

I Guess That's Me (A Reflection)

Lee Frank

College Freshman

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“I passed” is the phrase that sums up my high school education. I received no college scholarship. Quite simply, my grades were inadequate, little better than average. Had I not scored high enough on my SATs, I’m sure I wouldn’t have been accepted into college. Yet somehow I managed to get into college. Most of it was luck. I applied to only one college. Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) was my only, and overwhelming, choice. Was the fact my father and uncles had attended RPI my primary reason? (All but Herb, a depression collegiate who went to the local and less expensive Newark College of Engineering.) No, but it was the reason I knew about RPI. More important was its practical distance. Located in Troy, New York, it was a little over three hours from my parent’s house in New Jersey. I could live away from home without expensive travel back and forth for holidays and summer vacations. But more important still was my perception that RPI was the same kind of choice Wright had made, an engineering school to learn the structural basis for a career in architecture.

RPI today costs more than ten times what it did when I went there. Although it wasn’t cheap then, it was affordable for the middle class. Especially if other family members pitched in, as did my recently widowed Aunt

Fanny. What did I think about that? Nothing. I wasn't thinking. I was still floundering through life, still the bewildered teenager. I had no real plan, not a plan with options. I just made the best choice I could and hoped. I was lucky. Like most people with luck, I was largely unaware of the sources. When things are working smoothly, we tend not to examine the reasons too closely. I know I didn't.

Did college go smoothly? I think so. One example was my first day. Here I was, seventeen and living away from home for the first time. Well, I did go to a couple of summer camps (connected with Scouting, of course), but that was with friends. At RPI, I was a stranger. My parents had driven me to school, taking advantage of the distance, and helped install me in my freshman dorm room. Then my Dad, perhaps remembering his freshman experience at the same Rensselaer, did something uncharacteristic. Instead of leaving, with me sitting in my empty room by myself (my roommate had not yet arrived), he walked out into the hall, stopped the first student he saw, brought him into my room and introduced us. Now, I knew someone at Rensselaer. Now, my father felt better about leaving.

I, for reasons unknown, had few qualms about being away. Maybe I was still going with the flow, trusting my luck. I'd rather see this step to college as an anticipated adventure. Looking back, I wasn't disappointed. I appreciated my father's gesture (perhaps prompted by my mother?), but I never had a problem meeting people and making friends in college. Was this the same kid who, with only two friends, was always out of the social loop in high school? Perhaps. Perhaps not. Let's look at the (photographic) record on the next page.

The kid on the left is posing for his Senior Yearbook Usher Squad picture. The other is leaving, after his first

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year of college, for summer vacation. How do I remember the date of the second photo? I don't. The car gives it away; it's a '55 Ford. This was my parent's second car purchased after nursing our '48 Nash until it died at the ripe old age of seven. The Ford, bought as I entered college, was doomed not to last a full year. But that's another story. (For the next chapter.) Here, we're examining my high school to college transformation. I have no explanation for the hat. Did I think I was Leo Gorcey? Given the rest of the outfit, I guess it was a summer thing. (A big thing—I think I'll give that summer a separate chapter.)

Strangest thing about the picture with the hat is I never thought I wore them. Look at that stupid hat on the kid on the pony and you'll know why. And I recall other hats as parts of other cutesy little kid's outfits, like a cowboy hat, and probably soldier and sailor caps. And then the Boy Scouts with mandatory headgear. Then compulsory military caps. The more I think about it, the more hats I remember. I can picture photographs of a bunch of kids, adolescent to teenager, dressed for winter with coats and hats. I remember it was some special trip to Newark, and these were my cousins and friends.

Mostly I picture myself hatless, except for that WWI Campaign hat and bad weather. Then there was its Banana Republic successor, more practical as a rollup, stick-in-your-pocket, easy to carry. And its new replacement, much preferred, and essential to my Florida cold weather gear. (A hat, scarf, gloves, and wrestling knee pads substitute for all but the heaviest coat.) When I say I don't picture myself in a hat, I mean never as decoration, never for fashion. In my mind, I am not a hat person.

This past summer, I traveled with a CNN Sports baseball cap (bill to the front) and found myself occasionally wearing it in the car. Was this simply to spice the boredom of the Interstate? Sometimes I wore it to moderate the rental car's unruly air conditioner (if a little too cold, put on a hat). So I wonder: Is this, too, like me? One other thing. The watch I'm wearing, in the photo on the right, is the last watch I'll ever wear. A gift from my Uncle Herman, the jeweler, it lasted through my freshman year. In my revolt against eight o'clock classes, I stopped wearing a watch. There were clocks everywhere on campus. Why did I need to carry my own? I never put it back on. I found I was happier if I were unaware of the time until I sought it out. Having a watch was too strong a reminder.

What can we learn from these two pictures? In the first I'm seventeen and a few months; the second is a little more than one year later. (That hat is hiding a crew cut.) Not only had I graduated, and thoroughly left behind, high school, but I had passed, and survived, my first year of college. The young man introduced to me by my father didn't. And I was about to experience my first summer as a functioning college student. (Separate chapter as I said.) Some might characterize this transition as boy to man. It didn't feel like that then—or now as I look back. What I do see, and what this chapter is about, is how much my first year of college changed me.

