We Sang Songs Together
By Paul Edward Johnson

The only thing I liked about riding in a car with Dad was the singing. My first memory of riding in a car with him goes back to when I was maybe age four.

He was driving the Model-A Ford down a tar-topped country road. We were returning from a drive-in movie, returning to our little white hut along the shore of Cass Lake in Michigan. It was a summer night. The car windows were open. The air smelled like lake water. Green. Moonlight glittered upon water between dark pine trees. Lakes were everywhere there.

From my view behind Dad's shoulders, the head-lights showed a yellow stripe down the middle of the road. Mom, sitting next to Dad, held little Larry, asleep in her lap.

They started singing, Dad and Mom. They sang, "From the light, from the light of the silvery moon, we love to spoon, me, my honey, in June, in June."

Or something like that. And I started singing with them, leaning near my father's shoulders, smelling green lake air blowing through his window, watching the yellow stripe in the road twisting beneath the light from our headlights. The red wand inside the lighted circle on the dash panel wavered almost like a little metronome.

We had done some singing before, just a few years before, when they introduced me to a contraption that plugged onto the top of the toilet seat. It had arm rests and a back rest. And had rubber suction cups on the bottom, like the ones on the tips of my toy arrows, so the thing could sit stable on the toilet, so I could sit on it and not fall into the toilet water.

Mom and Dad made a big deal about it, as though it were the most important thing they had ever given me. Even more important than my Columbia red wagon or my red Radio Flyer scooter.

It was such a big deal that when they first put me on the thing and fastened the safety belt, they both sat down upon the bathroom floor, the two of them, and looked up at me with smiles on their faces and started to sing, "Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream . . ."

After a few choruses, I was singing along with them, happy as I can ever remember being, slapping my pudgy little legs against the seat atop the toilet seat to the rhythm of the words "Row, row, row your boat gently down the stream, merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily life is but a dream."

We sang songs together in the bathroom every night for I don't know how long, probably no more than a couple weeks. And from then on the bathroom always seemed to be the best place for singing. At least until that summer night in the Model-A Ford, coming home from a drive-in movie.

One of the characters in the movie looked like Dad. He was wearing a white shirt like Dad's. He had slick black hair like Dad's. The other guys in the movie looked a lot like men I had seen Dad talk with before. Anyway, at the end of the movie this guy who looked like Dad, he kisses this woman and then gets shot by these other men and then dies in the arms of the "dame."

Singing on the way home helped me not think about it as much, the second movie I had ever seen; the first being *Bambi*, which come to think of it was not a happy movie either; Bambi's mom being shot and killed.

We were singing merrily along when Dad decided to pass a car we had been following for maybe one or two songs.

As our car swerved across the yellow stripe, Mom stopped singing and screamed out Dad's name, "Ed!!!!!"

Dad stopped singing and I stopped singing when we moved up to the side of the other car.

While we were passing the car we went into this turn in the road and I lost my balance behind Dad and fell on the car's floor.

While I struggled to get up from the floor, Mom and Dad began having the first argument I can recall them ever having, Mom begging Dad to slow down.

I looked over Dad's shoulder. At the red wand in the lighted circle on the dash board, the thing he called the speedometer. It was dancing near the top of the lighted circle. I had never seen it there before, and said so.

Dad said, "Want to see it go higher?"

And I, excited, said "Yes!"

As we moved faster and faster Dad and I started to laugh and Mom started to cry.

Ever since that night, I seldom rested easy when I was in a car Dad was driving. Except for maybe one trip he and I took when I was about age seven, to meet a buddy of his in Cincinnati who had just returned from World War II and his buddy had this job working in a junkyard filled with hundreds of B-17 bombers, a junkyard where Dad and I sat in the cockpit of one of the B-17 bombers and he looked and behaved just like Mel Gibson in that movie *Forever Young* in which Mel teaches a kid how to fly a bomber while the two of them sat in the kid's tree house.

Other than that trip to Cincinnati, it seemed I was for the rest of his life waiting to die in a car he was driving, always vigilant for "the fatal moment." Always hating him for what an asshole he would become when he was behind the wheel, not ever caring how I or Mom or Larry or his other three kids felt, always never allowing another driver to remain in front of our car, always crossing into the other lane to risk a head-on collision with some sucker with a carload of kids. God! Did I hate riding with him!

And yet, whenever I was sitting in the back seat and couldn't see the speedometer, I sure loved the singing, especially in that 1939 Buick limo he bought when I was seven. It had a back seat area so big that there were two extra seats you could fold down from the back of the front seat.

When the singing started, I'd slouch down in a seat behind Dad so's I couldn't see the road and sang along with him while gazing up at passing telephone wires and poles.

While I was in third grade and Larry was in first grade, we were living in a little cracker-white house in Circle Pines, Minnesota, about a half-hour drive to our church in Minneapolis, Plymouth Congregational. Every Sunday morning Dad got paid for singing both church services.

During the first church service I suffered inside a gray wool suit while in Sunday school class, always itching my legs while sitting at a table with other eight-year olds who were always itching themselves, too. Except for John Crouse and Barbara Malkerson.

John had what looked like a silk suit and always talked like an adult. Barbara was always serene and far prettier and mature than the other girls.

After an hour of itching and looking into books filled with drawings of Bible people wearing loose-fitting comfortable robes draping their bodies, and wondering why I had to wear an itchy wool suit, Larry and I would meet in the Green Room, where we'd rub the soles of our shoes upon the thick green carpet and give each other static-electric shocks.

Then we'd run through the maze of hallways and sometimes sneak into the second church service to watch the choir sing, sometimes seeing and hearing our father singing a solo.

The first time we saw Dad sing a solo was when I was about five or six and we were living in Detroit.

Mom had to point him out to me because all the guys on stage had painted their faces black. Mom said they painted their faces black because they were in what was called a minstrel show and that's what they did in minstrel shows.

Toward the end of the show, Dad, who was barefooted and wearing a white shirt and rolled up pants, started singing a song in which he kept moaning out the name Chloe, as if he were searching for a lost dog, except Chloe was a woman.

As he sang the song, the other guys on stage kept spraying Dad with water, from what Mom said were seltzer bottles, and everybody in the audience laughed every time Dad got a dousing. At the end of the song he was soaking wet and we were all roaring. I can't remember if he ever found Chloe.

The church choir solos were always very serious and after the second church service Larry and I would run to the doors of the choir dressing rooms where the choir members would hang up their robes.

Sometimes we'd go into the men's dressing room and say hello to Mr. Jennings, the organist, and joke with Mr. Nelson, who sang bass next to Dad.

Sometimes we'd just stand out in the hallway and listen to them all sing parts of songs they had been singing during the church services.

Most fun of all was when Dad would come out of the men's dressing room and walk into the women's dressing room and make all the women scream at him.

We couldn't believe how dashingly daring he was, and how damned embarrassing he could be.

After church we would always stuff ourselves full of spaghetti and meatballs at the Cafe di Napoli in downtown Minneapolis.

On the way home in the Buick limo we sang songs together, while driving back up Highway 8 toward Circle Pines. Usually the same songs that we sang together around the piano in our little living room. Sometimes Dad would introduce a new one.

My favorite was "Garbage Man's Daughter," which went something like this:

I was in love with a garbage man's daughter
(slop slop)
She lived down by the brine
(slop slop)
Each night we'd stroll through the garbage
(slop slop)
Her slimy hand in mine
(slop slop)
And her greasy hair on my maggoty chest
(slop slop)
Oh, that was love divine
(slop slop).

There were others of that caliber, most of them now forgotten. Many of the others were folk tunes, Stephen Foster songs, and spirituals. Songs such as "Careless Love," and "On Top of Old Smoky" and "Oh Susanna" and "Red River Valley" and "Camp Town Races" and "Home on the Range" and "Shenandoah" and "She'll Be Comin' 'Round the Mountain" and oh yes, "Let Me Call You Sweetheart."

And then "Waltzing Matilda" and "Clementine" and "John Brown's Body" and "Joshua Fit De Battle Ob Jericho" and "Oh, a-Rock-a My Soul" and "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot."

By the time we'd get home we'd be all sung out, but later at night, after dinner and doing the dishes, we'd form a half-circle around Dad at the piano.

He'd open up the big *Fireside Book of Folk Songs* and we'd start in on them again, Mom, Larry, Sue, and even little Sylvia, all of us trying to read the words, but mostly faking it and flowing along in the wake of Dad's booming bass-baritone voice.

When I became a cub scout, Dad led song-fests at the monthly Pack Meeting in Circle Pines and he taught and led us in singing some new tunes such as "Alouette" and "In a Cavern, In a Canyon" and "I Want a Girl Just Like the Girl" and "John Jacob Jingle Heimer Schmidt" and "My Name is Yon Yonson."

He then became a Cub Scout Pack Leader soon after we had moved to Minneapolis and I had been enrolled in fourth grade at Robert Fulton Elementary School. The high point of those monthly pack meetings came when he'd get us all singing, the parents, too. More than 200 people crammed into the school's gym.

Dad was a natural ham and had no trouble getting us all laughing at his over-the-top antics and gestures that always got us to loosen up and forget our inhibitions while we sang along with him to "Old MacDonald Had a Farm" and "Over Hill, Over Dale" and "Pack Up Your Troubles" and "Sippin' Cider Through a Straw."

He'd end the pack meetings by turning down the lights in the gym while we all lighted a candle in our hands. With the lights turned out and with our candles burning we'd softly sing "There's a Long, Long Trail a Winding."

Makes me wonder now where all the matches came from to light all those candles.

During my first year at Robert Fulton, my favorite moments in Miss Sklater's fourth grade classroom were when she'd get out her pitch pipe and we would all sing her favorite songs. She struck me as being a sentimental old lady. I guessed her age to be about 80. She always wanted to sing World War I songs such as "When the Caissons Go Rolling Along."

When we sang songs together in her classroom, she had me sit in the front row, right under her eyes, and as I watched her clutch her little round pitch pipe in her hand she appeared to me to be like a frail bird. Kind of like a nervous chikadee.

Miss Sklater did not seem to have an easy job. About sixty percent of her class was fifth graders. We fourth graders, about 16 of us, including Jerry Bender, Phyliss Hall, Bill Lund, Eddie Chrisinger, Donna Stuart, Paul Goulding, John Croonquist, and I think Gary Googins, and maybe Peter Laidlaw, Suzanne Jebe and Dick Larson and Patty Risler, and maybe Jack Buekma and Carolyn Hughes and Charlotte Brunkow.

Anyway, we all sat in the two rows closest to the wall of windows along the 49th Street playground, the same playground where we always held our paper drives to raise money needed for things like Audubon field trips to the bird sanctuary at Lake Harriet.

Maybe Miss Sklater looked like a chickadee because she loved birds so much. Maybe she was a chickadee in a former life.

When it was time for us to sing songs together, she would stand before us, examine her round pitch pipe, squinting at it as she turned it in her trembling hands to find the correct hole to blow into.

Then she'd put it up to her thin lips, pucker her mouth, and blow, producing a sustained whine while gesturing with a flabby arm for all of us to hum in tune with her pitch pipe.

And while we all hummed, she waved a hand up and down, her loose bicep flesh flapping, to signal the tempo of the song we were about to try to sing, so as to get us to attack the song together.

Starting a song in Miss Sklater's class always seemed to be no small accomplishment.

If we behaved ourselves and sang well, she would let us finish our singing sessions with a song that had become very popular on the radio that year, one of my favorites, Patti Page's "Mockin' Bird Hill."

She loved to sing it with us, and from where I sat, she seemed to love most the part where we all together burst into the refrain: "Tra-la-la, twiddle-ee-dee-dee it gives me a thrill to wake up in the morning to the mockin' bird's trill."

We didn't do any singing in fifth grade. Miss Holter, as pretty as she seemed to be to me (I swear she looked a lot like Jane Russell) she never got around to it. Her thing was adding and subtracting and multiplying and dividing.

And my thing was making water bombs with Bruce Hixon and Jeff Land. We made them from the glossy "ink paper" I had stashed in my flip-top desk (under all of the Valentine cards I could never toss out until the end of the school year).

We didn't do any singing in Mr. Kerr's sixth-grade class, either. His passion was geography. Maps and lots of foreign countries. Most of all, it seemed, he enjoyed making disagreeable brats like me write 200-word "themes" whenever we were "getting out of line."

