

# *Figments and Flights*



*Collected Short Stories*  
*of*  
*Alan Harris & His Father, Keith E. Harris*

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**The reality that protects you also confines you.**

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# Across the River

## A Fantasy on Begging

by Alan Harris

IT HAS BEEN ONE OF THOSE warmish days between winter and spring, but now the sun has set and the dusk is deepening. My bones are weary, and my eyes feel out of round in their sockets as I drive home from the office. I am a casualty of the business world, that whirlwind of meaningless activity leading toward a grand total of zero on the famous bottom line. I now pull over and stop my car alongside the road. I have always wanted to do this, and now I will.

No, I won't go back to my prefabricated, prethought, predigested, prerotted life in that meaningless suburb. I will just walk. I will beg. I will have nothing and want nothing. Non-attachment is the time-honored way to happiness, as proven time and again in the East.

I leave the keys in what was my car. Anyone who wants this thing can take it. I won't be needing a car now. I walk ahead to the next cross street and turn left, not knowing or really caring what street it is. Ahead of me on the sidewalk a boy about twelve years of age is walking his little black-and-white spotted dog. The dog crouches in some tall grass by a utility pole and does his duty. The boy praises him with "Good boy, Jock. Good boy." I continue to follow them, but they pay no attention to me. Soon they turn into the sidewalk in front of a small yellow house and go in. The fading daylight is giving way to the artificial light of the buzzing streetlights.

Where will I stay tonight? I don't know. There are many houses along here, but I don't want to ask anyone to put me up for the night. Shall I try to walk to a motel? I have about \$150 in my pocket. But no. Why would I want to stay in a motel and pay money like a businessman? I will just stay in my body tonight, wherever my body happens to be. If it's in a mansion, so be it. If it's on a park bench, so be it. In a gutter? Fine.

I walk along for a few blocks and turn left again. Where will I go? I have now given away everything except my clothes and my wallet. Shall I walk north up to the street where the bridge is, cross the river, then walk west? Or shall I walk south out into the country? I could even walk east into the "changing" neighborhood. It doesn't matter. Why do I even need to walk? Will I be picked up as a vagrant? No, not with this suit on, and a trench coat. Am I crazy? Should I be locked up? I don't feel crazy. I just gave up everything, that's all. No big deal.

Yes, I guess I'll go north up the street, turn west, and cross the bridge. I don't know what's beyond the bridge very far, but it doesn't really matter, does it? Something is always everywhere.

I start walking north just like I know what I'm doing. As I reach the bridge street, a policeman drives by in his squad car. I smile and tell myself what a bad boy I am, leaving everything sensible behind and not playing the middle-class game. I should probably turn myself in, but I don't think I will. No, I need to see how this comes out.

I turn west and soon reach the bridge, smiling at how ridiculously symbolic it is to cross a bridge on my way to the unknown. I should write a novel about this, or at least a short story. Maybe I won't live long enough to fill up a novel. Over the railing the dark, peaceful river is just visible in the fading dusk. Two ducks swim effortlessly and smoothly out from under the bridge, each leaving a little wake. One

of them sees me and quacks. Then the other one quacks. Just one quack apiece—no big deal for them. I lean against the railing for a long while, lost in thought as I stare down at the deep, dark, moving waters. With a little inner ceremony, I take off my necktie, stuff it in my pocket, and continue west across the bridge.

Now I'm on the other side of the river, but strangely it seems as though I'm heading east. I haven't turned around, but as I walk I could swear that the sky ahead of me is beginning to lighten as if the sun were rising instead of setting. There is a fragrance in the air, too, that I haven't detected in a long time. The smell of lilacs. It isn't time for lilacs yet, but there is that unmistakable fragrance. Yes, the sun is rising in the west. I look around and see a robin pulling at a worm in the grass along the sidewalk twenty feet away. The robin notices that I am too close, and gives me a staccato scolding as it flutters up into a nearby maple tree.

There is a little park not far ahead, a park I have never noticed before. Not surprising, as I don't recall ever having walked in this neighborhood. On a bench by the sidewalk sits an old man with short white hair, staring at the approaching sunrise in the west.

"Hello there," I offer. "Why is the sun rising in the west?"

"That's where it always rises," he replies quietly. "That's where it always rises."

"Mind if I sit down here and try to figure this out?"

"Have a seat."

"Do you live around here?" I ask him.

"I'm right here. I live right here."

"On this park bench?"

"For now, yes."

"Do you have a house or an apartment?"

"No, I don't need one."

"I see." I watch a small woodpecker walk straight up the side of a large oak tree about halfway across the park. He switches on his head like a jackhammer and attacks a rotten branch. The sunshine is now catching the top leaves of his old tree.

"Where do you eat?" I ask after a long silence.

"Right here." He points to his mouth.

"That's good," I chuckle. "That's where I eat too. No sweat, huh? Life pretty much takes care of itself, does it?"

“Pretty much.”

“Do you have a family?” I ask after a short silence.

“Nope,” he replies quickly but without emotion.

“A job?”

“Yes, I do have a job. I meet the people who come across that bridge, and I answer their questions. It’s usually not too hard. They ask pretty easy questions.”

“Are you a philosopher?”

“Not so’s you’d notice. I just sit here and talk to the people. It’s not too hard.”

“Do you think it’s necessary to fit into the city rat race? Go to work, come home, spend money, get tired, go to bed, every day and every day?”

“Well, you get your weekends off,” he replies with a wry grin.

“You know what I mean. What is the point of all of this gaining and losing, loving and hating, waking and sleeping?”

“I don’t know.” He rubs his white-stubbled chin. “What do you think?”

“I don’t think there’s any point to it. That’s why I’ve decided to just wander and beg for the rest of my life.”

The old man smiles a little and looks me squarely in both eyes. I can see infinity in his deep blue eyes. His glance is amazingly deep, yet warm and harmless.

“You’re going to beg? What if no one gives you anything?” he asks, those blue eyes twinkling now.

“Then I’ll die.”

“And what will that accomplish?”

“What will driving a late-model car and living in a suburban home with TV-watching kids and a security-loving wife accomplish? Nothing. There’s not a thing to lose. I need freedom.”

“Maybe so,” he mumbles quietly. “Maybe so.”

He rises quickly from the park bench, nimble for his apparently advanced years, and pulls me to my feet. “You can’t get along begging without some training. High thoughts won’t fill your stomach. Why don’t you come along with me for awhile? I’ll show you how I do it.”

“Okay.”

It must be an odd sight, I think to myself as the two of us walk along the sidewalk together, westward into the rising sun. Robins are hopping unpredictably in the grass, cocking their heads and stabbing the ground for their worms. A chattering cloud of sparrows flutters over us, heading toward the branches of a budding magnolia tree. They all perch in it and nearly fill it up, jumping excitedly from branch to branch.

“My name is Fred,” I offer. “What’s your name?”

The old man looks a bit startled. “I don’t go by anything, but if you really want to call me something, just say Pete.”

“Do you think a guy can make it as a beggar in this day and age?”

