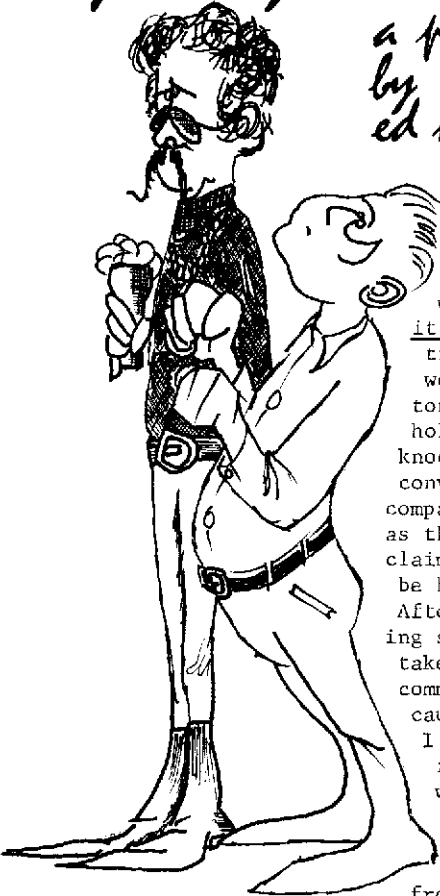


Highway 52--at least the stretch of it I care about--runs along the Ohio River for about 20 miles in Brown County, Ohio, from Riply through Aberdeen to Manchester. And the reason I care about it is that at Aberdeen there is a toll-free bridge to Maysville, Kentucky, my hometown; and since Ohio allows the sale of 3.2 beer to 18-year-olds (whereas in Maysville you can't even legally smell a bottlecap until you're 21, and even then only until 10 p.m., and never on Sunday), that bridge to Aberdeen looms as large in the landscape of my coming of age as the Golden Gate probably does for a Mill Valley teenager. Because Brown County knows perfectly well why the good Lord put it over there at the north end of the bridge, and in the days of my youth Highway 52 was fairly lined with taverns--the Top Hat and the Terrace Club and the Bay Horse and the Pennington Club and Danny Boone's Tavern and the Riviera Lounge and a dozen others--rank, musty, low-ceilinged places with puke in the urinals and Cowboy Copas on the jukebox and lighting feeble enough to allow a 16-year-old to pass for 18 if the bartender didn't particularly give a rat's ass to start with. Some of those havens have long since given way to motels and Frisch's Big Boy Drive-Ins and the like, but a remarkable lot of them have survived pretty much unchanged. And the most unchanged of all is the Pennington Club, where I have been wasting my substance in riotous living for nearly 20 years now. Which is why I found myself ma-

neuvering my mother's Chrysler into the Pennington Club's parking lot one night a few weeks ago, exactly as I do as often as I can wherever I'm home for a visit. Only this year there are a couple of subtle circumstantial differences--namely, this

Highway 52 Revisited:

a parable
by
ed mcclanahan



time I'm wearing Fag Store boots and a droopy Mandarin moustache and round, gold-rimmed, lime-tinted spectacles, a set of accessories not likely to take the Best Dressed Bar-Fly award in Pennington's, whose clientele's taste runs at its very dandiest to plaid sport-shirts and brand-new blue jeans and wingtip oxfords, glasses with tortoise-shell upper rims and steel lowers, and not the

first sign of a facial hair below the eyebrows. Already my little affectations, modest as they seem from here in Palo Alto, have won countless wide-eyed stares on the streets of Maysville. It's the spectacles that do it, actually--even to me they still look awfully you know, weird, somehow--; if it weren't for them the boots and even the moustache would get by okay, but the spectacles seem to confirm

what my other trappings merely hint at: it's a hippy it's a yippy it's a comic it's a California crazy it's a faggot it's a freak! Not exactly the sort of reception a sensible and prudent 36-year-old-college-English-teacher-father-of-three

would ordinarily choose to be accorded by the usual Friday night crowd in Pennington's, farmhands and highway construction workers and beertruck drivers on a busman's holiday, all in all a bunch of very rough customers, most of whom would just as leave knock me on my beatnik ass as look at me--in truth, would rather. And as a matter of convenient fact, it just so happens I've got my regular glasses right in the glove

compartment, put them there myself--if you must know--against just such a contingency as this. But what the hell, I think, if I really believe all the stuff I'm always claiming to believe about being honest with people, about caring enough about them to be honest with them, then I can't very well go slinking around in disguise, can I now?

