

## A Swift Sketch of My Friend Jim McGee Upon The Occasion of His Arraignment At The San Mateo County Courthouse On A Charge of Conspiring To Cause Certain Dissident Elements To Go Boom

by Ed McClanahan

In the picture which graced the front page of the Palo Alto Times -- I mean the one that showed the suspected conspirators, chained together, being led by deputies down the courthouse steps on their way back to jail after the arraignment proceedings -- my friend Jim McGee is the one nearest the camera, the one holding the newspaper in front of his face.

It's actually sort of a shame he didn't let the photographer get a better picture, because as a matter of fact McGee has a very pleasant face; there's an open, honest, direct look about him, an engaging and disarming innocence that almost passes for conventional handsomeness. With his carefully groomed sandy hair (sideburns just long enough to lend an unexpected dash of verve), his regular features and good teeth and ready smile, he could be the Arrow Shirt Man. You might even take him for a Swinger. He looks substantially younger than his 34 years, and he is in excellent shape, his shoulders wide and square, his waist remarkable small, his arms heavily muscled, his gut flat and taut. No one who has seen him will be surprised to learn that he's a physical culture enthusiast.

As a matter of fact that's how I got to know him. I first met McGee one night over a year ago, when I took Ken Kesey as my guest for a steambath at the Palo Alto Health Club, where I work out, and as we walked in we bumped into a fellow coming out who did a doubletake on Kesey and said, "But but but but...I saw that guy on teevee!" And the next time I went to the Health Club there was this same fellow -- McGee, of course -- laying for me, with his arguments all primed and cocked. The first thing that has to be said about McGee -- and one of the first things he makes sure you learn right away when you meet him -- is that he's a "born-again Christian," a superchrister, an aggressive and vigorous spare-time missionary, a zealot and proud of it, a classic true-blue true believer. Do not make the mistake of assuming that McGee's Bible Study group (which the police contend fronted for some explosive enthusiasms), was conceived in cynicism; McGee takes his religion seriously, and I'm satisfied he'd never deliberately dishonor it that way. Rest assured that by his lights he is not using Jesus; Jesus is using him. He's a righteous Christian crusader, and he needed just one look at me (and the company I kept) to see that I was as black with sin as any moorish heathen. For a time he took on my conversion as a kind of personal project, and I didn't discourage his proselytizing; I too fancy myself something of a missionary, and I enjoyed having someone to rap with while I struggled with the weights.

In the next year or so we must have logged a total of maybe a dozen hours of argument about politics and religion, virtually every word of it freighted with cant and polemic, none of it worth recounting here. Suffice it to say that he liked Wallace and I liked Eldridge,

he liked Billy James Hargis and I liked (if only for the sake of argument) Tim Leary, he liked Mayor Daley and I liked Julian Bond. You get the general drift. The curious thing about our relationship, though, was that despite the obviously unbreachable disparity between his views and mine, we were able early on to establish certain ground rules for our encounters; I don't recall that either of us ever got really angry with the other. Naturally I considered his convictions utterly simplistic and naive, but that judgment had the side effect of reinforcing my sense of his essential innocence, thereby making it possible for me to continue liking him; and I suspect his attitude toward me underwent a similar evolution. In any case, I did like McGee, and I flatter myself that he rather liked me too. We served each other as penultimate adversary and perfect bad example; we needed each other to justify our own more radical conclusions, and there were times when, looking at McGee, I could almost see myself. (If there's a lesson in that for our own militants, I hope to hell they heed it.) So our arguments were always friendly, and often ended with hearty expressions of our mutual distaste for the nefarious workings of the Establishment. The last time I saw McGee was one evening about six weeks before his arrest (for reasons best known to himself, he stopped coming to the Health Club along about then), when we went over to the Popycock after our workout to continue our endless debate. I was a bit surprised when he suggested the Popycock, but he soon gave me to understand that although he didn't have a great deal of use for your general run-of-the-mill Popycocker, he did dig fish 'n' chips. So I had a cup of coffee -- he paid -- while he had fish 'n' chips and a beer. (The mere fact that a man's a christer, by the way, doesn't necessarily make him a prude; McGee also likes martinis, he told me. And don't forget those sideburns.) I have no recollection at all of what the main theme of our discussion that evening might have been -- the Free U. or SF State or Eldridge, one of those, probably --, but I do remember that as we were sitting down he glanced about at the longhairs hunched conspiratorially over most of the other tables in the place, and said, amused, "You know, last time I was in here one of these hippies asked me if I was a narc." He paused to chuckle. "Can you beat that? Me, a narc?" To tell the truth it wouldn't have surprised me as much as it apparently had McGee; the fact is that a narc is exactly what he looks like. But I didn't see any point in saying so; it would evidently have hurt his feelings.

And I recall too that, half an hour or so later, just as I was leaving, someone plugged the jukebox and played Johnny Cash's "Orange Blossom Special." "Hey, McGee," I said, getting up from the table, "I just thought of something I'll bet you and I can agree on!"

"What's that?" he wanted to know.

I nodded toward the jukebox. "Johnny Cash," I told him. "I'll bet you like him as much as I do."

"Oh, yeah!" McGee said warmly. "He's great! Did you know he's a born-again Christian?"

"God, McGee," I said, laughing, "I give up on you. You're too much. I'll be seeing you. Thanks for the coffee."

The last I saw of him he was still sitting there over his unfinished fish 'n' chips and beer, grinning into the hippy-infested darkness, zealot amongst the heathens.

Well, McGee, I'm sorry it worked out this way. I wish I'd been a better teacher, or you a better student. But then I suppose if you ever give it a thought you most likely wish the same.