Memories of the 1950s

Operation Freshie (1953)

For most University students, “learning” means enrolling in a set number of courses each year and grinding your way through them until, in the fullness of time, you finally have your degree(s) in hand and are off to make the world a Better Place.

In my day, the standard academic fare was, for some, complemented by military training programs sponsored by the three armed services. The Royal Canadian Air Force version was known as the University Reserve Training Plan (URTP), and its purpose was to stimulate interest in the Air Force and to ensure a flow of trained University students as commissioned officers for the Regular service or the Reserves. To deliver the program, provision was made in 1948 for the establishment of RCAF (Auxiliary) University Flights at all the major schools across the country. The University of Manitoba Flight was one of the first formed. After a few years, the Flights were elevated to Squadron status.

The students’ training program covered three years. They attended lectures during the academic year, with pay, and could look forward to summer jobs as Flight Cadets while receiving flying or specialist training. For up to 22 weeks during three consecutive summers, they could be employed as pilot, navigator, or radio officer trainees, or in eleven non-flying specialist categories that ranged from aeronautical engineering to chaplaincy. Each University Flight/Squadron was to have an establishment of around 100 cadets, with selection being made at the rate of approximately 35 freshmen annually.

At the University of Manitoba, a Tri-Service Day was instituted as part of Freshie Week that was laid on shortly after the school year began in September. The purpose of Freshie Week was to introduce and orient new students to the campus and to University life. Tri-Service Day served to showcase the military training programs that were available, and to provide an opportunity to recruit new cadets. To that end, displays and demonstrations were standard fare; but the 1953 rendition of Tri-Service Day offered something special.
In the early 1950s, the Cold War was up and running, and the locally-based 402 “City of Winnipeg” (Auxiliary) Squadron was a going concern. Its role was to train for the day when the Soviet hordes would come pouring across our northern borders; and to deal with such an eventuality, the Squadron was equipped with P-51 Mustang fighter-bombers. These things were real hot rods: they could bore holes in the sky at the rate of 700 kilometres per hour and, as versatile fighter planes, were capable of all kinds of aerial gymnastics. They were sure-bet crowd-pleasers at air shows, which were common events in those days of concerted military build-up and personnel recruitment.

So at some point, someone got the bright idea: why not have the local Squadron give an aerial demonstration over the University on Tri-Service Day? What a dramatic way to promote the Air Force to a large group of impressionable young prospects for the URTP! In traditional military fashion, the exercise was even given an official code name—“Operation Freshie.” This spectacle wasn’t the brainchild of the Residence crowd, but surely many Residence students were in a position to enjoy it.

And so it was that on September 23, 1953 a pair of the swift, nimble Mustangs were put through their paces in the skies above the Fort Garry campus. The 402 Squadron Historical Report for the month noted that the event was a “great success,” and Squadron Leader R.C. Bellan, Commanding Officer of the University of Manitoba Squadron, expressed his appreciation to the CO of 402 in a letter that read in part:

“...In particular, the aerobatics carried out by the two Mustangs from your Squadron highlighted the show. The pilots put on a display to be equaled with the best of flying performances. Their sustained coverage of the campus over the full hour was timely, as the majority of students were able to be out of classes, and see the display."

How many other universities across the country kicked off the 1953-54 academic year with their very own air show?!

A repeat performance was staged a year later, but that one was to be the last. In the summer of 1956 the Squadron’s role was changed from combat to navigation training and transport. The unit reluctantly disposed of its agile Mustangs for lumbering twin-engine crates that bore the unglamorous nickname “Bugsmashers”—machines that were entirely unsuited to gut-wrenching aerobatics. The U of M aerial display program thus passed into history, and Freshie Week was never quite the same.

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Manitoba, Alma Mater (Brown & Gold)

Manitoba, Alma Mater, glory now to you,
Ancient prairie halls of learning, praises high and true.
From your loyal sons and daughters, prosperity and fame,
Manitoba, Alma Mater, honour to your name.

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A successful pep rally in the Auditorium in 1952 after the Freshie Parade when the campus Freshie Queens were introduced.
Student Union Building (1953)

With the unveiling of the Commemorative Plaque by Premier Douglas L. Campbell in late October, the new Student Union Building had been officially opened. The Union and Athletic Centre provided a common meeting ground for participation in sports, socials, and student government.

Work on the structure actually began in 1945 when the Students’ Union first took active measures towards obtaining a building for itself. A special meeting of the Board of Governors in August 1946 set up a committee to appeal for funds. By their efforts, the public was made to realize the need for a student administration and recreation building.

Committees were organized to lead the campaign for funding and in January of 1947 the Students’ Union and Athletic Centre drive was launched. University students solicited $130,000 and this amount was matched by a grant of $130,000 from the Manitoba government. The UMSU could finally make their plans.

The actual construction began in the summer of 1948, almost a year and a half after the drive for funds had begun. A five year old RCAF hangar formed the shell of the new building and was reassembled on the Fort Garry campus, west of the old Chemistry and Physics Building. It was to contain a basketball floor and a one-storey lean-to, housing athletic offices as well as student offices. Work was delayed by a cave-in in 1950, but by March of that year the first section was complete.

The building was completed in the spring of 1952 and the two-storey wing housed the Cafeteria, lounge, conference rooms, and the council chamber. The one-storey section beside it contained the offices of The University of Manitoba Students’ Union. This was the beginning of the end for the Residence building as the official meeting place for campus activities. Now students had other venue choices for sports, meals, and major events.

Construction had started by 1948, but the new Student Union Building was not opened until October 1953.

The students often referred to the Student Union Building as UMSU....as in, “Let’s meet at UMSU for coffee.”
Choral-Symphony Concert (1954)

“Choral-Symphony Concert on Tonight at the Playhouse,” read The Manitoban on Friday, March 5, 1954. But, all because two hotels burned in Winnipeg during the night of March 3rd, that particular concert has yet to be put on ... in the Playhouse.

The story behind the story shows that those two hotels stood directly west of the Playhouse Theatre. Smoke and water damage made necessary a complete check of the building’s wiring system, and this check—a three-day job—forced the cancellation of three productions. Included in the select group was the University's Choral-Symphony production. The committee heads were faced with a quick decision to change the venue location, and to a quick decision they came: the Fort Garry Residence Auditorium.

No one thought it would work, but everyone was pleasantly surprised. Radio stations plugged the switch and probably, in the process, aroused more interest than before. A great crowd of people, in any event, ended up at Fort Garry and enjoyed a great concert. In contrast to what choir members had felt was a rather mediocre showing at Portage la Prairie a month earlier, the March concert was probably the best Choral-Symphony effort in recent years.

Beethoven and Schubert by the orchestra and the hauntingly beautiful songs of Elgar by the Choral Society charmed the audience and made the months of practice and even the eleventh-hour shift decidedly worthwhile.

Last One Yesterday! Let’s Go Home and Rest (1954)

The 1953-54 term in Residence, thanks to the untiring efforts of the Women's and Men's House Committees, was a very successful one and will be long remembered by every student who spent even a few months in that unique place. At all times, the old Residence lived up to its reputation of “never a dull moment.”