After all, what's the use of the Fifth Freedom--i.e., the Freedom to Wear Funny-Looking spectacles--if I'm afraid to show my face with them on it? And anyhow I've always taken a certain secret pride in my talent for turning hostility into curiosity into communication at California cocktail parties; so I really shouldn't cop out just because I'm faced with playing a tougher house. And if worse comes to worst (although

I'm very likely the world's most inept fighter since Ethelred the Unready), I am fairly big, and of course they don't know I can't fight, do they now? So get on with it, goodbuddy. Into the breach. And all of a sudden there I am, sitting at the Pennington Club bar with a beer in front of me, sitting there amidst the neon glare (no intime candlelit shrinking-violet boite this) and the beery blare of loud talk and laughter and Red Sovine on the jukebox and the heady reek of lysol

from the men's toilet, and so far not a soul has uttered an unkind word. Couple of suspicious glances, maybe, but no badmouthing a-tall. Well, I decide, sucking at my beer and gaining confidence by the minute, so it was just paranoia after all, just paranoia compounded by my own unseemly willingness to think the worst of my countrymen. Clearly I owe them an apology, perhaps a musical salute to show that, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, I stand foursquare with them against the barbarian hordes. Taking my beer along, I leave my barstool and go over to the jukebox, plug it with a couple of quarters, and pick me out a bunch of songs - Kitty Wells and Buck Owens and Porter Wagoner and Johnny Cash and several others -- and then make my way between the tables to a booth over against the wall, where I settle down to drink my beer and listen to Patsy Cline sing "I'll Sail My Ship Alone" and watch a fat lady and her skinny boyfriend play shuffleboard.

And no sooner do I set my head adrift in these familiar and relatively tranquil waters than I become aware of some sort of minor turbulence at my shoulder, a gentle but insistent jostling, and I look up to see a kid (I took him for 18 or 19, though I found out later I'd slighted him by perhaps half a dozen years) standing there beside my booth, a big, husky fellow all decked out like an archetypal Pennington Clubber from his blonde crewcut to his plaid shirt to his burnished wingtips (to be entirely honest, he was in fact the model for my archetype), standing there all big and blonde, his cheeks so cleanly shaven they are as pink as two slabs of raw meat, standing there shaking my shoulder and grinning down at me like a cat eating shit-- a repast which, it soon develops, is precisely what he has in mind serving up to me. Instantly I feel the old adrenalin commence to surge-- but for me at least that brand of fuel only works for running, and flight is out of the question just now, if only because my man has had the foresight to position himself between me and the door. So all I can do is return his grin with interest, at the same time trying to make my own face say silently, Yeh? What can I do for you, jack? You know, an out-of-the-corner-of-the-mouth kind of look, tough but not hostile.

"Hey buddy," he says, still grinning, "see that there guy over there?" He points to a nearby table where in fact two

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guys sit watching us. But there isn't any doubt which of the two of us he has in mind. The big one. The big, thick-necked, dark-haired kid who is even now smiling as amiably at me as if he is privy to my every secret qualm, and knows exactly how to deal with such chickenshit trash as me. His smaller companion looks a bit uneasy, but he too eyes me the way he might a wad of bubblegum stuck to his shosole.

"I mean that black-headed one," the crewcut explains unnecessarily. "You know what he called you? He called you a fuckin punk."

Well, here it comes, hotshot, I tell myself. Can you dig it? Can you?

"Is that so?" I say lamely. But to my surprise my voice is stronger and steadier than I'd expected.

"That's what he called you." He pauses as if reconsidering, then corrects himself. "No, wait, I take that back. He just said you was a punk. I said you was a fuckin punk."

"Oh, well, that's different then." Careful there, McClanahan. No sarcasm, now. Sarcasm will get your ass whipped for you in the Pennington Club.

"What do you think about that?"

"Not a whole lot one way or the other." That's better; voice steady, friendly but not cowed, not panicky. Hang in there.

"You know why we said you was a fuckin punk?"

There it is, an opening, a chance to score a point or two for my side. "Sure," I say, as cordially as I can. "I expect it's because I got these boots on, and this moustache. And these glasses."

He shifts his weight from one foot to the other, looking just slightly surprised. He obviously hasn't anticipated a direct answer, and it has put him the tiniest bit off balance. But he plunges on.

"What you ought to do," he says, "you ought to go over there and beat hell out of him for sayin a thing like that."

"Naw," I tell him, "I wouldn't want to do a thing like that. Because if I did, he might not like it, and then he might beat hell out of me. And then where'd I be?"

