

College in the Hills

By Janet (Peterson) Howard
July 19, 1996

Why remember it now? On the occasion of the memorial for Elsa [Guernsey], the subject came up. I was unaware that it would — but it was really pretty relevant. Gathered in Tom and Adrienne's living room were two sons, two daughters, three grandsons and three granddaughters of Elsa and George who were married in 1934 on the 8th of August in the town of Marion, Illinois. This event took place well into the summer of drought, unemployment, poverty and discontent. Back at the college we thought they were merely visiting friends. I was privileged to be the first to know. I was also chosen to provide moral support when they told Nadia [Naumann, Elsa's sister]. I remember the four of us walking a little way down the road to be out of earshot. Had we been under a roof, Nadia would certainly have raised it. I felt a bit like a confederate, though I had not been any more aware than Nadia of what those crazy kids were contemplating.

The college as a whole did not seem shocked by the news. A few cynics were heard to say, "That'll never last." But it did. George and Elsa stayed married until "death did them part." George died at age 70 in 1979 and Elsa at 79 in 1995.

Back to 1934. A beautiful little folder introduces the College in the Hills as a "Venture in education." Its aims are "helping to build a new social, economic and political order in our time, and trying to make ourselves into human beings capable of living in that better order."

Nadia says — "I don't even remember how we got down there." Well, my father, who had recently acquired a 1934 Buick — our family's very first car — drove us four females, my mother, Elsa, Nadia and me, through, for us, uncharted territory, south from Chicago almost to the Ohio River. Did we stop somewhere over night? Can't remember. Anyway



Janet (Peterson) Howard, probably early 1940s.

the prairie lands finally gave way to the hills and we found ourselves in a little bit of Appalachia, or more likely "Ozark-ia". The college was truly on a hill, reached by a steep curvy



Janet (Peterson) Howard, third from left, and Elsa (Naumann) Guernsey, second from right. Elsa married George Guernsey and they lived in Garrett Park, Maryland, where Janet and Fred Howard moved in 1948. This photo is from the early 1970s in Garrett Park.

dirt road – a challenge to my father's new driving skills. My mother refused to stay in the car for that dangerous ascent!

The college was not prepared to house us that first night. Arrangements had been made for us to sleep at a neighbor's down the road on the road to Herod. (Sounds very Biblical.) All I can remember are trips to the privy and fears of rattlesnakes, poison ivy, or deadly insects which might be inhabiting the tall weeds along the path.

How to describe the first morning. A building to house kitchen, dining-room and "Women's Dorm" was partly "up." Another, the library, already contained books. The male population, most of whom were already assembled had distributed themselves among three or four tents.

My brother [Richard Peterson] who had come down with some of the movers and shakers a few days earlier, clued us in to the nature of some of the people we were about to meet. He identified a young (18) cynic, nicknamed Hoolihan, and an old (27) cynic later to be referred to as "Marse Tom." Before Richard had a chance to describe (analyze) the others, we were getting acquainted with those not hammering on a roof or otherwise occupied. Mrs. Rolfe, a tall woman of middle-age, very hearty, would perhaps in an ordinary college, have been cast in the role of a chaperone. Heaven forbid! We would certainly have no need of one of those! Mrs. R. did much advising about food and nutrition, stressing the qualities of beet greens and other unfamiliar products. Ac-

tual planning and cooking of meals was to be shared by all. Mrs. R's daughter, 14-year-old Harriet, our youngest member, became known for her singing voice.

My parents were around for a few days, exploring southern Illinois and looking in on us once or twice. My mother could never forget the sight of two students sorting green beans for supper. "Poor kids," she said "Those were the worst looking beans I ever saw." I'm sure it was not the beans, but I remember being laid low almost immediately with nausea, diarrhea. I also remember being already in love with Marse Tom.

The Classes

Nadia was supposed to teach German, but nobody took it. Richard was scheduled for Psychology – Human Behavior & Social Psychology. Can't remember if anybody took it. He really wanted to teach. George had taken upon himself a whole raft of things – The Humanities: Modern British & American Poetry, 19th century Thought, Modern Civilization. Elsa and I were students – not in the employ of the college. We actually paid \$26 for board, room, and tuition.

When classes began, Alan Huss (nickname Tup) and I sat on a log together with Marse Tom to learn Political Science. It was not my favorite subject, but it was where I wanted to be.