“I know a guy can. I’m making it. It’s not very hard. Now let me ask you a question. Are you religious?”

“Nah. I used to be a Presbyterian, then turned Methodist, then dropped the whole thing. Religion just seemed like a flimsy kind of entertainment there at the church. The congregation was always carping about how communion was too long or too often, or they didn’t like this hymn or that sermon. It seemed like a joke that wasn’t very funny. How about you? Are you religious?”

“No, but I do like to see that sunrise every day. I do like to see these birds, and the flowers that are blooming this time of year. I have nothing against religion, but I get mine here in the outdoors.”

“Do you ever feel guilty about begging? Not making a living, and all that?”

“Not at all. I figure if people want to give me something, that’s their business. I won’t fight it. If they don’t want to give, that’s fine too.”

“Did you ever go through a long time when no one gave you anything and you nearly starved?”

“Not really. Most people are pretty nice. They don’t mind.”

“Do the police ever give you any trouble?”

“No. Why, do I look suspicious?”

I laugh. “No, you look like an old guy who lives in one of these little houses along here and has a pension.”

Pete gives me another deep look and says, “I am on a kind of pension, but there’s no money in it.”

“What kind of pension do you mean?”

“One day I decided I had worked enough, and I retired. Done. No talk, no argument, no social security. I just retired, and my pension is being able to watch the birds and flowers in the park and think the thoughts I want to think. I don’t have any boss telling me what color my necktie should be.”

“That’s exactly the kind of retirement I decided on when I walked away from my car.”



As we walk along, a warm breeze floats up, bringing the fragrance of lilacs again. Pete suddenly stops me and nods to indicate a small green house with white shutters. “Now here’s a lady that always gives me something. She doesn’t give a hoot what I look like or who I am. She just gives me something every time. Watch.”

He walks up the sidewalk and knocks on the front door. A gray-haired lady comes to the door and immediately smiles through the storm door as she recognizes Pete.

“Good morning,” Pete says, in a friendly, non-fake way. “It’s a nice morning, isn’t it?”

“Yes it is,” she replies, opening the storm door. “Can I get you a little something to eat this morning?”

“Why, yes, that would be nice. And I wonder if you could spare a little for my friend here. He’s just walked across the bridge and doesn’t know quite where to turn next. Do have a little extra something for him?”

“Of course. Just a minute.” She goes back into the house. I notice the painted concrete deer in her front yard, and I admire her petunias beside the front stoop. She returns with two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. I walk up to the door and take one, and Pete then politely takes the other a nod and a smile.

“Thank you very much,” I say with more gratitude than I’ve ever felt before. “I can’t tell you how much I appreciate this sandwich. You are a very kind woman.”

“That’s all right,” she smiles back. “It never hurts to help a little.”

“Thanks again,” Pete waves at her as we return to the sidewalk and resume our wanderings. “See, that was easy. This sandwich will last you the rest of the morning, Fred, and you can spend all morning doing anything you want.”

“Where are we going, Pete?”

“Nowhere, Fred. Did you want to go somewhere?”

“No, I just thought you were taking me somewhere.”

“You already took yourself somewhere in your life on the other side of the bridge, and you didn’t like it. Now you’re going nowhere. Do you think you’ll be able to like that?”

“It’s hard to say. It’s so much different from the usual mindless hustle.”

We come to a large viaduct supporting a busy highway. As we walk under it, Pete gestures for me to sit down. He sits upon a big scrap of six-by-six lumber, and I squat on one heel, the way my father taught me when I was a boy.

He points his index finger upwards, raising his voice above the whizzing and thumping tires of the cars passing directly over our heads. “These people are all going somewhere, Fred. Do you know where? No, you don’t. And I don’t either. Maybe someone told them that they should go somewhere, so they did.



Maybe they had to build something, and to do that, they had to go buy some tools and materials, and to get them, they had to find a job to make some money, and they had to go to college to get a job, a *good* job, not just any job. And maybe they felt like they had to have a wife and a family, because everybody does. They're all going somewhere, Fred. They all think they know where they're going, but not a one of them knows."

I sit still for awhile, shift my weight to the other heel, and sit some more. A huge diesel truck thuds across the viaduct, and the roar of its powerful engine gradually fades away in the distance.

"What's the point of our not being part of them?" I ask whimsically.

"No point at all. Why does there have to be a point? I just watch things, watch people. I walk around, smell flowers. That's all. I don't do much. There's not much to do, really. Your heart beats, your lungs breathe, people give you food. It's not bad at all."

"Don't you ever want to go somewhere or make something or do something, Pete?"

"Nope. Why bother? Those folks up there that are going places can do that. They can build their buildings and work in their little office cubicles and write their reports and drive their cars till they end up dead, just like I will, and just like you will. What have they gained? Maybe a nice casket and a six-inch obituary, which I won't have."

"Can we get out from under this viaduct?" I suggest, annoyed by the loud rumbling of the traffic.

"Sure, we can go anywhere we want, Fred."

"Let's go back to the river and watch the ducks," I suggest.

We walk back east toward the river. The spring morning is bright and beautiful now. Dandelions are in full yellow bloom in most of the little front yards. A large woman with wrinkled stockings is leaning down and weeding her flower bed. She nods to us politely and anonymously as we walk by.

Soon we reach the river and sit down on the bank. I snap off a long stem of grass and clamp it between my teeth. No ducks are around. The water is very smooth and peaceful.

"You do this every day?" I ask. "Just wander around anywhere you want, and sit and think?"

"Sometimes I think, sometimes I sit, sometimes I walk, sometimes I lie down." He lies down slowly and meaningfully on the grass.

"Do you ever have pain or feel lonely?"

"Nope."

We are both quiet for a long time, looking out over the quiet river, smelling the lilacs whenever a new breeze comes up. After a while eight mallards swim by—a green-headed male, a drab brown female, and six half-grown ducklings. They are quacking and plunging after food in the water, seeming to enjoy each

other's company greatly. I begin to feel a strange ache inside me, and I know that my new life here is just not going to work. I can't even live a whole day like this, let alone the rest of my life. I will go out of mind with boredom.

"Pete, I don't think I'm going to be able to live the life of a beggar. It just doesn't feel right to me."

"I know, Fred. That's what everyone says who comes across that bridge. They stay a few days, a few weeks, maybe only a few hours like you, but sooner or later they go back. They just need to come, and they just need to go. It's no big deal. Why don't you go back to your family now, and no one will know any different."

"But my wife probably has the cops looking for me, and I left my keys in the car along the road."

"Well, you did make that decision. But I don't think it'll be so bad. Why don't you just go back over the bridge and see what's over there?"

"Okay, Pete. Listen, I really envy the way you can lead such a calm life, and how you are so kind. Maybe someday I will be able to retire like you did, but not yet. I want you to have this as a little token of my appreciation." I hand him a fifty-dollar bill.

He brushes it away. "Thanks, Fred, but I don't need it. Your heart is in the right place, though. If you ever decide to come and see me again, I'll be hanging right around here. I don't go very far. Like I said, there's really nowhere to go."

