

## **Growing Up In Oberlin, 1933 – 1953**

**By**

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The transition from Canton, China to Oberlin, Ohio, where I would grow up, was not an easy one for our family. The voyage from Hong Kong to New York by way of the Panama Canal lasted thirty-nine days. There was a swimming pool on board ship where my brothers entertained themselves for hours. I was too young to be allowed in. On the day my father first came to join my brothers, he saw with great embarrassment that his full-body bathing suit with straps over his shoulders was completely out of fashion. He quickly retreated to his cabin to change and never once swam in the pool. “I felt like Rip Van Winkle,” he recalled with a laugh years later.

In New York we boarded a train for Dayton, Ohio, arriving in late October, 1932. My father soon made arrangements to inter Annette’s ashes in the Siddall family plot in the Lee Cemetery, surrounded by fertile farm land on County Road 193, about ninety miles to the north near Findlay. Before the burial took place, a memorial service was held in the small, white country church, now gone, at the cemetery’s edge. The church was filled with family, relatives and friends. Some were people from the surrounding countryside whom my father had known as a boy when he worked on his uncle’s nearby farm during the years his family lived in Findlay.

In addition to obituaries in several newspapers, a more detailed tribute to Annette’s life appeared in *The Evangel*, a monthly publication by The Women’s Missionary Association of the United Brethren Church in Dayton. In language that reflected the time, it described her as a person of “sweet disposition and companionable spirit, whose childhood and youth were spent amid the fragrance of a happy Christian home. Her life on the mission field was a fine tribute to

her noble parents of sainted memory. She was unwaveringly yet unostentatiously loyal to her husband's missionary commitments.”

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My father first considered Cleveland as a place to settle, mainly to be near his former medical school where he could continue his research projects. Also, Annette's sister, Jessie, and her family lived there. After visiting the city, however, he learned that because of the Great Depression, many physicians were having difficulty surviving financially, so he decided to look elsewhere. He had heard about nearby Oberlin from a medical school classmate who had gone to college there. Also, on the ship from Hong Kong he met a couple from Oberlin by the name of Burgner, who were returning from a visit with their daughter in Japan. With encouragement from them, my father visited Oberlin and was favorably impressed. It turned out that when my father finally made the decision to move there, Mr. Burgner, who had a real estate business, helped him find office space and a place to live. They also became good friends.

As my father struggled to come to terms with the loss of Annette, he convinced our grandmother Siddall, a widow of several years, to accompany us to Oberlin. This meant selling her house in Dayton. Her furniture and household goods, plus some things of my father's, were packed into a large moving van; most of my father's furniture from China was loaded into a smaller truck. About halfway into the trip, at a busy railroad crossing near Marion, Ohio, the large van was hit by a fast-moving train, scattering its contents for a mile along the tracks. The driver was killed and my grandmother lost almost everything she possessed. My father remembered walking along the tracks and finding among the splintered remains a hand holding a pearl, all that was left of a small Chinese statue of Buddha.

The town of Oberlin, home to Oberlin College, is about thirty-five miles southwest of Cleveland, and fourteen miles south of Lorain on Lake Erie, nestled in the flat farmland of northern Ohio. We moved here on a cold day in January, 1933. We settled into our new home, a rented house at 163 Elm Street, as best we could with what little furniture we had. For a short time we ate off of orange crates and slept on borrowed cots. The house was a modest, drab, two-story wooden structure with a front porch and a large barn in the rear. Next door was an imposing brick house with a huge buckeye tree in the front yard and a fancy wrought iron fence along the sidewalk. Houses of a various architectural styles, some even grand looking, lined the street that stretched two long blocks from the Methodist Church to Prospect Elementary School.

My first memories are of this time, when I was three and four years old. One is of my grandmother tying me to the front porch with a long piece of clothesline so I wouldn't wander off. Though I don't remember it, I had already been downtown once by myself, reportedly pulling my wagon in my underwear. While my grandmother was busy doing housekeeping or preparing meals, I often sat on the front steps in the warmer weather waiting for my brothers and my father to come home.

Another memory is of lying in bed upstairs with the measles, the window shades pulled to shut out the sunlight. I can also dimly remember being hit by a car in front of our house and my father carrying me to my room and putting ice inside my head, or so I thought. As the story goes, the car was driven by our minister's son. Fortunately he had been going slowly.

I was fascinated by the barn at the rear of the house. Standing there silently, its wood siding faded and streaked, it seemed both mysterious and inviting. When I finally ventured inside, instead of a place to play I found only a dank and dusty interior with a dirt floor and cobwebs covering a few broken old tools and a discarded bicycle wheel.