Again that fleeting hint of confusion crosses my interrogator's face, and I see that I'm still making the right move, that he'd been prepared for almost any reaction except what is so far passing for relaxed candor. But he isn't giving up yet --not by a long shot.

"Hey Emory," he calls above the din, "come over here a minute."

Emory rises and ambles toward us, growing taller and broader by the step. He brings his beer bottle with him, carrying it by the neck like a billyclub, despite the fact that it is still half full of beer. A bad sign, that.

"Emory," the crewcut says, "I was just tellin this guy you called him a fuckin punk. Ain't that right?"

Emory's grin widens. "Naw, Cecil," he says, "I never said he was a fuckin punk. I said he looked like a fuckin punk."

"Well," I say, "you just might be right about that. You sure as hell wouldn't be the first one to think so." Emory's turn to look puzzled. Seeing my advantage, I hurry on, "But what I am might just be an entirely different thing from what I look like. You ever think of hat?"

There now, that was just right. Now I'm really grooving with it, and Emory's uneasiness proves it. "How's that?" he says. "I mean, I reckon I know a fuckin punk when I see one..."

"Well, maybe you do and maybe you don't. But I tell you what, why don't you all sit down here a minute and let me tell you a couple of things about myself, and if you still think I'm a fuckin punk after I'm through, why, we can deal with that then."

Hearing myself make the offer, I realize that if they sit down with me it will mean the tide has definitely turned in my favor, and with that realization comes also the first full knowledge of just how desperately I want this encounter to work out right. Because it will justify so much; already I can see in it the substance of a metaphor that will explain perfectly the directions my life has taken during the last few years, explain then not just to the world but to me... Cecil and Emory look questioningly at each other, and for an instant my breath catches in my throat, and then to my relief and delight Emory slides into the seat opposite me and Cecil, following his lead, sits down beside me.

"Okay," I begin, "now the first thing I ought to tell you is that I probably wouldn't be too far wrong if I say I'm twice as old as either one of you."

"Shit you are," Emory scoffs, his disbelief dangerously reviving his contempt.

"Well, I'm 36," I tell him quickly. "I could show you an ID. I graduated from Maysville High School in 1951. So figure it out."

"Shit you did," Cecil says. "You mean to tell me you're from Maysville?"

"That's right. I live in California now, but I come from Maysville. What'd you think I was, some Cincinnati dude or something?"

"California?" Emory says. "What do you do in California?"

Beautiful. Now they're asking for information, instead of making me force it on them. "I'm a teacher," I tell them. "I teach college English."

"Shit you do," Emory says, but this time his scorn has been replaced by amazement. "What college?"

"Stanford University."

That one struck a nerve I hadn't expected to hit. "Stanford?" he says. "Sure enough?"

"I could show you my faculty identification card, if you..."

"I went up to Morehead State one semester myself," he muses almost wistfully, "but I flunked out."

I see now that the game is almost over, and that a kind of victory is within reach. I could probably launch right now into an us-college-men talk with Emory, and once and for all defuse what had been an explosive situation. But there's a lot I haven't got said yet. For a starter, there's still one more possible explanation for my outlandish dress that I want to eliminate from their consideration. I mean the chance they still suspect that I'm a faggot.

"One more thing," I tell them. "I'm married, and I've got three kids."

"Shit you do," says Cecil. But by now the last trace of animosity has left his voice too.

"Right. So the way I figure it, if you all want to think that a 36-year-old college English teacher with three kids is a fuckin punk, well, okay, you'll just have to go on thinking it, that's all. But that was when I was one, you

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see. And that was a long time ago. So I figure what you think of me is strictly your own business."

"Well then," Cecil begins, "how come..."

"How come I wear these glasses and stuff? Well, first of all, I like them. But besides that, just look at what these things have done right here in the Pennington Club in the last fifteen minutes. I mean, take you all, now if I've done my job right, you all have learned you ought not to be so quick to judge people. I mean, you know, you make mistakes that way, man, that's why the wrong people are always getting hurt!"

It is over, and for once in my life I have done my job right, and I know it, and the knowledge is positively exhilarating. I'd be perfectly will satisfied if Emory and Cecil would tuck their tails and go sulking back to their own table right now. But this turns out to be one of those rare times when the breaks just won't quit coming my way. Because just as I finish my little speech, up to our booth steps their forgotten friend, the smaller fellow who'd been sitting with them at the other table.