"Good-bye, Pete. Thanks again for taking me along with you."

I walk up the slope to the bridge and wave to him as I head east over the bridge. I find myself thinking that it will somehow be night on the other side, and that this has all been a dream. I reach the other side, but the sky is just as bright as ever. The sun is still climbing in the west, higher and higher as the spring morning gains warmth. I reach the road that leads to my car and turn south, fully expecting to have to walk all the way home. No doubt the car has been stolen by kids or towed away by the police.

As I walk over a familiar rise, I see my car ahead, just as I left it. I walk up to it and look into the left window. The keys are still in it. No one has harmed it. I open the door, get in, start it up, and drive towards home. The only thing is that sun still in the west. What time is it? Am I late for work? It doesn't matter. I meet a police car, but I am driving within the speed limit, so I am invisible to the law.

As I approach the block where my house is, I wonder what I am going to tell my wife. Just then I hear a faint but unmistakable whisper in my ear. It sounds like Pete asking, "Where are you going?"

I smile as I pull into my driveway, and say aloud, "I don't know, Pete. Maybe nowhere."

# Chester the Rooster

## A Fable of Chicken Bravery

by Alan Harris

AMONG THE INHABITANTS of a certain barnyard were several two-legged but not-quite-human creatures, chickens. I would guess there were about 35 of them, though I never counted them to be sure. Of these chickens, two were roosters, and they were on terms less than friendly—but also, less than hostile, I must add, for they were civilized roosters. They were on speaking terms (this is the first of several appeals to your imagination), but they were both guilty of a common sentiment which infests nearly all competitors, no matter what the prize or its value—that is, hidden suspicion.

It would not suit the requirements of high drama if our two antagonists were of like temperament, and luckily, they were not. But neither were they antithetical in temperament. I will reveal more of their respective personalities (second appeal) later as the occasions arise. By way of slightly prejudicing you, however, I will mention that Robin, for that was the elder rooster's name, was stronger, cleverer, louder, and faster than Chester, the younger rooster and also the hero of this tale.

Do not think that Chester was less than a rooster in any of the anatomical respects which distinguish roosters from non-roosters. He was neither ignorant of nor inept at any deed which separates those two divisions of the animal kingdom. He was a full-blooded, full-fledged rooster in every sense of the word (including the roosting sense).

Even so, alas, Chester was rather unusual, being endowed (not to say plagued) with a contemplative disposition. To prevent too-sharply-drawn contrasts in this story, I must insert prematurely the information that Robin was not totally bereft of ideas, but for now, ideas will not appear among the more noticeable or striking of his possessions.

Chester could see the gulf between his own abilities and those of Robin all too easily. Evidence of this gulf was the quantity of attention which the hens (who shall be, in the interests of brevity, nameless) bestowed upon Robin, which they failed to bestow upon Chester. While Chester held himself above the vulgar sentiment of jealousy, still he could not avoid concluding, through careful reasoning, that there existed a somewhat less than desirable inequality of attention distribution.

Had Chester himself been at the opposite end of the inequality, we from our vantage point can at least speculate as to whether his reasoning might have been precisely the same. Perhaps inequality, in its pure philosophical sense, was not the focal point of Chester's thinking, and biology was. But all this is merely idle speculation.

Robin was by no means boastful or contemptuous of Chester. On the contrary, he possessed all those qualities of nobility and generosity that one would expect in a rooster of his age and abilities. He was amiable toward Chester in every circumstance. In keeping with his generosity of spirit, he never attempted to start a fight with Chester. And the reverse was also true—Chester never showed any inclination to fight with Robin, though perhaps for reasons of a slightly different color. The exact color I leave to your imagination and intuition.

The hens also respected Chester, though I must admit their respect did not differ much from the respect which they held for each other. From the tongue of a malicious hen I heard the rather bitter witticism

that there was only one difference between Chester and the hens themselves—that is, while they laid real eggs, Chester's eggs were merely metaphorical.

As a kind of poetic justice I will mention here that this hen later suffered a severe attack of egg constipation, from which she was eventually delivered of three eggs within five minutes of each other. Though she gave her eggs the most solicitous care, it happened that none of them contained the necessary germ, and alas, the shells were so thin that she soon broke the eggs with her own not inconsiderable weight, greatly to the pejoration of her fine coat of white feathers. Some of her less sympathetic companions bantered about an idea among themselves that perhaps the eggs were already rotten before their arrival, but this rumor was kept well away from the ears of its subject.

I was telling of the several attitudes which Chester and the hens reserved for each other. I did not at all mean to imply that the hens, as a group, intentionally ridiculed Chester—only the one hen stooped so low. Actually, they tormented him more by simply ignoring him than if they had openly scorned him, for Chester knew that scorn is usually a thin disguise for admiration (especially among chickens), whereas to ignore is, of all responses, the most devastating and discouraging.

Chester, since he was largely ignored by the hen population, and since their opinions weighed heavily upon his mind, took to secluding himself from them. At any hour of the day or night, the hens could find him brooding in his own private corner of the henhouse. I must here explain, with apologies to the more prudish reader, that among chickens in general, the roosters not only frequently visit the henhouse, but they also sleep there.

But back to Chester. Some wise person has observed that the primary fruit of seclusion is the desire for more seclusion. Chester's actions demonstrated no exception to this truth, and I am afraid he had become, by the time this story takes place, no less than a hermit of chickens.

Robin and the hens continued to perform the time-honored rituals of living—roosting by night, roaming and pecking and clucking by day, and suffering life's minor tragedies. I will not spread before you all of these minor tragedies, since only that portion of readers given over to the enjoyment of scandalous and sensational news articles would appreciate their inclusion. I feel that reading matter of that type has never found itself widely unread, and since as a result it is available in quantity to those who like it, I will record only those events which have artistic potential and wide significance.

I fear I may have made the pace of the preceding introduction a little less than torrid, with its lack of any dialog or action, but I feel confident that the reader who has thus far remained with me, for whatever reason, will not mourn the lack of these two elements which so often pull potentially great literature down into the realm of the readable and the interesting. However, if you have proceeded to here in the expectation of finding some spicy dialog or exciting action after the preliminaries are over, you should set this story aside and better employ yourself by writing it over in that manner, for I promise it will contain little action and no dialog.

The actions and speeches of our chicken characters will not go unnoticed by any means, but I will so distill them as to present to you a pure exercise in the analysis of chicken behavior, and not, to be sure, a paltry transcription of vulgar scenes and conversations. In short, I will not permit the plot (there will be a plot) to run away with itself by simply playing the part of a movie camera or a tape recorder, but will exercise selection of detail to such a degree that some sagacious critics, who may arrogantly imagine that they can do better themselves (but will not lower themselves to try it), will maintain that the plot of

this story is completely subordinate to my interruptions of it. I will resist a temptation to comment upon television commercials, and force myself to begin the plot, lest our chickens die of old age before I have committed their drama to paper.

