

# ROCHESTER

Turning sixteen meant that I got my drivers license. I was allowed, probably encouraged by my mother, to drive the car to the peace demonstration on Peace Bridge, between the US and Canada in Buffalo. You see, my birthday is August 6, the same day as the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. Back then, it was 1959, it was the height of the cold war, and atmospheric nuclear and thermonuclear testing was still going on.

We also moved into Rochester that summer. My parents found a house a short walk from my father's office, which meant we needed to have not three cars, not two cars, but one car, and thus save some money. My sister had just started college, at Swarthmore, and they were paying full freight. That and the fact that the schools were better, much better, and my parents were profoundly disappointed with what had happened with the science fair, so we moved into Rochester. Looking back, I think it was a fast decision, propelled by my mother. I know I liked the idea, because I would be getting my own room.

To the right is a picture of the house in Rochester, taken in the middle of winter. My bedroom was in the front of the house on the second floor, and my brothers was in the front of the house on the third floor. Winters in Rochester were serious. I think the idea was that when I went away to college, Steve would move into my bedroom, and they would rent what had been his room to a graduate student at the nearby University of Rochester. Steve, though, had different ideas, and liked being up in his roost, where Alice would not find his stash of beer.



The school in Rochester were in fact much better, and I, who had always been a year or two ahead of my classmates, seemed two years behind everyone else. It took some adjustment, a lot of adjustment, both academically and socially. How much different socially? There were fraternities and sororities, and even a Jewish fraternity and sorority. Not only that, the school had enough students to field a football team. No longer could I just coast through my classes, in fact, I had to catch up, and the city was a much tougher social environment and I had to make a whole new set of friends.

How much tougher an environment. The first week we were there, my brother and I decided to check out the neighborhood, walked to the corner, where we met some of the kids our age. They took us across the street, to a large yard in front of the city jail, and beat us up. I was not a fighter. I had learned that the best thing I could do was to accept the assault until it was over. I had learned to be a pacifist as a means of survival. And these kids were not the toughest kids in the city, just normal, general education high school students.

It was time to start looking at colleges. My plan was to improve the spectroscope, make it a better working model, calibrate it so that it could identify the various chemicals I was using. This never happened. My science fair days were over. At Monroe high school, I met a fellow science nerd, who got me interested in ham radio, and continued making Heathkits, and got my novice ham radio license, WN2LWC, and tried to learn Morse code and electrical theory in order to pass the general license. I never did. I was changing, and so were my interests.

School had always been very easy for me, but I lacked good study skills.. Why, I am not sure. If I enjoyed something, I would pursue it, but if it meant grinding through, I would not do it. I think this was compounded by the transition from a small school, graduating class of maybe 40 at Honeoye Falls, to a large school, graduating class of 400 at Monroe High School in Rochester. And it was further compounded by the teachers I had as a senior. My math teacher, Mr. Arnold, I was taking intro to calculus, was excellent, but for some reason I did not continue with Mr. Benjamin, an excellent social studies teacher, and thus was assigned to a truly wretched physics teacher, instead of the excellent Mr. Ulrich [I am surprised how many names I remember]. Even worse, I had a second year with English teacher, Miss DeRosa, who I had suffered through the year before. I tried to get my classes changed, but I did not have the political clout, and my parents were no help, which might explain my incipient rebellion in terms of my study habits.

It might have been that Mr. Benjamin was gay, and did not want me in his class a second year. He was certainly my favorite teacher that first year at Monroe. I remember in my Junior US history class, with Mr. Benjamin, asking another student, what these words mean, "*laissez faire*." who told me to ask Mr. Benjamin. Stan was far wiser to the world than I was. I raised my hand, Mr. Benjamin recognized me, and I asked him, "What does 'lazy fairy' mean?"

Mr. Benjamin paused, composed himself, told us it was pronounced “lazay fair” and told us the French meaning. Mr. Benjamin shared an apartment with the swishy drama teacher ... but he was also an excellent teacher, and I wanted to take another year with him. Now, perhaps I had a school boy crush on him and he wanted to carefully avoid any ugliness. I know I really liked him. He seemed the model of what I would want to be as an adult. But at that time in my life, I certainly had no way of articulating such emotions. I was still a simple boy from the country.