In the realm of athletic activities as well as of social life, Residence students enjoyed a banner year. Again the two Residence Gyms were the scenes of much expenditure of energy. The new addition to our athletic set-up—the skating and hockey rink—was used to advantage. Residence skating became a must on Friday nights, then a trip to the Canteen, and then up to the dance became the typical Friday
evening itinerary. Some even managed to fit in a few assignments … but these were rare. Winter athletics were rounded out by Residence curling, climaxed by the annual Residence bonspiel.

Many Residence students made the jaunt over to the UMSU Building for various indoor athletic activities. Judging from the amount of participation, basketball, curling, and badminton remained the favourites.

The social life needed for a well-balanced college diet was admirably taken care of by our old friend the Residence Auditorium, and Sunday-night programmes were presented and featured some very talented Residence performers. Included this term was a visit by entertainers from rural towns … a welcome innovation.

Two things were consistently evident this term—the meal hours and the Friday-night dances. These Friday-night dances after the Cafeteria closed will always take a prominent place in a student’s memories of Residence. The Hallowe’en Dance was a big success this year, amid the marvellous decorations that were up all over. The Aggies were in their glory on November the fourteenth when the annual Residence Barn Dance was held. On February the nineteenth, in the girls’ Gym, the Residence Formal came off: and it, too, took its place as one of the outstanding social events of the season. March fifteenth saw our annual Colour Night take over the Residence Dining Hall, and, after a banquet and the presentation of awards, a dance was held in the Auditorium. Both dance band and vocalist were top-notch.

Sunday morning church services were conducted weekly in the Residence Auditorium. The Residence Choir, under capable direction, had an outstanding year, and thanks must be given to the hard-working Residence Church Committee.

No matter how many big events or activities are listed, it is always the little things of everyday Residence Life that linger in the mind. The trip to the post office every day, trying to sneak into your roommate’s food parcel when you’re hungry, trying to find a magazine in the common room, and the leisurely breakfast hours on Sunday—it is these experiences, to mention only a few—that make the Varsity Residence a place of unforgettable memories.

Tied Up (1954)

Life is full of deadlines. And as often as not, if you don’t toe the line, you’re dead. That’s why they’re called “deadlines.”

Getting into (and out of) the Men’s Residence at the University of Manitoba in the mid-1950s also involved deadlines. You had to have sent in your application (cum $10 deposit) by July 31st if you
wanted to be considered for accommodation during the coming term. If you missed the deadline, you were put on a waiting list and you took your chances.

If you applied on time, three things could happen:

1. You didn’t get accepted into Residence (because, for example, you were a graduate student and the undergrads, of whom there were many, were given preference);
2. You were accepted and happily spent the following school year in Residence; or
3. You were accepted but voluntarily withdrew. If you intended to voluntarily withdraw, you had until September 1st to let the authorities know so that you could recover your application fee. Miss that deadline and you were out ten big ones—a tidy sum in those days.

Of course, would-be Residence students missed their deadlines from time-to-time. Then came the reasons/explanations/excuses in the hope that the “Powers That Be” would be sufficiently moved to tears to make an exception for you. The reasons proffered by tardy students for missing the deadline were generally well founded and reasonable. Sometimes it wasn’t so much what they said, however, but how they said it.

Take, for instance, the chap who sent in his $10 deposit too late. By all appearances he was working for the railroad or the Highways Department. “I would have sent this sooner,” he wrote to the Director of Men’s Residence, “but I have been tied up in the gravel pit these past three weeks and had no opportunity to send it.”

Was being “tied up in a gravel pit” solid grounds for missing the deadline for submitting one’s room deposit? The record is silent as to the outcome of this ambiguously worded plea.

Wages of Sin  (1954)

Just when the first water fight took place in the Men’s Residence is surely now lost in the fog of antiquity. But one thing is certain; in the mid-1950s, the tradition was alive and well. And somehow the Administration folks never seemed to have quite gotten used to the idea.

It transpired that on the morning of December 13, 1954 a “disturbance” manifested itself. Said construction involved unauthorized use of fire hoses; and behold, conspicuous violations were committed against the health and welfare of the Residence building. The Superintendent of Buildings & Grounds conducted an examination of the trauma, and it was discerned that a total of 33 bedroom floors were water-damaged.

It was found necessary to re-surface, stain, and apply two coats of varnish to each floor. In addition,
two bedroom ceilings were found to be water-stained due to seepage from the floors above. The total estimate to effect the needed repairs came to $413.40 in 1954 CDN funds.

However, there were mitigating circumstances: this was hardly the first time aqueous warfare had broken out in the Residence, and the Administration had to concede that some of the noted damage may have been there already from previous campaigns. Accordingly, the authorities saw fit to deduct $170 from the estimated cost of healing the structural wounds from the December 13th outbreak. Where was this money to come from? As it turned out, there had been similar incidents on September 25th and November 5th of that same year, and fines levied on those occasions had netted a $170 surplus.

By subtracting $170 from $413, we are left with $243. There were 367 students in the Residence on the morning of December 13th, and it was decided, in an astounding display of frontier justice, that every blessed one of them would be assessed a fine of 65¢ (in round figures), whether they participated in the engagement or not. Blessed are the innocent, for they, too, shall get ding’ed.

Predictably, this tarring of everyone with the same brush didn’t always go unchallenged. On April 29th, 1954, a similar disturbance materialized. As a consequence, all of the individuals who had been in Residence that night were informed that they would be placed at the bottom of the waiting list for rooms for the forthcoming 1954-55 academic year!

How many unblemished victims made formal objection to this travesty is unknown, but one chap wrote the Director of Men’s Residence in June, pointing out that he and many others were not party to the April rambunction, and that his own personal behaviour as a Residence student to date had always been good and proper. Furthermore, with no relatives in Winnipeg to lend a hand, it would be difficult for him, being far out of town for the summer, to obtain lodgings off-campus.

Happily, the “Powers That Be” saw the error of their ways and all ended well for the guys in the white hats—our supplicant, for one, not only got a room but in company with his old roommate as well. Meanwhile, the varmints in the black hats presumably got their just desserts.

But water fights weren’t the only means whereby a Residence student could be separated from his modest lucre and thereby held to account. At the beginning of the academic year, each had to make a deposit of “caution money” that would be returned in full if his room was left in good condition upon his departure. Otherwise, some or all of the caution money was retained by the Administration, presumably to repair or clean up what was left behind. In May of 1955, a list was made of offenders, their offences, and the fines levied [see side panel].

If you feel that the above sins appear rather venial from a modern-day perspective, your assessment is not without foundation. Since the mid-1950s, more robust ways have been devised by Residence students to keep the juices flowing. In the 2009-10 Residence Housing Agreement, two old favourites—tampering with or misusing fire-fighting equipment and setting fires—were still listed among the other activities seriously frowned upon [see side panel] by those who sought to keep peace and good order.