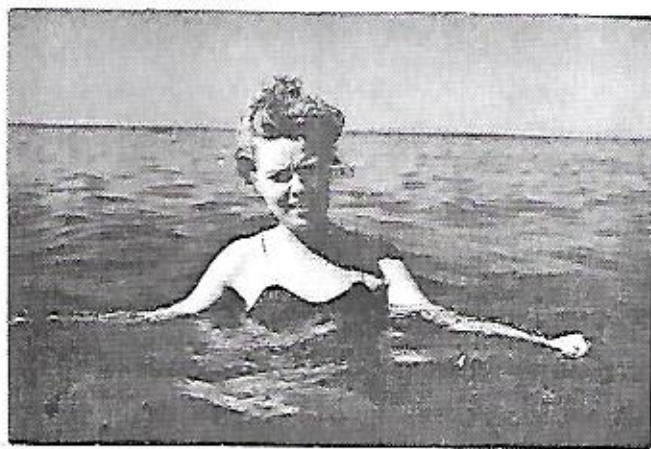


Tom Garrison, likely October 1939.

Penny Cent, Friedrich Wilhelm University of Berlin: "Art must be a tool for fearless social critique and for bold social reconstruction." I took the class, painted with tempura and to my great regret lost my picture of the road leading away from the college which I liked and Penny liked, although he recommended that I put a person or persons in it. I never did, and I never painted another.

Don Monson, our architect, (he was probably all of 22) was tall and skinny and very serious. He was also Harold's little brother and was exposed to a great deal of brotherly advice and criticism. Whenever the two were together, arguments and loud voices prevailed. Harold (all of 24) was a high school teacher somewhere in Wisconsin. At the college, he was to teach Biology. He assumed responsibility for the proprieties such as the use of the only privy — handed down a stern edict to the young men to be sure to put the seat lid down in consideration of the ladies. That was all very well, but who was responsible for putting the latch for keeping the door shut on the outside instead of the inside!...Harold's frequent pronouncements about the weather led to the nickname Windy Monson. Later in the dry summer just before our one downpour, he was heard to say "It won't rain. Wind's in the wrong direction!"

Tup (why Tup? His real name was Alan) was just out of high school. His sister Jessica who was a fellow journalism student of George's had engineered his enrollment at the College. Life in his hometown, Mendota, Ill. Became well-



Nadia (Naumann) Lassin (1913-2005), probably early 1940s.

known to us all, but we were unprepared for his story of having spent time at Reform School in Pontiac, sent there for stealing apples. We university types listened wide-eyed to how the inmates banged their tin cups on the table to protest the lousy food. (We had to hear from Jessica later on that there wasn't a word of truth in the story.) But we didn't stop listening. Tup had a way with words.

Hoolihan (not his real name) was a very Irish-looking kid from Indiana. He was a particular follower of Marse Tom, and a contemporary of Tup. He was recruited by his English teacher, Mildred George and had the usual cavalier attitude towards her of a high school student for any teacher. Girls were his focus. He was soon in pursuit, at least theoretically, of various farmers' daughters in the neighborhood, since most of the rest of us were too old for him, and Harriet too young — though he did on occasion pay her some attention.

Mildred, said English Teacher, was connected with Ball State College, in Indiana. How she became part of our college, we never really knew but we tended to pair her off with Don Brown, our President. I remember the night we visited the nearest C.C.C. camp and Mildred entertained the boys with her elocutionary skills to tremendous applause. By the way, we were beholden to the C.C.C. for a pair of very solidly built privies to replace the primitive unisex facility we had started out with.

Astrid Aronson, a hearty, dedicated social work type was instrumental in organizing community events in nearby towns. One that I remember involved a play group for children, in preparation for which a church social hall had to be cleaned up. I did really participate in scrubbing the floor, and perhaps I joined in the games introduced by Astrid. Can still hear her voice going "Here we go Luby Loo," etc.

George — How to sum him up. I met him in Advanced Composition in 1931 at NU [Northwestern University]. In this class we wrote 1,500 words in prose, or a poem every week — a 14-line sonnet was an acceptable length. Our Professor Hungerford chose from our work for reading to the class probably the best of each week's endeavors. Then the class was "let loose" for criticism. Once in a while the good



Tom Garrison, Janet, and John Alan (Garrison) Howard, 1939.