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My father's first office was at 33 West College Street, up a flight of creaky wooden stairs to the second floor of the business block that faced the town square. (I think the store to the left of the stairs was Yokum's, a dry good store.) In order to set up his practice and support his family the first year, my father borrowed money from the United Brethren Church in Dayton. Years later he told me there was lukewarm welcome from the few other physicians in town, not surprising considering that the Depression had come to Oberlin. Many patients found it difficult to pay even the two dollars for an office visit or a dollar more for a house call. One memory is riding with my father in his 1932 Ford while he made one of his many house calls, feeling the warmth of the car's heater on a chilly fall evening. Some patients paid in goods, such as a dozen eggs or a live chicken. Though times were difficult, I can't recall any of my friends' fathers being out of work, and even a few mothers were employed as teachers, secretaries and bank tellers.

Other consequences of the Depression were low prices. A clothing store advertised in the *Oberlin News-Tribune* that a man's suit by Hart, Schaffner & Marx could be purchased for \$17.60 and an overcoat was on sale for \$14.50. An article in the newspaper stated that the trustees of Oberlin College had voted to reduce its annual tuition from \$300 to \$225. The only apparent increase was for a ticket to see a movie. According to the newspaper, the Apollo movie theater apologetically announced that, because of new state tax laws, it had to increase its admission to thirty-five cents.

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In the summer of 1933, Estelle Warner, a voice student at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, came to see my father as a patient. I was unaware of their developing relationship, but a year

later they were married in the home of Estelle's parents on College Street. At twenty-two, Estelle was fifteen years younger than my father, and only thirteen years older than my brother, Clair, Jr. I had turned four a month before the wedding. I don't remember the ceremony, but I do have a recollection of eating ice cream and cake with my brothers in the kitchen.

At that time Oberlin College rules forbade a student from getting married, so Estelle had to drop out for a year. She eventually graduated in 1936. As I got older I came to appreciate the beauty of her voice and her strong commitment to music. She continued to work with voice teachers for years. When I took singing lessons in my fifties, something I heard her say once had meaning: "It's all in the breathing."

The first memory I have of Estelle is when I realized I didn't want to call her "mother." I must have tried, but apparently it didn't sound right. I was now five years old. I remember talking about it with her in my bedroom one afternoon. No doubt I was influenced by my older brothers, who had already been calling her Estelle. In any case, she accepted my decision. She has been Estelle to my older brothers and me throughout our lives.

The first major problem my parents faced was the presence of my grandmother. My father always spoke of a close relationship with her, but Estelle told me that she could be inflexible and stubborn. It was difficult for my parents to tell my grandmother that she would have to leave. She soon returned to Findlay, where she lived until her death twenty years later. Though I never heard her talk about this time, it must have been extremely hard for her to be uprooted in the first place, lose her furniture, move to a strange community, care for three active boys, and then be displaced in less than two years. She occasionally visited us in Oberlin. I remember she always drank a cup of hot water during supper, and I found it hard not to stare at her glass eye, which never moved.

Two of Estelle's characteristics stood out and endured over the years. These were her uncommon good looks and her soprano voice. In growing up I often heard people say how beautiful she was, and after hearing her sing in church, they would say what a lovely voice she had. I would hear her sing at home as she accompanied herself at her Steinway piano (passed on from her mother, who had also been a student at the Oberlin Conservatory). There's no doubt that my love of classical music has its roots in those early years, hearing songs of Schubert, Brahms and Schumann. As an adolescent, however, I was more drawn to the popular big band music of Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey and Lionel Hampton, and the singing of Peggy Lee and Frank Sinatra.

Estelle came from a large family of seven children, three girls and four boys. Her father spent most his professional life working abroad for the Y.M.C.A., much of it in Brazil, where Estelle was born. For years the family lived on an idyllic island in the bay of Rio de Janeiro. As the children got older they came to the United States for high school and college. All but one attended Oberlin College.

Estelle told me many years later, in an unguarded moment, that when she was a senior at Oberlin High School in 1930, she was in love with a student at the college and had talked of marriage. However, her mother wouldn't allow her to be engaged. The young man returned to Oberlin a few years later and was dismayed to find Estelle married. In his retirement he came to live in Oberlin. She wouldn't tell me his name.