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Looking back at my Freshman year, I see many changes but none indicating any increase in maturity. Make that social maturity. I do find evidence of intellectual maturation. The new people I met had varied intellectual interests, as one would expect. I can still see the Picasso poster (“The Musicians”) on the wall of Steve’s dorm room. I stared at it endlessly as our small group listened to classical music at full volume. Classical music was not unfamiliar to me, but never attracted serious interest until college. I remember the first time I heard Bartók’s “Concerto for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta.” Blew me away. Sounds clichéd, but that’s what it did. (It just did it again: Researching the exact name and spelling revealed it was born in my year, 1937!)

The music at college was always loud. Stereos in the '50's were barely beginning to stretch their audible muscles. I recall one set rattling the cheap metal venetian blinds in the room shared by Phil and Tom. (There'll be more to this story later.) Not all music moved us, but we were quite taken—to the point of demonstrating with dance—with Bill Haley's "Rock Around The Clock." And two years later, listening to Fats Domino finding his thrill "On Blueberry Hill." We were less taken with the Once and Future King, Elvis. For most of us there and then, he was too different. He sounded Black and most of us white kids (this is the academic year of '54-'55) were not yet listening to soul sounds. Right now, as I write this, I'm listening to Motown, which I can do endlessly. Elvis I can only take in small doses but I readily acknowledge his special talent and admire his ability. I truly believe no one had a bigger career with, at best, mediocre material.

At RPI, my intellectual curiosities were expanding in every direction, and music was just one. Another was literature. The source for my explorations of the written word also came from my fellow students. (The books

themselves came from my weekly visits to a downtown used book store.) I read everything from science-fiction to Havelock Ellis; from philosophy to James Thurber; from Thorne Smith to the classics. One author I didn't sample back then was Thomas Hardy. Don't know why, since I saw my roommate (who did show up later that first day) reading *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Maybe Hardy looked too serious? Don't know and find it curious, since when I did ultimately hit upon Thomas Hardy I read all his novels.

Pete was my first roommate (first ever in my life unless you count a bunch of kids sharing a cabin in summer camp). He was quiet, serious, and rarely drunk, the best possible roommate. I doubt I was as exemplary. Since we were both sans stereos (or TVs which were neither permitted nor affordable), how much noise could we make? I don't know if I was as good a roommate as Pete, but I remember visiting friends in their rooms rather than inviting them to mine.

I remember one favor from Pete. Some wise guys next door had planned an elaborate ruse. (Probably found in a Freshman Prank Handbook.) They'd filled an orange juice container with urine. The plan was to have me sit on the floor to drink it; when I spit out the drink and dropped the container, they'd grab my legs and pull me into the spill. (I doubt I was their first victim since Pete knew the whole gimmick) Tipped off in detail by Pete, I prepared a trick of my own. I chewed up a mouthful of peanut butter and Ritz crackers and kept my mouth closed. When offered the trick juice, I put it to my lips, made a face, gagged, and then threw up the stuff in my mouth onto their floor and ran out of the room. Not only were they too surprised to pull me into the mess, they kept asking Pete if I was OK. (I was on the bed moaning every time they came to the door.) Pete kept a straight face until he shut the door and we both resumed laughing.

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I not only read, I also wrote. Had I jotted down a few thoughts in high school? Maybe, but now I began in earnest to put my thoughts on paper. Still do. Today, most of these go into the tape recorder I always carry with me (and have for a dozen years). But I have paper and pens (plural) next to my bed, in the kitchen, and even next to the computer I'm typing on now. There is no intellectual growth without expression. Even simple knowledge is more meaningful the more it is integrated into everything you know. And writing, expressing your ideas, is one method of integration.

Integration. A word, in those mid-fifties, newly arrived in the American consciousness. Did we talk about it at RPI? No. Did we notice Blacks at RPI? Not particularly. At RPI in the mid-fifties, they were merely another tiny minority like the Latin-American or Asian students. One thing one quickly learned at Rensselaer was never to underestimate a fellow student. High school valedictorians and class presidents were a dime a dozen. Academic scholarships, too. Since it took some serious ability to get into Rensselaer, you learned to respect everyone. Color, creed, or country of origin never entered into it.

My freshman changes came in many dimensions, learning to learn is just one. Learning to work is as important, if not more. We students of architecture had many projects, even in our freshman year. Some projects took weeks, others only hours. It was not unusual for us to work through the night, fueled by our generation's coke, Coke. During assignments, they told us, "Never throw anything away." They didn't mean pieces of string or scraps of aluminum foil. This advice was directed at our excess creative output. I still follow it to this day. If a

good idea doesn't end up in your final version, save it for another project. I had so much left over from *My Life in Bars*, I'm writing two more books.