### A sample of fines levied in 1954.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CRIME</th>
<th>PUNISHMENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Door panel damaged</td>
<td>All caution money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burn on desk, chest, and bookcase</td>
<td>All caution money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very dirty room</td>
<td>All caution money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bottles and rubbish left, room very dirty</td>
<td>All caution money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Floor stained with oil</td>
<td>$1.00 each, 2 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very dirty room</td>
<td>$1.00 each, 2 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Screen off and damage to walls</td>
<td>$1.00 each, 2 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Screen off and garbage left</td>
<td>50¢ each, 2 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotch tape on walls</td>
<td>50¢ each, 2 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dirty room</td>
<td>25¢ each, 2 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Screen off</td>
<td>25¢ each, 2 students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### In comparison, note the assorted misdeeds listed in the 2009-10 Residence Housing Agreement.

- Illegal sale, purchase, or use of drugs and/or alcohol;
- Physical acts of violence, threats of violence, coercion, intimidation, or any other form of harassment;
- Use or storage of flammable liquids or other dangerous substances;
- Use or storage of combustion engines in the Residence (including anything that has, as a component part, a combustion engine, e.g., a motorcycle); and, perhaps most unsettling of all
- The use or possession of explosives, firearms, or dangerous weapons.

The Age of Innocence is indeed behind us.
One might well presume that the listing and explicit prohibition of all of the listed transgressions was based on actual precedents. Is it not the case that laws and rules are more often than not formulated in light of harsh experience?

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**ABC (1954-55)**

In about 1954 or 55, it was rumoured that two chaps on the third floor had been operating the “ABC” (Aggie Beer Club) over a long period of time, whereby beer was obtained and sold at cost to friends and other Residents. One of the cleaning staff eventually discovered a mountain of empties after a Friday night dance in the Auditorium, and told the authorities.

Beer at that time in Residence meant no graduation and immediate expulsion. The accused Aggies were hauled up in front of the U of M President and somehow avoided punishment. Apparently the fellows said something to the effect, “Do you really think, sir, in our graduating year, knowing how close to graduation we are, that we would take the chance of ruining our chances of graduating?” Obvious answer: “Well no, no one would be that stupid!” And they got off!!

Smuggling the beer in, spreading it around Residence, and consuming it in secrecy took considerable ingenuity, and the “forbidden fruit” aspect made it highly adventurous. Smuggling girls into rooms was more rare and fell just short of a “media event” on the floor!

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- The Aggie Beer Club (ABC) was a clever play on words for the Athletic Board of Control (ABC)—an established and respected organization at the U of M.

- The Women’s Lounge (East) to the left and the Men’s Lounge (West) to the right in 1952. Wow, cool drapes!

- Some of the Residence students enjoying one of their favourite beverages of the time.
Dr. Marshall Gysi has given his permission to include excerpts taken from his second book titled, “U of M Prairie Chicken” published in 2005. His book recounts memories of his years of dorm life and Engineering training at the University of Manitoba from 1954 to when he graduated in 1958. Our sincere thanks for these wonderful stories of a Residence student in the 1950s.

The Walk

I was walking east on the road into the University of Manitoba, about to begin a new phase in my life. It was the fall of 1954, and I would soon be 18 years old. I had $200 in my pocket, saved from my two months’ work as a hired hand that past summer. I had won a $300 scholarship, so was only $100 short of the total of $600 that I would need for my first year in Engineering. I only had to pay $300 now, and the other $300 in early January, so I had until the Christmas holidays to try and earn the extra hundred dollars needed. I was on my own and on my way. I did not know what life had in store for me, but I was eager to get on with it.

My cardboard suitcase did not contain many clothes. In it I had my “good” pants, which were made of dark blue serge wool, rather shiny in the rear. I would just have to keep my back to the wall, if I was invited to social occasions. I had enough shirts, shorts, and socks to get through a week, and Aunt Mary had promised to do my laundry for me on the weekends. Aunt Mary and Uncle Ross lived on Sherburn Street in west Winnipeg. Uncle Haig had given me his old winter coat, which also had a bit of shine, but Mom had re-sewn the buttons. I knew that I was not the most fashionable young man in Manitoba, but I was well scrubbed and pressed. In the years ahead, there would be time enough to buy smart clothes. For the next year, my task would be simple. I would have to keep my back to the wall, my nose to the grindstone, and pass into second year Engineering.

The Campus

By now I had reached the campus, and was directed to the men’s dormitory. At that time, the men’s dorm was on the west side of the dormitory building, and the women’s on the east, and never the twain should meet. The only occasions for meetings of the sexes would be the mealtimes in the Cafeteria that separated the main floor of the dorms, and the Friday Night Dances in the ballroom just above. Never, under penalty of death or banishment, would one consider trying to visit the other side of the dorm during a dance. Two guardians were posted permanently, one on each side, to see that no breach of this rule ever took place.

I entered my new “home” and found the office of my new guardian. Her name was Clara Unwin. She seemed a hundred years old and tough as nails. She fixed you with a look that said
“don’t you ever mess with me.” Actually, it was all a sham. Clara was only 50, and probably quite liked her young internees. However, she adopted a stern air for first meetings to let you know who was boss.

Superintendent Unwin gave me the joyous news that I was assigned to a room in the dormitory immediately below her office. I smiled at her with delight, to show that I was thrilled to be within earshot of “the enforcer” for the foreseeable future. Clara smiled back with a look that queried, “Is he really that innocent, or is he another smart one that I’ll soon have to whip into shape?” Not able to fathom my enthusiastic smile, she proceeded to tell me that my roommate would be Bob, who also came from Darlingford, and who had shared one year with me at the Darlingford High School.

I was glad to learn that I already knew my roommate. Bob was a farm boy whose family lived south of Darlingford, and who was enrolled in the Agricultural Faculty. I liked Bob and was happy with this start to dormitory life.

I went down to my room and started to unpack. There were two single beds on either side of the room, and two small closets on either side of the front door. Straight in front was the window at ground level, with a cast-iron radiator below it. There were two small tables and chairs, one on each side of the radiator. It was a simple room, but large and luxurious by my standards of the time.

Outside the door, which was at the foot of the stairs leading to the basement, was a small open area. On the other side was the washroom. We quickly learned never to cross the open area, which was the bottom of the four-storey corner stairwell. To ignore this unspoken rule would be to invite a water bomb on the head from some upper level prankster.

The washroom had several sinks on either side of the entrance, and around the corner was a second room with toilets and showers. For a young farm boy, who had always used an outdoor toilet and bathed in a tin tub, this was pure luxury.

I returned to the room and sat on the bed. I thought back two years, to the time when the Tribune Agent had given me the advice to go to university. He was an Engineering student who was working part-time for the Winnipeg Tribune, to pay his way through university. I silently thanked him now for the help he had given me then. I hoped that I would meet him again soon, so that I could personally thank him for his advice. (As life has turned out, I never did find this young man who had helped me get started with my Engineering career. I hope some day I will meet him again, to express my sincere thanks.)

I went to the window to look out at my new world, the University of Manitoba campus. I was looking north along the sidewalk that would take me to the Engineering Buildings, just on the left (west) side of the sidewalk. On the right side was an expansive quadrangle. On the north side of the quadrangle was the Administration Building, one of the oldest buildings on the campus, sitting on a small rise, overlooking the quadrangle. I wondered if it had been built on its mini-hill to avoid being flooded by the Red River. The latest flood of 1950 must have made quite a mess of my current quarters.