A major weekly tragedy, besides the minor ones, was beginning to worry everyone in the chickenyard. This recurrent tragedy was the unfortunate death of three hens of the choicest proportions and weight on each Saturday morning. The person responsible for the deaths we will call simply the Boss of the Barnyard so that he may be protected from the talons of any indignant descendants of his victims (though these descendants, I surmise, are rather few).

He effected the slaughter neatly and humanely (to avoid the word "chickenly" here) by means of two objects external to himself. One of these objects was a flat-topped tree stump about as high as his waist and located some 18 to 20 feet west of the henhouse. Rather I should say, the henhouse was located about 18 to 20 feet east of the stump, because the stump with its predecessor, the tree, long antedated the henhouse.

The other of the two objects was a hand instrument commonly employed to separate limbs from a tree, but in this case used, if I may present a gruesome analogy—but no, I will not. The instrument, then, was a hatchet, which, when propelled downward by both gravity and the arm muscles of the Boss, embedded itself in the stump—but only after making a sharp and unnatural division in the hen's neck.

An animal's head, however little it may sometimes contain, is its dearest appendage, and the removal of it is in every case attended by death. It is possible that you may not have attained an intimate acquaintance with country life, and perhaps you have been so carefully trained that you have never heard the vulgar simile involving a chicken deprived of its head. I will not repeat it here because the high-bred will not care to know it, and the common folk already know it.

What I am leading up to is the rather banal observation that each chop was accompanied by much flurry and confusion on the part of the hapless, headless victim. Those hens who were lucky enough to be carrying their heads with them in the proper position after each week's massacre proceeded to use these heads in avoiding the area of the stump. Soon they began to avoid even looking at the stump, much as some humans avoid reading about executions in the newspapers.

I now shift from the stump outside the henhouse to a different scene, much more agreeable and instructive. Here inside the henhouse Chester the rooster has assumed a rigid reclining posture of deep thought. In fact, he looks as if he might be in a hypnotic trance, in the darkest, most isolated corner of the building.

Not many two-legged creatures, human or chicken, are inclined to waste much of their valuable time in such isolation as I have just described. We humans have found that for the purpose of amassing a small fortune (or indeed, a large one), isolated contemplation is one of the poorest devices known. And those few eccentrics who do indulge themselves in the dubious pleasure of independent and fanciful thought usually find themselves to be the worst paid in yearly salary, that universal (if meaningless) barometer of competence in all fields of endeavor.

Nevertheless, perhaps you, the reader, who are no doubt a diligent worker, can remember a time when wild and disconnected ideas were somehow permitted entry into that paragon of rationality, your own brain—that one time when you were idle. If so, you can sense our hero's state of mind.

Chester, secluded and in deep thought, began to believe in some of his fantasies. So absorbed had he been that he knew nothing of the recurring triple slaughters. He had lately been relishing the dream that he, by an enormous display of physical strength and mental quickness, had saved all the hens from some impending disaster which threatened to destroy them all.

The specifics of this fantasy danger he never bothered to clarify for himself because the good feelings that arose in his thin breast due to having acted as benefactor and savior to so many fair-damsel hens entirely precluded the necessity of any details. He basked and bathed in his imaginary glory for an entire week without giving the least thought to the real world of Robin, the hens, and the henhouse.

Then by degrees during the next week, he began to descend back into the cold, indifferent world of roosts, nests, and straw which surrounded him. Upon his return into reality he could sense a certain pervading nervousness among the hens. For example, they might have to peck upwards of five times at a single kernel of corn before they would hit the mark.

At night the hens constantly fidgeted back and forth on their roosts, casting sleepless and suspicious glances at each other. The slightest unfamiliar noise would prompt the whole roostful of them to jump into the air, squawking and flailing their wings in utter panic, and then landing helter-skelter on the floor, on the roosts, and on each other. Sometimes there had been no noise at all, but the power of some imagination among them had provided the alarm. Noise or no noise, the flurry was the same. "The panic of one chicken spreads to the many faster than flames spread over gasoline" (old farmer's axiom). After such an episode, the hens would gather what little of their wits remained and hop back up to their roosting places, only to go through the same cycle within a few minutes.

Chester, observing this anxiety, decided that perhaps his dream of danger was at the point of coming true. He could not account for the hens' case of frayed nerves without ascribing it to an external threat of some kind. A plan began to form in his mind. Perhaps he could discover the source of the hens' fright. This should not be difficult to do since he could go wherever they could (except for a certain sacred territory into which it would never be proper to affirm that the male of any animal species would be allowed to follow the female—the hens' euphemism being "the protein room," analogous to the human "powder room.")

Then (in his plan) with his superior mind he would be able to outwit the enemy, and to achieve in reality that glory and honor which he had before only be able to dream about. Thus, he determined to rise very early the next morning (which would inevitably be Saturday, since it was Friday evening when he determined this) and search the entire chickenyard to discover the source of the danger. Having decided upon a plan of action, Chester dropped into a fitful sleep of anticipation.

He awoke before sunrise the next morning and began to fill in the details of his plan: he would sneak outside through the henhouse door before that glorious symbol of all life, light, religious experience, hope, and charity rose in the east. He would investigate the grounds over which the chickens roamed, and perhaps he could discover that menace so greatly feared by them.

True to his plan, Chester soon crept through the dark open door on tiptoes, making every effort to conceal his going, for he was not outwardly as confident of success as he was inwardly (he was in this respect the reverse of most chickens). Nevertheless, for all his fastidious precautions in the way of



stealth, he was noticed by nearly every hen on the roosts. You will perhaps wonder at this, but the fact is that the hens knew that this morning was Saturday and that it would bring another Incident. They had suffered through most of the night in nervous insomnia, fidgeting and reenacting such scenes of mass hysteria as I have already described.

As soon as Chester had disappeared outside the door, the hens squawked to and at each other in suspicious undertones. They all had thought that Chester was in no way connected with the slaughter of their fair sisters, but they could not account for his present mysterious actions. Soon their suspicions about him outweighed their confidence in him. Chester's going outside would have indeed surprised them had it occurred on any morning of the week, for Chester rarely ventured outside the henhouse—but for him to go out on Saturday morning was sufficient grounds for suspicion, as any hen-sized mind would aver.

Outside, Chester thoroughly inspected the territory around the henhouse for groundhog dens, fox dens, or any other possible or plausible sources of danger. But he did not expect much to happen until after sunrise, when the hens would begin to forage for their first scraps.

He did not have long to wait, as it happened, because the sun was already rising. Chester (an intelligent modern rooster) was not so pompous as to crow when the sun rose, as though he were somehow responsible for its return to the eastern sky. He left such foolishness to Robin, who was just now beginning to tune up.

Instead of crowing, Chester looked around for a safe place to be when whatever might happen happened. The chickenyard was barren of any fixtures or hiding places except for the stump. He obviously could not consummate his plan of action with a heroic rescue until he knew exactly what the danger was; therefore, he reasoned, the stump might afford him his best view as well as his safest haven from harm. He jumped (with some difficulty, considering his slight build and lack of recent exercise) to the top of the stump and began his watch, which he felt could be a long one.