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In 1935 we moved to a large brick Italianate-style house at 47 College Place, only a block from downtown. Built in 1866 and since 1930 owned by the college, it provided our family with more comfortable lodging. I have fond memories of this spacious place. The two downstairs

front rooms had tall windows, and on the roof was a glassed-in cupola which we sometimes used as a hideout. At the time the house had a wooden addition at the rear and I recall the upstairs playroom above the kitchen, which could be reached by the back stairs. One time I slipped and painfully slid down the stairs on my back. There was also a room for our maid Eileen, who lived with us for a year or two. Her boyfriend, Glen, drove an old Ford coupe with a rumble seat. They eventually married and lived on a farm fifteen miles from Oberlin on route 303. The summer I turned seventeen I lived with them and worked on the farm.

Cast iron radiators heated the house with steam produced by a coal-burning furnace in the basement, called an Iron Fireman. My older brothers had the unenviable job of shoveling coal every morning, and then having to clean out the ashes, or clinkers as they were called.

The large back yard had a wooden fence along one side that was close to the rear of the Methodist Church. One of the risks of playing ball was hitting it over the fence and breaking one of the church's windows, which I recall happening at least once. There was an old apple tree in the back, and one summer night when my brothers were sleeping near it in a tent, a rain storm with thunder and lightning came up, putting an end to their sleep-out. The next morning we saw that a large branch from the tree had fallen very close to the tent.

The first radio broadcasts that I can remember were heard here. I can clearly recall our family sitting around the large Magnavox radio in the living room on Sunday evenings listening to Jack Benny, whose program was followed by the ventriloquist Edgar Bergen and his sassy dummy, Charlie McCarthy.

The first Christmas that I remember was in this house. After supper on Christmas Eve, we listened to the radio and then sang carols. I didn't mind going to bed early. The next morning my excitement was almost unbearable. I stood in my plaid flannel bathrobe with my two brothers at

the top of the front hall staircase, holding on to the dark mahogany banister. From there I had a glimpse of the presents under the tree downstairs. I was first in line because I was the youngest. We were waiting for permission to go down. Where the stairs curved before reaching the second floor, there was a niche in the wall in which sat a Chinese figure representing a kitchen god, painted red and gold. Just as we were about to descend, my brother Clair said, pointing to the figure, "Don't forget to touch it for good luck." Then down we went to discover what was in our bulging stockings hanging from the fireplace mantle. Afterwards we began what seemed like a painstakingly slow process of taking turns opening our gifts as we sat around the tinsel, lighted tree. My excitement of the morning was temporarily diminished in the afternoon by a careless injury. My right thumb still bears the scar from cutting myself with the first pocket knife I ever had, which I had earnestly requested. I was too scared to go to my parents, and instead sought treatment from my brother John, who washed the wound and put a bandage over the flap of sliced skin, adding, not unkindly, "Maybe you're too little to have a knife. You have to be more careful, or I'll take it away from you."

It was from this house that I walked to kindergarten, located not far from where our family had lived on Elm Street. I can see in my mind the small rug I took my naps on, which afterwards I rolled up and stored neatly on one side of the room with the others. The kindergarten building was at the end of a long driveway between two houses, in a woodsy area which we called Fairy Land. My friends and I played there for several more years.

It was also along Elm Street that I walked the fifteen minutes to Prospect School, a wonderful old two-story stone building, long since torn down, where we first learned to read and write. I can still recall the smell of freshly-varnished floors on the first day of school each year. First grade was memorable because everyone wanted to hear about how I broke my arm, encased in a

white plaster cast. The previous afternoon my brothers tossed me into a leaf pile and I landed on my left arm. I was surprised that the teacher complimented me on my penmanship in front of the class, in spite of his injury, she said. She overlooked the fact that I was right-handed.

The school had several fire escapes whose elaborate superstructures beckoned to be climbed (if you could get away with it after school let out), and a playground with three teeter-totters, monkey bars, two slides, a large set of swings, and a volleyball net. One day in second grade, when I was chasing a girl during recess, I didn't bend down far enough while dodging under the net, bloodying my upper lip and under my nose. The playground's surface was of fine gravel, just right for playing marbles. Carrying my bag of marbles to school was like transporting a treasure.

I was now old enough to be assigned a few household chores for which I received a small allowance. I remember earning my first twenty-five cents and I wanted to spend it right away. Since we lived just a block from downtown, I was familiar with many of the stores, and I knew just where I wanted to go. With the quarter in my pocket I headed for the Ben Franklin store. For a long time I wandered the aisles looking for something I could afford. I finally decided on a small truck that cost exactly twenty-five cents. When I presented it and my money to the cashier, she said, "Sonny, I need one penny more."

"But it says here, twenty-five cents," I replied, my voice trembling with dismay.

"You're right, but the penny is for the state tax."