I would have enjoyed singing in his class. There were so many cute girls in there: Signe Olson, who sat across from me at our United Nations table, the two of us representing Sweden; and Linda Miller and her pretty friend Terry Ross. Oh, and Linda Forsman, and oh yes, the cute sassy redhead who always teased me about how my head was shaped like an egg.

And oh my God! My first date, Cathy!

Oh well, I guess I should be a tad more honest now. Truth is there was a sixth grade chorus. Not many kids got to be in it.

There was a tryout for it and when it came time for me to pipe up and sing a scale and part of a song I had never sung before, I guess I sounded pretty awful.

Several days later, when the list was posted of the kids who qualified to be in the chorus, my name was not on it. I felt more embarrassed than I felt disappointed. Hell, the kids on that list were all just goody-goody tuttie fruities and not like Jeff Land and Bruce Hixson.

The last thing I needed was to be associating with them. They were all guys like Jim Hutchins and Mike Daggett and girls like Phyliss Hall and Judy Green. To have to stand up and sing with them for just a dumb Christmas concert or Easter concert or eighth-grade graduation ceremony? Yuck!

I'm not sure what happened in seventh grade that allowed me to be in the junior high glee club. Maybe everybody had to be in it. But I'm not so sure. That's because when we rehearsed we were all crammed into Mrs. O'Leary's classroom, two in a desk seat, eighth graders and seventh graders combined. And that being the way it was, she would never have been able to get all of the kids in eighth grade and seventh grade into her classroom. No way! And anyway, who cares?

What mattered is that we had fun singing all kinds of stuff while stuffed together in her room.

Funny thing is though I hardly remember what we actually sang together, except for "Battle Hymn of the Republic."

I remember that because Dad always hated that one. He really did.

When we sang songs together in the car, he would mock the lyrics by always singing, "Glory, glory what's it to ya?"

I never felt good about that. But he did. And he'd always say, "How in hell can people justify putting God or Christ on their side when they're fighting a war? Shit! The Rebs were just as much Christians as the Yankees! Singing that song is hypocritical. Think God or Christ only loved the Yankees? It makes me sick every time I hear it being sung!"

But Mrs. O'Leary liked it and she was one of my all-time favorite teachers. She reminded me of Nana, my grandmother, who as I had been told over and over again by my mother, once sang with the Metropolitan Opera Company in New York City during the great Caruso's career.

Both Nana and Mrs. O'Leary were large ladies who carried their big-bosomed bodies with grace and dignity. Imposing figures. Stern, and yet they could display a sweet smile in their eyes that revealed the gentleness and humor all kids crave. A joyfulness. A beauty. A generous spirit.

I flat-out loved Mrs. O'Leary. And when we sang "Battle Hymn of the Republic" at our last concert for our eighth-grade graduation ceremony, all of us standing proudly in our white shirts, I saw tears in her eyes and felt tears on my cheeks as we built the song to its climax.

She wore a corsage and I tried to ignore my father's reddening face as he sat in the front row trying to suppress a proud smile.

So that this doesn't get out of hand, however, as much as I enjoyed our last concert, what I enjoyed most about being in Mrs. O'Leary's chorus was the rehearsals; the fun of sitting in the back of her classroom with Jerry Bender and Mart Aldre and getting to know Jim Hutchins and Mike Daggett and Don Best and Dave Anderson and a lot of other guys who I had felt avoided knowing me until then.

What I especially liked was Judy Green's hair. Judy curled it into visually interesting sculpted forms, inviting me to dare touch it as she sat in front of me. Mart dared to, and so did Jerry and Jim and Mike. Me? I was just chicken.

But I wasn't afraid of now and then goofing-off back there in the back row, knowing that whenever I did Mrs. O'Leary would walk straight back and rap me a good one with the cork handle of her baton. Maybe I simply loved getting her attention?

Throughout seventh and eighth grade, Mrs. O'Leary would tell us about the Southwest High School Choir, she always talking about its reputation for being one of the best high school choirs in the state of Minnesota and how proud she was to have so many of her former junior high students go on to become members of that choir.

She would tell us stories about how this choir was led by a director who demanded a lot from his students, and if any of us wanted to join it, we would not only have to be good singers, we'd also have to display excellent behavior and outstanding character. She'd always say to me after rapping me on my head with her baton, "There are no trouble makers in the Southwest Choir."

Jerry Bender was always telling me how great the Southwest Choir was. Maybe that was because his sister, Sandie, who was about three years older than us, maybe it was because she was in it.

Jerry, who had an outstanding singing voice, was taking a few turns toward juvenile delinquency, however. And although I was starting to improve my behavior, we both doubted we would ever qualify to become a member of the Southwest High School Choir. Good boys we were not.

We were not exactly bad, either. We just enjoyed thinking we were bad. Maybe that's why we enjoyed walking up alleys at night stealing green apples from backyard trees, and then pegging them through garage windows. And, maybe that's why I talked Wayne Swanson into releasing all the water from a giant inflated swimming pool that covered the entire back yard of a house up my alley, flooding the owner's basement. Or why Jerry always had to snap off two or three aerials from parked cars on our way back from Friday night dances at the Pershing Park field house.

On the day we all met to walk together for the first time to Southwest High School, the day after Labor Day in 1955, the only school organization we could see ourselves as being qualified to join was a gang of boys at Southwest who called themselves Bucks. Jerry and Wayne and some of my other friends, including Mart Aldre, John Lind and Bob Rishovd, they had it in their heads that if we wanted to be popular at Southwest, we had to become Bucks.

To become a Buck, you had to be initiated, or to use their words, “to stink.” And before you could stink, you had to be approached by a Buck who would offer to be your “Big Brother.”

That first day of high school I had three concerns:

1) Was I properly dressed?

2) Was I going to be assigned to a home room with some of my friends?

3) Was I going to be approached by a Buck who would offer to be my Big Brother?

During the summer I had grown damned near a foot. I had suddenly become six-feet tall and was worrying I might never stop growing. The only thing I enjoyed about my summer sprouting was the fact that I got to go downtown and buy a whole new wardrobe for high school.

So on the first day of school I had great pride in my new “threads.” I had been allowed to buy enough clothes so that I could wear a different shirt each day of the week, as well as a different pair of pants.

I had five new shirts (my favorite a bright yellow flannel shirt) and five pairs of cords, including a pair of white ones and a pair of purple ones (the high school’s colors were purple and white). Plus a pair of white suede shoes (the same kind Pat Boone wore) and five pairs of white socks and a white suede belt! Was I ready, or what?

So what happens? On the first day of school, as we’re all walking to school together … Jerry, Wayne, Mart, John, Bob, and me – me wearing my new bright yellow shirt and my new bright lime green cords – as we’re all walking past the football field on 48th Street, John says to Mart, actually loudly whispers to Mart, “Fairy colors.”

And Mart and Jerry and Wayne and Bob all laugh.

And because they’re all laughing I start laughing, and while we are all laughing I look at John and say, “Did you say fairy colors? What’s fairy colors?”

All five respond instantly and seem to shout out in unison at me: “GREEN and YELLOW!”

John laughs and says, green ‘an yellow’s fairy colors. Everybody knows that. Except maybe you.”

I look at Mart, at Jerry, at Wayne, at Bob, and they all nod in solemn confirmation.

Among all the color combinations in my new rainbow wardrobe, I had chosen fairy colors to wear on

my first day of high school. And it was too late to go home and change out of my lime green cords and my yellow flannel shirt.

My home room was in the corner of the school's cafeteria, near a door someone said was the entrance to the choir and band room. Except for Jim Hutchins and Judy Green and Phyliss Hall and Steve Juul and Suzanne Jebe and Carolyn Hughes and Sandy Isham and maybe a couple other kids, nobody else in my home room was from Fulton. Almost all of them were from Lake Harriet Elementary School.

We all sat at lunch tables (a sweet looking girl in a pink sweater whose last name was Jahn across from me, a girl in a Hawaiian print dress whose last name was Johanson to my left, and to my right a greaser in a black leather motorcycle jacket whose last name was Johnson).

We waited and waited there and wondered who our home room teacher was going to be, and while we waited we all guessed about what was going to happen next.

Then the door near my table, the door to the music room, slammed open and this tall and balding redheaded man wearing a brown double-breasted suit and shiny brown shoes walked through the door, he giving me and the guy next to me a baleful scowling stare.

He walked directly toward me, stood over me and the guy next to me and looked out at the rest of the 30 or so of us and said, "Welcome to Southwest High School, I'm Mr. Dahle. I'm your home room teacher."

He had a thin red mustache and looked a little bit like Jack Benny always looked after he delivered a punch line to a joke. Except this guy, this Mr. Dahle, he did not look at all like he was a joker.

The guy sitting next to me, the guy whose last name was Johnson, wearing the leather motorcycle jacket, this guy loudly whispers to me, "He don't look so tough," so that almost everyone could hear him.

I blushed, and as Mr. Dahle looked down upon us he must have seen my beet red face looking up at him.

Then he looked straight into my eyes and said, "Look, Buster! If you or anyone else wants to know what tough is, you came to the right place to find out. I don't want to hear another word from you unless I ask you a question. Or unless you lift your hand and I

give you permission to speak. If you, MISTER, want to get past ninth grade in this school, you must get past me first. Pay attention now or I'll see you pay later!"

I sensed he could have been a former marine drill instructor. I had often felt the wrath of Mr. Kerr, my old sixth grade teacher who had been a captain in the army during World War II, but this guy, this Mr. Dahle, he made old crusty Captain Kerr appear to me to be about as mild mannered as Mr. Peepers.

Dahle then passed out cards to each of us that had the room numbers of the classes we had signed up for back last spring when we were eighth graders.

My first "class" was study hall. In the same room, the cafeteria, and Dahle was our study hall teacher.

Great!

Not a word was spoken in that study hall. Not one word. There must have been at least a hundred of us in there, mostly seniors and juniors, and we all just sat there in absolute silence, three at a table, without a thing to study except the clock on the wall.

Second hour was algebra, taught by the football coach, Mr. Kelson. Jerry Bender was in there with me and he was wearing jeans way down below his hips that he called "hood pants" and a white t-shirt with the sleeves all rolled up.

Jerry was combing his greasy black hair back into what he called duck tails, when he told me that one of the senior Bucks, who was a friend of Jerry's sister Sandie, had met Jerry in the halls and told Jerry that he would be his Big Brother.

During algebra class, Kelson reamed Jerry at least twice for just looking at him.

With five minutes remaining in the period, Kelson walked over to Jerry's desk near the windows, opened one of the windows, glared down at Jerry, and lighted a cigarette, blowing the smoke all over Jerry's hair!

Third hour was civics class, to be taught by a new teacher, Joe Hutton, who was also the new basketball coach. Jerry and John Lind and about 35 other guys were in the room, and just two girls: Beth Crary, whose dad was a Park Board pee-wee hockey coach and football coach, and Sue Burroughs.

Jerry told me Hutton was recently a member of the World Champion Minneapolis Lakers, and his father coached a national championship basketball team at Hamline University.

Hutton told us that he didn't have any text books to pass out to us and he then spent the rest of the hour just sitting on top of his desk in silence. Not looking at any of us, not saying a single word and every now and then looking at the clock over the door. Jerry didn't say much either. He wanted to be on the basketball team.

Fourth hour was music class with Dahle and before the hour was over, all the guys in the class hated his guts for having this thing about being in control and paying strict attention to him. A maniac. And now three times in one morning I had had Dahle.

During lunch in the cafeteria I sat with Jerry and Wayne Swanson and John Lind and a bunch of other guys who had gone to Fulton.

Some 10th grade guys who had also gone to Fulton stopped by our table and offered to be Big Brothers to Wayne and John and Mart Aldre and Mike McGowan and just about everyone else at the table, except me.

At the end of lunch, John Lind looked at me and laughed, "God, Johnse! How could you dare wear fairy colors on the first day of school? I can't believe it!"

After lunch it was English. The class I feared the most. English was my worst subject in seventh and eighth grade. I could never figure out the difference between verbs and adjectives and adverbs. Nouns, pronouns, and prepositions were pretty easy. The rest of that stuff was beyond me. The way I had it figured, I'd fail English, and fail again, and again, and then drop out. There was no way I was going to pass English if I had to know all about grammar and diagramming sentences.