"Come on, you guys," he tells them. "Leave this poor bastard alone and let's get out of here."

"Hey Bill," Cecil says, "this here guy claims he graduated from Maysville High!"

Cecil evidently sees one last chance to vindicate himself; if Bill, who is evidently something of an authority on graduates of Maysville High, rules that I've introduced false evidence, then we're right back where we started.

"Shit you did," Bill says flatly. "When was you ever at Maysville High?"

A bad moment. Nothing for it, though, but to ride it through and hope for the best. "I went there three years," I tell him. "I graduated in fifty-one."

"Shit you did. Because listen here, my name is Ormes, and my brother..."

"Oh for Christ sake," I interrupt; laughing with the relief of recognition, "you're Billy Ormes. You're Bobby's little brother. Hell, I graduated with Bobby!"

Of course he's Billy Ormes! Little Billy--O whose brother Bobby was a basketball superstar and therefore the best guy in Maysville to take along when you were going out cruising, looking for a little stranger; little Billy-O whose brother Bobby--therefore--was one of my most cherished friends in high school; little Billy-O whose brother Bobby used to chase him home whenever we set out on those nightly expeditions. Little Billy-O.

But in my delight at this unexpected turn of events I've momentarily forgotten that Billy-O still doesn't know who I am. Even now, in fact, he's leaning across the table, peering intently at my face. Suppose he doesn't remember me? After all, it's been --what?--17 years since I saw him, and he was just a little kid then...

"My name's Ed McClanahan," I say finally, searching his face for some reaction. For the first few seconds, nothing. Then, very slowly, he straightens, raises his eyes to the cobwebby ceiling, and dramatically claps a palm to his forehead.

"Jee-zus Christ!" he cries. "Eddie McClanahan! Why you stupid sons of bitches, this guy went to school with Bobby! Why this here was the smartest guy in Maysville High School! He teaches college somewhere, ain't that right, Eddie? Why you stupid sons of bitches, this here guy is smarter than both of you all put together, and you all wantin to fight him!"

And now Billy-O is pumping my hand energetically, and my own grin is nearly splitting my face in the almost boundless pleasure of this moment, and Emory is hiding his face behind his hands in mock shame. "Hey Cece," he says, peeking between his fingers, "you know what you are, don't you?"

"Yeah, Emory," Cecil snickers. "I'm a fuckin punk."

And there you have it. That's all there is to tell, except that I spent the next five hours or so getting roaring drunk with Bill and Emory and Cecil, and that during those five hours I told them exactly what I thought about Vietnam and Chicago and spades and dope and hippies and what-have-you, and that for the first time ever they actually listened to these heresies, and found them a good deal less difficult to get next to than they would ever have suspected.

And as I drove home, drunk and happy in the dawn, it came to me, in the perverse form of what has to be the silliest pun I ever invented, that the only real difference between my freaky spectacles and, say, an Oxford don's cap and gown was a difference in degree. But then, even as I giggled at my own giddy wit, I was also struck, for perhaps the tenth time in the ten years I've been a teacher, by the full force of the revelation that teaching is just possibly the one thing in the world worth doing every single time one really gets in there and does it.

COORDINATING MEETING DECISIONS

1. The MFU is one of the supportery organizations of the Liberation festival to be given at Lytton Plaza, Sept. 6 & 7. The festival is intended to bring to the people of Palo Alto the opportunity to participate both in creative activities - such as arts, crafts, singing, music and dancing - and in a living community growing out of these activities. It is not offered as a confrontation to anybody, but as an invitation to everybody to sample what we shall offer in the permanent community center.
2. Authorized up to \$3,500 from the fall budget, for the fall catalogue.
3. All elected and appointed officers of the MFU are asked, when making any public statement or speeches, to mention the fact that the MFU supports non-violent action.
4. Support printing of leaflet by United Action on Housing.

Objectives

"We undertake this endeavor in response to the conviction that contemporary man has an urgent need for integration of thought and being, a release of creativity through synthesis of intelligence and the X of man's experience; that our world civilization requires the activation of some common human denominators; and that both these needs can only be met through a world community intent upon facing these problems head on, and perhaps through the discovery of a completely new ontology of man, which is, at once, scientific, humanistic, and personal. These are our objectives."

These are the objectives of New Experimental College in Thy, Denmark, a world college founded in 1962 and run by a student-faculty Board of Directors. Anyone interested in this school per se or the above statement should contact Kathy Kirby at 328-4941. I think this is a very positive statement about what the Free University is trying to do.