I knew enough not to argue, but I also knew I wanted the truck. "I'll be right back," I said. I hurried home where I found Estelle, who without much persuasion gave me a penny. I went back to the store and completed my first financial transaction. The truck was painted blue and its wheels actually moved.

The town's small business district ran for a few blocks from the intersection of Main and College Streets. Stores along two of these blocks faced the thirteen-acre tree-lined green known as Tappan Square, the largest and most beautiful of any town common I've seen anywhere in America. On the corner of Lorain and Main Streets, on the opposite side of Tappan Square from the business district, was the Congregational Church, a handsome brick structure dating from 1842. At the time it was the largest edifice west of the Allegheny Mountains. This was the church my family joined. It was where I attended Sunday school, and for several summers, what was called daily vacation Bible school.

After we moved from 47 College Place in 1939, my father rented the downstairs from the college as his office until the 1960s, when he and other town physicians formed a community medical clinic. The house was almost demolished to make way for the new Conservatory of Music, but local citizens convinced the college to allow the house to be moved. It is now a museum, known as the James Monroe House, named for a distinguished previous owner who had been a professor, congressman and U.S. Consul to Brazil in the late 1800s.

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The character of Oberlin, whose population is still less than 10,000, has changed very little in the intervening years. In fact some businesses downtown that were familiar to me as a youngster, such as the Ben Franklin store and Gibson's Bakery, are there today. Gibson's is still run by the family of a girl I grew up with.

The Apollo movie theater, with the same marble façade, hasn't changed very much. It was operated until 2009 by one of my childhood friends. His father, who owned the theater before him, brought "talkies" to town in 1930. (The theater is now owned by Oberlin College.) Going to

a movie for a Saturday matinee was a favorite activity for me and my friends. As I approached adolescence I couldn't wait to be old enough to attend the midnight showing on New Year's Eve.

It was at the Apollo where we first saw cartoons with Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck. It was there that we were introduced to Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, The Wizard of Oz, the antics of Abbott and Costello, and the magical dancing of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.

Among the first films I recall was *Drums Along the Mohawk* in 1939. A frightening scene of an Indian attack has remained lodged in my memory ever since. By contrast, *State Fair*, with Jeanne Craine and Dick Haymes, and songs by Rogers and Hammerstein, left me with unrestrained romantic notions at the age of fifteen. In the days before television, the films at the Apollo were our window to life outside of Oberlin, with newsreels that graphically displayed what we read about in the newspaper or heard on the radio.

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In February 1939, six months before my ninth birthday, our family moved to the new house my parents had built at 345 Edgemoor Place, an extension of Forest Street. It was of Dutch Colonial design, with three dormers and sided in brick with white mortar that added a distinctive touch. The window of my bedroom looked out on a pin oak that had been newly planted in the front yard. Now its mammoth branches almost touch the house. At the top of the stairs, to the right, was a small room where my sister Jane would sleep in her crib after she was born a few months later in May of that year.

Not long after we moved, World War II began. I can remember the day in September of 1939 when a paper boy on a bicycle rode down our quiet street calling out, "Extra! Extra! Germany invades Poland!" After the United States joined the conflict following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the war effort became the national preoccupation in our daily

lives through gas rationing, a 35-mile-an-hour speed limit, blackouts, recycling of tin cans, buying war bonds, and the disruption of households as young men and women joined the armed services. Soon my two brothers enlisted in the navy. Clair, Jr. ended up in Okinawa and John in Japan. Estelle's younger sister served in the WAVES for two years. My father tried to enlist, but was rejected because of his history of rheumatic heart disease as a child. After two of his younger colleagues signed up, he and the three remaining physicians were left to shoulder the town's medical needs. For my father there would be several years of long, exhausting days and interrupted nights.

As a youngster I thought I could serve my country by learning how to recognize domestic and foreign aircraft from a plane-identification game I was given for Christmas.

As time passed, my horizons widened. I became a cub scout, then a boy scout. I went to summer camps. I took piano lessons, but I soon gave them up for lack of talent. I got a beautiful new bicycle, a balloon-tire type that I proudly rode to school, though I didn't really have to because we now lived only three blocks away. My bike could take me anywhere in town. I went exploring, either alone or with friends. Among my favorite places were the old waterworks, the college's athletic fields, Tappan Square in the center of town, and the town library, located then in the college's Carnegie Library. I would also ride downtown on errands for Estelle to buy a few groceries. A pound of hamburger cost twenty-five cents from Andy's Meat Market; a quart of hand-packed vanilla ice cream at Ohly's Drug Store was fifty cents. Estelle also sent me downtown to pay bills. I always followed her admonition, "Don't forget to count your change."