In English I sat at a table with Jerry Bender, who was in almost all of my classes: study hall, algebra, civics, music, and now English, plus gym class which alternated with music on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

We sat at a table with a girl who had gone to another grade school. Sue Day. She sat up straight with her back next to the blackboard. Sue looked a lot older than 14. She could have passed for 16. Maybe even a senior. I liked her. So did Jerry. So we decided to shove the table against her stomach and squish her up against the blackboard. And we did that at least once a day for the rest of the year, which the teacher, Mrs. Haaland, never seemed to notice. She never seemed to notice anything, not even how dumb I was.

That first day of high school ended with mechanical drawing. I figured if I lucked out and made it through the English class, I might be able to someday be a mechanical engineer, like Dad wanted me to be, or maybe an architect, which Mom seemed to favor. The teacher was a nice old man who always gave me *A*'s on my drawings and who would let us listen to popular songs on the radio while we labored over our drawing boards.

Next to mechanical drawing, my favorite class that year actually turned out to be music. I don't know why. Maybe it was because Dahle was such a nut case that he actually fascinated me. Maybe it was because he was damn good at what he did.

What he did was amaze me.

Several weeks after school started, I had been chosen by one of the Bucks to be a stink and was sitting in the school's auditorium among all my classmates and next to Jerry Bender, complaining to him about how one of the senior Bucks, Tom Worthley, had been forcing me to wear a stupid ring around my neck on a string, something only girls who were going steady did.

Jerry tried to explain to me that this was just a part of the hazing process that all we stinks had to endure until after Hell Night in January.

"Talk to your Big Brother, Paul. Maybe he can get Worthley to let you take that ring off the string around your neck. You know you really do look like a fruit with that around your neck. It has to really embarrass Bob Bloom to be your Big Brother. God, was he hard up to choose you to be a stink, or what?"

"Thanks, Jer! But stop laughing. Ain't funny!"

While we were talking, the Southwest Choir began entering the auditorium, single file, all of them heading for the stage.

Looked to me like maybe a hundred, each wearing a burgundy robe and showing white collars. And the guys, who all walked to the top of this four-level platform on the stage, they all wore black bow ties, about 30 of them, and then below them were three rows of maybe 75 girls.

Once they were all upon the stage, facing the entire student body, they just stood there, hands by their sides, looking straight ahead, silent, and waiting.

I spotted Worthley standing up there in the back row, looking like he always looked, like a professional wrestler, and said, “Come on Jerry, how’s a guy like Worthley get to be in the choir? As a matter of fact, there’s lots of guys up there who are not my idea of choir boys.”

“Shut up, Paul. I’ve been to a few Southwest Choir concerts. Until every person in this here audience shuts up, Dahle won’t come out to direct them.”

“So what?”

And then he hit me. A sluggo. Right in the arm.

The choir was important to him. I figured because maybe his sister Sandie was in it.

I was fixing to slug Jerry back, but then Dahle came walking out from behind the edge of the stage.

I decided not to slug Jerry. It wasn’t worth risking Dahle waxing me in front of the whole school.

Except for muttering from a few freshman boys in the audience, the auditorium was almost quiet while Dahle turned to face his choir.

But Dahle didn’t do anything. He just stood there looking at his choir, his back to the audience.

After what seemed to be a long while, he turned and walked toward the audience, to the edge of the stage. The tips of his brown shoes extended out over the edge.

He looked down at me and at all the rest of us freshmen sitting together in our assigned section.

Just looked at us for what seemed to have been a full minute, until the entire auditorium was silent in the darkness.

Didn’t say a word.

Then he turned his back on us, walked toward the choir, and stopped.

As he raised one hand and one finger, the girls, together, all in one simultaneous motion, they all cupped their hands in front of their waists, each with the back of their right hand resting upon the palm of their left hand.

With Dahle’s right hand raised about eye level, in the silence, I heard a small clear voice humming a note, almost sounding like a pitch pipe, but not a pitch pipe, only a small human voice humming a note.

Then again, silence.

When he brought his hand down, they bloomed into song, song seeming in that single moment to

flower in my stomach as pure melodic lines from the violin voices of the sopranos, entwining with the mellow altos, the soaring tenors, the big baritones and the booming basses, all singing harmonies and melodic lines in intricate counterpoint directions, creating a magical musical moment that to me was as fascinating and exciting as beholding the marching movements of a crack drill team.

I had never heard anything like it in my life. I had no idea that more than 100 kids could create such a sound. And without a single instrument to back them up, to support their singing, not even a piano. And they had it all memorized!

Throughout the concert I remained mesmerized and awed by how high school kids, how kids like Worthley, could sound better than the Plymouth Church Choir that Dad sang with on Sundays.

My God! No wonder Jerry had slugged me. No wonder Mrs. O'Leary was proud of the kids who went on to sing with the Southwest High School Choir.

Now I have to admit Dahle's choir was probably no better than hundreds of other a cappella choirs in the nation. I mean, after all, the Southwest High School Choir had never been invited to be on the Ed Sullivan Show. And they didn't have any hit records and people were not paying top dollar to hear them.

But that's not the point. The point is that from the first day that I heard the choir sing, I joined Jerry in believing that Dahle's choir was the most important thing happening at Southwest High School, even more important than being a Buck.

That freshman year, when I was 14, just may have been the happiest year of my life. It was a year filled with vital new challenges and discoveries and new friends.

On my first report card I got a monumental "*B*" in English – what had to be until then my most significant academic achievement. Mom and Dad couldn't believe it. And an "*A*" in mechanical drawing.

I had made the honor roll in my first at bat!

I was also a starting forward on a church-league basketball team that Jerry had got me into with Wayne Swanson, who was our star performer, and Bob Rishovd, and John Lind, and Lee Goddard. We played the whole season without losing a single game.

And I had joined a group of kids who met every Saturday morning to learn how to play Glenn Miller's and Count Basie's music, but that's a whole other story. And I was invited to parties at kids' homes where I would dance with Sue Day and other popular girls. And I survived stinking and had become a Buck.

During the spring of 1956, I was batting cleanup on a church-league softball team and hit one, two, and sometimes three homers a game.

As impressed as I was with my unexpected athletic success, with my unexpected popularity with some of the popular girls, with my new status as a Buck, and with my amazing academic honor role achievements, I was much more amazed by how my singing voice had suddenly fallen into a deep sub-basement and how Mr. Dahle had declared that I was now a bass singer.

That was in May, when Dahle was holding tryouts for the next year's choir. He had openings for about ten guys and about 25 girls. More than 100 of us had already been selected to be in his freshman choir and we had performed in the gala Christmas Concert.

The Christmas Concert was a big deal. Dahle had the high school band set up below the stage with the high school choir standing next to it, curving around a corner of the gym, and then our freshman choir standing next to them along one wall. A true pageant complete with colored spotlights and actors on stage playing Joseph and Mary and the three wise men and lots of angels.

I stood between Jerry Bender and George Bestrom and after the band had played a series of Christmas tunes, we sang a series of old standards: "Away in a Manger" and stuff like that.

Then the high school choir began to sing their sophisticated sounding songs, even a Fred Waring suite that seemed to me to sound as good as the actual Fred Waring Chorus that I had heard on the Ed Sullivan Show.

For the grand finale, the band, the choir, and we 100 freshmen all combined on "Silent Night" and made the parents cry.

The Spring Concert was even more impressive. So when that week near the end of the school year came to try out for the choir, I was more nervous than I had been during the last week of stinking for Bucks.

Except for the fact that I had learned more than most kids about how to read music, I didn't think I had much of a chance. I had tried to behave myself in home room, in study hall, and in Dahle's music class, but, when it came to singing, my voice was nothing to make anyone think I had a chance to be another Bing Crosby or Pat Boone.

During that year the Lawrence Welk Show had become increasingly popular on television, especially one of the singers on the show who had an amazingly low bass voice. His name was Larry something. Hooper? Anyway, this guy's voice was so low kids would talk about it at school during our music class. It got so that the lower a guy could sing, the better his voice was respected.

To try out for the choir, Dahle first had us each, one by one, come down to his piano in front of everybody and sing do-re-me-fa-so-la-te-do up and down the scale a couple of times.

When it came my turn, I had wet stains running from my arm pits down both sides of my brown shirt. I had chosen to wear a brown shirt on that day because Dahle almost always wore brown suits.

As Dahle played down the scale on his piano I kept with him, singing lower and lower, singing lower than any of the other guys who had sung before me, singing even lower than I had ever sung before. Dahle's eyes got bigger and bigger, his smile wider and wider.

"Oh my!" Dahle said. "Try one more note."

I lowered my chin, bent my knees, and damned near hit it solid.

Dahle grinned and said, "You work on that, and by next year you'll be singing as low as the guy on the Lawrence Welk Show."

By midweek he had us each singing in small groups consisting of a bass, a baritone, a tenor, and alto, and a soprano.

By the end of the week I was always singing the bass part and Judy Green was always singing the soprano part while all the other kids rotated in and out singing the baritone, alto, and tenor parts.

On Friday, at lunch, Jerry Bender, whose voice was the only one lower than mine, he slugged me on the arm and said, "Johnse, you've got it made."

The next week the list came out with the names of freshmen who could be in the Southwest choir starting

their sophomore year. Despite what Jerry had said to me, I could not believe that my name was actually on the that list.

"Just because I can sing low, Jerry. Just because that guy on the Lawrence Welk Show's so popular."

But it wasn't that simple, joining the choir. Lots of guys that wanted in didn't get chosen, just like I never got chosen to be a safety patrol at Fulton, or a member of the sixth grade chorus at Fulton, or a member of the high school basketball team.

Earlier that spring I had filled out a tentative class schedule for my sophomore year, which included a class in architectural drawing and a class in art. I had to have art if I was going to be an architect. But the art class was scheduled for the same hour that the choir met every day.

What was I going to do? Sing in the choir or be an architect? And what if my secret heart throb, Toni, who would be a ninth grader in September, what if she was in that art class? How could I pass up the chance of being in a class she might be in? It didn't matter that I had never said more than hello to her, and that she didn't know me.

Toni lived a block away, on the same street. And ever since she had smiled at me and said hello to me for the first time on one unforgettable summer afternoon the previous year, while we were walking in opposite directions, crossing 50th Street on Vincent Avenue (she wearing a cool blue shirt-and-shorts outfit with white knee-high socks, me in grubby khakis and a sweat-stained t-shirt, but holding a new blue and white tennis racket), well ever since that moment when she first showed me her flashing blue eyes and her bright smile, I ceased being the same kid I had always been.

I found out she had a steady boy friend she seemed to adore. Yet although I could overcome him in my wild imagination, I was trapped in my self-made envelope of cowardly shyness.

Perhaps if Toni had not had the bright blue eyes of my favorite movie actress, Esther Williams, and her heart-stopping smile, too, I might have found a way to talk with her.

What drew me to her, however, also bedazzled me. Whenever I looked into her smiling eyes, my breathing stopped, my hands and face tingled, and the golden

words I rehearsed for those moments always vanished, as if I had been transformed into a frightened squirrel.

Some nights and Sunday afternoons I'd take walks around Toni's block, only a block down from where I lived on Vincent Avenue. I hoped to catch sight of her coming out her door, or see her sitting on her steps or her lawn. Most of all, I hoped to hear her say, "Hey Paul! Where ya goin' in such a hurry? When you gonna sit down with me and talk awhile?"

So I spent the summer agonizing over what I thought was the most important choice of my life. It never dawned on me that Toni might only be a human being, and all I needed to do was ask her if she was going to be taking art at Southwest next year. No, it wouldn't have been cool to let her know I was attracted to her. And my God, Toni was a year younger than me!

I chose art. Jerry couldn't believe it. Mart Aldre thought it was the right choice. He chose art, too.

But on the first day of school, the first day of tenth grade, I changed my mind.

Toni wasn't in the art class, and the art teacher had way too many classroom rules.

After school I went into the school's new choir room and asked Mr. Dahle if he would help me change my class schedule so that I could be in his choir.

I was afraid he had let someone take my place, that I had made a terrible mistake. But he smiled and said he was glad I had changed my mind.

