

4. An unhappy Senior year

Henry: Well, if I remember correctly, we left off with my having been asked to run for a position in the student government of Paly High.

David: Commissioner of Student Welfare?

Henry: It was called Commissioner of Public Welfare, which was the top of the Board of Commissioners. At that time, I think that there were 8 commissioners altogether. There were Public Welfare, Finance, Publications, Boys' Athletics, Boys' Activities, Girls' Athletics, Girls' Activities, and Social Activities -- that's a total of 8. I was resisting, since I was totally unqualified. But the kingmaker, a fellow named Dick Jennings, kept after me. Finally I said, "OK, as long as it's understood that I'm not running seriously". In other words, I began to campaign on behalf of my opponent, and I did some pretty darn good posters saying "Vote for Philip Pierce".

To somewhat complicate the scenario, there was a girl in my class named Doris Mosher, who had been a Mothers' Helper at the Anderson summer camp for the last couple of years of its existence, in the course of which she and Oscar had become quite interested in each other. By the time she was a junior (that was my year; Oscar was going to Stanford at the time), they became sort of engaged. It was all very proper (my mother wouldn't have permitted anything else) -- at the very least, they were going steady. Doris thought that I was qualified for this office, and began campaigning on my behalf, even though I tried to talk her out of it. She had a lot of friends among the girls.

So, things were going along with a sort of inevitability. The next step in the process was a nominating convention at which people were supposed to make speeches on their own behalf, as well as nominating speeches by their supporters, all at a general assembly in the school auditorium. I don't think attendance was compulsory, but there was a pretty good turnout.

I had never made a public speech in my life, and I didn't know what to say. I don't know if anybody gave me ideas, but there was one thing -- I didn't want to read a script. So, wherever I got my ideas, I memorized them. There was going to be a time limit -- 3 minutes, 5 minutes, something reasonable like that.

The fateful day came, and there was a flip of a coin to decide who would go first. Philip Pierce went first. I can't remember who gave his principal nominating speech, but that person was able to recite a whole list of offices that Philip Pierce had held, in the various grades he went through, and the various clubs that he had belonged to, and so forth and so on. Then it came my turn, and I was nominated by this fellow Dick Jennings. (*Laugh*) He was in a tough spot, because he couldn't name any of my qualifications. All he could do was dwell upon the fact that I had had a fair success on the track team that year. I think he put it into oratorical terms, that I had had "a smashing success on the cinder pad".

Then I had to go to the microphone and say a few words on my own behalf. I can't remember a

word that I said. But I do remember one thing -- that I ran overtime, and I guess they had a timekeeper who said that my time had expired. So I started to walk off the stage in mid-sentence, dragging the microphone with me. The whole audience thought that was very amusing, because nobody had done that before. I guess they thought that I was a funny fellow.

There were a few days before the election itself. My campaign manager (if that's the right word to use) had the idea of putting a big banner across the main hallway of the school, touting the slate that he had put together of himself and two fellows who were on the track team. All of their first names were Richard, so his banner said "Vote for the big Dick, the medium-size Dick, and the little Dick" (*general laughter*).

David: Oh, my goodness.

Henry: Well, your goodness had nothing to do with it. The Principal of the school ordered him to take it down -- which of course he had to do. But it's just as well he didn't have my name in there with them. Oh dear. Well, an announcement of the results of the election was going to be made on a certain Saturday night, which was also the night they were going to have a school dance in the gymnasium. I guess the voting took place on Thursday, and the incumbent commissioners counted the votes and turned them over to school paper (called "The Campanile"), and The Campanile came out with a special edition which was going to be distributed at this school dance. It was all supposed to be very hush-hush.

Well, I thought it was incumbent on me to attend that dance, and the only person I could think to ask was the girl named Jeannie Brokaw that had been my first and only date up until that point, in a fiasco in which I dropped on her feet for a few minutes before we both gave up. In the meantime, I had learned to do a "one-step" that consisted mostly of walking around the dance floor, so I was a little bit advanced from the last time. To my surprise, she had not been invited by anybody else. I had assumed that the time I had taken her to that first dance, all of the local Romeos would have gotten an idea "here's a really good-looking girl", and that they would have started to move in. But that had not happened, so she was available. On this occasion, I think Oscar drove me to the dance, rather than my mother.