On the east side of the quadrangle was the Science Building, a beautiful gray limestone structure. The dormitory, from which I was viewing this scene, was on the south side of the quadrangle. A modern building, the Library, was at the northeast corner of the quad, on the east side of the Admin Building. The UMSU (University of Manitoba Students’ Union) Building was west of the Admin Building. The city buses terminated at a loop on the southeast side of UMSU, beside the north (modern) wing of the Engineering complex.

There were other buildings on the campus, such is the Physics Building, the Home Economics Building and the President’s Residence on the north side of the Admin Building, and the Agricultural Building to the west of the dormitory. Nearly all of my classes would take place in the Engineering complex, with most lectures taking place in the new building. (As I write this story in 2004, 50 years after my start at the University of Manitoba, this building, which was new at that time, has just been demolished, and will soon be replaced by a “newer new” building. Time marches on.)

About this time Bob, my new roommate, showed up. We got reacquainted. We had not seen each other for a year. After we had exchanged news of the past year and packed away our clothes, we began to walk around the basement, visiting future friends who were sharing that corner of the dormitory.

Down the hall we met Roger from Prince Albert, SK, and Robert (Bob) who was from Souris, MB. Bob’s sense of humour was a bit
special, and it always worked unfailingly on the innocent Prairie Chicken. He would tell me something quite believable, but slightly surprising. If I accepted the bait by saying, “Really?” he would laugh uproariously, pointing a finger at me while gasping, “Gysi, you numbskull!” (Actually, Bob would refer to a lower part of my anatomy, but I am trying to keep these stories readable for Grandma and grandchild, alike). He thoroughly enjoyed these opportunities to pull my leg. In spite of being embarrassed by constantly re-swallowing his “whoppers,” I never wearied of being around Robert, for he was truly a good friend. However, I never missed an opportunity to try to play a joke back on Bob.

As you continue reading, the following stories are about Robert (Bob), not Bob my roommate.

The Big Date

The major social event of the week at the U of M dorm was the Friday Night Dance. The dance hall was on the second floor of the dormitory, above the Cafeteria. It had a door leading to the women’s side, on the east side of the dance floor, and a door leading to the men’s side on the west. Guardians were positioned to make sure that no one from the wrong sex entered either side.

Alex (from Dauphin) and Roger (from Prince Albert, SK) usually played saxophone in the orchestra at these dances. I was very proud to have such important musician friends. The girls admired the boys of the band. Most of these guys were quite cool, wearing their draped pants, with 36-inch knees and 12-inch cuffs. I felt like a bit of a hayseed beside these cool guys, because I did not have drapes. I had asked Mom to take in my blue serge pants at the cuffs, so that I could take on some semblance of cool. Unfortunately, my 20-inch trouser knees tapering to 12-inch cuffs made me look more like a Mountie who had worn his breeches too many years. I tried to keep my shiny seat against the wall, and rarely approached a girl to ask for a dance.

One of the most beautiful girls who attended these dances, in my opinion, was Carol. She was tall and slender with auburn hair. She
had been a “Freshie Queen” for one of the faculties, so was quite a
star in the eyes of us first year guys. For several dance evenings I had
admired her from afar, but then one night I asked her for a dance.
I managed not to tread on her toes, despite being so nervous I could
hardly talk. She thanked me politely after the dance, and then returned
to the young man with whom I had seen her share many dances.

The following week I received a letter from Mom with $5 enclosed.
I could hardly believe my eyes. I knew that Mom had very little spare
cash, and so was extremely grateful for this unexpected gift. I thought
back to my dance with Carol, and summoned up the courage to call
her on the telephone. One of my buddies had shown me how to tap
out the number on the receiver hanger of the pay phone, in order to
save the nickel that was normally required to get a dial tone. To my
delight, Carol answered the phone. I asked her if she knew who was
calling and she said, “Certainly.”

I was surprised and happy that Carol had recognized my voice.
After a brief chat, I asked her if she would like to go to the movie at
the Metropolitan Theatre the next evening. The Metropolitan was one
of Winnipeg’s finest downtown theatres at the time, like the Odeon,
Garrick, and the Capitol. She said that she would love to.

I thanked Carol and told her that I would be at her front door the
next night at 7 o’clock. I said goodnight, but as I was removing the
phone from my ear, I thought I heard her say, “Good night, Bill.”
My mind froze, but by the time I had returned the receiver and said,
“Carol, you’ve made a mistake,” she was gone. I wondered what I
should do. I was sure that if I called her back, and explained her
mistake, she would be embarrassed and annoyed. She would probably
never speak to me again. I decided to take the risk and show up the
next evening for our date.

The next evening when Carol opened the door, I saw her eyes
momentarily open wide, and then return to normal. She said with a
warm smile, “Come in, Marshall.” I knew that she had been surprised
when she opened the door, but her warmth and instant welcome
completely set me at ease. She took me to the living room and introduced
me to her father, who was a Consulting Engineer.

We took the Corydon trolley bus downtown and went to the movie at
the Metropolitan. As we left the theatre, I was hoping that she did not
want to have something too expensive for a treat. Carol seemed to read
my mind and suggested we have a cup of cocoa. I was very impressed
with her simple and inexpensive request, given the amount of change
that I had left in my pocket. We then took the trolley home, and I
wished her a “Good Night.” She never let on during the whole evening
that she had been surprised to see Marshall at the door, rather than
Bill. I was thrilled at how pleasant she was, and hopeful that she had
truly enjoyed her evening.

The following day I went over to UMSU, to see if I could spot Carol
with her friends. Sure enough, there she was chatting with one of her
girlfriends at a table. As I approached her from behind, I heard her
mention my name and begin laughing. I hesitated, and sat down
at a nearby table, with my back to Carol. To my horror, I heard her
laughing about what a painful evening last night had been, and what
a “farm boy” Marshall Gysi was. She had found Uncle Haig’s shiny
winter coat to be particularly amusing. I quietly slipped away. Carol
may have been cool enough to act pleasant the evening before, but she
certainly did not seem so pleasant to me anymore. Oh well, I said to
myself, you don’t have enough spending money to ask her for another
date, in any case. This was to be my only date in first year Engineering.
From then on I devoted all my attention to my studies. I guess I can
thank Carol for my good grades that year.

**Entertainment**

There wasn’t much time for entertainment in the dormitory, given
the number of hours of study that we had to do. However, there was
one weekly event that was rarely missed. That was Sunday night in the
common room watching “The Ed Sullivan Show.” The common room
was a large room just inside the main door of the men’s dormitory. It
was filled with comfortable chairs, some magazines, and, in the corner,
a television set. I had never experienced television before, so enjoyed the
magic of seeing the stars on the screen, as much if not more than the
entertainment that they brought. A large area was cleared in front of
the television, and the space would be jammed with students from the
dorm, sitting on the floor.
I could never understand why Ed Sullivan was such a star. He seemed like a pretty bland personality to me. Every week he said the same thing. “Tonight we have a really big shew.” We all laughed at how he spoke, and tried to imitate his accent. He had as guests, however, very big stars of the time. Singers like Dinah Shore and Perry Como. Comedians like Milton Berle and Bob Hope. Ventriloquists like Edgar Bergen or Senor Wences. He also had plenty of entertainers from around the world. On any one Sunday you could see Russian circus performers or Bulgarian acrobats. His favourite guests from Canada became Johnny Wayne and Frank Shuster. I remember seeing the first show when Elvis Presley appeared, filmed only from the waist up, to protect the sensibilities of the audience. I don’t remember whether I saw that show in the common room or not, but that will give you some idea of the level of stars that he had on the show. Many megastars got their first break on the Ed Sullivan Show, including the Beatles.