The next day at the start of fourth hour, I was sitting way up in the back row of the new choir room, way up in the big bass section between Jerry Bender and a senior I didn't know, looking down upon three long tiered rows of obedient looking girls who were almost all wearing soft lambs-wool sweaters. More than half of them were older than me and the girls sitting directly in front of me, especially Karol Ericson, a gorgeous senior, were so mature that I felt they had to be uncomfortable having a twerp like me so close to them, almost touching them when we stood up to sing.

If it weren't for the fact that I had spent much of the summer vacation practicing my saxophone in our basement, learning to read notes better, I doubt I would have lasted past that first day in Dahle's choir. The music he had us singing was much more complex than anything I had attempted before. Most of it was eight-part stuff.

And, more to the point, all of it had to be memorized at a time in my life when I was finally beginning to recall on a regular basis that seven times seven equaled 49.

There was no way I was going to memorize more than 50 songs. I had never memorized even one song, not even “Mockin' Bird Hill.”

All the camp fire songs, the songs Dad and our family sang in the car, all the songs we sang together around the piano every week, even “Dear Hearts and Gentle People,” I never memorized them. Couldn’t even sing the chorus without Dad leading me into it. And still, to this day, I’ve never memorized the words to a song, despite having tried. Not even the words to “The Star Spangled Banner!”

So what did I do? What I’ve always done whenever I’ve been called upon to perform. I faked it.

It wasn’t all that difficult, I guess. Hey! I was surrounded by more than 100 voices. And the guy on my right was a senior who had memorized all the words to all of the songs we would ever sing in concerts. Some didn’t have many different words in them. One song had only one word: *halleluiah*. We pronounced it or sang it ahhh - lay - lou - eee - ahhh.

The real challenge was knowing when not to sing. Nothing could be worse than to be blasting forth and suddenly hear yourself as the one and only voice still singing. To avoid that disaster, you had to watch Dahle’s hands. All the time. Not for a single moment glance away from him.

I somehow eased into it and avoided getting drop-kicked out the door. Except for the fact that I could sing low, I didn’t feel I belonged with these kids. They were all such nice kids, attractively dressed and groomed, mature; kids who were obviously going to be rich and successful when they grew up.

Now that being an architect was no longer in the cards, and knowing I couldn’t make a living as a singer if I couldn’t remember the words, I was waiting for what seemed the inevitable moment when I would be asked to sing a solo or sing in a trio, and blow it.

As we began to prepare for the spring concert, Dahle decided it would be great fun to augment our regular material with something I hadn’t seen since childhood, a little minstrel show.

To do such a show, he needed a few kids who would paint their faces black, except for a big white border around their lips, and put on stereotype Negro accents similar to the voices on the Amos and Andy radio show.

After a short tryout, I was selected to play the part of a Negro who when asked questions by the "straight man" would misunderstand the intended meanings of his words, like Mortimer Snerd would do with Edgar Bergen on the Charlie McCarthy radio show.

The script was Vaudeville burlesque and while the audience was supposed to be provoked into laughing at my character's stupidity, he was also supposed to be carried away by the audience response, broadly laugh along with the audience, and consequently provoke more laughter.

This all seemed to me to be great fun, at the time. An opportunity to ham it up in the same way as when I had performed in Cub Scout Pack Meeting skits.

Southwest High School in 1957 did not seem to have one minority student in its entire enrollment. Not one black kid. Maybe no Asians. No Native Americans. Except for some Foreign Exchange Students from England, Germany, Sweden, or France or Spain, we had almost no awareness or sensitivity regarding other races or cultures.

But many of us WASPs thought we were "liberal minded." Maybe that's because about 25% of the kids in our class were from Hebrew families. Some of us gentiles often felt smug when saying "some of our best friends are Jews."

I don't know how many one-liners I had for my responses to the straight man. Maybe five, six, seven at the most. I rehearsed them over and over with Mom and Dad. And the night before the Spring Concert, I hardly slept at all.

The night of the concert, after we performed some of our songs, I went backstage and a girl put the black makeup on my face. Maybe it was shoe polish.

I put on an oversized pair of bib overalls, stuffed them with pillows, put on a huge straw hat, and sauntered out onto stage where the straight man, John Hotvet, a senior who was dressed up in a white tux with tails, was making an announcement to the audience. Again, John, as the straight man, was kind of like Edgar Bergen, and I was the dummy.

I don't remember any of my lines, the words. All I recall are images. The mental pictures. How narrow the stage was between the curtain and the edge. How the auditorium seemed packed with people. I couldn't actually see them. The spotlight was too bright. But I could feel them, their presence, and I liked the feeling. I wanted them to have a good laugh, no matter how afraid I was, no matter how bad the material was.

After I delivered my first punch line, the audience groaned. So I emitted a roaring laugh, rolled over onto my back, and continued to laugh as I rolled off of the stage and into the orchestra pit.

As I was being assisted back onto the stage by a couple of band members, the audience continued to laugh, and we continued our shtick, me getting bigger and bigger laughs with each "joke."

When our minstrel show ended, I went backstage, wiped the black grease paint from my face, and was later overwhelmed by praise from Mr. Dahle and the kids in the choir.

Now, in view of all that has happened since then to advance the civil and human rights of minorities and people of color, I'm astonished my father and I ever appeared in such racist Vaudeville entertainment.

Although we performed about 25 concerts during my sophomore year, the highlight for many of the kids was the annual choir trip financed by our fund raising efforts, such as the Annual Music Carnival that the choir and band kids hosted.

Our trip that year was to Duluth, where we stayed at a hotel for two nights.

We had three Greyhound buses and on the way up to Duluth, we stopped off at Grand Rapids High School, Mr. Dahle's alma mater, and sang a concert.

On the way out of Grand Rapids, Mr. Dahle had the Greyhound buses stop in front of a little house.

We all piled out of our buses, got into formation on the front lawn, and Mr. Dahle went up to the front door, rang the doorbell, and an elderly couple came out onto their front steps, the two of them wondering what was going on.

Mr. Dahle told the old man and woman we had stopped to serenade them because the man was his former high school music teacher.

We sang maybe five or six of our best songs while the couple wiped tears from their eyes.

When we finished singing, they applauded, the lady kissed Mr. Dahle, and he hugged the old man.

I damned near cried. I mean, how often does an elderly couple, any couple, have 110 kids show up on their front lawn to sing for them?

I didn't sleep at all during our first night at the hotel in downtown Duluth. After dinner, we had met in a large room and sat in a big circle, about 80 girls and 30 boys.

One of the girls stood up and placed a Coke bottle flat on the floor in the middle of the circle. She gave it a spin and when it stopped spinning, she lined up the direction in which the bottle was pointing and pointed toward Jim Hutchins.

Jim stood up, strode out to her in the middle of the circle, put his arms around her, and planted a big kiss on her lips. The girls all squealed.

Ever since grade school at Robert Fulton, Jim had a rep for being one of the best kissers in our class.

Jim then spun the Coke bottle, and when it came to a stop he pointed at Karol Ericson, one of the most yummy and attractive girls in the senior class.

She got up, went out to the center of the circle, and kissed Jim. Then Karol spun the bottle.

God! What was I going to do if the bottle suddenly stopped and pointed to me? I wanted to disappear.

I had never kissed a girl before. Never. I know. I was 15 years old, damned near 16, and by then I should have kissed at least one girl. I had seen it done enough in movies and had heard plenty of talk about it from guys who had had plenty of experience with their steady girl friends, experience that went all the way back to grade school. But I had had only one date in my life, a disaster way back at the end of sixth grade.

Of course, I had heard about this spin the bottle game having been played at parties that I had never been invited to, the parties I had always been curious about, but parties I had also felt lucky to have never attended because I had never kissed a girl.

There was no escape. The most I could hope for was that I figured my chances were about one in 30 that the bottle would point toward me.

When the bottle came to a stop after Karen spun it, I felt as though I had dodged a bullet.

Lee Goddard got up, one of the best looking guys in my class, and he casually walked toward Karen to receive his reward. I mean, he looked like he was looking forward to digging into a banana split.

He put a hand behind Karen's waist, and as they embraced, he bent her torso so that her back was near parallel to the floor. Everyone applauded wildly.

Goddard bowed.

Karen sighed.

The game continued for about ten minutes before I met my fate.

One of the junior-class girls, a tall attractive gal, Claudia, was pointing at me and I was nudged in the ribs by Mike Daggett to get up and get out there.

Shouts welled up from the group as I slowly got to my knees. I gave a long look to one of the chaperones, as if she might sense my apprehension, my fear, and suddenly call an end to this foolishness.

But she just smiled at me, as did the red lipstick lips of Claudia, who patiently waited.

As I approached Claudia, she extended her arms and clasped her hands around the back of my head, pressed her lips against mine, and, as I shut my eyes, I felt her tongue wiggling around in my mouth.

She didn't let go until I opened my eyes wide and started turning in a circle, as though we were dancing together.

Dizzy, I stepped on the Coke bottle and fell flat on my butt.

While they were all applauding and cheering, I put a hand to my mouth and then saw that two of my fingers were blotched with lipstick. I wiped them on my white shirtsleeve, and searched for the bottle, knowing I was only half way through this ordeal, which surprisingly was a lot like jumping off a high diving board, where after the initial shock from hitting the water, I was less reluctant to try it again.

I can't recall who came forward to kiss me. She looked terrified. We pecked, and then I ran back to my place in the circle.

About twenty minutes later the game ended, with me saved from any further display of incompetence.

Funny though, from that moment on, and throughout the next year, whenever my eyes met Claudia's, I always felt I knew something about her (and she about me) that few others would ever know.

Most of us guys stayed up the entire night, playing poker and telling stories, plotting ways we could get up to the rooms the girls were in on the floor above us, and boasting about what we would do if we got into one of their rooms without getting caught.

The annual choir trip during my junior year was less adventurous. We traveled to Winona and we spent a night, maybe two, in La Crosse, Wisconsin.

We didn't play any spin the bottle game, which was a disappointment to me. Not because I had gained more experience kissing girls, but because my secret crush, Toni, had become a member of the choir, an alto. She still had a steady boy friend and so all I ever dared was gaze at her profile between songs during concerts as she stood way over on the other side of the choir, about what seemed to me to be a mile away.

Sometimes I'd catch a glimpse of her bright blue eyes glancing up at the bass section.

Around the last month of my junior year in 1958, I was shocked to learn I had been nominated to be Southwest High School's student council president.

I had never been a student council member, and consequently didn't know a thing about what kids did in those meetings they held every month. I'd been told the student council president ran the meetings, held a gavel, and said such things as, "Is there any old business?" Or "Does someone want to second that motion?" That kind of stuff.

I knew that if I was elected, I'd have to learn a lot about what they called Robert's Rules of Order so that I wouldn't look like a fool trying to run a meeting. That didn't bother me, though. What bothered me was trying to figure out why I had been nominated.

The only experience I had at leading any high school group had been the result of something that happened earlier that year, when the 20 guys in my YMCA club elected me as its president.

I took the job seriously and was proud to be the club's president. Secretly, I suspected that the reason I had been elected was simply that no one else wanted the responsibility. They were all leaders of other activities or were big-time athletes on the football and basketball and hockey and track and baseball teams.

They didn't have time to be the president of a dinky little club. They didn't have the time to lead a lot of community service fund raising projects.

But that was okay. I was proud to be their president, and was especially happy one spring night when we played a senior YMCA club in a softball game and I hit a home run over the head of their left fielder. It was no big deal to all the athletes in my club, I suppose, but it sure made me feel great to be able to show them that I could belt a ball a mile. That was something they could respect.

Anyway, on the day of the election, Jerry Bender, George Bestrom, and myself, we three candidates, we showed up at school wearing our suits, complete with white shirt and tie. We did that because that's the way the student council president candidates had always dressed during the previous years on the election day.

Then, around the end of the second period, the entire student body assembled in the high school's auditorium.

George and Jerry and I were introduced by the current student council president, who had a ton of nice things to rattle off about George and Jerry, about all the things they'd each accomplished during their three years at Southwest High School.

They both got a lot of applause after the whole school was told how great they were. They both had done a lot as juniors and had both slain a lot of dragons as members of the school's athletic teams and clubs and organizations, including the work they had done in the student council.

They deserved to be up there on the stage.