As we walked in, they handed out copies of the paper, and the headline read "Anderson swamps Pierce". I think it was about 2 to 1. It was not a good feeling (*laugh*), but I was stuck with it. And it wasn't a good omen that more people came up to Phil Pierce and commiserated with him, then came up to me and congratulated me. I don't know if the bulk of the people who voted for me didn't go to the dance. I guess my appeal was to "the little guy", rather than to the in-group that really ran the student body part of the school.

Well, the summer went by, and I became increasingly nervous. As I recall, I had a call from the counselor of our class -- her name was Mrs. Kaiser. She suggested that I call a meeting of the other commissioners before the school year began, introduce ourselves if we weren't already well acquainted, and talk a little bit about what our plans were for the school year and so forth. I said, "Well, how do I get in touch with them?" She said that she was going to send me a confidential list of the names, addresses, and phone numbers of everybody in the high school.

So, I was able to get in touch with the other commissioners, and suggest that we meet at the school a couple of days before the formal opening of school. That is indeed what happened. Among other things, it was decided to elect from among ourselves a chairperson and a secretary without regard to the offices that we already held. The other two Dicks nominated Dick Jennings to be the chairman. One of them moved that the nominations be closed, and so Dick was elected chairman by acclamation, which (*laugh*) rather set the stage for the power structure that was to come.

The first thing that took place after school began was that another election was held for the cheerleaders -- specifically, the head cheerleader. I think that person then appointed others -- I don't remember the exact sequence. In any case, there was an election for head cheerleader, and two girls ran for that office. There was no hard and fast protocol laid out, but somehow or other Dick Couterie (*sp?*), who was the commissioner of Boys' Athletics, had put himself on the board to count these votes. I thought it was my job, as head of the whole school, to also serve on that. There were a couple of our friends as observers hanging around. So, we counted the ballots. A girl named Florence Wheeler came in second, and a girl named Peggy Wilson came in first. As I recall the vote was close, and about 10 votes separated the two.

Dick Couterie, it seemed, was a strong partisan of Florence Wheeler -- maybe they were in fact going together. He went out of the commissioners' room where all this was being held (the commissioners had a good-sized room of their own in the layout of Paly High). People were waiting outside in the hall for the results. Dick Couterie went out and announced that Florence Wheeler had won. The other guys who had been inside the room knew that was not true, but they had no say in the matter. I told them that it was not going to be allowed to stand -- that we would recount the ballots, this time being extra careful to make sure we had it right. It did come out the same, with Peggy Wilson being the winner.

Then I went out, and although some people who had been waiting had left, there were some people still there. I said that there had been a mistake in our counting. I tried to cover up for Dick Couterie (I didn't want to get him in dutch). I said that in the recount Peggy Wilson was the winner, and that's the way it went into the school paper. Dick Couterie then took it upon himself to spread the word under the table that I had changed the results because I was a secret admirer of Peggy Wilson, and that I was the one who was at fault. That was not a glorious beginning of my (*laugh*) position as Commissioner of Public Welfare.

Among many of my other problems was the fact that I had never been given any idea of what the duties of the Commissioner of Public Welfare were. My predecessor was a jock -- a guy who was a supremely gifted athlete and had been elected on that basis only, because I don't think he had any qualifications other than the fact he was such a good basketball player, swimmer, and whatever he attempted to do, he was really good. But I never even met the guy, since I was a complete outsider until the very last second. Well, I think I only met him once, on the very last day of school when I was going around getting signatures in my yearbook -- I got the signature of Norm Keeler. I guess he wished me luck, or something like that -- that was the extent of my knowledge of the job. There was nothing written down anywhere.

So, I got a little advice from this class counselor named Mrs. Kaiser. She said one of the jobs that the Commissioner of Public Welfare is free to do is to organize occasional assemblies -- open-ended; there's no requirement that they be held, or how many of them be held, although it's assumed that a person won't have too many. But they are to be of general interest, educational. So that's one concrete thing she said I could do to carry out the position. I organized two or three of them during the course of the year, one of which was fairly successful, and one of which was somewhat controversial.

The one thing that I remember accomplishing, that I was proud of, I didn't get any credit for, because it came under the general aegis of the Pep Committee or Rally Committee, before the big game of the football season. This was the game between Palo Alto High School and our arch-rival Sequoia High School, which was located in Redwood City. We called it the "Little Big Game"; the "Big Game" was Stanford vs. Cal -- Stanford, of course, being right across the street from Paly High. So, I had the bright idea of asking a sportscaster from San Francisco, a guy named Ernie Smith, to come to the rally held the day before the Little Big Game and simulate a portion of the broadcast of the Paly High/ Sequoia High football game. In those days, every sportscaster worth his salt was supposed to be able to visualize an event taking place elsewhere, and broadcast a baseball game as though it were taking place in front of him. He would get the bare details over the wire, of balls and strikes and so forth, and he would have to invent the story.