By now the hens were deciding that their hunger exceeded their fear, and that perhaps they would rather die on a full stomach than live on an empty one. They ventured into the new morning to look for and peck at whatever it is that hens look for and peck at. But in keeping with their usual Saturday morning habit, they avoided the area of the stump. Consequently, they did not see Chester perched watchfully upon it.

Suddenly one hen forgot herself for a moment and glanced at the dreaded stump through the corner of her eye. She was positioned somewhat nearer to the stump than the others, and when she saw Chester upon it, she let out an ungainly squawk (for hens are wont to squawk thus in feather-raising alarm). Other hens quickly came to see if perhaps the Boss of the Barnyard had taken her as a victim.

Of course, the hens' motives for rushing toward the squawk arose entirely out of pity and concern for one of their number, and not in the least out any morbid eagerness to see a companion executed, even if that very execution might mean one less chance for their own demise that day—nothing of the sort had entered their heads, I am sure, almost.

At any rate, these hens saw what their sister had seen—Chester the rooster perched steadfastly upon the very stump they had been avoiding even looking at. The variety of excited clucking and squawking was sufficient to amaze any ear.



Instead of crowing, Chester looked around for a safe place to be when whatever might happen happened. They being, as chickens are, very generous toward apparent martyrs (even accidental martyrs), the hens attributed Chester's action to a much nobler chain of reasoning than the one which he had actually progressed through. They had little doubt that he was offering himself as a sacrifice—a replacement for one of them. Each hen imagined that she herself was the one benefiting from Chester's martyrdom.

Robin, who was by now finished with his sunrise aria, showed no inclination to take Chester's place—an act which one might expect the nobler rooster to perform. Instead, he gave out a peculiar chuckling sound, a sound very uncharacteristic of a brave, experienced rooster.

At this point I will arbitrarily skip over a period of several hours without relating every incident, for, surprisingly, nothing of any consequence occurred that morning, nor most of the afternoon. You can imagine what prolonged agony the chickens were suffering, since the dreaded Incident had never before taken place later than Saturday noon. You are perhaps experiencing the same feeling, waiting for something to happen in this story.

The inevitable result of any, even the slightest, deviation from normal patterns of events, however undesirable the deviant events, is that rumors will arise to account for them. The most prominent and widely-accepted rumor circulating amongst the hens was that the Boss of the Barnyard had prepared to come out to the chickenyard that morning for his weekly quota of hens, but had seen Chester sitting bravely upon the tree stump. From that distance Chester probably did appear brave, but actually he was asleep, and had been since 9 o'clock, owing to his scant sleep the night before. The Boss, respecting and perhaps fearing (thought the hens) this magnanimous gallantry, had decided not to venture into the chickenyard after all. This, please note, was merely a rumor among the hens, and I will so far infringe upon the natural order of events as to tell you that it had not the least grain of truth in it.

Around 4 o'clock the hens had assured each other that any danger this Saturday was no longer to be anticipated. They were by now certain that Chester had saved their lives (each hen thinking of herself), and they all had good clucks for him on his heroic stand. But Chester, ignoring this effusiveness, was becoming quite impatient (he was now awake) for the Horrible Event to happen. He could find not the least reason for the praise which the hens were so generously bestowing upon him, and indeed, he was not a little embarrassed, since now he had praise without having consciously performed any act at all. True, he had fallen asleep, but he was hard pressed to view this as a valiant deed. While the hens were showering compliments upon Chester, practically carrying him on their shoulders (and probably they would have done so if they had had shoulders), Robin slipped away into the henhouse so inconspicuously that no one noticed his absence.

Because of their great commotion over Chester, none of the hens noticed that a pickup truck had backed into the chickenyard, loaded with several crates especially designed for holding chickens. The story from here forward is as sad as it is short. All the hens were quickly captured, having been taken by surprise, and the truck, driven by the Boss of the Barnyard, carried them away, leaving behind only our two roosters, Robin and Chester.

The latter was still outside, and was quite surprised that he had not been captured or even chased. Soon Robin emerged from the henhouse with a long and sad look about his face (you must use your imagination). Robin had known all afternoon what would happen, which explains his mysterious comings and

goings. He well knew the entire pattern of the Boss of the Barnyard's actions, for he had lived through many generations of hens.

The pattern was this: when each group of hens became full-grown, the Boss would slaughter three of them each Saturday for several weeks, and on the first Saturday which saw no slaughter he would put the rest of them in crates and drive away. Chester was too young to know the pattern, having only recently arrived along with the hens just removed.

Robin knew life would be tedious for some time until the next group of young pullets arrived. He was growing old, and he knew that Chester would soon replace him. He jumped onto the stump, took a deep breath, and released a sad, experienced cock-a-doodle-doo, while Chester, rather repelled by such a display of emotion, retired to the henhouse.

# Hail Rain Well Met

## No Poem about No Good Sense

by Alan Harris

TODAY WHILE I WAS WALKING toward the restaurant about a mile from home, I heard faint rumblings in the indefinite northwest, but decided to take a chance that I could finish my lunch mission without disaster. I reached the restaurant and had a fine meal of three eggs, hash browns, and toast. As I walked back outdoors, I observed that there was still no rain, so I congratulated myself on my meteorological prowess.

By the time I had walked only a block toward home, however, drops were in the air. The rain began tentatively in an "I don't know whether I'm going to just dribble on you or really break loose and let you have it" mode. I had no umbrella, and only a cardigan sweater for a wrap. There was no one to telephone, nothing to do but keep walking.

Gradually the May rain intensified as I played the dignified fool who didn't know enough to come in out of it—a fool who was also wearing new shoes that allowed rainwater to be cozy with his toes. Before long I saw beads of hail bouncing all around me—quite small, about the size of little pills. Lightning was zitting close by, thunder was showing off its surround-sound, and I was by this time a thoroughly soaked stoic.

Halfway home, I considered milking this experience for a new poem, using at the beginning the soft tap of gentle raindrops tickling the tree leaves, then the crescendo of pattering on the leaves as the rain intensified, then the enthusiastic applause heard in an utter downpour, and finally the dice-like scamperings of tiny hailstones across the sidewalk. All of these might be in the poem, I mused, not wishing to waste an embarrassment.

But when I arrived home, I just took off all my clothes and threw them into the dryer. No poem came, but I did recall the wisdom related to me by Sister Davina, an Irish nun in her eighties who, sixteen years ago, was walking beside me through a light rain. Unconcerned, she said, "You get wet, you get dry."

# Lemonade and Seed Corn

## A Rural Money-Grabber

by Alan Harris

HOW CLARENCE GOT INTO SEED CORN I'll never stop wonderin. But then, he always was a little uppity to Jack when he was helpin him there on the family farm. You know how a grown boy gets with his dad—sometimes they ain't much respect. Farm was never quite good enough for him. And you know how Jack is—hurt him, but he never said nothin. Clarence always was kind of a money-grabber whenever he thought he had some scheme that would work.

