

# **I Guess That's Me (A Reflection)**

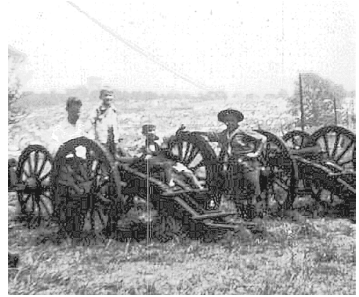
**Lee Frank**

## **High School**

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## High School



The summer before high school was the Big Scouting Summer. Here's a set of photos. Upper left shows me fully equipped for the big adventure, the International Boy Scout Jamboree of 1950. A big deal at the time, because the only prior Jamboree was in 1937 (naturally). A closer look at the top right photo reveals I'm still this short kid.

And in the bottom left I'm gaining a little weight. (Note the butt as I bend to hoist my load.) The final photo, taken by Mom, is the family visiting me at Valley Forge, home of the Jamboree. In the background are the many tens of thousands of encamped Scouts.

The Jamboree was a big deal for more than the Scouts. The Korean conflict (sounds like a simple family dispute) had barely begun. We were addressed by President Truman. He was a white dot over a quarter of a mile from where I sat. We were also addressed by future candidate Eisenhower. I don't remember any of what either said. I did grasp that our little outing was important in the larger scheme, the media scheme, of things. The part I remember best from the Jamboree was the horned toad I brought home. I traded some forgotten object to a Texas Scout for it. He, the toad, lasted through the Jersey summer but failed to survive (on the porch) the first hard freeze.

*Some people see a connection between Scouting and the military. Perhaps that was why ex-general Eisenhower wanted the platform. And while many aspects of Scouting could be described as paramilitary, those never attracted me. None of my Scouting experiences predisposed me to love the Army when they came for me. Bivouacking with the military was most unpleasant, not remotely like the fun we had camping in the Scouts.*

High school was a longer walk than grammar school, probably a mile and a half, and not long enough when you're with friends. Both these friends were tall, blond, and very non-Jewish. One thing we had in common was nothing in common with our other classmates. Even though one of us, Gil, became the star of our high school basketball team, our company was never sought for social circles circumscribed by cliques. We each, of course, had other friends and . . . I was about to say other interests in high school.

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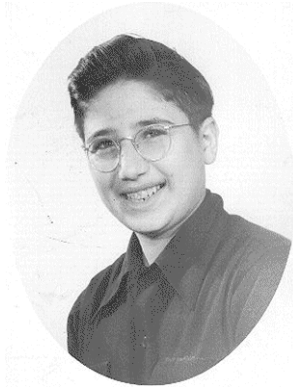
When Gil became a fixture on the basketball team, Dick and I joined the Usher Squad to get into games free. That was it. No other interests. Not in high school. Outside of high school, we three stuck together. When Gil and his dad decided to build boats, Dick and I were right there to help—and reap the benefits. My primary outside interest then, as now, was reading. Did I share my reading interests with my two compadres? Not that I recall.

Were we not interested in girls? Sure, in the abstract, at a distance, as a concept, and most especially women on the Burlesque stage as we grew older. I'm not sure why my friends were social retards, but my reasons began with being short and then having phony front teeth, glasses, and fat added in that order. What the hell was this, some teenage curse?

*My only relief from teen inferno, was that I was largely acne-untainted. Many of my male classmates were not so lucky, some horribly disfigured. Today's common over-the-counter remedies were only wishful thinking in the fifties. The other side, the unlucky one, of this particular coin was the onset of psoriasis after I passed the acne years. The other irony was my inability to use this freedom from acne to gain access to the opposite sex. Not for lack of interest, just complete social incompetence.*

For about two years, my fourteenth plus some six months on either side, I was this short, fat kid. I didn't grow until the end of my junior year. Within a year of my teeth being knocked out, I was able to smile (capped) for photos.

Now, as you see, I was also posing in my glasses. I wore them in every picture since; vanity disappeared as I became a teenager. It's still gone. I've never even considered contacts.