But when I was introduced, there wasn't a lot the student council president could say, other than the fact that I was the president of the YMCA club that George and Jerry were in, and that I had been in the choir for two years. However, when I stepped forward after the short intro, I was surprised to hear a lot of clapping and shouting. It made me feel that maybe I had a chance, that maybe I was liked and was "popular."

During fourth hour in choir, girls in the soprano section turned around to me and told me that they were going to vote for me.

We all voted during lunch hour.

During fifth hour, as I was sitting in biology class, Sue Foster and Sue Day told me they thought I was going to win.

I started to believe them, started imagining myself as becoming one of the school's big wheels, as being president of a group I had never been a member of, imagining the respect I'd get from everyone, from maybe Toni, too, who as I recalled had been the president of Fulton's student council.

Just before biology class ended, the PA system came on and the student council president announced that the votes had been counted.

I sucked in my breath and Bob Martin, who was a sophomore and one of the nicest guys in the school, gently nudged me in the ribs and said, "Get ready to take a bow, P.J."

Kids in the rows in front of me turned around, gave me big smiles and looks of encouragement.

Jinny Dale and Sue & Sue turned around and looked at me just as we heard the current president announce, "We have counted all the votes. Next year's new student council president will beeeeee . . . . . Jerry Bender."

I'd had told myself in the morning when I was pretending to shave, and again when I was plastering talcum powder on my pimples, and again when I was lacquering my sweaty arm pits with gobs of Mennin deodorant, that there was no way I was going to be elected the student council president. I kept telling myself somebody must have rigged my nomination, maybe Sue & Sue, who I suspected ran the school but never let anyone know it.

Sue & Sue seemed to be like puppeteers, and the guys who were "leaders," guys like Jerry, they were simply their puppets.

So I thought I was prepared to accept my defeat. But I wasn't.

When I heard Jerry's name announced as the winner, I blushed beet red. Could feel my face getting warmer and warmer. And feeling oh so warm, began to feel embarrassed that I was showing all those kids in biology class how I was feeling, as they still looked at me, at my eyes that started to water, at my red face, at my growing and obvious disappointment.

Bob Martin tried to console me. That seemed to only make it worse.

I dropped a pencil on the floor, and bent down to pick it up, so's I could hide my face, if only for a moment.

When I surfaced, pulling at my necktie that seemed to strangle me, Sue Foster extended her hand, placed it on the top of my school desk, and said, "That's okay, Paul. We'll make you choir president. You'll be choir president."

Sue Day nodded.

And so did Jinny Dale, who as I recall wasn't even in the choir.

A few days later, during fourth hour in choir, Mr. Dahle asked for nominations for next year's choir president.

Some girl way over in the alto section immediately nominated me. I can't remember who she was. Maybe it was one of Mike Daggett's or Jim Hutchins' former girl friends. Maybe it was Sue Day or Sue Foster.

After I was nominated, Mike Daggett and Jim Hutchins were nominated. We walked out into the hall and I wondered which one of them would be elected.

As we stood there out in the hall, Mike broke the silence by saying, "Look. The guy who gets elected buys a six pack for the two who lose."

Hutch and I laughed. I looked up at the clock on the hall wall and wondered what brand of beer I'd want one of them to buy me.

Then Bill Kosmas, the choir president, opened the choir room door and said, "Congratulations, Paul. You're next year's choir president."

Jim and Mike and Bill shook my hand, and as we walked into the choir room, Mr. Dahle shook my hand, and kids in the choir applauded.

I was on a cloud. I had imagined that this might happen. I wanted it to happen. I wanted to believe that Sue Foster and Sue Day could pull the strings that would make it happen. But it didn't seem probable when guys like Mike and Jim were also nominated.

I wondered what the dynamics were that allowed me to be elected. Had Mike or Jim become too popular to suit Sue & Sue and the power elite, the so-called Power Group?

Had Mike and Jim made it clear to those with influence that they did not actually want to be choir president, did not want that responsibility? Or had they maybe pissed off too many girls during the year?

All I knew “for sure” was that in that one moment in May of 1958 I had been suddenly transformed into a guy who felt a large group of his peers felt he was good enough to be their leader. I couldn’t wait to get home and tell Mom and Dad.

That summer before my senior year, especially before going off to sleep each night, I imagined all sorts of things I could do as choir president to help make the choir become the best choir Southwest ever had.

I even went over to Mr. Dahle’s house, a block down from Toni’s house on Vincent Avenue, on weekends, to talk with him about what we could do during my senior year to get things off to a great start.

One August afternoon, during a meeting at Dahle’s house, he told me he knew a song writer who had written some popular songs for Nat King Cole and Mitch Miller.

He said that this song writer, Sid Lippman, had recently talked with him about a couple of songs he had written, Christmas songs, and that he wanted our choir to record them for release in December on the Columbia label. Dahle said we could rehearse them in September and record them in October and the radio stations in Minneapolis and other cities would promote the record during the Christmas season.

The songs were titled “God's Christmas Tree” and “Great Somebody.”

During our summer meetings, Dahle made it clear what he expected of me as choir president. Essentially, what the job amounted to was leading fund raising projects for our annual choir trip, making sure the 110 choir robes and the collapsible platforms we stood upon during concerts were loaded onto the buses, and providing any leadership that was required when he wasn’t available to provide it himself.

The two previous presidents had functioned as role models, so I had a fairly clear notion of how I was expected to comport myself.

What gave me the most confidence was that I had acquired a set of new sweater vests that looked a lot like the sweaters the other presidents had worn.

The autumn of 1958 seemed magical. By the end of September our school’s football team had won all its games and destined to win the city championship, a feat not accomplished since 1951.

And my buddy Mart and I had been appointed as columnists for the school newspaper, *The Arrow*.

Mart's column was about movies and my column was about music: "Scoring a Hit with P.J."

Most special, however, was what was happening in the choir room during fourth hour when we sang songs together.

As promised, Mr. Dahle had us rehearsing those two pop Christmas songs, in preparation for our studio recording date in October.

Except for a short speech I had given for the benefit of the new sophomores on the first day of school, on the subject of what was expected of them as new members of the choir, I hadn't yet had much to do in my new role. It looked, as we went into October, that being choir president was going to be easy.

Then about a week before our big recording date, Mr. Dahle was absent for a day.

Linda Miller took attendance and we got out the music we'd been rehearsing.

Dahle's substitute looked to me to be about 21 or maybe 22. A recent college graduate. She was pretty, had a pleasant smile, and she told us Mr. Dahle would be back the next day; that she understood we were getting ready for a couple of concerts and were going to be making a record for Columbia.

A real sweetheart she was, her dark brown hair flowing off her petite shoulders.

But when she asked us to take out a piece we had been rehearsing for several weeks, a group of guys sitting down the back row from me started goofing off.

Throwing wads of gum at the girls seated in front of them, the guys laughing and blowing off loud farts.

This got some of the girls upset and some of the other girls laughing.

When the sub tried to get us to start the song, half the kids weren't paying attention.

Then she blew her cool, got angry, and instead of taking control, she lost it.

For the first time in the years that I had been in the choir, I was suddenly witnessing this rebellious and belligerent behavior from a group of kids who had always been obedient and respectful.

It took her almost ten minutes to get us to even start singing the piece, and once we did, we sounded horrible.

While she tried her best to lead us she, and we, failed, miserably.

She may not have been prepared. But that shouldn't have mattered. We were good enough to make even a grade-school kid look good directing us.

Perhaps some of the choir members had been feeling too much pressure during the previous weeks of rehearsals. Perhaps they needed to goof-off for a change. Whatever the reason, I became increasingly ashamed and angry.

I wanted to toss guys out of the room, and about ten or twenty of the girls, too. But I didn't have any idea how to go about it. Mike Daggett and Jim Hutchins would have, I suppose, but I didn't have the presence of mind to ask for their help. Instead, things got worse.

By the end of the hour, the sub cried. Worse yet, no one seemed to care.

Throughout the afternoon and during all of that evening I agonized over what had happened. I knew that if I was going to be a leader, I had to do something about how we had misbehaved during choir that day.

The next day, at the start of 4th hour, I went into Dahle's office while Linda Miller was taking attendance to tell him about what had happened.

He looked up from a note he was reading and said, "Yeah, I know, I'm reading for the tenth time a note here that was left by the sub. Seems like she went through hell yesterday."

I asked permission to let me handle the matter myself. I said I wanted to have the next ten minutes alone with the choir members, to tell them how I felt we owed Mr. Dahle and the sub an apology. I told him how I had not handled the problem when it occurred, and the least I could do was take steps to ensure it wouldn't happen again. I could hardly believe what I was saying to him, how I was volunteering to chew out the choir members, to act in a way I had never acted before in my life. To pose as a responsible leader.

I had no idea what I was going to say to them. But it was something I felt I had to do if I was going to have any self-respect as their president.

When I closed Dahle's office door and entered the choir room, they were all seated, more than 100 of them jabbering about this and that.

Linda gave me the attendance sheet and sat down in the soprano section.

I sat down on the tall stool in front of Dahle's podium, trying to look cool, trying to look like maybe Perry Como looked when he sat on a tall stool and sang on his TV show.

As I looked up at them all stretched out in ascending rows above me, I motioned, as Dahle always did, with one finger, that I wanted their attention.

They quieted.

My mouth was dry. I had no exact idea of what I was going to say to them and how I would say it.

So I let them all know how proud I had been to have become a member of our choir, and how even prouder I had become on that day last May when I had been elected their president. And how embarrassed I had become when they treated Dahle's substitute with so much disrespect she had been reduced to tears.

I couldn't believe what I was saying and doing. I doubted they could, either. The looks on their faces, almost without exception, were at first incredulous.

As I gave them my thoughts and heartfelt feelings, however, they started to shift in their chairs.

Most of them looked down at their twitching shoes and began to take on a collective look of contrition, looking the same way I remember responding to Dad when he'd lace into me whenever I disrespected or mistreated Mom.

When I finished, not a sound could be heard, just the whirr from the ventilation system.

My ten minutes were up. No one moved. I smiled and said, "Thanks, this wasn't easy to do. I've written a letter here for our substitute and Mr. Dahle, an apology for how we misbehaved yesterday. I've signed it. I want you to sign it during lunch hour. But for now, I'll go get Mr. Dahle, and let's again sing songs together."

Dahle had agreed to say nothing to them.

When I joined Jerry Bender and Mike Daggett up in the top row of the bass section, Jerry nudged me and said, "Way to go P.J."

Mike whispered, "That was great, really great."

A moment later we burst into song and sounded better than I could ever remember us being.

As we sang, I couldn't believe what I had pulled off. Couldn't believe how much better I felt.

And how much older and mature I felt in just less than fifteen minutes.

Looking back at that moment in which I stood alone before them, as I have recalled it so often in later years, especially during my early thirties, while I was a high school teacher, I regard that single moment as having had more of an impact on me than any other moment during my entire four years in high school.

Since then, I've had numerous leadership roles as an "adult." I've sometimes wondered, however, if I would ever have taken on any of those subsequent leadership roles had I failed to act like a leader on that single day in high school during the autumn of 1958.

After that day, leading people became more and more natural. I started to learn how leading a group wasn't that difficult once you helped them agree upon the direction in which we were destined to go.

One of the directions the choir wanted to go was to Winnipeg, Canada. Our destination for our annual choir trip. All we had to do to get there was raise about $8,000 to cover the expenses for transportation, food, and hotel rooms. Eight grand plus the dough from the royalties on the Christmas record would allow us to charter our own private train, including a mail car for dancing.

The Christmas record became a big hit. During the weeks before Christmas in 1958, I enjoyed driving around in Dad's black '58 Chevy listening to our songs being played on WDGY and WCCO and the other radio stations. WDGY had "God's Christmas Tree" as being #1 on their Twin Cities Top 40 Chart. We felt we had become famous overnight.

Variety, "the show business bible," and the two Minneapolis newspapers had written stories about us. Mom cut out and saved some of them, such as this headline and story in *Variety*:

> "Great Somebody" Is Sweeping the Nation. For the first time in the history of Music Americana, a high school choir is hitting the best seller list in the record business. Little Southwest High School of Minneapolis is now known across the nation because of its recording of "Great Somebody" -- a catchy, rhythmic melody that fits the season like a

> new pair of gloves under the Christmas tree. Monitor, the weekend radio service on NBC, featured the record at least five times last Sunday. Every radio and television station in the country has a copy of the record. Reports indicate it's being played as often as "Silent Night."