One day I read about an interesting hand that was called “The Mississippi Gambler’s Sucker Hand.” It was a famous hand that had been used on the riverboats to separate rich innocent people from their money. Mr. Rich Sucker would be dealt an incredibly strong hand, missing hardly any high cards. He would have all the aces, kings, and queens in three of the suits, and the king, jack, and nine of hearts. He would obviously be thrilled with his hand, and would bid to a very high level. When he got to six no trump, one of his opposing players would bid seven hearts, to his utter amazement. Not having the ace of hearts, the poor sucker could not bid to seven, but in utter disgust and frustration, he would double the “fool” who had bid seven hearts. This bidder would then redouble, and “Rich” would usually become so angry that he would want to bet a large amount of money on the outcome. Of course, the cards would be laying incredibly poorly for Rich. Behind his king-jack-nine of hearts, was the ace-queen-10 of the “foolish” bidder. Not only that, but the bidder and his partner had voids in all the side suits, so no matter what was led, it got trumped. By cross ruffing, and finessing the hearts as they were drawn, the bidder’s long diamond suit became established, and seven hearts, doubled and redoubled, was made.

I had shown my friend Alex this article, and we decided it would be fun to try and play this trick on Bob. We got together with Larry, and carefully went over the hand until we knew how it should be played. I then stacked the deck. The next Sunday, when we went to Larry’s room, I pulled out the deck and pretended to shuffle it, while we all talked happily about the show. I passed the cards to Bob and asked him to cut, which he did. I then put the cards back the way they had been, and dealt the hands. We could hardly keep straight faces when we saw Bob’s eyes bulge as he sorted his hand.

Bob was not only the perfect “conned man” at the table, but turned out to be the dream “Mr. Rich Sucker” of all time. He was so flabbergasted by the whole event, that he overlooked the obvious possibility he had been tricked by his buddies. He raved on and on about the incredible lay of the cards, and how his monstrously strong 33 point hand had been cross ruffed and finessed to dust. He so
For years thereafter we would listen to Bob gleefully describe this amazing hand to disbelieving friends, silently enjoying the best trick ever played on our dear buddy, Rapid Robert. (Nearly 40 years later, while visiting Bob for the first time in more than two decades, I said over a glass of wine that I had a heavy secret to share. Before I had got two words out Bob stopped me, and asked with a gasp if he had been “conned” by Larry, Alex, and me that incredible bridge evening in the dorm. We had a great laugh, as he belatedly realized that, yes, he had truly been “had.”)

College Boy Comes Home

The first semester quickly came to a close, and I was heading home to Darlington for the Christmas holidays. I went down to Ken Pearce’s store and asked if he could give me some work packing turkeys. He was happy to take me on, and I was soon packing naked turkeys into wooden boxes. The pay was good, 75¢ an hour, so over the holidays I was able to save $75. This was all I needed to cover the cost of my books for the next semester.

Mom gave me a watch for Christmas. It was a “Birks-Dingwall” model, which must have cost $20. I was thrilled with my first wristwatch. I would now be able to leave my Westclox pocket watch in my room. A few days after returning to the dorm, I removed my Birks one evening in the washroom, laying it on the sink while washing up. I returned immediately from my room when I discovered what I had done. I had only left the washroom seconds before. My precious gift from Mom was already gone. I ran around the corner into the toilet-shower area, calling out if anyone had seen my watch. There was no reply. I found no one there.

I headed down the hall, knocking on doors, confident that someone had picked up my watch for me, and that it would soon be returned. There was either no reply to my knock, or no knowledge of the missing watch, after my circuit of all the doors in the basement.

I was shocked and saddened that one of my basement companions was probably a thief. I put a notice on the dorm bulletin board, offering a reward of $5 for my watch’s return. All I received was some embarrassment the next day, when I heard some guys laughing at the notice. Life could be cruel, at times. I was sorry to have to tell Mom about my carelessness in leaving her beautiful gift in the washroom. Of course, replacement was out of the question.

Cafeteria Capers

The second semester at the U of M was now under way. A big part of dorm life was mealtime at the Cafeteria. Every morning, from 6:30 am until 8:30 am the Cafeteria was open for breakfast. Lunch was served from 11:30 am until 1:30 pm. Supper was served from 5:30 pm until 7:30 pm. Most of my friends complained about the food served in the Cafeteria. They joked about how bad it was. For me, the Cafeteria food seemed quite good, and I could never understand why it received such bad reviews.

We would often line up outside the Cafeteria door just before opening time, in order to get first choice at the food that was available, and to find a good table, perhaps with some friends from the women’s dormitory. By now, we had made friends that you could almost classify as “girlfriends.” For some reason or another, our girlfriends seemed to be all enrolled in the Home Economics Faculty. Bob’s friend was Marion from Fort Churchill, and Alex’s friend was Linda from Minnedosa. My friend was Sylvia. Sylvia’s roommate was Donna from Souris, a friend of Bob’s, who introduced us to the others. We didn’t have enough money or time in first year to ask our friends out on dates, but we often joined them for dinner conversations.

As the warming days slowly ate away the winter snow, we contracted spring fever, and began playing a few pranks. One day, although I knew it was against the rules, I hid an extra cookie behind my plate as I went through the Cafeteria line. We were allowed to take only one soup, one main course, one dessert and one cookie for each meal. Our trays would be inspected carefully at the cash register, and our meal cards punched only after we had passed inspection. I was quite nervous as I snuck my extra cookie past the inspector, but when I got to the table, I proudly put the two cookies beside my glass of water. Suddenly, from out of nowhere, Beatrice Brownlee, the University Residence Dietitian, was looming behind my back.
BB pointed at my two cookies, and then dragged me by my shoulder down the hall to see “the Enforcer,” Clara Unwin. Clara was terribly disappointed in me. She told me that rules were rules, and that they had to be obeyed. She said that I would not be allowed to have cookies for the next week, as my punishment for having broken the rules. I thought that “Superintendent Brownlee” had been a bit hard on me, for dragging me to the Enforcer for this first offense. I swore that I would get even with BB before the semester was closed. Not long later, the opportunity accidentally arose.

About three weeks later, it was a warm day as I was walking across the quadrangle. I saw several earthworms wiggling in the sunshine. I picked one up and dropped it in my pocket, wrapped in a paper tissue. One never knew when having an earthworm in your pocket might prove handy. That evening I was lined up with Bob, Alex, and Roger the Dodger in the supper queue. I had whispered to Alex and Roger before Bob arrived that I might try to drop my treasure in Bob’s soup. As I followed Bob through the line, I noted that he had not taken a soup, so I dropped Wiggly Willy into my potato potage. I noted with satisfaction that the specific gravity of Willy exceeded that of potato soup, as Willy dived for the depths.