Would I have considered today's latest in corrective surgery. Sure, when I was still disillusioned by having to wear glasses. Which I got over, probably as I left my teens. Of course I had to explain, as many eyeglass wearers do, why I wasn't interested in contacts. The converted are constantly proselytizing and demand to know why you shouldn't be as uncomfortable as they are. Most questioners were women. I preferred women, if they needed them, to wear glasses. To me it showed confidence in their appearance. Not an easy concept to explain.

*Did I ever consider eyeglasses as adornment? Once. On television I saw this modern-day Hamlet movie called The Rest Is Silence (1959). It starred Hardy Kruger wearing these cool, using only the top of a frame, glasses. I sprang for a similar pair when I worked in New York. Expensive, and like many conceits, impractical. After that pair, I preferred large aviator-style lenses with the upper half tinted. The latter was very practical, as it reduced the glare from the computer room's excessive overhead fluorescents. I also had sunglasses in the same aviator-style.*

The fat disappeared when I grew about six inches. I had minor weight problems twice later in my life, but the first was demoralizing and not minor (although I was).

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At fourteen, it seemed this might be the future me. Being called stocky didn't help. At least no one said big-boned. Maybe this fat me explains some of my interest in Scouting. You stand out less in uniform. Your peculiarities are hidden by the uniforms in formation. A good place to hide, which is why we should always be a little suspicious of anyone enamored of uniforms.

Scouting, at this time, came at me from many different angles. I mentioned my father's involvement (lifelong, he was eventually awarded the Silver Beaver). I mentioned beginning with Cub Scouts in Newark and then joining my friends in a Mormon Boy Scout Troop. Beyond hiding in uniform, there was my interest in the paraphernalia. A holdover from childhood, it came from my perception of the glamour of WWII. This was manifested in trips (with my Dad, of course) to, and purchases from, authentic WWII surplus stores.

*Lest you assume my Scouting experiences were always enjoyable, my second summer camp was a disaster. First, I was prevented from swimming because of a fungal infection not dissimilar from athlete's foot. Still Mr. Stocky, swimming was my only athletic salvation. Confined to the cabin while others went aquatic was pure torture. So much so I called my parents to get me out of there. Fortunately, I was able to get a ride home with a friend's parents the first weekend. Unfortunately, just a few blocks from my house, we were hit broadside by another car. My friend's father was taking me home through a neighborhood strange to him and didn't see a hidden stop sign. Luckily, no one was injured, but the accident turned into a law suit and then into a court case at which I was youthful material witness. I told the truth about the stop sign, but I don't think my testimony was believed. Not a pleasant summer.*

In the years immediately after the war, these Army-Navy stores held real treasures of military technology.

One store I recall had belly tanks, the teardrop-shaped detachable fuel containers that extended the range of fighter planes. In the pages of *Popular Mechanics* you would see these converted into civilian vehicles using motorcycle parts. Another store had airplane cockpits from which shopping scavengers removed various instruments. I purchased smaller, less expensive, items. One was a shoulder bag I used everyday to carry my books and lunch on our walk to high school.

About that lunch. I had been making my own breakfast and lunches for years. Although Mom was not working, she had my two smaller brothers to content with. Perhaps I was only demonstrating my independence and maturity over my little brothers who needed Mom's help. (My youngest brother, Robert, began kindergarten the same year I entered high school.) I'm sure I gave up breakfasts in high school. I know I never regularly ate breakfast again—except for my time in military uniform. As for those lunches: peanut butter and jelly on white bread. I don't mean I preferred peanut butter (Skippy) and jelly (grape), I mean it was my exclusive choice. As soon as I learned I didn't like, and didn't want to pay for, the lunches in the school cafeteria, I made my own. With the exception of a handful of bologna sandwiches, peanut butter and jelly was my staple through four years of high school.

About that Army Surplus bag. While it was only one of many interesting and inexpensive items I acquired from these surplus stores, it was the most utilized. (I recall buying an assortment of C-rations—planning for some vague, perhaps nuclear, disaster?—which no amount of curiosity could cause me to sample.) The shoulder bag was large enough for a notebook and three or four large schoolbooks. And my standard lunch. There was another standard aspect of this bag that has far more significance: I carried it with the strap on my right shoulder. Exclusively. My school program of lunch, books, and bag

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pulling on my right shoulder lasted four full years. Look carefully at my grown teen pictures beginning with those on page 51. The right shoulder droops. Eventually the head inclines to the left. A permanent embodiment of a foolish youthful habit.