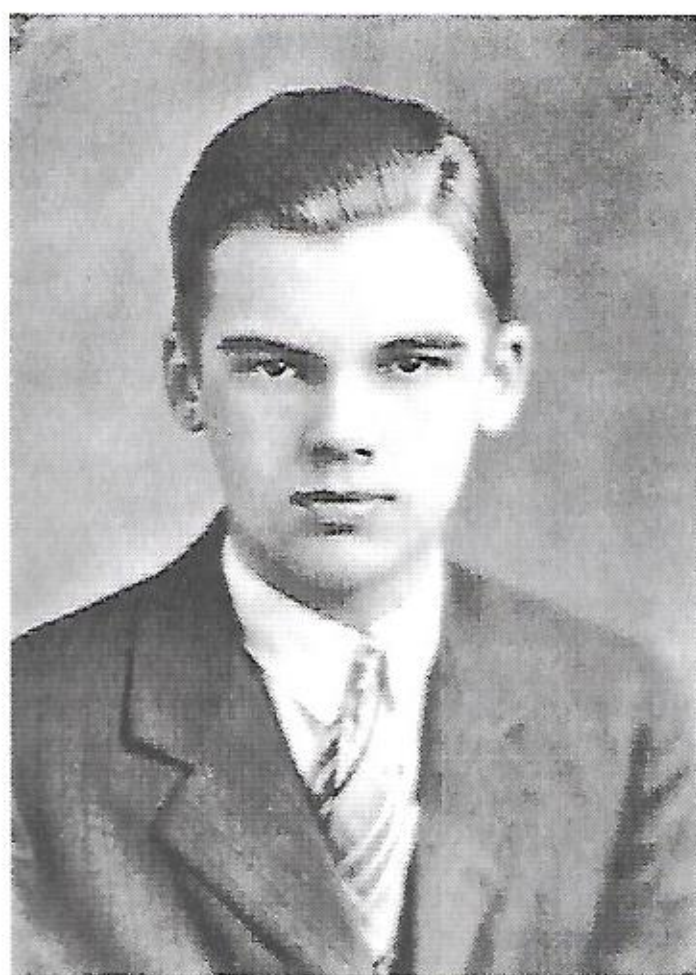
Prof. brought in something from the outside world of literature to read, but he once wryly admitted that the interest level of the listeners fell precipitously when it wasn't our own stuff.

By 1934, George was into unions, politics, journalism of a muck-raking nature. While still in school he had begun producing "The Gadfly", attacking University employment policies. It was the time of the Memorial Day Massacre — Republic Steel against the workers, Chicago teachers not being paid. Hitler moving into Austria, the Spanish Republic threatened by church and monarchists.

Barbara, another student from Indiana lived on a farm near Noblesville. Good company, always.

Tom drove the truck. It was a wreck of a thing, broke down frequently, probably very unsafe, but absolutely essential. Water for all our needs had to be fetched from a well in Herod, hauled in two huge cylinders. Remembered best, however, for a trip to the Ohio River, to a swimming beach. What a thrill — to swim in so important a body of water. Even to us city kids who were used to spending our summers in Lake Michigan. The trip on dirt roads through brush and woods and tall grass, the smell of honeysuckle, the breeze created by the truck's speeding down one hill and plodding up the next was so reckless and carefree. Penny Cent would stand up at appropriate moments and order "Achtung! Observe the erosion." We brought food, probably roasted hot-dogs, cooled off in the great waterway flowing swiftly towards the Mississippi. George and Penny Cent must have decided to swim across to the old Kentucky Shore. The swift current took over. There they were far out midstream, finally lost sight of by anybody who was watching — almost nobody in fact. Rage and panic took over among us happy campers. What was actually done to send an alarm or organize a rescue, I don't remember, but the swimmers themselves hailed a boatman who brought them to shore. But most of us were in doubt for some time as to the outcome.

Once the truck was commandeered for a trip to Cairo ("Cayro" in southern Illinoisese). Our other great River, the



Richard Peterson

Mississippi, joined up with the Ohio at this historic point. Don't know whether this expedition was in the nature of a field trip. Think it was more a joy ride. Tom, our driver, had recently been steersman on a federal barge-line which operated ...[unreadable] to some northern point on the river. It just so happened that one of the boats was anchored at Cairo that day and Tom knew the captain, so we were taken on a tour, not once, but twice. The captain was in a very happy mood and once he made the rounds with us, he seemed to forget and started all over again. At the end of the second tour we have the good sense to thank him kindly and get off. Then it was on to General Grant's former headquarters, situated in a riverside hotel. Refreshments were in order. Beer had been back since 1933, and it seemed to be the thing to have. Eighteen, I believe was the age of consent and we all qualified. It was not long before some of us were as happy as the Captain had been. Partway home, it was deemed we were to stop by the wayside to recover. We slept a little, and arrived in the wee small hours.

