knew me by my voice on the radio, but not as an individual student knocking around campus). With her awesome looks and popularity, to me, Kay Gaither, would have seemed to be unapproachable.

The second semester of our freshman year, I took a Biology course that included a one-hour laboratory class each week. At the first lecture, the professor assigned lab partners randomly by number for the entire semester. Therefore, I didn't know who my new partner would be until I arrived for the first lab session.

At the appointed time, I entered the laboratory in the Science Building. Looking at the schedule the professor had given me, I went to the indicated table. Standing there, waiting for me, was my new lab partner for the semester---Kay Gaither!

Kay Gaither--the "Campus Queen of Everything!"

Cold sweat broke out on my palms. Then, she flashed the dazzling smile that had graced the

newspapers and the television screens so many times. "Hi! I'm Kay Gaither!" The incredibly beautiful girl extended her perfectly-manicured hand and shook mine.

I stammered out my name.

"Looks like we're in this lab together!" she went on, completely at ease.

What was *this*? The girl was being friendly to me! Didn't she know that I was just an ordinary fellow, not one of the '*Big Men on Campus*' with whom I figured she was always hanging around?

As it turned out, Kay Gaither, far from being the unapproachable coed-queen, was, in reality, a real person of substance who became, over the course of the semester, a trusting confidante and friend. During that time, we swapped stories about ourselves and our families. She had a warm and generous nature that had been instilled, as I learned, by strong family values. To her, all the attention she received was a bonus she accepted with grace. Kay was a resourceful and valued lab partner---we peered through microscopes together and compared notes; the two of us laughed together and frowned with concern at the appropriate times. It was a great semester.

The lesson Kay Gaither taught me was to not pre-judge or be intimidated by people who were supposedly glamorous, powerful, or otherwise famous---a lesson I later applied many times in my life. She turned out to be a really special person I came to know and respect in a way that would have been impossible except for that random assignment.

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One day, the campus newspaper printed an article that began with something like: "Guess what? The 'Sunbeam Bread Girl' is going to school here at Florence State." The article went on that the familiar little blonde girl on the "Sunbeam Bread" wrappers eating a buttered slice of bread had grown up and was now a freshman at Florence State. Her name was Marie, the paper stated, and she was from Miami, Florida. The story told how she had won a nationwide contest to advertise Sunbeam Bread on their bread wrappers. Little Marie would have been about two or three years old at the time. The write-up had pictures of her as she looked on the wrapper and as a college student. The newspaper didn't say by what circumstances she had made it all the way from Florida to Florence to go to school, but here she was.

A few days after the article came out in the school paper, she came in and sat down across the table from me in the school library. After I recognized Marie, it took me a while to get up enough nerve to speak to her, since I didn't really know what to say to such a famous person or how to act. After all, her picture had graced hundreds of millions---perhaps billions---of breakfast tables across the country, and I figured she probably had no time for me.

Then I remembered Kay Gaither's object lesson about how not to be thrown-off by celebrities. Swallowing, I took a deep breath and summoned the courage to say something.

It turned out she was very approachable and casual; pretty neat, in fact. It was not a great conversation as conversations went---in fact I don't even remember exactly what we talked about that time---probably just chit-chat about classes, and stuff. Whatever it was, she made a very positive impression on me. After a while, both of us finished our library work and went our separate ways.

I don't believe I ever talked to her again, but I saw her around the campus from time to time. She eventually married a high school football coach, stayed in the area, and had four children.

The final chapter in her story came years later, when Marie was killed by a drunk driver in a

head-on collision on a lonely country road just west of Florence.

The drunk driver went to prison.

Even to this day, when I'm in a grocery store in another part of the country and see her picture on the bread wrapper, I still remember the time that I met and talked with the "Sunbeam Bread Girl".

* * *

Each semester, the college sponsored yearbook portraits for all the students. One time, as I sat for my picture, there was a loud "*TWANG!*" inside the camera. The photographer uttered an exclamation of dismay (actually it was a lot stronger than that) and bounded to his smoking, now-lifeless camera. Obviously, it had suffered a major malfunction, and everyone who was waiting in the line to have their picture taken had to re-schedule for another day.

The story about the broken camera made the rounds in a hurry, much to my embarrassment. Of course, I had had nothing to do with the camera's crash, but the fact that I was the photographer's subject when it happened gave my classmates all the ammunition they needed to kid me that I had "broken the camera".

(I always believed it was the ugly guy just in front of me who really caused the camera to blow up. He had a face that would have stopped a train.)