Like the time years ago when he was sellin lemonade out by the road with about three people a day drivin by. I saw him one day and stopped. Asked him what he was sellin, and he says lemonade and so I says I'll take one. God, it was warm as hog pee, but I drunk it down and said how good it was, like you do to kids. And I asked him, well, how much is it, and he says about a dollar.

Well, I says, how can you get a dollar for a glass of lemonade when the price of soybeans is down so for these farmers. Just kind of kiddin him, you know. And he says, well, he figures that's the only way he can come out ahead, cause he only sells about one glass every three days, and has to throw a lot of lemonade out on the grass.

So I give him a dollar and went on to town. Made me half sick, too. Warm lemonade at a dollar a glass. He'll be somewhere someday, I says to myself.

Now this year Clarence wanted to sell me this new type of seed corn that's supposed to have all the bug poison built right in it and grow faster than the weeds and all that, like all the seed corn salesmen will tell you. Since Clarence is one of Jack's, I felt kind of obliged to talk to him now that he's gotten into seed corn.

When he came here, we hashed over old times, and how he'd sold me that glass of lemonade for a dollar along the road one time years ago, and we laughed. Finally I says, okay, I'll buy seed corn from you this year, but if there's a blank hill of corn on the whole place, I'll have you in the county jail in no time. Laughin, you know. So he writes me up a ticket and I pays him in advance with a check.

That's the last I ever see of him. Several other farmers here had the same thing happen. Jack feels terrible about it, but you can't blame Jack, honest and broke as he is. He can't pay his son's money back. Jack's lucky to save out enough seed from one year's corn crop to get a crop in the next year.

Jack can't help all this. I don't blame him none. The county boys are lookin for Clarence now. He always was a money-grabber. Wonder if they'll serve him warm lemonade in the county jail.

# Lessons Out of School

## Ten Anecdotes from Childhood, by Alan Harris

### 1. A Shooting in Town

ONE HOT SUMMER DAY when I was about ten, I was sitting alone on our front porch when I looked east and saw Jerome, our rotund old neighbor, carrying a rifle as he walked my way from where he and his ancient mother lived three doors away.

I knew that Jerome was an accurate shooter because he and Dad would sometimes shoot rats around Jerome's barn, and Dad had remarked once that Jerome hardly ever missed a rat.

Anyway, when Jerome got about halfway to our house with his rifle, a big dog was trotting along on the other side of Brown Street—probably a stray. That same dog had come up to me the previous day and I had petted it—it seemed pretty friendly. Jerome stopped walking, aimed his rifle at the dog, and shot it dead with one bullet.

Then he lumbered across the street, grabbed the ex-dog by one hind leg, and dragged it over to his front yard, all the while muttering loud oaths about how that dog ever got into this world.

I never found out what Jerome did with the carcass because I went on into our house, not feeling too well.

I was dumbstruck that anyone could be allowed to do such a thing, right there in town. I told my parents about this, but what could they do?

**Lesson:** Killing is a bad deal.

### 2. A Shrill Focusing

There had been a big snow the day before, and I was walking home from school along Stilson Street where a stretch of sidewalk had been shoveled very straight and neat, leaving foot-high cliffs of snow on either side of the bare concrete. Absentmindedly, I walked along and rounded off the neat top corner of snow, kicking some of it down onto the sidewalk with each step.

Suddenly Florence's shrill voice (my first acquaintance with her) scolded me from her ample front porch—for wrecking a shoveling job she had just paid perfectly good money to get done.

"Come up here on the porch," she commanded. Like someone who owned me, she put a broom in my hands and ordered me to sweep up all the snow I had kicked down.

I dutifully did, and it took an embarrassingly long time.

When I returned the broom to her, she softened into "I hope I wasn't too harsh with you. I can see that you probably didn't mean to do it. Were you daydreaming?" "Yeah, I'm sorry."

**Lesson:** When you mess up, people can own you with their tone of voice.

### 3. Wayne's Hardware Store

Humor and hardware came together whenever Wayne was in his store. His laugh, once it got going, sounded like a 2-cylinder John Deere tractor at a little above idle. Every time Dad and I would stop in (and we seldom really needed any hardware), Wayne would banter with us and tell us a new story.

One of the stories I remember was that a backwoods father had confronted his son about possibly having tipped over the family outhouse. The son, thinking to save himself with honesty, replied: "I've read about how George Washington confessed to chopping down his father's cherry tree, so I must be honest, Paw, and tell you that I did tip the outhouse over."

"That's a nice try, son," said the father, "but there's one big difference: George Washington's father wasn't sitting in the cherry tree at the time."

Then Wayne's laugh would come to life like our old flywheel-cranked Model A John Deere, catching and firing.

Another time Wayne passed along to us the championship lie from the year's National Liar's Contest, which was: "I have a grandfather clock which is so old that the shadow of its swinging pendulum has worn a hole in the back of the case."

**Lesson:** Hardware is human; humor, divine.

### 4. How Cold It Can Get

When there was snow and ice on the ground I couldn't use my bicycle for delivering the Ottawa newspapers, so the route always took longer then and wore me out.

There was one house on my route which required walking up north of town a quarter mile, and whenever the wind was very strong and cold from the north or northwest, I wasn't sure I would live through it. No houses or trees were beside the road along the way to slow the wind down.

One night when I was about twelve years old I came back home to report an unusual phenomenon to the rest of the family, who were already eating supper in the kitchen. Dad asked me, "Was it cold out there tonight?"

I said, "Yeah—it was so cold that when my nose ran, the mucus would freeze before it got down to my upper lip."

Dad wasn't impressed by this observation at all, and he scolded me: "Can't you see that we're all eating supper here? Now don't say things like that."

**Lesson:** When trying to impress, always consider context.

## 5. A Sorry Quarry

I was 16 and Dad had given me thorough mechanical and safety instructions on how to use his .22 pistol. I was never to have it out when kids were around and was only to use it for target practice or shooting pests like rats and gophers.

We had an old wooden shed behind our house which would collect forgotten miscellany for a period of several years and then, with grand human effort, get cleaned out in order to again collect forgotten miscellany for several more years, world without end.

Not much miscellany was inside the shed this particular summer and you could actually walk around inside it. The shed's outside north wall sported a large parabolic rat hole such as you would see in Tom and Jerry cartoons. Rats had chewed it out of the clapboard siding for access to their nests beneath the shed's wooden floor.

One day while in the back yard feeding our three geese, I saw a rat scurrying through that hole to get under the shed, so I decided to go get Dad's pistol and see what could be done. Nobody else was around that day.

I went to his bookcase and pulled the main part of the pistol out from where it was hidden behind some books, and then to the fireplace mantel to pick up the cylinder, which always had bullets in it. I was forbidden to assemble the pistol inside the house, and I never did.

I then walked out back, assembled the pistol, quietly entered the shed, and peered down with my head stuck through the open north window. I also pointed the pistol straight down at the rat hole and just waited. Before long a rat stuck its head out through the hole and looked around. I shot him and got him.