So, it would not have been great trouble for this fellow to do that. But I had no reason to believe that he would have the time. He was almost a one-man sportscaster in the Bay Area -- he broadcast football, basketball, and baseball games. There was gas rationing at that time, and here I was asking him to make a trip 30 miles from San Francisco down to Paly High. I had no reason to think he would accept, but lo and behold he did. So, I met him out at the curb at the appointed hour, led him to the source of the outside amphitheater where the rally was to be held, introduced him to the head of the Rally Committee, and I withdrew from the scene entirely. I thought that was something worth doing.

But for the most part, I did not know what I was doing, and made a lot of mistakes. Another one of my bright ideas occurred to me when somehow or other a catalog came -- maybe catalogs of this sort were sent out to every high school in the country. It had a number of motion pictures listed that one could rent for a nominal fee. I had the bright idea of providing entertainment on noon hours during rainy days in the school auditorium. I had friends in the Stage Crew who knew how to operate all the equipment that would be needed -- they had a good projector and so forth. So, I had the idea of ordering what this catalog called "classical cartoons", and I had a little slush fund. Each of the commissioners had a little fund -- I suppose supervised by the Commissioner of Finance. I dipped into that to order a supply of these so-called classical cartoons. On some rainy day in the month of December, I believe it was, I had it announced over the school PA system that everybody was invited to the auditorium, at 12:30 or whatever, for this form of entertainment.

Well, it got off badly when there was a problem with the focus and the sound, but after the first cartoon or so those things were worked out. And then the really big problem came out, that

these were not classical cartoons in any of the usual sense of the term. They weren't Mickey Mouse, or Bugs Bunny, or anybody that any of us had ever heard of -- they were characters like Ronald the Rat instead of Mickey the Mouse, things of that sort, and people began to grumble. (*Laugh*) it grew in volume, until the whole auditorium turned into a veritable riot -- people screaming, and yelling, and throwing things. I had to ask my friends in the control booth to shut the whole thing down, and that was the end of that experiment. I should have read the fine print more carefully.

I really had great, great difficulty at the personality level of how to act as student body president, which was what in effect I was supposed to be. I felt that I needed to be dignified and serious, rather than the happy-go-lucky kid I had been through my whole school career up to that point. I felt a failure, I felt inferior -- I guess I tried to compensate by pretending that I was sure of myself when in fact I was completely insecure. The business of being untrue to my real self just made me into a different person. My brother told me that. He said I was not the same person even at home. A lot of the people I had palled around with in my previous school years also felt the difference, and I became more and more isolated and lonely. I would occasionally try to break out of it by suggesting to some former friend that we go to a movie together, or something. Maybe occasionally they would humor me by going along, but for the most part they didn't have any fun the way we used to.

Then there was a real fiasco. In February, around Valentine's Day time, the Commissioner of Social Activities put on what they call a Sadie Hawkins Day dance. Now, I don't know whether you remember the Li'l Abner comic strip and the "Sadie Hawkins Day" which appeared in the strip every year. But the idea was that it was a day on which the girls in Dogpatch (the location of the Li'l Abner strip) were free to pursue boys and to invite them out, and whatever. So, in this case, it was the time that girls could invite boys to the dance.

No girls invited me to the dance, until I guess it was practically the last day for it, or maybe a couple of days in advance. A young girl from the sophomore class (her name was Dorothy Couterie) had been to the Anderson summer camp a few years earlier. She was incidentally the sister of Dick Couterie, the Commissioner of Boys' Athletics, but that's irrelevant to the story. She got a crush on me at the Anderson summer camp, and after some years in between she thought to act upon it by inviting me to this dance. She probably must have heard from the grapevine that I hadn't been invited by anybody else, so there it was. But I didn't accept, because I thought it would be out of place for me to go with a youngster.