When we sat down, Bob suddenly noticed that he had forgotten his soup. I offered him mine, saying that I was not particularly hungry, (at least not for that bowl of soup, I silently smiled, as I winked at Alex and Roger). We watched with fascination and mild horror as Bob dug into his soup with gusto, downing three or four spoonfuls with obvious pleasure. Suddenly he stopped, stirred his bowl, and then almost gagged. Willy had just surfaced, doing the breaststroke.

Bob gave a yell at the top of his lungs. Before we could quiet him, there was Beatrice B. at our table asking what was causing the uproar. BB indignantly pointed out Willy doing laps in his bowl, and Beatrice almost fainted. By now, I was starting to feel pretty uncomfortable. I already had cookie theft on my record. If she fixed me with her suspicious stare, I would definitely be doomed. Prairie Chickens have a high moral standard. They cannot tell a lie, besides which they have a low tolerance level to the pain of mental torture. I sat with my incredibly panicked gaze of innocence, willing Beatrice not to look my way, and praying with a fervency long forgotten. I need not have feared, as it transpired.

Bob’s absolute innocence and outrage was completely convincing for Beatrice. She must have seen her University Dietitian’s career flushing down the drain, where Willy would soon be swimming. She could not imagine how Willy had made his way into the potato soup, but she assured us that extreme care would be taken in her future supervision of the soup making. We speculated that perhaps Willy had come in through the water supply. Beatrice, being no Hydraulics Engineer, thought that that might have been the case.

BB suggested that we all forget about this highly unusual event. Taking away Willy for his final dive, she said she was going to get us all an extra dessert for our pains. While she was gone we strongly urged a still distraught Bob to accept Beatrice’s peace offering, rather than pushing the incident to a higher level. We said that we would probably have BB’s undying gratitude if we “did not press charges,” and perhaps we could count on VIP treatment in the Cafeteria henceforth. To my immense relief, Bob agreed. Wow, we had pulled it off! I had “pranked” Bob again, and gained my quite accidental revenge on Beatrice for nailing me as a cookie thief, all in one caper. “Who says crime cannot pay?” I mused, as my heart decelerated from 200 to 65 beats per minute.

The Dorm Raid

One evening, late in the semester, word got around that there was going to be a raid on the women’s dorm. This was exciting business. Soon a bunch of guys were gathered at the far end of the basement hall, beside the elevator shaft. We had a very old fashioned elevator, with a grill at every floor that had to be opened in order to access the elevator. Our leader pried the grill open, eased over the edge, and dropped down to the sub-basement level. We all followed, one at a time, with the last one in closing the grill on the elevator shaft opening.

We were carrying flashlights, because it was very dark and dusty in the sub-basement. We could see silverfish everywhere, which explained where these pesky little insects came from. One of the problems we had
always faced in our basement rooms was the invasion of silverfish. If you left any kind of food on the table, in the morning it would be crawling with silverfish. We had tried putting our parcels of cookies, sent from home, on the radiators. The silverfish had tough feet, happily infesting our heated treats.

We found that the only way to protect our food was to put it on top of a thick wool blanket. The deep pile of the blanket was too difficult a barrier for these little cookie lovers, and our precious parcels from home remained safe.

We soon found the tunnel leading under the Cafeteria towards the east side of the dormitory. Word was passed that we should be very quiet, so we all held our breaths as we crept towards our goal. We finally arrived at the elevator shaft of the basement of the girls’ dorm. We gathered around the grill, trembling with excitement. Soon we heard some girls returning from the washroom, and saw them dressed in their pyjamas. Wow, it could not get more exciting than this!

When the girls went into their rooms, we pried open the grill, and climbed up and into the basement level. Mission accomplished! We were in the “enemy camp.” Some of the guys must have known more about the territory than I did, because they began to head for particular rooms. Suddenly, around the corner came a girl, who gave a loud scream and ran for her room. Many doors opened, and some guys disappeared into some of the rooms with the apparent complicity of the occupants. The rest of us scrambled out the rear exit, and tore back to the men’s dorm. We were breathless, and sweating with nervous excitement. Most of us headed for the washroom, where we tried to clean up, to cover any evidence of crawling through the dusty basement. Then we quickly retired to our bedrooms.

The next day, the “Dorm Raid of 1955” was on everyone’s lips. No one had actually been caught, but the audacity of the raid was big news. A large notice was posted in the men’s dorm, stating that the raid was strictly forbidden according to dormitory rules, and that a second raid would result in serious consequences for anyone caught in the forbidden territory. For me, it had been a tremendous success, providing me with all the spring excitement that one could ever want.

Knife Throwing

A few evenings after the big event, Roger the Dodger was visiting our room, chatting about the success of the Dorm Raid of 1955. Roger had been one of those lucky fellows who had been yanked into a room, when the alarm had been raised. After spending an hour with his gracious hosts, he had managed to sneak undetected out the back door, when the dorm had quieted down. Nothing illegal or immoral had taken place in that dorm room, but his two hosts had been charmed to have the visit, and to have the monotony of a typical evening in the girl’s dorm so deliciously broken. Roger the Dodger became their good friend and co-secret-sharer for the rest of the semester.

As Roger recounted his great exploit, Bob and I gave him our fascinated attention. Roger started throwing his pocketknife at the door. He had become quite skilled with an underhand throw, and was able to have the knife stick to the target, 3 out of 4 throws. Between each throw, he would walk to the door, retrieve his quivering projectile, and return to his throwing position, all the while continuing with his story. Suddenly, there was a rap at the door. The sequence went like this: the under handed throw, “rap, rap,” “thunk.” Roger dived into our closet and closed the door. I quickly whipped off my shirt, opened the door a crack, and faced a glowering Clara Unwin (the Enforcer).

I leaned far enough out the door to show Clara my bare shoulder, to try to make her believe that I was ready for bed, sans jammies. Clara scowled at me and said, “Are you throwing knives at this door?” Beside my hand was Roger’s knife, still quivering from its last “thunk.” I had her on a technicality. I had not been throwing knives, Roger the Dodger had. I said, truthfully, but not innocently, “No, I am not.” Clara stared at me for a long time, wondering whether she really wanted to push the door open wide. She finally decided she did not. She said to me, “Well, you’d better not be, because it’s against the rules.” Then she turned and ascended the stairs. I think that Clara might have had a soft spot in her heart for me, and had not wanted to see what had made that “thunk” sound just after her knock. Maybe Clara wasn’t as ferocious as she made out to be. I began to develop a bit of a soft spot for Clara.
Year's End

The first year of Engineering drew to a close, and I had successfully passed all my exams. The exam week had been very stressful, with exams every morning and afternoon, without a break. One could cram long hours for the morning exams, but many afternoon exams benefited from only a noon hour cram.

Many of the exams were written in the auditorium of UMSU, with hundreds of students grinding row upon row. After each exam we would meet to compare answers, and feel content if many of our colleagues had obtained the same result. My hard work throughout the first two semesters resulted in fairly good grades. Only about 60 percent of the students who had enrolled in first year Engineering passed successfully into second year, so I was pleased to be in that group.