Stan certainly was not, and became a big influence in my life. My first friends at Monroe were the science nerds, Norman Koren in particular, who got me interested in ham radio, and convinced me to get my own slide rule, showing me how it worked. But by the end of the my junior year I was getting to know another, more rebellious group. Stan was one of the prime movers in that group. He was rebuilding a jalopy. He was smart. He was also in a Hi-Y, at the local YMCA. I wanted to join his chapter, but instead, the Y formed a new chapter, sort of like a fraternity, but with open admission. I became a leader of it my senior year.

We met Wednesday nights, and I would take two buses to the meetings, down South Avenue to the library, and then down Monroe Avenue to the Y. Coming home was the opposite of that. By then, it was after 9 PM, and the buses ran less frequently. I often had to stand in front of the library, waiting for the bus. After a few weeks, a man, probably in his twenties pulled up, and asked if I wanted a ride. He seemed OK, so I told him I was waiting for the bus, but, sure, I would take a ride. He gave me a ride. Several blocks later, he asked me if I would like my cock sucked. I said no, pressed hard against the passenger the door, ready to jump out. He dropped me off on my street. Several weeks later, this happened again, with someone else. Turned out I was standing at a cruising spot, I guess, and, I guess, the word went out that I was waiting for the bus, and no longer was I offered rides. A lesson about life in the big city.

At school my senior year, I was hanging out with Stan and his friends. Half of us were college bound. The other half were definitely not. For example, Mike Abruzzi was in the shop program, where he made a chisel, and chiseled a hole my copy of Plato's Republic. So much for book learning. I lacked the social and physical stature to prevent such things from happening.

But I had a trusting face, and I worked in the small store at the school which sold pencils and pads and other sundries. That gave me access to the school's storage closets, where hall passes were stored. We learned how to forge the Dean of Boy's signature on hall passes that I had access to. We volunteered to set up the Christmas lights, [weren't we good boys!], found the forms to effect class transfers and grade reports, and were able to transfer one of us from one class to another, and change grades for another student. We even found the carbon paper colored the same as the ink of driver licenses, which gave us the opportunity to fabricate drivers licenses which showed we were over 18, the drinking age in New York at the time. Not that it really mattered. I looked 16, yet was able to buy apricot brandy from the corner liquor store. We were hackers before there were computers. Later that year, to the relief of the gym instructor, I quit going to gym, and forged my grades. Otherwise, I was most likely going to flunk gym and be kept from graduating.

At the Y, they were so impressed with how the new Hi-Y chapter had gone that they offered me a desk job for the next year. When I told them I was graduating from high school that year, and going away to college, they looked at me with surprise, because I looked far younger than my almost 18. I did not reach my full height until I was in my mid-twenties. Now that I am in my seventies, I like looking younger than I am, but back then, being physically younger, and emotionally younger, I found myself in situations I did not really know how to handle.

My social life was centered around the Unitarian Church, and its LRY. We would meet each Sunday evening. Twice a year, we would have regional conferences. Our district, the St. Lawrence District, included upstate New York, from Albany west, and then around the western end of Lake Ontario to Toronto. One year, when the conference was in Toronto, a train car was hired, which picked up passengers all along the way. It was a great party.

When the weather was decent, I would ride my bike to school, about 2 miles each way. During the summer, our Mendon Center neighbor, Harold Hodge, got me a job in his labs. He ran the pharmacology department at the University of Rochester Medical School, and would test medicines for toxicity on lab rats. My job was to fill in for a full time staff person on vacation, feeding the rats, cleaning the cages, and "sacrificing" them when the experiment was done. None of it, unfortunately, lead to lab work, where I might have learned something of practical chemistry. I just recently learned that [Dr. Hodge's department](#) also conducted tests on radioactive elements and humans.

Not the best recommendation for him, now, but he reentered my life several times, in San Francisco and then Boston

My mother thought I should get a liberal arts education, so I did not apply to Cal Tech. I applied to three schools, Oberlin, the College of Wooster, and the University of Rochester. Wooster accepted me, Oberlin wait listed me, and the U of R turned me down. Oberlin had a better reputation, so I turned Wooster down, and then Oberlin opened up for me.