So, I came up with a lame excuse that I thought I might have a previous engagement with my brother, going to a jazz festival or some such nonsense -- I made up a story. A day went by until the absolute deadline, and I hadn't bothered to get back in touch with Dorothy Couterie because I assumed that when she didn't hear from me that she would assume I had in fact this prior engagement with my brother. But she didn't assume that at all, and she called my mother (*laugh*) and asked her what she should do. My mother really let me have it, and demanded that I get back in touch with Dorothy, and said I would accept with pleasure.

So there I was at another school dance, not really knowing how to dance, and still not knowing

how to talk to a girl, particularly to a girl so far outside of my orbit. Everybody must have noticed, and must have known that I was a virtual social pariah to everyone else except this unknown youngster. I don't think that I went to another school dance the rest of the year. I think maybe I went to the senior prom, the last event of the year, and it would have been a real humiliation if I hadn't shown up at that. I think I went to that in the company of Doris Mosher, just as a token, because at the time she was engaged to my brother. But at least I was there.

Eugene: This was your senior year?

Henry: This was my senior year. I was 15 when it began. I didn't turn 16 until the middle of the year. By that time, practically everybody else in my class was 18. One of the assemblies that I organized consisted of a talk called "This is the Army", or maybe "This is going to be the Army" or something to that effect. This fellow was a friend of one of the mothers at the Anderson nursery school. She said he was a good public speaker, and that he could give the class -- the whole student body for that matter -- an orientation of what it would be like if they were drafted, which many of them were going to be. So, that wasn't a bad idea for an assembly subject. But, to my surprise, it turned out that this fellow was something of an ideologue who felt that it was a good idea for the United States to get along better with the Soviet Union. He had a point in that the U.S. and U.S.S.R. were allies at that time, against the Axis of Germany, Italy, and Japan. But I think he probably overdid it a bit in whatever he might have said about the virtues of the Soviet experiment, and the virtues of Uncle Joe Stalin. So, that did not turn out to be the total triumph I had hoped.

One assembly I remember that went a little bit better was a program of music by a trio of students, one of whom played the piano pretty well, one of whom played the drums pretty well, and one of whom played the clarinet pretty well. So, they entertained the audience successfully.

By and large, my senior year was a very unhappy time. I was totally out of the swim; there was no group that I belonged to, and I was terribly lonely. I spent many an afternoon going to the movies by myself, and other times I would just go to the library and read books by William Saroyan, or whatever. On the very last day, Dick Jennings, the evil genius that I had to thank for the whole thing, got me to one side and said "You know you screwed yourself this year, don't you, Hank?" I guess my jaw dropped, and I looked at him ... At moments like that, I can't think of the right thing to say. I should have said "The whole thing was your idea, Dick", but I guess I just held my tongue, which is my usual practice. But it did change myself from this happy-go-lucky kid that I had been formerly to this guy who came across as stiff, unsmiling, and aloof ... some thought of me as arrogant.

It's been tough -- in fact, I guess it's been impossible -- for me to ever recapture that carefree, happy-go-lucky kid that I once was. So, when I said the other day that I was going to be talking about the single biggest mistake that I ever made in my life, some of you might have thought that I was referring to some of my experiences in the way of romance. But, although I made my mistakes in that area all right, in a certain sense I think that what happened to me as a result of my agreeing with Dick Jennings affected those later mistakes and everything else. I think it was

the turning point. So, if I had it to do over again, I would have stayed with my initial reaction, which was "No, no, no". It also affected my grades, although by the time it got down to my applying for admission to places like Pomona College, I had already made a sufficiently good record in my other years that even though I began getting B's as a senior instead of all A's, they still gave me a very generous scholarship, so that worked out all right.

It also affected my experiences on the track team, because I began sloughing off a bit in practice, taking days off with the alibi that I had business to attend to in the Commissioners' office, and so forth. But I was in fact just being a little lazy. I must say that our coach was very laid-back and didn't notice that I wasn't practicing very hard. He spent most, if not all, of his time on the varsity side of things rather than the lightweight side. He never told me that I should run a certain number of 220's to work on my speed, and run a certain number of 880's to work on my endurance, or that sort of thing -- he just let that go.

So, in my senior year on the track team I did not do at all well compared to the first year as a junior. First of all, because I hurt myself in a practice game of basketball -- hurt my knee, which kept me out of the meets for the early part of the year. I only ran in one dual meet, and that was against Sequoia. On that occasion, I took it easy in the first three quarters of the race, and then hoped that I had enough left to turn on the afterburner. In fact, that worked -- I nipped the guy from Sequoia High at the tape. The crowd loved that, but it wasn't a very good strategy because I tried it in the league championship where Paly was in with Burlingame, San Mateo, and all those others. I tried holding back until the last quarter of that quarter mile, and my strategy did not work at all -- I came in fourth.