After exam week, the first year Engineering and Architecture students had a one-week Survey School. We all headed into the fields of the University, with our transits and levels, learning first hand how to conduct engineering surveys. It was wonderful being outdoors for these exercises, so I thoroughly enjoyed the experience.

Moving Up and Out

It was exciting coming back to a second year at the University of Manitoba. We were no longer green freshman, but now seasoned sophomores. I went to the dormitory and informed Clara Unwin that I wanted to room in my second year with Alex. She assigned Alex and me a room on the third floor, at the head of the stairs. This was definitely a move in the right direction. We were just down the hall from the entrance to the dance floor. We also did not have any silverfish attacking our cookies in that third floor room.

Alex had a phonograph, which could play the old “78s,” the more modern “33 1/3s,” or the super modern “Long Plays (LPs).” He had plenty of the latest LPs of such jazz and big-band greats as Ella Fitzgerald, Benny Goodman, and Glenn Miller. I was thrilled to have such fabulous music “on tap,” and almost wore out the track of “Honeysuckle Rose Jam Session Live from Carnegie Hall,” with Benny Goodman, Harry James, Gene Krupa, et al, blowing up a storm.

Alex and I decided to “bunk” our beds, to give us more floor space in the room. I was pleased to get the upper bunk. This arrangement worked perfectly, except for my nightly foot cramps that required me to leap from the upper bunk to press my cramped instep to the floor. This usually happened 30 seconds after Alex had drifted off to sleep.

I bumped into Bob shortly after arriving on campus. He and Roger the Dodger had decided to rent a room at the Aqua Terra Motel, on Pembina Highway, to escape the dormitory meals. Maybe he felt there would be less risk of finding Wiggly Willies in his soup (he-he-he!). He asked me if I was reapplying for the Manitoba Brewers Bursary. I told him that I did not have to, because I had saved $600 over the summer, which was just enough to get me through the second year. Bob laughed his usual laugh. He said, “Gysi, you dummy! You don't have to go another year so broke that you can't have a date. For goodness sakes, reapply for the Bursary. I'm going to.” With Bob's encouragement, I reapplied, and shortly thereafter had another $400 bursary. This was to come in very handy within the next few weeks.

Uncle Glenn and Aunt Ellen had been stationed at the Winnipeg RCAF Base during the summer. Shortly after classes had got underway, I had a chance for a date with Judy, a Freshie Queen from the previous year. Judy's family lived in Fort Garry, not far from the University. I told Uncle Glenn that I was thinking of buying a car, in order to be able to date Judy. He advised me not to waste my money on a car. He told me that I should ask him, every now and again, if I needed a car, and if it was free, he would lend it to me. I decided to take his advice.

A few weeks later, after twice asking Judy if she was free on Friday, asking Uncle Glenn for his car, being told that unfortunately he was using it, and then cancelling my tentative date, I took my third attempt at a date with Judy. I called Uncle Glenn on the Monday, and asked if he was using the car on Friday. He said no, that it was free. I called Judy and made a date for the Friday evening. On Friday morning I called Glenn and asked what time I should come over to pick up the car. He hesitated, and then said unfortunately something had come up. I would not be able to borrow the car. I decided that this time I would not call off the date.

I climbed on the bus and went down to Portage Avenue, where I visited a used car lot. There I found a 1949 Mercury, with plenty of...
miles, for $375. I bought the car, insured it for $25, and headed out for my date with Judy.

I cannot recall the long awaited date with Judy, so it apparently was not memorable. The 1949 Merc, however, was a thrill to own, and became a big part of my second year at University. It also became a big part of the lives of Alex, Bob, Roger the Dodger, and many of my U of M pals.

The Unwin Tricks

When we got back to the dormitory from our Easter weekend, we discovered that one of the greatest tricks ever played on Mrs. Unwin had taken place in our absence. Some of our dorm mates had decided to put their construction skills to use to build “The Great Wall of Unwin.”

During the middle of the night, they had transported a skid of bricks to the back of the dormitory, where they set up a construction site. Mixing mortar and establishing a construction chain, they began their work in the utmost silence. Quietly they transported the bricks and mortar by pail down the hall to Mrs. Unwin’s door. There, they carefully built a solid brick wall, completely filling up the door frame space. They then removed all the evidence at the back door, cleaned up, and went exhausted to bed, to await the commotion in the morning.

They did not have to wait long. Clara was up early the next morning, planning to go to an early morning Easter service. She opened her door at 7 am, to slip down to the Cafeteria for an early breakfast, and walked right into a brick wall. One can imagine her temporary confusion, until reality and frustration set in. The next thing that was heard was Clara’s voice, crying out of her window that she was going to “call the Mounties.” The U of M security personnel soon arrived with a ladder, and poor Clara had to unceremoniously clamber down to attend her service.

When she returned, The Great Wall of Unwin had been breached, and all traces of brick and still-hardening mortar removed by U of M maintenance staff. The staff had found their work to be quite amusing, but looked suitably serious when Clara arrived. Hopefully the message of the service had been to forgive sinners, because although there were about 400 suspects, there were no hot clues. Fear of banishment from University kept the bond of secrecy secure, and Clara had to, once more, heave a resigned sigh about the trials and tribulations of being “The Enforcer” of the U of M men’s dormitory. (Author’s note: Buck informs me, 50 years after the fact, that Clara somehow “nailed him” for that job, and hoofed him out of the dorm. However, he returned the next day, pleaded for clemency, and Clara relented. Buck apparently kept his nose very clean after that, as far as dorm life was concerned.)

A few weeks later, someone carelessly parked a Volkswagon Beetle outside the front door of the men’s dorm on a Sunday evening, when the gang was just inside watching The Ed Sullivan Show.

Don and a bunch of his Architecture faculty buddies slipped out, picked up the Beetle, climbed the stairs and placed it in the front hall. They then pushed it down the hall and parked it right outside Clara’s door, in case she wanted to ride to breakfast in the morning. It’s a wonder that Clara did not suffer from high blood pressure. I hope she wrote her memoirs, because she certainly deserved to cash in from the many moments of frustration suffered during her “career” at the dorm.

A 1949 Merc, like mine.
Anita

Just before the end of the spring semester of 1956, some new students arrived at the women’s dormitory. This was a refreshing treat, offering new faces at mealtimes. A real spring renewal, you might say. Amongst the new faces, the most refreshing, for me at least, was Anita.

Anita had the look of an angel: large, soft, doe-like eyes, and a radiant smile that lit up the room. How else to describe Anita? Let’s just say that none of her sweaters had wrinkles. Anita was Audrey Hepburn poured into Sophia Loren’s body. It took tremendous concentration to maintain eye contact, when you chatted with Anita across the table. The Prairie Chicken was immediately smitten.

There were two small problems. First of all, Anita’s boyfriend Abby, from the north end of Winnipeg, had also checked into the dorm, on the men’s side, of course. Secondly, my buddies warned me that Anita was Jewish. I did not understand what one’s religion had to do with human attraction, so I swept aside the second concern with absolute ease. Abby, however, would be a more formidable foe in my battle for Anita’s affection. As it turned out, I had an ally for this struggle. My willing co-warrior was Anita.