*As an adult I found another surplus item—an authentic WWI campaign hat, the kind drill instructors wear. It was part of my bad weather attire for over a decade. Hats, for me, are essential bad weather gear. When the campaign hat died, I bought a felt rollup fedora from Banana Republic. When it died, I looked for a replacement for almost a year. I found a similar hat in a Natural Wonders store on a trip to New Jersey. I had overlooked the same hat during my only visit to their store here in Sarasota—I was too rushed with Christmas shopping.*

I've only had one nickname in my life and it was given to me by one of the cool guys in our high school gym class. By my senior year, I'd not only grown in inches, I added a few muscles. The previous summer, I began using weights and a device called a chest expander. I'd spend hours in our basement lifting my little weights and stretching the multi-coiled chest springs. The natural growth and this physical effort turned me into an ordinary-looking, average-sized high school kid. And I was. Except for gym.

Up to this time, since I first needed them, I never wore glasses in gym. This lack of vision, plus my size and weight, put me at the end of the line whenever teams were chosen. But when I achieved normalcy, I realized I also had the potential to be average in sports. I began to wear a glass protector made of sturdy, but transparent plastic. Suddenly, I found I could find the missing hole in the basketball rim. With a few muscles, I was no longer physically afraid of the bigger kids. With normal vision, I

could see where I was going and when the ball was coming to me. The other kids began to accept me. Then one day I was singled out to demonstrate hurdling technique to the class. If I were this conspicuous, the cool kids decided I needed a nickname. With my glasses and large plastic protector and no stretch of their imaginations, they called me "Eyes." No one else did, and I've never mentioned it to anyone since.

*Some people attract nicknames, acquiring many throughout their lifetime. I was only given the one. (Which I hoped would go away if I ignored it. And it did.) But I was not against the concept. Giving it some thought a few years ago, I hit upon "The Flake." (Get it? The psoriasis.) Which might have made sense by the time I got out of the Army. But I get ahead of myself.*



My high school days were not spent exclusively in high school. Our family took trips. This was before Disney, before Six Flags Over Wherever, before Theme Parks. Would we have patronized these if they *had* existed? I assume three young boys would have lobbied hard for such treats. And I like to think my parents would have held out for the historical sites we did visit. We also visited

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what were then called natural wonders like Crystal Cave, an easy day's drive into Pennsylvania. Best were the battlefields. Especially when they served ice cream.

Note the taller, slimmer me. And another, shorter haircut. And new glasses. I still visit Gettysburg every decade or so. (Quick Civil War Experience: spend a few minutes at both ends of Pickett's Charge.)

Amusement parks, however, were not that special for me, living a short bus ride from Olympic Park in Irvington. While not as big as Palisades Park or Rye Beach, and certainly not Coney Island, it was big enough. The name came from its Olympic-sized swimming pool, a full hundred yards in length. It also had all the standard rides, a full-sized roller coaster, funhouse, and even a pretty decent circus, complete with professional band.

I spent a lot of time at that pool, swimming at the surface and below. (I liked to expel the air in my lungs and sit at the bottom watching the girls.) Except for the summer before high school, the summer of the big polio scare. No mothers let their children near public pools that summer. It was especially scary for me because Mike, my best friend from my Newark days, had contracted a particularly scary form of the virus. I returned to Newark for many reasons after moving to Union. Visiting Mike was one.

As he lay in a coma and near death for days, I talked a lot to God. I'm not sure what deals I tried to make, but given his survival and my current physical condition I may have succeeded. Some years later, perhaps my high school sophomore year, our family drove to Mike's new home far south of Newark. He was luckier than many, having few remaining effects. Many who shared Mike's variety of polio spent their remaining years in iron lungs—if they survived. Mike was only paralyzed in his left arm. We talked, he showed me his new games, but we never

really reconnected. The fault was mine. I was unable to bridge the gap because I was frightened out of my wits. Mike had been left-handed.

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