My feelings of triumph were surprisingly mixed. The rat had never bothered me personally, but you were just supposed to shoot rats. I was a hero but a murderer. Dad would praise me when he came home, but I felt dirty inside. There was no cure for this ugly feeling except time.

**Lesson:** Killing is a bad deal.

## 6. Canine Chemistry

Earlville in the 1950's allowed dogs as much freedom as it did people. Dogs weren't walked with a leash or tied up or scooped behind or fenced in or dogcaught as are their descendants in modern suburbia. On my paper route a common experience was to be barked at, nipped at, lunged at, or bitten by a frenetic dog.

I would receive all kinds of advice from people for handling dogs, but nothing really worked. Once somebody told me that I could fill a toy squirt gun with ammonia water and use that for self-defense—the ammonia would irritate the dog's eyes and make it stay away. So one day I filled my squirt gun with the proper mix of water and ammonia.

Skippy, the most ill-tempered dog on my paper route, belonged, appropriately enough, to the most ill-



tempered couple in town, and this 15-pound terror-terrier was forever harassing me. It was a darn shame that Skippy would sometimes tear up his mean owners' newspaper after I tossed it inside their screen door, but that behavior was beyond my control.

On this particular day Skippy was loose outdoors for some reason, and he rushed at me with furious barking as if to bite me. I whipped out my ammonia gun and shot a squirt at him. Probably only a few millidrops actually hit him, but he immediately became even more furious. He didn't actually bite me, but the ammonia was no help at all.

At the end of my route that day I discovered that the ammonia had gummed up the works inside my squirt gun, which wouldn't squirt properly anymore. I threw away the squirt gun and the whole idea.

**Lesson:** Chemical warfare is iffy at best.

## 7. Striking Out the Shed

I was 11 years old and was already playing in Little League Baseball. My observation at that time was that the pitchers received all the glory, and I coveted that position. I played left field for a while, and later the coach moved me to shortstop as I became more skilled, and finally to first base near the end of the season. But being a pitcher was my dream.

One problem was that my aim wasn't very precise, and another problem was that I couldn't throw the ball fast enough. Those are problems for an aspiring pitcher.

I determined to throw harder and more accurately, so at home I chalked a big square on the north outside wall of our back shed to represent the strike zone for an average Little League batter. Whenever I could, I would practice throwing the baseball hard at the shed, keeping track of how many pitches were hitting the strike zone and how many were missing it. Whap. Whap. Whap. I fancied myself a dangerous new pitcher in the making.

I was improving a little, I think, until one day I saw that a siding board on the shed had developed a crack about where I'd been throwing the ball. I must be getting stronger to be able to do this, I thought, so I kept on pitching the baseball at the shed with renewed vigor.

After a few days that crack had widened, and finally, with one mighty pitch, I broke a hole through the siding and a piece of board fell down inside. Wow, I said to myself, it's amazing what a little baseball can do.

A couple of days later Dad and I were walking in the back yard and he spotted the hole in the shed.

"What's this?" he asked me.

"Oh, I was throwing my baseball at the shed and I guess I threw too hard." was my braggart's apology.

Dad was not impressed in the least. "You mean you saw this starting to happen and you kept on throwing until the siding board broke? I can't believe you'd be so stupid."

I never did become a pitcher. Pitchers have to be fast, accurate, and above all, smart.

**Lesson:** Power can be stupid.

## 8. A Close Call

One winter's night around 6 p.m. I had been delivering newspapers up north of that windy quarter-mile stretch north of town and was walking south back toward town through the snow. I was 14 and far too young to die.

Coming out of town toward me were the wavering headlights of a car being driven fast and erratically. I stepped off the left side of the road to be cautious, but as the car came closer it appeared that the driver had spotted me and was heading straight for me on the shoulder in an attempt to run me down.

I completely stopped thinking (as people do in such moments) and darted away from the left shoulder out in front of the car to escape the threat of being splattered into the ditch. I barely cleared the front of the car and escaped being hit, then ran toward town as fast as I could plop my heavy four-buckle boots along the pavement.

At a safer distance from the maniac car, and completely exhausted, I looked back and saw that the driver, a man, had stopped his car and was getting out. Now what? I was breathing so hard from the exertion of running that I doubted I could escape another attack from him. I walked south into town and he drove on north.

The next day at school I found out that this death driver had been a high school boy who lived in the house where I had just been delivering a newspaper, and that he was probably driving more carelessly than homicidally. But whichever stupidity was prevailing that night, his car's impact could have been lethal.

I didn't dare tell my parents about this close call because they would probably make me give up my paper route.

**Lesson:** Getting killed is a bad deal.

## 9. Birthday Glory

The evening of my 12th birthday began with a Little League baseball game on the Earlville High School ball diamond. My coach and the rest of the team had been impressed by my having hit a triple in the opening game of the season, so they were always peppering me with "Get a triple, Harry! Get a triple! We know you can do it!"

Harry was my nickname. Bernard, my coach, was also my mother's first cousin. After those Little League days he continued to call me Harry until he died twenty years later.

My first turn at bat culminated in a walk. Nothing exciting. My second time up, the bases were loaded and my teammates were yelling their usual "Come on, Harry! Drive everybody in. You can do it!" The

pitcher's first offering was a fat one and I nailed it for a home run. Our low-budget baseball field had no outfield fence, so the opposing team didn't get the ball thrown back into the infield until long after I had crossed home plate. From my team there was backslapping and "Way to go, Harry! We knew you could do it." Such glory.

My third time at bat, with nobody on base, I watched a few questionable pitches go by. "Look for the good one, Harry! Hit another homer, Harry!" Then a fat pitch came in and I hit it pretty deep into right field. It wasn't hit as hard as my earlier home run, so I ran as fast as I could. After I crossed second base the shortstop bobbled the throw coming in from right field. I took a chance and ran around third base and sprinted toward home plate. It was a reckless move, but I crossed the plate just ahead of the throw to the catcher and was safe. The cheerings were crazed now, and the backslappings were manifold. "Nice job, Harry! Keep it up, Harry!" I was in Harry heaven, it seemed.

Next time I went to bat, everyone was screaming for another homer, and I was psyched up for another one, but instead I hit a low single to right field. Teammates and crowd cheered anyway. "That's okay, Harry. They can't all be homers! Get around those bases now!" Our team won the game, and I had tasted glory knowing that my family was in the stands.

At home after the game my family had a birthday party for me, during which I drank tremendous quantities of Kool-Aid and ate far too much cake. When I went to bed that night, I was all Harry the Hero. 12 years old now. Two home runs. On and on went my mind while my stomach, filled with Kool-Aid and cake, was feeling worse and worse. There was no sleep until halfway through the night.

**Lesson:** Glory isn't a natural state, but it's fun while it lasts.

## 10. Rat Stampede

Shelling corn on the farm was always a big occasion. Ear corn was stored for several months in the crib because it dried better while on the cobs and would bring a better price if you didn't sell it at the time of harvest rush. Today's technology of shelling corn in the field with a combine and drying it with heat wasn't yet widely used.