While our parents required us to be home at regular times for meals and to observe reasonable bedtime hours, they were not otherwise restrictive. Since my father was never home during the day, Estelle was the parent to let us know what was allowed. I don't think she liked being a

disciplinarian. I found that being even mildly scolded was unsettling, so most of the time I did what was expected and never talked back. Though I was not a trouble-maker, I did get into mischief. Once, urged on by one of my pals, I climbed with him to the top of the town's water tower from where I could see Lake Erie, violating a town ordinance in plain sight.

On a cloudless summer afternoon two friends and I went bike riding along Lorain Street that led to the other side of town. We were almost in the country and stopped by an abandoned house near a gas station and car-repair place. We decided to look around and, finding the back door unlocked, sneaked inside. The house was creaky, decrepit, and empty except for a broken wooden chair in the living room and a dirty plate in the kitchen sink. Our curiosity led us to the basement, where one of us said, "Let's break a window." This was followed by, "Yeah, let's do." I was the first one to pick up something off the dirt floor and fling it at a window, shattering not only the two panes of glass but also the wooden frame. "How about that?" I exclaimed. One of my friends found something else to throw at another window. Then suddenly we heard footsteps upstairs, and in what seemed like an instant a large man with thick black hair was standing next to us. Before I knew it he grabbed my arm, scaring me half out of my wits.

"Don't move!" he ordered. "I'm calling the police!"

With anguish in our voices, there followed what might be considered an attempt to negotiate. The man was furious and threatened our very lives. Finally, I said, "If you let us go, we'll tell our fathers." By this time the man had calmed down and agreed to set us free and not call the police, at least not then. He took down our names. We left feeling subdued and thoroughly chastised. All of us dutifully reported the incident to our fathers. I was told I would have to help pay for the damage, but we never heard from the man again.

In the same year, when I was eleven, I came home one brilliant fall afternoon with severe abdominal pains, and by seven that evening I had my appendix removed at Allen Hospital. My father gave the anesthetic. I remember the ether's penetrating vapors enveloping me as it dripped onto the mask hovering over my face. My father's calm voice kept saying, "You're getting sleepy. Now your eyes are becoming heavy." Later, though I enjoyed the attention of being a patient, I felt frustrated that I had to suspend playing backyard football and the satisfaction I had discovered in rough physical contact. For the few days that I spent in the hospital, my appendix was displayed in a jar of formaldehyde on the bureau next to my bed.

At home, next to my bed was a bookcase where I kept my comic books. Batman and Robin, Superman, and Dick Tracy with his wristwatch radio were my favorites. I remember first reading the word "espionage" and having no idea what it meant or how to pronounce it. Additional reading material included *Treasure Island* and *Robinson Crusoe*.

Of equal importance during my boyhood years was my radio, a small black Silvertone that held special status on the bookshelf. Almost every day beginning at five o'clock I listened to the voices of Tom Mix, the Lone Ranger ("Hi-o Silver, away!"), and Jack Armstrong ("the All American boy"). I frequently responded to special offers by sending in the top from a box of Wheaties ("Breakfast of Champions"). One offer was a decoder ring, and I remember my excitement being deflated after deciphering what I thought would be a vital message, and finding that it only read, "Tune in tomorrow."

There were also evening radio programs that I closely followed, such as "The Shadow." I can hear the host's resonant voice saying, "Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men?" Even scarier were "I Love a Mystery" (sponsored by Fleischman's Yeast), and "Inner Sanctum," a program that began with the squeaking of a door, a sound that inevitably elevated my pulse rate.

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In 1941, the year Japan bombed Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, Estelle had a second child named Ralph, whom we called Ralphy. He had been born with a defective heart and was periodically cyanotic, but I was not aware of this at the time. I came home one afternoon after school when Estelle was bottle feeding Ralphy in the living room. He was about six months old. I had just gone upstairs to my room when I heard Estelle cry out, "Call your father! Ralphy is having difficulty breathing! Now he's turning blue! Hurry!"

What I remember next occurred several hours later. I was sitting with my brothers in the library, having been assembled there by our father. He told us that Ralphy had died, and we were to go upstairs to see him. When we entered my parents' bedroom, I first saw Estelle standing by the window weeping. I felt a pang of anguish because I had never seen her cry before. She was being comforted by one of my father's colleagues, a family friend. Then my brothers and I in turn approached the crib. I looked down and saw Ralphy lying there with closed eyes, his soft face pale in the early evening light, his small shoulders covered with a light blanket. Estelle's muffled sobs drew me away and I didn't know what to do next. Then our father ushered us from the room. For weeks afterwards the household was subdued, and for months Estelle would become teary if Ralphy's name was mentioned, something I avoided if at all possible.