The only saving grace was that when I came to the Northern California sectional meet held at Edwards Field here in Berkeley, they changed the definition of unlimited and lightweight, to lower the limits of the lightweight group below what they had been. A number of guys who had come in ahead of me at the league meet had more than the requisite number of factors -- they changed the number from 130 to 125, and I still came in under 125. So, I didn't have to go up against the same guys that I did before. This time I decided I would use the opposite strategy, go out as fast as I could to begin with, and then hope that I was able to stagger in for the final quarter of the quarter mile race. It worked out better than the opposite strategy had -- I came in second -- but I had the experience of becoming so exhausted that I was unconscious of my arms and legs; I didn't know that I was moving them. I felt as if I was floating. I'd never had that experience before, and I hope I never did again, because I think it does terrible things to the heart of a young kid, which I still was. In any event, I got a second in that and a fourth place in the long jump, which is more than any of the other Paly guys did -- either varsity or unlimited. So, in a certain way I did all right at the very end of my athletic career, such as it was.

Well, I then went into something that I had been looking forward to as a certain sign of maturation: I was able to get a legitimate job, instead of mowing people's lawns for 25 cents an hour, which is all that I had been able to do during summers up to that point to make pocket money. I got a job in a cannery, and in order to do that I had to join the Teamsters Union. It was all part of the war effort, because we were canning stuff with labels to send peaches and

whatnot to the U.S. army rather than sending them to Safeway stores. So I felt pretty darn good about that. But my brother and I never fully made up the rift that opened up between us at that time. Incidentally, his engagement to Doris Mosher didn't last terribly long. So, when she wrote in my yearbook that she looked forward to having a brother -- all she had in her life up that time was a sister -- just the way I looked forward to maybe having her for a sister-in-law -- but it didn't work out. But Oscar and I have never been really close ever since, even though he lives only a few blocks away. We never see each other, except (*laugh*) at get-togethers at Rachel's place, or occasional picnics organized by Rachel at Tilden Park, or whatever.

Eugene: Was the rift just because of the change in your demeanor?

Henry: Yeah, he thought I had really become Mr. Morose, and maybe he's right. I could make advances to repair the rift insofar as possible, but I'm not sure it's possible. We're both pretty well established with what we are. I remember (*laugh*) an intelligence test that we were supposed to take in the middle of our senior year at Paly High. It wasn't the Stanford-Binet IQ test of infamy. It was a more generalized test. It had a section on grasp of spatial relationships, and had a number of general questions, one of which I distinctly remember. The question was, in so many words, what should be the principal quality of a village leader. The choices were age, experience, wisdom, and ambition. I knew, of course, the answer that they wanted -- any fool would know that -- but I didn't give it to them. I told them that I thought ambition trumped everything. A person should really want to be a leader rather than have it forced upon him. I have never wanted to be a leader. If I had "followed my bliss", as I think the expression goes, I would have worked on being the best that I am capable of being as a writer and/or as an artist - - but I didn't. So, that's one of the lessons I have learned in life a little too late.

As long as we're just free-associating here, off the record, we have a few more minutes before Virginia gets back -- anything you'd like to say? What do you think I should have done?

Eugene: Did you take advice from either your brother or your mother? Were they aware of the whole situation? What did they think? I mean, in the election.

Henry: I'm sorry, I don't follow your question.

Eugene: Oh, you mean, you're saying, what should you have done in your life?

Henry: No, I mean how should I have dealt with the blandishments of Richard M. Jennings.

Eugene: That's what I thought. That's what I'm saying. Did you get any advice? Did you make your mother aware of ...

Henry: Oh, oh, oh, yeah, I see what you mean. Yeah, she was aware of it, and didn't try to influence me one way or the other. She just said I should do whatever I wanted. She and Doris were very close. I think Doris actually worked for my mother on weekends and various times in the nursery school, as well as at summer camps. So, I wouldn't be a bit surprised, now that I think about it, if she were heavily influenced by Doris's claims that I was very popular, and that I

would make a very good student body president. I think if I had asked for the advice of my brother, he would have been much more cautious. He knew I was basically a very bashful and shy person, and that I would be unhappy. But, I don't think I asked his advice.

David: Are we done?

Henry: Yeah, anytime.