Funny thing about not throwing anything away: Neither does my Dad. You might attribute that to his also attending Rensselaer. Yet his coursework was Engineering and not Architecture, basically, you would have to say, less creative. But if his savings come from somewhere else, where did my Mom's come from? There was a period in the fifties when she made—designed and fabricated—hats. And those hats, the ones not sold or distributed as gifts, were still there in the nineties when the house entered the real estate market. Therefore my inclination to save came from each of my parents and my schooling. (You should see my notes for these books.)

Another freshman change was physical. I had enjoyed wrestling in high school gym class. Across the hall in my dorm lived Bob, a wrestling champion from Los Angeles. Rensselaer had no official wrestling team, but they did have a "club." Another friend in our dorm, John, and I joined Bob in joining the club. Was I interested in perfecting my wrestling skills? No, just looking for better exercise. Staying in shape, we called it. While never competitive as a wrestler, I did learn to trust my body. I also lost my fear (from the short, fat days) of the bigger kids. Once, in a mock match, I wrapped up Ellie, a six-four tight-end from our football team. We were just fooling, but I earned his respect. Another time it was more serious. Somehow a fight started and although this guy was also larger than myself, I hung onto him too fiercely for my own good. Until Bob came out his room and used his skill to separate us. Saved my ass.

Bob and his roommate were an interesting pair. When Bob was drunk he played a mean ragtime piano. Claimed

he couldn't play sober. One time, he stumbled out of his room in the morning and invited us to view his bright green vomit. Impressive. His roommate, a recycled Navy veteran, was very quiet. An older guy, maybe even twenty-two, his beer drinking was also impressive, winning various local contests. As we got to know him, we realized he was rarely sober.

In this first year of college, I also expanded socially. Learning to drink beer was but one component of this change. (And covered in detail in *My Life*.) In high school, I and my two friends were on the periphery of social life. At Rensselaer, I not only made many friends—dozens in our dorm—I became an integral part of a small society. College began as a social vacuum. Fraternities were supposed to fill in most of the social blanks. Fortunately, I was still enough of an outsider not to get sucked in. To this day, I'd rather not "fit in." But other social circles developed, and I found I was a key supporting player.

College pranks are of a special magnitude, exercising newly found creative and technical abilities. Picture us at one of the country's top engineering school and carrying a work load none of us would have thought possible in high school. So what do we do? Become college pranksters on a massive scale. A small circle in our dorm instigated "The Revolution," loosely patterned after the still thriving Soviet experiment. We had organizational structure, manifestos, award ceremonies, and to what end? What we called "The Revolution" was simply the surprise overturning of dormmate's beds—with them in it. In the middle of the night, a group of us would sneak into a room, quietly grasp the side of the mattress and quickly rotate it, and its occupant, towards the wall. The former sleeper was now

on the floor wedged in by his bedspring and covered with his mattress. Sometimes we'd get both beds simultaneously (most rooms had two occupants).

To celebrate our victories we fabricated medals (from bits of paper, metal and ribbon). Then we assembled in Phil and Tom's room and awarded the medals with full ceremony. Honor guards recited the names of the recipients, all very formal and done to the accompaniment of Mussorgsky's "Pictures At An Exhibition." We used the peak passage from the "Hall of the Mountain King" section played at full volume on their stereo. (The music was not the original piano version but the full Rimsky-Korsakov orchestration, accompanied by the aforementioned resonating metal venetian blinds.) Looking back, the real wonder was the extent of my involvement. No mere soldier, my nom de guerre was Friedrich Engels, author of Manifestos. How did I, the ultimate high school outsider, become a pivotal player in this elaborate prank? Obviously, I had made some friends at Rensselaer. Beyond that, exposure to their interests stimulated my own. College, in the person of my dormmates, awoke my dormant creativity. The clever little pre-schooler revived at Rensselaer. And more. Here I found I could contribute significant ideas to a group project.

No one was safe from "The Revolution," not even the inner circle. I was the first to break down my bed, placing the frame and box spring in the closet and sleeping on the mattress directly on the floor. No place to fall if they turned me over. They never tried. Roommates, also, were not sacrosanct. But rather than dump Pete on the floor, I planned a special treat. When Pete went out to see his local (townie is now Politically Incorrect) girlfriend, he'd return a few sheets to the wind and throw himself on his bed. Always.

My fellow revolutionaries and I removed and hid his bed frame and box spring. Then we placed his mattress on

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cardboard boxes which we covered with the bedspread. The bed looked perfectly normal. While everyone waited in their rooms, I stayed in our room to insure normal appearances, so Pete would carry out his normal routine. He did. I watched as the bed crumpled to the floor. Others came in to see the results of their handiwork. Pete laughed a bit, and then went to sleep where he had landed. I explained it to him the next day.

As evidenced by the pictures on page 51, college changed me. I suppose it changes most people. I know some of us worked at it. At the end of the year, we reviewed our RPI Freshman Handbook, a compendium of dormitory do's and don'ts. We had broken every single rule. Women in the dorms and fireworks were only a few of our accomplishments. A fitting end to a long freshman year.

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