And another headline in *Variety*: Choir Disc Brings School National Acclaim!

And this from the Minneapolis Tribune:

> The 110 "recording stars" at Southwest High School are keeping a close tab on their popularity rating. The choir members' recording of "Great Somebody" and "God's Christmas Tree" has bounced upward on local disc jockey charts since its release. "We thought it was the greatest when it hit No. 22," said one female member. "But it's even neater being in the Top Ten." The disc, 7,000 copies of which have been sold locally, holds a No. 5 rating at one station and is in the "Top Ten" at others.

Barbara Flanagan had featured the choir in her newspaper column after she had interviewed five or six of us in her office at the Minneapolis Star and Tribune.

When her story appeared in the newspaper, however, it contained a quote attributed to me that was not true.

She had written in her column that I had said, "The choir's success has stolen the glory from our school's city-champion football team."

Jesus Christ! What I had said was our choir's success had brought more glory to our high school in a year that included a football championship. My God!

Mike Daggett had been with me at the interview. He knew. He knew that I had not made such a dumb statement. Hell, he had been a star linebacker on the football team. No way would I have said such a thing.

But there it was in print, for everyone to read. So that night, at a hockey game, I cautiously approached Mr. Art Fredrickson, the football coach, and Mr. Myers

Peterson, an assistant coach, and told them about the column and pleaded I had been misquoted.

They smiled and told me they had read it that afternoon, and had not been all that offended by it.

I phoned Barbara Flanagan the next day and told her how distressed I had become, about how I couldn't face people at school, especially the football players.

She said she didn't have the quote in her notes and she apologized. But she also said that she would not print a retraction.

"The best I can do for you, Paul, is set up an interview with another one of our columnists, say maybe Cedric Adams. He could do a story that maybe clarifies your point of view."

About a week later, on a Saturday afternoon when I was munching up a box of graham crackers in the kitchen, the phone rang.

I picked it up, and this deep voice said, "Hi, this is Cedric Adams. I understand your high school choir has made a hit record and you would like to talk with me about it."

I had seen this guy on TV news programs maybe 400 times and had read his column every day. He was a celebrity. He was always riding in a convertible in the annual Aquatennial Parade.

As I started to talk with him, I could hear the sound of his pencil scratching down the words I was saying to him; every single damned word. I became overwhelmed by a sense of self-consciousness.

I started to hyperventilate. Couldn't breathe. My voice started to shake. My God, I was talking to a celebrity and he was jotting down my every word.

Whenever he asked me a question, I tried to grab some air so's I could speak to answer.

He asked if I was okay. I wheezed and tried to simply say, "Yeah."

But I could hardly do it. This was my chance to clear myself, and I was screwing it all up.

The interview lasted for maybe five minutes, four or more in a bubbly haze of my spittle, his pencil scratching and scratching every time I could manage a word or two or three of what seemed to me to be incoherent gasps that failed to communicate what I wanted to say to him.

He thanked me. What for? And told me he would maybe have something in his column within the week.

It turned out to be a paragraph about things that were happening in Minneapolis. Something about how he had been talking with Paul Johnson, the president of the Southwest High School Choir, and that Paul had commented on how proud the kids were about how the school had become famous for recording a record that had become popular.

Nothing about how I had been misquoted in the newspaper. Nothing about how proud I was that our football team had gone undefeated that year. Nothing to help me out of my dilemma.

I don't remember how much money we netted from the Christmas record.

All I recall is we needed an extra eight grand to get to Canada and back, and except for the money we would get in early March from our Annual Music Carnival, and maybe some spare change from a car wash or two, we'd have to raise at least seven grand from selling something door-to-door, as we'd done in years past.

The previous year we had sold plastic scrapers to remove snow and ice from car windshields. No way were we going to raise seven to eight grand selling windshield scrapers.

One of the girls who stood in front of me in the soprano section, Bobbi Carlson, had told me her dad was a sales representative for a light bulb company. I think it was General Electric.

I called him and we set up a meeting in his office, which was located in the basement of his house on Upton Avenue.

As we sat in his basement office, I told him about how we needed to raise at least six, maybe seven, maybe even eight grand in the next couple of months, and asked him if I could order enough light bulbs and store them in two large rooms that had locks on them in the high school.

I explained how I had asked Mr. Dahle if he had any plans for using the two rooms (a practice room and a room we used for stashing our 110 choir robes) and how Mr. Dahle had said to me that he had no need to use those rooms until April.

Mr. Carlson said that we were talking about a semi-truck full of light bulbs, four to a pack, a total of

64,000, and that it would be several weeks before they could be delivered.

I said, “No problem.”

As I envisioned a semi-truck, I thought back to talks I had previously had with Dad about his produce brokerage business, and how when he would order his produce to be delivered in train cars and semi-trucks, he would always prefer to order the perishable produce “on consignment.” That’s so he would not have to pay for the fruits and vegetables up front and not get stuck with whatever he could not sell.

And so I said to Mr. Carlson, “May I order the 64,000 light bulbs on consignment?”

He smiled and said, “Of course you can, Paul, as long as I have your assurance the light bulbs will be stored in a safe place. Anything damaged will be charged to you. And of course, if you order on consignment, you will only get 50 cents for every dollar you generate in sales. That would be 50 cents for every pack of four bulbs you kids sell. That okay by you?”

I asked him for a pencil and some paper.

“Let me write this down, Mr. Carlson. Let’s see, there’s 64,000 light bulbs. There are four light bulbs in a pack. Each pack costs a customer one buck. That means if we sell all (64,000 divided by 4 equals 16,000), if we sell all 16,000 packs, we'll get $8,000 and your company gets $8,000. Is that right?”

“Right.”

I couldn’t believe it. In an instant I had become a big-time wheeler dealer.

I asked him if there was anything he wanted me to sign, and he said, “Nope. I do my business on the word of the people I sell to. You look like someone I can trust. Just be sure you have a safe place to store the boxes of light bulbs when they arrive.”

That meeting with Mr. Carlson took place around the first week in January.

For some reason, in the weeks that followed, I kept expecting a call from him, expecting him to call and tell me that the deal had fallen through.

I had told Dad all about it, about how I had gotten Mr. Carlson to ship on consignment.

He was proud of me.

I had told Sue Day and Richard Wigand, the choir’s vice presidents. And Jim and Mike and Jerry. Why I had not told Dahle, I just don’t recall.

Except maybe I had told him and he had not listened to me. Or maybe he had told me that raising funds for our choir trip would be a subject we would discuss later in the year.

On a cold winter morning in 1959, say toward the end of January, say around my little brother Ricky's eighth birthday, I sat in Mr. Halley's trigonometry class, gazing out the window at snowflakes falling upon Beard Avenue, wondering how in hell I would ever memorize complicated statements that Halley said were theorems, and wondering why I was even taking trigonometry as long as I wasn't going to be an architect and didn't need any more math classes to graduate.

Mr. Classon, the school's principal, and Mr. Dahle walked into the classroom and said to Mr. Halley, "May we take Johnson away for the rest of the hour?"

As we walked in silence toward Mr. Classon's office, I looked up at Mr. Dahle and said, "Is something the matter?"

Classon said, "We'll discuss that when we get to my office and you explain a few things to us and to a gentleman who is waiting for us."

I didn't have a clue about what "was up" and was feeling as dense as a hockey puck.

Sitting in Classon's office was a cheerful looking little man wearing jeans and a worn jacket. Maybe fifty years old. He held a clipboard in one hand and a pen in the other.

He smiled when Classon introduced me to him, rose from his chair, extended his clipboard to me, and said, "Alls I need's your signature here and for someone to show me where I can unload my truck."

"All Mr. Dahle and I need," said Mr. Classon, "is an explanation of what's going on here. According to this gentleman, he has 64,000 light bulbs that he wants to unload in our parking lot; that he wants your signature; that those light bulbs are for the choir. Why does the choir need 64,000 light bulbs? And why does he need your signature?"

I looked at Dahle, and was surprised to see a big grin on his face. It was as though he was enjoying this. As though this was one of those moments he could hardly wait to relate to his pals in the faculty lounge.

I explained I had a place to safely stash all the light bulbs, and we could return any we did not sell.

And how I had put together with friends in the choir and Mr. Carlson, a business plan to sell them all.

Classon regained his composure, let me sign the man's shipping document, and let me have the next hour off to help unload the truck.

At the start of 4th hour, I showed Mr. Dahle and all of the choir members eight maps drawn on poster boards, drawn up with help from Mike Daggett, Jim Hutchins, and the eight section leaders.

Using colored magic markers, we had divided all of southwest Minneapolis into eight separate areas or territories, one for each section in the choir. For example, the first sopranos and their section leader, Barb Slais, they were assigned all of the blocks between 60th and Penn and 50th and Penn, going west to say Upton Avenue. That was all clearly marked using the colored magic markers, and each member of the first soprano section had specific blocks assigned to them.

The year before I had somehow managed to get my hands on a phone book set up by city blocks, showing who was listed at each house on any block in Minneapolis, and of course, what their phone number was. House by house.

So I passed out the pages in the book that had all of the phone numbers of people listed in southwest Minneapolis. Each kid could use them to call these people to let them know that they would be in their area during the next week, and to ask, "What night would be best to deliver your light bulbs, light bulbs that will help us light our way to Canada?"

Within a month we sold them all. The only problem we had was that most people didn't want 100 watts. I should have ordered 75 watts or 60 instead. My thinking was that people would want the brightest. Oh well. We sold them all.

We had more dough than we needed for the trip. But we still held the Annual Music Carnival along with the kids in the band.

Paul Goulding was the president of the band. He and I got together to plan the thing in early March.

The Carnival had always been in my mind one of the gaudiest and splashiest events of the year. I mean sure, there will always be those who recall their junior-senior proms or their homecomings or maybe even their graduation ceremonies as being the big deal of

the school year. No doubt. But right up there for me was the Annual Music Carnival. I mean you had your pie tosses, where you could plant a sticky apple pie or better yet a banana cream, right in the face of some of the prettiest girls in the school.

And there was your faculty dunking machine, where with an accurate toss you could have a teacher drenched for just twenty cents.

And of course maybe 50 other booths, including a sexy kissing booth for kids who were uninhibited or maybe just plain hard up.

Every time someone paid a dime at any one of the booths, they'd get a ticket with a serial number stamped on it. You saved your tickets for the big midnight raffle, which included about 100 prizes from local merchants and a big cash prize at the end of the evening for maybe as much as 100 bucks!

Paul and I worked hard to make the '59 Music Carnival the best ever. We got all the merchants on 50th and Penn, 50th and Xerxes, 50th and France, 44th and France, and 43rd and Upton to contribute "valuable prizes."

We laid out a floor plan that included every kind of carnival booth we could think of, even pie eating contests and a wrestling event down in the cafeteria.

We had about four people working each booth and a committee in charge of setting them all up and another one for decorating them with streamers and another one for making up posters and another one for publicity, and another one for handling finances, and another one for this and another one for that.

We were organized. We made a bundle. Everybody in the choir and the band entertained the hundreds of students and parents who showed up.

Mr. Dahle was again proud of me.

The choir's trip to Winnipeg took place somewhere around Easter vacation. It's odd that I don't have many vivid recollections of the event.

Maybe it's because I didn't sleep.

I do recall showing up at the Great Northern Depot at around eight in the evening. I was lugging my suitcase and my tenor sax case and sporting a French beret that looked a lot like the one Dahle was wearing.

The grand train depot was a magnificent marble structure with a high vaulted ceiling in the lobby.

Mr. Dahle had everyone in formation and was testing the acoustics with some of of our favorite songs, including “Salvation,” “Beautiful Savior,” and “Minnesota Hail to Thee.”

When everyone was accounted for, we boarded our privately chartered train, consisting of passenger cars and an empty mail car for dancing, for all 110 of us and about ten chaperones, including Mr. and Mrs. Bender.

During the all-night train trip to Winnipeg, I broke out my tenor sax and played tunes with Mr. Dahle (who brought along a ukulele) and with someone else who had a banjo, maybe Larry Rosenfield? Someone else lugged along a big bass fiddle, and there were about five kids playing bongo drums.