Two years later, when I was thirteen, my brother Jim was born.

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Oberlin College\* has always been the town's major employer, and it provided an opportunity for me to earn money. The first dollar I ever made outside the home was from setting pins in the

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\* The college and town were named after John Frederic Oberlin (1749-1826), a Protestant pastor in the Alsace region of France. By the time he died at the age of eighty-six, he was known throughout Europe and America for his

college's bowling alley, where I earned tips from the students. I kept my modest earnings in a large, black leather purse. I also earned a little money helping to hang Chinese lanterns on ropes strung from tree to tree around Tappan Square for the college's annual Illumination Night at commencement time, an event that continues to this day. By the time I was fifteen I was old enough to be hired by the college's buildings and grounds department, which meant two summers of hedge clipping and lawn mowing, and several Christmas vacations when I was older shoveling snow and cleaning student dormitory rooms. I liked the physical work and found it a welcome change from the classroom. Also it felt good to have money of my own to spend on phonograph records, going to the movies, and buying Christmas presents.

These jobs were a source for stories to tell at dinner, a time for lively conversation of the day's events. My siblings and I learned from our father the pleasure of story telling, often with embellishments, which in later years we passed on to our own children. On the other hand, heated discussions about politics were rare. As youngsters we also liked to hear our father tell stories he made up, such as the one about the crooked mouth family, making us laugh when he moved his mouth this way and that. It was even more fun when one of us had a friend over for dinner. We all watched as the innocent victim was drawn in by the story and, totally unaware, moved his or her mouth along with my father, creating much laughter. I also remember a time when a guest of mine came for supper. We were having meatloaf, and as my father was carving it he said to my friend, with a perfectly straight face, "Would you like a wing or a leg?"

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many good works, which included improving the health and education of the impoverished people in his parish. According to one biographer, John Kurtz, Oberlin was "the first educator anywhere to train and employ women as teachers."

Soon childhood gave way to adolescence. After completing sixth grade at Prospect School, we all looked forward to junior high school because we would be in the same building as the senior high students. It also meant getting to know a whole new group of kids from the other side of town who had gone to Pleasant Street Elementary School. It was in seventh and eighth grades that I began to take a more serious interest in girls, who now were wearing sweaters, plaid skirts, and brown and white saddle shoes. As true American bobbysoxers of the 1940s, they were ahead of us boys in style when it came to clothes. It hadn't been that long since I had outgrown my knickers. I can still recall how much older I felt after I got my first pair of dark blue corduroy trousers.

This was also the time when I discovered that I was going to be shorter than most of my male friends. Up until then we were similar in height, but with the onset of adolescence, my growth slowed down. Over time I became less and less sensitive about my size. In my family it turned out that I would be the shortest member. (My mother Annette was barely five feet tall.)

I had my first date in the seventh grade. She was a pretty girl whom I had known since first grade. We went to a movie at the Apollo, and then had ice cream and a cherry coke at the Standard Drugstore. The next year, when my friends and I had taken up dancing, she was one of our group that got together on Sunday afternoons to play records and dance. Years later, after she was married, I was saddened to learn that she died from a brain tumor while still a young woman.

I was instinctively drawn to dancing. I can think of few physical activities more pleasurable than twirling around a dance floor with a woman in my arms. I can recall the exquisite feeling of holding a girl close as we moved together to the lush sounds of Glenn Miller's "Moonlight Serenade." On those Sunday afternoons, each of us would bring a few of our own records of Big

Band music, bought at the local record store, where we would spend hours in the listening booths on a Saturday morning. As we got older we gave up Sunday afternoons for Saturday night school dances. We also held a few dance parties in our homes. At one of these was a girl with long red hair who I found attractive. I was surprised when she came up to me with her dance card and said with a sparkle in her eyes, "I want you to put your name here and here and here. You're one of my favorites to dance with."

Sports, like dancing, came naturally. Though I was not an outstanding athlete or a sports fan like some of my friends who could tell you all the latest statistics, I liked physical activity and developing a skill. We didn't have community-organized sports for kids, only backyards and vacant lots for football and baseball, a hill at the old water works for sledding, and a makeshift rink on the other side of town for ice skating. I clearly remember the rink's old wooden shack and the smell of the steam from our soggy mittens drying on the hot potbellied stove.