If only the idea of a gap year had been around then! I was not prepared for college, and certainly not prepared for the kind of intensity of the science education at Oberlin. Or maybe I was no longer interested in science. Because I was good in science, I was considered for the advanced Intro to Chemistry class at Oberlin, but I did not pass the qualifying test. My advisor was one of Oberlin's many renowned teachers, and after that had little interest in my progress. Oberlin's chemistry department was always looking for the next Charles Martin Hall, who invented the process for extracting aluminum from bauxite, never married, and left his fortune to the College. Unfortunately, my lack of study skills were not a good match for the intensity of the work at Oberlin, and my grades suffered. Back then, things were pretty much sink or swim, and by the end of my second semester, I was definitely sinking. I was placed on academic probation, and it was strongly suggested that I take a year off.

Looking back, I probably should have done that, but my father's only suggestion was that I join the army. Not likely. If only the Peace Corps had existed! Plus I was having too much true excitement learning about a much larger world than I had ever imagined. What is now called a gap year was just what I needed. Not the army.

My roommate at Oberlin, Tom, who had graduated from Exeter, and spent the summer in France, with many, many stories, got me involved in tech work at the newly opened Hall Auditorium. It was there I saw my first opera, Mozart's "The Magic Flute." I was entranced. My dorm counselors introduced me to the nascent new left, the Student Peace Union, and Students for a Democratic Society and the Northern Friends of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. One evening, at most a dozen of us met in the lounge of our residence hall to hear Tom Hayden talk about his travels in Mississippi, working for SNCC. I had seen his picture that summer in Newsweek, of him being beaten by a sheriff in McComb, Mississippi I believe, and looked at his face, wondering if the wounds were still visible.

Needless to say, he had a compelling story. I was not new to the peace movement, or Civil Rights movement, but here was someone who practiced non-violence. "Would I have been able to lie there and take the blows?" I asked myself. "Yes", it turned out, for this is how I dealt with all the times I was physically confronted as I was growing up. I was small and uncoordinated, and I got pushed around a lot. Kids two years younger would pin me, and force me to say uncle, so, rather than fight or loose, I would choose simply not to fight. Pacifism came easy to me. I still believe that it is both morally and tactically superior as a means of social change, and wished that Tom had kept to those beliefs, but, for reasons I will explain later, am no longer an ideological pacifist.

Anyway, at Oberlin, one weekend, we drove a school van to Washington, DC, and picketed the White House in support of a ban on atmospheric atomic bomb tests. Miraculously, within a year, the ban was enacted! We thought we had made a difference, us twelve people with some signs. We sold cookies on campus to support SNCC. We listened to folk music, and sang freedom songs. I learned of the Coop movement, and applied to be a member of Grey Gables Coop for my sophomore year. We read modern poetry. I saw foreign movies, like "Last Year at Marienbad", and we discussed them in English class, far different from how Miss DeRosa taught. I met people from New York and its suburbs who lived for the excitement of Greenwich Village, and the high culture of Manhattan. My grandmother would have been proud of me. My uncle Otto would have been relieved. It was a new world to me. I was going back for a make or break third term.

Despite having had two years of high school German, I had flunked first year college German at Oberlin. So, that summer, between my shifts counting passengers on the rush hour buses of the Rochester Transit Authority, I took third year high school German. It was a struggle. I studied diligently, but I did not learn the vocabulary on the flash cards I had made, nor memorized the grammatical endings of German nouns and verbs. But at least I kept the German alive in my mind, and thought I could get through it that next Fall.

I was wrong. By December, I knew that I was not going to make it. I would go to New York City and asked my friends from around New York where I should live. The lower east side was affordable, and one mentioned she had a friend who rented rooms in his apartment. I wrote him a letter, asking if he had room, and when I expected to arrive, mid January.

Christmas time I went home to my parents in Rochester, and told them of my plans. My mother would rather that I stay in Rochester, but I believe she understood, for she herself had spent her twenties, from 1928 to 1936 when she married my father, in Paris and the Village. So, I withdrew the several hundred dollars I had in the bank in the form of a cashiers check, bought a Greyhound ticket, packed a suitcase, and traveled to New York.