We had a routine where five or six of us dressed up in flashy Caribbean costumes and straw hats and we banged on bongos while Lee Goddard sang Harry Belafonte tunes, highlighted by an arrangement of “Day - O.” Maybe it was spelled D-e-o. Goddard was a big blonde kid who looked like a Swede. But he pulled it off and got big applauses from our audiences.

Dahle always enjoyed throwing in what he called “novelty tunes,” to lighten things up during concerts that were primarily filled with serious music.

Our novelty tunes included Spike Jones’ “Hawaiian War Chant,” in which Dahle mounted a grass skirt around the waist of his suit coat and did his version of a hula dance while he directed us.

Another one was “Spooky Boogie,” in which Lee Goddard cranked up a police-car siren mounted on a stand behind the choir and Mike MacGowan fired off a revolver loaded with blanks, while the choir swayed back and forth on the risers and the girls converted their robes into “ghostly” wraps (by placing their hands inside their robes and moving them up and down by the shoulders to the rhythm of the song). Real spooky, we were.

I enjoyed the Caribbean tunes the most. That’s because I got to sit right next to Toni, on the floor in front of the choir, our knees touching.

And while Toni and Mary Ellen Kassmir and me banged away on our bongo drums, Jim Hutchins faked bass fiddle and Lee sang the Belafonte songs with the choir backing him.

I don't recall the train pulling into Winnipeg. I do recall dancing in the mail car and not going to sleep that night while playing poker on the train with Mike Daggett and Jerry Bender and Jim Hutchins and Lee Goddard and anyone else who wanted my pennies.

And eating from buckets of a new food fad called Colonel Sander's Kentucky Fried Chicken.

And telling stories.

After we had all got off the train and took buses to our hotel, we met in one of the hotel's banquet rooms, a room with oak wainscoting on the walls and oak beams running along the ceiling, where we had breakfast while Dahle tried to assign our rooms and tell us all about what we would be doing that day.

I remember us doing a concert at a radio station and then singing in a Winnipeg department store.

Then we went to a private school and sang songs together there. God. That was awful. I think it was a Catholic school.

I think it was around noon.

Someone from the Catholic school stood up in front of us and went on and on about what a great choir we were. While we stood there at attention, red-eyed, and more than half asleep.

When she was finally finished introducing us, Dahle then stood up and went on and on about what an honor it was to be invited up to sing at their school. By the time he had finished talking, an alto and two sopranos had fainted.

When he turned to direct us, one of the tenors, I think it was Scott McIntyre, he took a dive off the top riser into the altos, and some of the tenors propped him up on the floor behind the choir.

As we started to sing, the guy on my left, Steve Aune, he fell into the sopranos, right between Carol DuBois and Judy Green, and then into Toni's younger sister Sheila on the second tier, and then into Barb Slais standing in the first row.

We kept on singing. We always kept on singing whenever someone fainted. Someone usually fainted during every concert. Dahle always warned us to avoid locking our knees.

"If you lock your knees up, you'll probably faint."

He usually could spot a kid about to tumble. Whenever he saw someone's eyes start to glaze over, he'd motion to someone next to the poor kid to grab

onto him or her. But Dahle was off his form during that concert, too. Or maybe all of us had glazed eyes during that concert.

I can't recall a single concert (except for the one at St. Mark's Church in downtown Minneapolis) where Mr. Dahle had us sing some stuff we hadn't really memorized yet and we sounded horrible.

But this concert in Canada was a true disaster and we even fell apart in the middle of one song. We couldn't stay on key. Half of us, our eyes were so bloodshot we couldn't see Dahle's hands. Just awful.

It was the only time I ever saw Dahle's face grow red and stay that way. Toward the end I saw black spots dancing about in front of my eyes and couldn't hear well. But I didn't lock my knees, like Aune did, who between songs was dragged behind the choir to sit with his head between his knees with all the other casualties.

They gave us polite applause and we sat down.

The kids in the Catholic school choir were all wearing a school uniform. Maybe 50 or 60 of them. And as we were about to doze off, they burst into angelic song. They had twice the power of our choir. And they sang songs twice as complex as anything we had ever attempted. They humiliated us.

And then, to top it off, when they had finished showing us what a talented group of kids were capable of producing, we had to go off in pairs with them to their homes, to have lunch with them.

Richard Wigand and I went off with some girl to have soup and sandwiches with her family and then learn all about an education we were not getting in Minneapolis. I mean she was studying anthropology, advanced calculus, sociology, Greek, and even political science!

When we got back to our hotel, I found a second wind, and stayed up all night, moving from one room to another in the hotel until around sunrise. Whatever happened that day, however, is a total blank. Total.

All I can recall about the rest of that trip was sitting with Julie Hutchison on the train ride home. I had brought along a book containing about 500 songs that were popular during the 30s and 40s. Songs like "Where or When," "Stardust," "September Song," and "I'll Be Seeing You."

While Julie sat next to a train window and held the book open upon her lap, we sang songs together for more than an hour, maybe two. She had a real sense for how their lyrics should be phrased, and she sang in my key.

As we sang songs together, I didn't know if I was dreaming or if I was awake. It seemed to me to be the best singing I had ever before done. I was relaxed and carefree. She was amused and skilled. She could have sung for anyone's band. Been a headliner, maybe another Doris Day or a Chris Conners. A low and mellow tone. A real feel for ballads. Singing with Julie on that train going home became one of my favorite high school memories.

If I had had my head screwed on right when I was seventeen, I would have asked her to go with me to a dance. And yet, as I learned from her at our most recent class reunion, she cannot recall singing songs with me on the train ride home at all. So it goes.

Here's a newspaper article Mom had saved:

> Choir Combines Holiday, Music Making On Trip To Winnipeg.
>
> From a triumphal tour as ambassadors of international good will, O.B. Dahle and his Southwest High School Choir returned Sunday from Winnipeg, Canada, where they met with a royal reception from their hosts, the Canadians.
>
> They were treated to much entertainment, gave many concerts, were entertained in the homes of their hosts, sang in the Parliament Building, broadcasted over the Canadian Broadcasting System, and were met with a public ovation when they sang in the railroad terminal in Winnipeg, when they arrived and again, when they departed.
>
> The entourage composed of Mr. Dahle, 10 chaperones, and members of the choir totaled 115. They left Minneapolis in a three-car special train April 23 at 9:30 p.m. and arrived in Winnipeg at 8:15 a.m. in a blizzard that brought about six inches of snow to the host city.
>
> They hurried to the St. Regis Hotel for assignment of rooms and breakfast.

Their first scheduled concert was in the Nelson McIntyre School, where they sang a concert for the 620 students of the school.

After the program each student took two students to his own home for luncheon. After luncheon they made a tour of the Parliament Building where they gave a concert with beautiful effect in that building of famously fine acoustics.

At Daniel McIntyre School, the Southwest High School singers presented a concert and in turn were given a program by the choir of that school, which won first place in the Manitoba Musical Festival of 1957, and went to Wales for the Welsh Music Festival. The McIntyre choir is one of the top Canadian choirs, according to Mr. Dahle.

Following the concerts, Canadian students were hosts at a dance for the visitors in the school gymnasium. Dance steps comprised a "Foreign Exchange" as the guests taught U.S. dance steps and Canadians interpreted their terpsichorean art.

Canadian bacon and scrambled eggs were the piece de resistance of a breakfast served to the visitors in one of the biggest chain stores of Canada.

From there the party went by bus to the Canadian Broadcasting Station, where they gave a concert on "The Good Deed Hour."

The remainder of the afternoon was spent touring stores. Some bought china but most everyone spent money on some kind of hat, mostly red.

At the close of the program in the Daniel McIntyre School, Southwest's choir sang the National Anthem. The Canadian choir responded with "Oh Canada."

At the Canadian National Railway station, for the second time, the choir stood in formation and gave a concert to an immense crowd that gave them an ovation.

Probably the most enthusiastic members of the party are the chaperones. They had a wonderful time and received much honor and gracious gifts from the students.

Everyone emphasized the good manners, kindness, and fine deportment of the students.

Chaperones were Messrs. and Mmes. William C. Green of 5125 Russell Ave. S., Philip M. Hall of 5141 Ewing Ave. S., Stanley J. Dietz of 4709 Chowen Ave. S., and Samuel Bender of 5209 Abbott Ave. S., and Mmes. Gordon M. Malen of 5035 Queen Ave. S., and Ted Miller of 4905 Drew Ave. S.

Mrs. Miller said: "I shall long remember that enjoyable trip and hope that I may make it again. It was terrific. We had a wonderful time all of the time, but I was most impressed by the young people themselves. On the train they had 20 buckets of fried chicken from De Laria's of Southdale, about 300 pieces of chicken. They ate all during the evening and the next morning. But when they ended the trip, those kids picked up and cleaned up every place in those cars. The train crew said that they cheated them out of a job."

The snow furnished lots of fun and incidents. They were not prepared for winter. The shops sold them pairs of galoshes and rubbers.

Those choir members didn't forget the chaperones. Each lady was presented with jonquils and each man with two cigars.

Mrs. Malen was hostess at a birthday party for Mrs. Miller in their hotel suite.

The faculty of the McIntyre school entertained the chaperones at dinner at Swift and Company Restaurant.

Enjoying the trip to the limit were Mathy Schmitt of France and Graham Buckley of England, two American Field Service students at Southwest this year. Miss Schmitt is a member of the family of Mr. and Mrs. Green.

In reviewing the tour, Mrs. Green said, "Our kids could learn much from the Canadians in how to conduct a dance and have a good time. They had Bingo dances, Charleston and Bunny Hop. They got their crowd all mixed up and had plenty of good times. There was none of this 'going to have a dance' and dancing all the evening with the same person."

Mrs. Malen hopes to go again. She was impressed with the good conduct of the young people and said: “There wasn’t anyone out of line during the entire trip.”

And here’s a Letter to Editor in the Minneapolis Star:

Does the southwest community, or the city of Minneapolis as a matter of fact, realize what honor the Southwest High School Choir has brought them?

On April 23 this choir, accompanied by chaperones, departed on a night train for Winnipeg, Canada, where they had been invited by the Junior Chamber of Commerce to give several concerts.

The credit for such performance and decorum speaks well not only for their home training, but also for the respect and admiration they have for their conductor, O. B. Dahle.

- Mrs. Samuel Bender, Minneapolis

After Canada, we entered the Annual State Choir Contest and won an *A* rating, sounding in our minds as being equal to or better than any of the competing choirs at Northrop Auditorium.

We had a splendid Spring Concert. The girls were decked out in formal gowns, most of them strapless.

And I got to stand behind Faye Pishney’s soft shoulders. Her complexion was porcelain and she was as beautiful as a Greek statue.

We guys all wore black slacks, white shirts, black bow ties, and starched white bus-boy jackets Dahle rented for a buck apiece. He insisted that from the audience’s perspective they would look like tuxedo jackets. Sure.

We must have also impressed them with our white cotton socks.

Here’s a clipping Mom saved from the community newspaper:

People are talking about the sound effects and beautiful tonal quality of the Southwest High School Choir in its annual Spring Concert Tuesday evening in the school auditorium.

They are wondering what made the marked eye appeal and tonal quality.

Frank F. Engdahl, an expert in speech with the mechanical know how to create equipment and setting to enhance the beauty of sound, fashioned a type of shell for the stage to shelter tones. People are also talking about the fluff and color created by 75 young ladies in their formal pearly chiffon, their gossamer tulle, and their glimmering silks.

O. B. Dahle directed the choir, at its peak, in a cycle by F. Melius Christiansen (composed in four parts) dealing with Decadence, Love in Grief, Spring Returns, and Life.

An "Apostrophe to the Heavenly Host" for double choir was a feature. From the Russian field was "Our Father" by Gretchaninof. There was a 15th Century piece by Palistrina, "Praise Be to Thee." Contemporary selections included "Time and Space" by Paul Christiansen and "Vision of Peace" by Jean Berger.

There was also a 16th Century composition in Latin by Kuhnau. After the formal program had been sung and acclaimed by the audience, alumni of the past 10 years joined the choir members on stage and sang many of their favorite songs of past years.

On our graduation day, June 10, 1959, my 18th birthday, we sang songs together for the last time. Wearing our graduation robes. Just us seniors. About 35 of us who were in the choir together for three years.