It wasn't until junior high school that I played on a real football team through an intramural program. What a thrill to wear shoes with cleats, shoulder pads, and a jersey with a number. It was exciting when we had a game on a Friday night under the lights, just like the high school team. It was also my introduction to a boys' locker room, with its smell of sweat and liniment. Though shorter than most of the other players, I could run fast and was convinced that in two or three years I would be on the varsity team.

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From its early beginnings, the town of Oberlin was known for its strong anti-slavery sentiment, an attitude influenced by the college's progressive policies, including that of admitting African American students, the first non-black college in the country to do so. As a result, Oberlin became a stop on the Underground Railroad that helped slaves escape north

around the time of the Civil War. Consequently, many African Americans settled here. Since the mid-1800s blacks have made up about twenty-five percent of the town's population.

In the days before the civil rights movement of the 1960s, blacks were referred to as Negroes, or more commonly as colored. As a boy I didn't give much thought to who was white and who was black. I was undoubtedly naïve, but as far as I could see, in school we were all pretty much on equal footing, whether in the classroom or on the athletic field. It was only after school when our lives diverged. While some of my pals at school were black, none of my after-school friends were. This was not a conscious choice, but reflected the way we lived. Segregation certainly existed, because most of the black families lived in the southeast part of town. It was years later that I began to give serious thought to the divide between us.

The older brother of one of my friends was able to cross the color line. He had somehow been invited to several gatherings the black kids had at their social hall. After some of us heard that he had learned from them how to jitterbug to the big band music that was popular then, we talked him into teaching us.

On a visit to Oberlin in 2006 I looked up one of my African American classmates, a tall, handsome woman, who had returned to Oberlin with her husband in their retirement. She had left Oberlin after high school, became a nurse, and married a man who would become the first black engineering manager for IBM. I wanted to know about how it was for her growing up in Oberlin, and why she thought we didn't socialize after school. She reminded me that some of the black kids did come to a regular Friday night dance at the Teen Canteen, sponsored by the church I belonged to. But she agreed that blacks and whites didn't mix in parties held in private homes.

As we reminisced about attending Prospect School together, she recalled that when she was seven or eight, she often stopped on the way to school to pick up one of her friends, a white girl

in our class. One chilly morning she arrived early and had to wait outside. Later she asked why she wasn't invited to come inside. Her friend's response was, "Because my mother said you were colored." This was the first time, she told me, that she realized she was black. She remembered spending a long time after school that day sitting on her grandmother's lap as the world of race was explained to her.

We both remembered that there had been one or two racially mixed marriages among our contemporaries. Then with a smile she recalled that in high school she and a white boy in our class were attracted to each other. "Nothing was ever overt," she said, "but we had an understanding with our eyes and smiles."

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I liked school and most of the time took it seriously. I was a good student, but not outstanding. It was a surprise when my father told me as a freshman in high school that he thought it would be a good idea for me to go to private school. He had in mind Western Reserve Academy, fifty miles away. I knew about the school because my brother John was there, as were two friends of my oldest brother Clair. But I had no wish to go there myself. I was content enough at Oberlin High School. What seems strange to me in hindsight is that I don't remember being asked my opinion. I have wondered many times since why I was so unassertive in expressing my feelings, which I most surely had. My father was probably right that I was not working hard enough for the grades I was getting, but I could have remedied that. It seems that he had made up his mind. I dutifully complied.

I entered Western Reserve Academy\* as a sophomore in the fall of 1945. I found that keeping up with the heavy academic load was a huge challenge. In the beginning I had to string a light bulb into my tiny closet after lights out to get my homework finished. I had to repeat first year Latin. It soon became obvious that I wasn't going to get the grades I was used to.

I also found it hard to adjust to the formality and rigidity of the school, which at that time enrolled only boys. Besides being required to wear a jacket and tie, it felt as if almost every minute of the day was scheduled, and my time closely monitored. The policy that allowed only so many weekends away was strictly enforced. On top of that, I was separated from my friends at home. It was not an easy transition.