Anita, it transpired, had found the Prairie Chicken to also be a refreshing new face. She warmly smiled as she instantly accepted my proposal for an evening stroll on the campus, the first time that we met. I was probably aided in my conquest by a recent lovers’ quarrel, but maybe my lanky 6 foot 2 inch frame appealed to Anita. She had previously been required to look down at her elevation-challenged Abby. There was no doubt that those brown doe eyes worked more magic when they looked up in adoration.

Anita and I were smitten by each other. We instantly fit, in spite of competing contours. Anita’s brown eyes flooded me with affection, and I floundered joyously in my first plunge into requited love. Of course, having Abby “tail” us in his 1953 Lincoln was a bit of a bummer, but Anita and I soon found paths where the Lincoln could not follow.

The last month of second year Engineering was a tremendous challenge for me, trying to cram for exams, while my head was filled with Anita. I survived, but my grades dropped somewhat as my romantic life soared. I headed for the lumber camps of BC in the summer of ’56, with promises of frequent letters to Anita as we tearfully parted.

Jack’s Place

In the Fifties, two favourite spots for dates near the U of M were Van Buren’s and Jack’s Place, both at the corner of University Drive and Pembina Highway. Van Buren’s had the best hamburgers and fries, south of the Salisbury House at the corner of Stafford and Pembina. Of course, at the Salisbury you didn’t have a hamburger and fries, you had a “Nip and Chips.” Happily, to this day, you can still get a nip and chips at the Salisbury at Pembina and Stafford, or at other Salisburys around Winnipeg. Other cities of the world are just not civilized, gourmetly speaking, without Salisbury Houses. Two eggs, hash browns, and toast for $1.99 is still pretty amazing for this millennium.

Fortunately for us, cholesterol did not exist in the Fifties. Van Buren’s cheeseburgers, piled high with lettuce, tomatoes, pickles and all the red, yellow, and green condiments, were a nutritious, juicy, mouth-filling delight. The thick beef patties contained nothing but good, western beef proteins. The fries were crisp and fluffy, full of healthy carbohydrates and vegetable fibre. All fats were polyunsaturated. You left Van Buren’s full, contented, and absolutely guilt-free. Boy, those were the days! Two burgers, fries, and root beers for a buck made for a great break from the grind.

Jack’s Place, at the northwest corner of “U” Drive and Pembina, was for the “big night out.” It had a dance floor, booths, waiters, a disc jockey, or, on special occasions, a small orchestra. It was not a
dine-and-dance club, but rather a drink-and-dance joint. It did not have a liquor license; it had a Coke or 7-Up permit. You took your own bottle of “hard stuff,” and Jack provided the soft, at the high but not exorbitant price of 25 cents a bottle.

In the spring of 1957, Alex, Bob, and I decided to take our dates on a Friday evening to Jack’s Place. Alex’s date was Linda and Bob’s was Marion. My sister Pat had arranged for a blind date for me with a friend of hers from Grade 12, named Elizabeth. When I arrived at her house to pick up Elizabeth and meet her parents, I was thrilled to discover that she was a beautiful, slim brunette with a soft voice, who had very pleasant parents. I was delighted with Pat’s choice of my blind date, and hopeful that my relationship with Elizabeth might be long term.

Elizabeth and I then drove over to Alex’s frat house, Bob’s Aqua Terra Motel, and then out to the dorm to pick up Marion and Linda. We all buzzed with excitement about the upcoming evening of dancing to live music at Jack’s.

We bought Orange Crushes in their thin brown wrinkly bottles, at 25 cents a pop. We thoroughly enjoyed our “Screwdrivers,” as Alex called them, with the worldliness of an ambassador. I tried a sip of Elizabeth’s drink, and discovered that it was true that vodka was virtually tasteless. We danced the evening away, and before we expected, we heard that it was “last round – last dance.” We quickly bought three more Orange Crushes and emptied the vodka bottle. We knew that carrying an open bottle of alcoholic beverage in the car was illegal, so the empty would have to stay behind. The concept of leaving it partly full was not conceivable to us.

As we left the club and headed into the parking lot, I felt a warm glow of contentment with the wonderful evening that had passed. As I backed up and drove out onto Pembina Highway, the warmth intensified. I peered through the windshield in disbelief. Pembina Highway used to be two lanes in each direction, but it was now six lanes heading north. The paving crews must have been very busy while we were in the club. Then I blinked again. The Hydro gang had been out, too, installing two more lines of power poles.

I suddenly realized, through the fog, that I had accidentally drunk the wrong glass in our “bottoms up” session, unless one of my buddies had purposely freshened my glass with the deadly brew. I was more than a bit scared, in a hazy way. I told myself to not drive fast, and to aim for the centre lane in the six-lane highway.

I do not remember dropping off Elizabeth, or much more of that foggy evening when I first experienced the dulling effect of the rapid vodka consumption. The next day, Don told me that I had backed into his brother’s rear bumper as I exited Jack’s, fortunately doing no great damage to the car. I had absolutely no recollection of the event. I made a promise to myself that that would be the last time I would ever allow myself to get into such an unconscious state.

I called Elizabeth, but was told by her father that I should not call her again. I felt terrible. I had hoped that I had not done anything bad, other than driving home Elizabeth cross-eyed drunk. I told Pat to tell Elizabeth that I liked her a lot, and that this was the first and last time I would ever get drunk on a date with her. It was all to no avail.
My relationship with Elizabeth had ended before it could get started. I do not like the taste of vodka, even today.

In my third year of Engineering, my Mom moved to Winnipeg and I agreed to live at home and pay Mom room and board, to help her with the rent. So my dorm life ended, and I began to live, for the first time that I could remember, in the big city. I was going to miss the social life and pranks of the men’s dorm, but on the other hand I would be eating Mom’s good home cooking.

Finally, time came for graduation. I lived that moment with joy and solemnity. The Prairie Chicken had grown in so many ways those wonderful four years at the U of M. The dorm pranks and the leap from innocence were behind me now. The contributions of my professors and colleagues were silently acknowledged. I was now a Civil Engineer. “Look out, world, here I come!”

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**Quote from Hugh Hamilton Saunderson (1959)**

President of The University of Manitoba (1954 – 1970)

Those of you who have read Stephen Leacock’s books will remember that he recommended that the first building needed in any University was the Residence. If there was more money available, classrooms and laboratories would come next. This recommendation is more than pleasant whimsy. Those people who have a chance to live in Residence have an opportunity to profit from their stay at University in a way that is denied the other students.

During the years in Residence, you can, if you wish, form friendships that will be a source of pleasure for the rest of your lives. Such friendships come not because you are living under the same roof, but because you are prepared to do those things which build friendship: to play together and work together. To discuss your own and the world’s problems, to share your privileges and your responsibilities, and yet to recognize that those around you are individuals too, each with his own views and need for quiet study.

It is my hope that you will enjoy greatly and profit much from your stay in Residence. It can give you abiding satisfactions.

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Marshall Gysi in front of the Men’s Residence almost 50 years later.
A view of the Residence in the wintertime in the early 1960s, before the building was named Taché Hall.