And then it was over. Except for a train trip up to Little Falls so's we wouldn't go out that night, get drunk, and kill ourselves in cars.

Our last night together started out all right. Who wouldn't love another train ride? But as we moved toward midnight, dancing in a big conga line in some roller skating rink in Little Falls, it hit me that we were all about to soon change into pumpkins. That this was the last dance. That from that night on we would begin to grow apart instead of continue to grow together.

I wandered off to a booth to be by myself, to suck on a cigar and feel sorry for myself.

Around three in the morning just about everyone was gassed.

I was wishing I had never made the journey up there with them. They were all being so damned happy it was disgusting. And, of course, they had every right to be. My God, if anyone could understand why kids could be happy about getting out of high school, it had to be me.

With the exception of Mrs. O'Leary and Mr. Dahle and a few of my other teachers, many teachers had a way of making good people feel as if they were bad. They had ways to kill your creativity, your dignity, and your pride. But that was not what I was thinking about that night, the night of my 18th birthday, when suddenly old enough to smoke, I smoked.

As I sat alone in that booth, watching the kids in my class dancing together, I reviewed a parade of all the experiences I had shared with them. These 180 kids, especially the 35 or so who were in the choir with me, they seemed to me to be as important as my family. In many respects, they were a part of my family. They had given me self-respect, dignity, and pride during a period in my life when I craved it. Why shouldn't I be pissed off that we were coming undone, and that my wonderful world and extended family seemed to be dying before my eyes, gleefully?

Later that year, in the fall of 1959, I soon learned that the University of Minnesota could not provide all the positive strokes I had experienced at Southwest.

I joined a group of kids on campus who were members of an organization that booked jazz groups for concerts at Northrop Auditorium and Coffman Union. And twice a week I sang with Dad in the Lake Harriet Methodist Church Choir.

During my sophomore year at "The U," Judy Green introduced me to three fraternity guys who were looking for a bass to complete a quartet. With a lot of help from Judy, we rehearsed about five or six pop songs, the only one I recall is "Getting to Know You," and with Judy playing the piano, we called our group Four Bens and a Her. You see, the movie *Ben Hur* had been playing to sell-out crowds.

We sang mostly to salesmen at sales meetings, to women's clubs, and to any other organization that was sorry enough to hire us.

I think we got about five, maybe ten bucks a piece for singing a few tunes and then getting our rears off the stage.

I can't believe I did it. I mean, I was terrible at memorizing song lyrics and I was afraid of standing up in front of large groups. It was one thing to perform behind the shield of 100 high school kids. But to be standing up with just three other guys was altogether different. With Judy's help, we did it at least six or maybe seven times before we decided to give it up.

That was maybe the last time I recall singing with anyone. Oh. Except for whenever I got together with Dad, we'd soon be at his baby grand piano, going over our old favorites. "Shenandoah." "Moon River." "Old Man River." We sang a lot of river songs. I love a good river song. Name a river song that isn't a great one. Think about it.

About 10 to 12 years later, say around the spring of 1973, I was nearing the end of my second year of teaching in a town 60 miles north of Minneapolis.

It had been a terrible year. I had been kissing the high school principal's ass since September, hoping to win his hard-to-earn approval, trying to successfully complete my two-year probationary status and get a contract for the next year.

Although I had felt some measure of success during my first year of teaching, my boss had made it clear that he did not want me to conduct classes in any other way than his way. His way sucked. It's a whole 'nother story. Maybe 100 pages worth.

One of the reasons I had become a teacher was that I had sensed from my experience at Southwest High School that kids could be helped by teachers, and not feel they were less than dog shit on the soles of their teachers' shoes. But my principal did not see it that way. He believed that several seniors should fail each year, "so's the others will work their butts off for fear it might happen to them."

He had been disappointed in my performance the previous year because I had failed to fail a single senior. (You want to know something interesting? Dahle always gave almost every kid in his choir an *A*).

During my second year of teaching, however, using my principal's methods, I had six seniors eligible for the *Big Red F*. And my principal was proud of me.

I felt as if I were no better than one of Hitler's stooges. I had tried rationalizing that it was better for me to compromise, and teach his way, than to not

teach at all. And I knew I stunk. Stinked. Was saying to myself, “Pee - You, P.J.”

At about my lowest point, say toward the end of the second year, I hated myself so much that I knew I could not continue on, especially if I was not allowed to be myself in the classroom.

A month before the end of the school year, one of my friends on the faculty, Dave Miller, met me one morning in the teacher’s lounge. He said that as long as I had fourth hour open that day, I might pop into the choral room and catch a guy who’d be coming in from Minneapolis to do a little clinic for his 40-member chorus.

My thoughts flashed back to the clinics that Dahle had us undergo at the hands of other music teachers. Guys like Leland Saturn from Augsburg and a spiffy professor from the University of Minnesota whose last name was Caswell or something like that. And maybe the Christiansen brothers from St. Olaf College.

Somehow their clinics seemed to teach me in five minutes what Dahle couldn’t get through my thick skull in five hours. And Dahle was a master.

When the fourth-hour bell rang, I walked down to the music room and stood outside the closed door, wondering if I should walk in, not wanting to disturb what was going on in there, and feeling that old pull in my gut that goes all the way back to first grade. That feeling I first felt in first grade upon entering a classroom after the bell had rung and being late.

I couldn’t hear anyone singing, so I opened the door and walked in.

The choral group was standing at attention, facing me at the other end of the choral room.

Facing them, with his back to me, was an old man in a brown suit.

He was saying something to all the kids in the chorus.

Some of them diverted their eyes toward me as I sat in a chair near the door.

He turned his head a half turn away from the chorus, glanced at the ceiling, and without looking at me, said, “You’re late, mister. You want to observe? Then pay attention.”

Then he turned his face back toward the chorus and said, “If you don’t disturb us, you might learn something.”

All the kids laughed. Miller blushed. And so did I.

He was Mr. Dahle! Old "O.B." himself.

He proceeded to pull the same stunts on this chorus he had pulled on me and my old classmates during my freshman year at Southwest High School.

During the first ten minutes of Mr. Dahle's clinic the kids could not believe this guy was for real. He demanded obedience. He'd go into a rage if a kid so much as glanced away from his hands or eyes for a single second.

When he insisted they sing scales using the sounds "om ahh nee po to la may," they resisted and soon felt his wrath. And whenever they obeyed him, they felt his pure praise.

In less than 20 minutes, he had them following his every command, no matter how absurd. And they enjoyed it. They enjoyed working with a man who demanded perfection and who rewarded them when they approached it.

As he worked with them, using all the tricks he used with me, I could see again that he was a master; that he knew how to blend humor, candor, and fierce concentration and discipline into a labor of love. And most importantly, how to make kids feel proud.

By the end of the hour, he had made it clear to these 40 small-town kids that he was indeed an odd one, but also an all-out teacher who wasn't afraid to be perceived as being odd.

By daring to be different, daringly flamboyant and outrageous, and by following his own impulses to teach, he helped show them how they too could dare to be different, and by daring, become twice the singers they were before the hour had started . . . almost like magic.

When the bell rang, we were all spellbound.

Dahle said a few words to Miller, the kids' choral teacher, who was in his first year of teaching, and then he turned and walked out, nodding to me as he left.

I saw him walk down the hallway and into the faculty lounge.

I had to get back to my classroom before the next period started. But I couldn't resist going into the lounge and greeting him.

Dahle did not recognize me. I was sporting a beard and was at least 30 pounds heavier than when he knew me as his student at Southwest High School.

After introducing myself to him in the lounge, he said, “Oh yeah. You’re the one who ordered all those light bulbs. The kid who was into jazz. My president when we recorded ‘God’s Christmas Tree’ and ‘Great Somebody’. Hell yes! I remember you! That was a great group of kids. Do you hear anything from Jerry Bender or Phyliss Hall or Judy Green? How about that big blond guy? Lee Goddard? Glad to see you’re teaching. And I bet you love it here. You know, I went to a high school in a small town.”

The experience of watching this man do his magic again, for forty minutes with forty kids, changed my approach to relating to teenagers during the last two wonderful years I spent as a teacher. Watching him work for those few minutes reminded me of what it was like to work for a man who was dedicated to a principle rather than to a principal.

He let me see again, as had Dad when he boldly led songs at scout troop meetings, that it’s okay to risk making a fool of yourself in front of kids if in doing so you help them feel less pinched, less self-conscious, help them to be brave, and to feel more free to be themselves. To take risks that help them grow.

Mr. Dahle died a few years ago. No one told me at the time. I regret not singing in the choir that sang at his funeral service. But then again, thinking about it, singing a song like “Salvation” at his funeral, hell, I wouldn’t have made it through without bawling my eyes out. It would have been bad form. But he would have loved it, me being myself, a fool for a great song to sing together with great people, for a great generous genuine man.

The last time I can recall singing for an audience was one autumn night in 1986. Tracey and I were celebrating the first week of our marriage. We were honeymooning up at Cross Lake, Minnesota.

Her Uncle Walt and her Auntie Lu took us to dinner at a supper club up there, some cozy joint in the northern woods.

After a fine meal we adjourned to the bar, where an entertainer was singing popular tunes.

Lu and Walt talked us into getting up from our table and dancing.

Within a few minutes three or four other couples were on the small dance floor showing off their terpsichorean skills. But no one could match Lu and Walt's grace and glide as they moved through the music in ways that made me think of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers movies.

At around midnight, while Waltzing Walt and his Polka Princess were taking a break at our table, our waitress went over to the entertainer, who was playing some kind of keyboard instrument that gave him rhythm-section backup and special musical effects.

He handed the little waitress his microphone, stood up, and announced, "Ladies and Gentlemen, tonight, as we do every night here at the Cedar Chest, our waitress is going to sing her favorite song, so let's hear it for Debbie!"

Debbie put down her serving tray and with the entertainer backing her with his keyboard skills, she cupped the back of her right hand upon the palm of her left hand and broke into a tune that I had not heard in more than twenty-five years.

And I couldn't to save my life remember the name of the thing. It was a song I had sung before in the Southwest High School Choir. It was the Hawaiian song. The one in which Dahle always wore a grass skirt while he directed the choir.

But as much as I struggled to remember the name of the song she was singing, struggled to remember the title of the tune, I just couldn't recall it.

Debbie finished her song and everyone applauded.

She bowed, picked up her serving tray, and I motioned to her to join us at our table.

"What's the name of that song you were singing?"

"It's called 'Hawaiian War Chant,' " she said.

"That's it! The same song I sang in high school!"

"Really?" she said, "That's where I learned it, too."

"No kidding? Where did you go to high school?"

"Southwest High School, in Minneapolis."

"My God! Me too! Was Mr. Dahle your teacher?"

“Yeah! Old 'O.B! Hey, let’s sing it together.”

Before I could stop her, she was talking to the entertainer who had finished his break.

She lifted the microphone, and spoke into it, “Ladies and gentlemen, we have here in our audience tonight someone who graduated from my high school in Minneapolis. A man who sang in the Southwest High School Choir, where we learned to sing the song ‘Hawaiian War Chant.’ So ladies and gentlemen, welcome up here Paul, who’s honeymooning with his wife Tracey. Please welcome Paul up here to sing ‘Hawaiian War Chant’ with me one more time.”

Well, we were a big hit with Uncle Walt, Auntie Lu, and Tracey.

The waitress and the keyboard player enjoyed the moment so much that when we had finished singing “Hawaiian War Chant” (I damn near remembered all the words) they talked me into doing oldies but goodies with them, mostly ‘50's “shoo-shoo-bee-do” songs.

About the only times I sing songs now is when I’m alone in the car. I crank up the speakers pretty loud, so’s it sounds like a sound system in a concert hall.

Then with, oh say Frank Sinatra, Neil Diamond, or Anne Murray, I belt out a duet with them, imagining we’re on a concert stage, all singing songs together before an adoring audience.

So far, I’ve been lucky not to have a car accident.

Or maybe I’ve a guardian angel singing with me.

One more page to this story is reserved for the lyrics to the Christmas songs “Great Somebody" and “God's Christmas Tree.”

All I have to do now is locate someone who still has the record. My copy melted one summer afternoon in 1959 when I had left it upon my father’s piano near a window in our sunroom.