The teachers, or masters as they were referred to, lived on campus and it often seemed as though they watched our every move. Most were well liked, but a few were feared. We had nicknames for them, passed down from upperclassmen. We called one of the Latin teachers The Toad. My favorite teacher, who taught English, had the nickname of Jiggs. (I assume the name came from the comic strip, "Maggie and Jiggs"). A short, middle-aged single man with thinning gray hair, he was beyond casual in his dress. I can still see him in his rumpled wool jacket, half-pressed trousers, the ends of his shirt collar turned up, and the narrow end of his brown knit tie hanging several inches below the front. He was the resident master in the dormitory known as the Athenaeum where I roomed during my sophomore and senior years. More than a hundred years old, this brick building was one of the original structures on campus, still standing stalwartly as a result of several renovations and reinforcement rods from one wall to another. I

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\* Western Reserve Academy, located in Hudson, Ohio, occupies the original campus of Western Reserve College, founded in 1826. The town was settled in 1799 by David Hudson and other Connecticut pioneers. The college's name came from the Connecticut Western Reserve, the same wilderness territory in which Oberlin was settled fifty miles to the northwest. After the college moved to Cleveland a half century later, its Preparatory Department remained and eventually became Western Reserve Academy.

remember having occasional chats with Jiggs in his small, cluttered apartment that smelled of cigarette smoke and old books. He revered the written word and did his best to teach us how to write a good essay and understand literature. I recall one time in my first year when he called on me in class. We were reading *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, by Thomas Hardy. "Larry, what insight did you gain from the chapter we read last night?" I didn't know how to answer because I didn't know what insight meant. "So, that's a new word for you, is it? Well, let's all take a few minutes to talk about this indispensable new word."

Sports played an important part in the life of the school. I liked the fact that we were required to participate in a sport each season, either through the intramural program or on a varsity team. I was on the football team, but because of my small size I didn't play enough to earn a letter, which was a big disappointment. I would have done much better going out for soccer. However, I did get letters in wrestling and track. The mile relay team I was on my senior year missed breaking the school record by only half a second.

Coming from small-town Oberlin, it took time to adjust to a different social life. The majority of students came from more sophisticated communities around Cleveland and Akron, and many of the girls they brought to our dances also attended private schools. I eventually got to know one of these girls and invited her to several social events. She turned out to be a terrific dancer. We had a great time jitterbugging to music like "One O'clock Jump" and "Stomping at the Savoy."

While I developed close relationships with several classmates, I missed my friends at home. Even though I saw them during vacations, I could tell that I wasn't as much a part of their social life as I used to be.

I completed three years at Reserve, graduating in 1948. While I didn't receive any academic honors, I was recognized in other ways. In my senior year I was a class officer and a member of

the student council. I was also selected to be a dormitory counselor to underclassmen, called a prefect (borrowing the British term). Being a prefect had a number of perks, the most valuable as far as I was concerned was having almost no restrictions, which meant freedom to spend more weekends off campus.

One of the most important things I learned about myself during those years was that I had the capacity to stick with something that was difficult. All told it was a good experience, though in the beginning I had some lonely times there. I never complained. In fact I kept most of my feelings to myself. My parents had little idea what it was like for me. In any case, I was well prepared for college.

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I entered Oberlin College in the fall of 1948. I lived at home for economic reasons because my older brothers and I were enrolled there at the same time. After two years they married and moved into campus housing for veterans. Though my parents were not involved in my daily college life, living at home sometimes felt restrictive. In spite of this I began to be more my own person. One way this showed itself was in politics. Though my parents were progressive on social issues, they were conservative in the voting booth. From the time I cast my first ballot, I leaned considerably to the left. I have maintained that position ever since.

I had four good years at Oberlin. I worked each summer to help pay for college expenses, though the annual tuition at that time was only \$500.\* In my freshman year, to get better acquainted with my classmates, I took meals at May Cottage, a dining hall and women's dormitory that was only half a block from where my family first lived on Elm Street fifteen years before. Because of academic demands, I had time for only a few extracurricular activities.

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\* According to the General Catalogue of Oberlin College for the year 1950-1951, total expenses, including tuition, room, board and fees, were \$1,245. The estimated cost of books and supplies was \$60.

Playing lacrosse for three years was the most satisfying. One thing I especially liked about Oberlin College was the egalitarian social life. Following its tradition as a socially conscious institution, there were no fraternities or sororities, and automobiles were not allowed. Rich or poor, virtually everyone had a bicycle. It was a wild scene in between classes when hundreds of students could be seen crisscrossing the campus on their bikes, even on snowy winter days.

I graduated in June of 1952 with a major in sociology. I was unclear what to do next, though I found myself leaning toward further study in a helping profession. This led to enrolling at Chicago Theological Seminary. After one year it was clear that I was not suited for the ministry. As I considered my undefined future, I was drafted into the U.S. Army in November of 1953.

I describe my military service and subsequent adventures in my memoir, *Two Years in Poland and Other Stories*, published in 2008. The memoir is primarily about serving in the Peace Corps from 1997 to 1999 following my retirement as a psychotherapist. It also includes an account of driving overland with a friend in a VW Beetle from Europe to India in the fall of 1956.

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Amherst, Massachusetts

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