The college had a spot on a radio program emanating from Harrisburg. Our theme song was "Down in the Valley", which Hoolihan insisted was really "Birmingham Jailhouse". A chorus of some of us that could carry a tune was organized by Astrid. We sang "Go Down Moses" and "Swing Low,

Sweet Chariot", following an introduction to the College and its community-related activities.

Some time early in the summer, we lined probably in Herod, for Typhoid shots. Around the same time, probably no connection, Elsa became ill with what turned out to be malaria. George and Nadia must have taken her to a doctor in Harrisburg and a family that George had become acquainted with invited the girls to stay with them until Elsa recovered enough to endure the rugged life at the College. Malaria was no joke, but at least it wasn't Typhoid. Nadia remembers very little about this episode, except that the people were very friendly, and that she tasted spiced apples for the first time in her life.

Tom and I were invited to dinner in Rosiclare by a family whose children were participating in the games and entertainment offered by the College in the social hall of the nearby church (where I had scrubbed the floor!). The oldest girl was named Heather. I think the father was unemployed, but they seemed to be managing and their hospitality was unstinting.

Baths: How were these to be conducted with such limited accessibility to water and privacy? The ladies took over one of the tents for daily 4 o'clock ablutions. Each equipped herself with a small container of water — a bowl, a cup, a saucer — a bar of soap, probably shared a washcloth, a towel, and managed an entire sponge bath, from head to toe. It was one of the jolliest hours of the day. The funniest moments of our lives tended to be recounted there, judging from the shrieks of laughter exploding behind the tent flap. I remember us emerging as an incredibly clean-looking bunch. Now Nadia says she doesn't remember this and there's nobody else to ask. Whether the boys ever washed I also don't remember. But I could ask my brother. He dwelt in the same tent as Tup and Marse Tom and Hoolihan. Tup referred to it as "Stench Cove."

Hoolihan cooked up a date with the daughter of one of the more prosperous farmers. There was much talk of how he better watch his step. The girl's father surely had a shotgun ready. Tup, the sophisticate, oversaw the preparation — the attention to amenities such as mouthwash, deodorant and manners. That's all I remember of Hoolihan's date. A farmer's wife agreed to do some washing and ironing for some of us. Tom and I went over to collect the items and (I hope) make payment for the service. The house stood stark and weatherbeaten on a hill. Inside there may have been a chair, but no other furniture — surely there must have been beds somewhere. There were reportedly seven children, but the only one we saw was a little fellow whom his mother referred to as "this least boy." She apologized for having slightly scorched one garment, though it was otherwise beautifully ironed. I fell all over myself to convince her that it was no problem. Now, I cannot believe how little I remember besides this. But the image is very vivid — a tall, gaunt figure, without possessions, kindly towards but inviting no pity from us pampered youngsters.

George, a polio victim who walked with crutches, chose to labor in the kitchen and was almost always assisted by

Elsa. There was a lot of bickering, friendly and otherwise going on, also some "necking" and "flirting." As cook, G. was probably at least as capable as anyone else, but he cooked for a highly critical crowd. Almost nobody would admit that the food was edible. I remember George wielding the post and frying pans, better than I remember what was in them.

Tom also had had a childhood bout with polio. He walked with a slight limp and wore a raised shoe on one foot. But he had always been able to drive. During College days he had driven a cab at odd hours. It was simply assumed that he would be in charge of the truck. This besides his advanced age (27) gave him an aura of authority, which he wore very well. A slight person, with dark hair and eyes and a moustache that did indeed make him look like Clark Gable or William Powell. His southern background — Birmingham, Memphis and New Orleans — suggested (at least to Tup) the Marse Tom image.

This is the end of the story as far as I know, but it seems like there may have been more.

George Guernsey and Elsa Naumann were married and had four children, two girls and two boys (one named Tom).

Janet and Tom were married, but later divorced after my brother John Alan Garrison was born in 1939. Janet married again in 1941 to my father, Fred Howard.

The Howards and the Guernseys were neighbors and best friends in Garrett Park, Maryland.

Nadia Naumann married Phil Lessin and had two daughters. She remained good friends with my parents and lived nearby in her later years. She died in 2005 at the age of 91.

Janet lived to be 98 years old and died in 2012. Both Janet and Nadia worked as school librarians.

My father Fred died in 2013 at the age of 103.

My brother John (Garrison) Howard died in 1991 at the age of 51. He was a teacher in Montgomery County MD schools.

My uncle, Richard Peterson who taught psychology at the College in the Hills, married and had two children. He lived in Enumclaw, Washington, until he died in about 2004.

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