Dad and Uncle Bob would hire John and Elmer each year to come to the farm with their loud, complicated corn sheller that was mounted on a truck bed. All hands had to be there early on shelling day to help make the job go faster.

It was time to shell corn at Uncle Bob's farm, and the rats that year had been especially plentiful in his corn crib. Uncle Bob's son (my cousin) Tom was 13 and I was 14. Our job was to stand between the corn crib and the barn (which were about 25 feet apart) with ball-bat-length 2-by-2 clubs and kill all the rats we could as they ran away from the emptying crib toward the barn.

After the shelling started and the rats were stampeding, we found this task to be great sport. Some rats got away, since there were so many, but we clubbed many of them to death and made piles of their bodies as the shelling progressed.

Uncle Bob's dog Spot was a big help too. A fine farm mongrel, small and bearing mottled markings which no one questioned, he was considered a valuable part of the team. As the rat exodus picked up

speed, so did Tom's and my efforts at transporting those freeloaders into rat heaven.

At one point a big rat ran between Spot and me and I swung hard at it just as Spot independently made a lunge for it. Spot grabbed the rat at the very moment my club came down and actually broke in two over the top of the poor dog's skull. I was excruciatingly flummoxed.

Spot immediately rolled over on his side as if he were dying, and he was emitting horrible howls of agony: Awwwr Awwwr Awwwr Awwwr (but an octave higher). I thought I had killed him. Uncle Bob came right over, but he had no idea what to do or say. He picked up Spot and carried him away.

After this incident, Tom and I felt far less gusto for killing rats, but we continued doing our assigned job until the corn shelling was finished, around noon. That afternoon we saw Spot walking around the barnyard again, apparently recovered from his trauma. He lived to be an old dog.

I don't remember what Dad and Uncle Bob did with those heaps of dead rats.

**Lesson:** Killing is a bad deal.

# The Load of Corn

## Errors and Ingenuity

by Alan Harris

IT'S ALL IN THE WAY that cheap wagon was made, I kept telling him. Clyde never could understand mechanical things like I could. He was always asking dumb questions about how a bearing worked or maybe why you needed rings in pistons or where a spark plug got its electricity. Dumb things any guy should know no matter what he's interested in.

He stood there looking at the spilled load of corn like if he looked at it long enough it would all hustle back into the wagon and the wagon box would hustle back up on the running gear and he could just climb back on the tractor and head on into town.

"Wait a minute, didn't you even bring a shovel?" I asked him.

And he said how he never thought he'd need a shovel hauling corn to the elevator. Yah, as long as you don't dump it on the road, I says to myself.

"Well," I said, "we gotta get this corn out of the road, or cars will be running over it, and that costs us money."

Clyde started thinking about that like as if thinking might get the corn out of the road. I never seen a guy so full of brains that acted so stupid when it come to sensible things. I guess he thinks ESP'll do everything for him.

"Well," I said after a bit, "why don't I go back home and get a shovel and a jack and some tools, and maybe we can get this mess cleaned up. You stay here and keep the gophers and cars away from it. And if you can think of any way to start getting the corn out of the road before I get back, then you can get started on that."

He said okay, and I got in the truck and started back home. Man, what a dumb trick. Turning a corner at full throttle pulling a full wagon of corn. I guess he never thought inertia worked anywhere besides in his head. On paper he could have figured the whole thing out—how much force would be pushing sideways on the wagon with 110 bushels of dry corn in it, going around a 90-degree corner at 18 miles per hour. He could have figured the whole problem out on paper, and figured out how the right front brace on the running gear was going to break off and how the whole wagon box was going to slide off to the right and dump about 58 and seven-tenths bushels of dry shelled corn onto the gravel road. He could have figured that whole problem out on paper.

And there he is in the rear view mirror, just sitting there by the pile of corn in the road wondering why it went and did that when all he was doing was turning a corner. Of course I was nice enough about it. After all, he's a man, or supposed to be. I said how it was the wagon was made weak. Said how you couldn't buy things anymore that lasted more than a couple seasons. So then he said how maybe he was going too fast cause he didn't pull back any on the throttle cause he found out he never had to before when he was driving the old John Deere around the corner. How it always took corners like a Jaguar.

Well. Who could ever think going around a corner with a tractor pulling nothing and a tractor pulling 110 bushels of dry shelled corn was going to be the same thing? He could, I guess.

So I got the jack and tools and shovel and put them in the truck and drove back down there where he was still sitting by the dumped corn at the corner. Then I got out of the truck and looked at the wagon. I see it was never going to be the same again. The box was twisted all funny and the running gear was twisted too. And the tongue was all kind of bent. Lucky he didn't tip the whole tractor over on himself. A really dumb trick.

And then I see the box was split at one of the corner seams so even if you shoveled all that corn back in, you'd never get the wagon anywhere before corn was all strewed out on the road again. So I looked at it and swore a little.

Then we tried putting the jack under the dipped right front corner of the box and seeing if we couldn't kind of lift it back up on the running gear. Well, you just don't lift wagon boxes like you do cardboard boxes. And he couldn't figure out why the twisted box didn't just snap back in place on the running gear after we lifted it up, I guess. Guess he never figured anything could be bent permanent, and everything just snapped back like watch springs. Or else he never knew watches had springs. Well, that wasn't going to work, so we thought about it awhile, about how we were going to even get all this gear back home, the way it was so bent up.

So I said, "Why don't you get on the tractor and see if it'll pull the wagon along like it is without busting anything else? And if that works, we'll bring our other wagon out here and shovel some corn into it. We sure can't carry much corn in this pretzel."

So he gets on the tractor and starts it up and pulls the whole mess about a mile down the road before I can get him stopped, and corn strews out all along the road and the box cuts down into the wagon's right front tire and pops it, and then even more corn spills out cause that corner of the wagon is lower now. Well, not a mile, but it seemed like it. Clutch stuck, he said. Couldn't pull it out of gear. What else can go wrong? Minds well chalk this whole load of corn up to the county for graveling the road and forget it. Mighty expensive gravel, I'd say. And how can you shovel it up when it's all in a stream like this? Unbelievable.

So after I was done cussing some more he said well we could load that pile of corn back by the corner into the back of the truck and just forget about this other stream of corn on the road since it wasn't much. Well, I'd been getting ready to think of that, so I said all right and he got to shoveling corn into the truck while I was thinking about some way to get the wagon back home without losing any more corn out of it. And where I was going to find an extra tire with this one all cut to shreds. And the John Deere still popping away.

So I shut the tractor off and thought awhile about how I was going to get that wagon back home and what I was going to do with it after I got it there. You couldn't weld that broken box back together. It was worse than Humpty Dumpty. But I didn't want to lose all the corn either. A dollar a bushel ain't much, but it don't come free either.

And the John Deere's engine was clicking like it always does after you shut it off, like it was relaxing its muscles and cracking its knuckles back in place. And then some fool hillbilly roared by and raised about forty bushels of dust while I was sitting there thinking how we were going to get that wagon back home.

So Clyde comes over and he says how we can unhitch the tractor and bring it around to the side of the wagon and hook a chain on the back of it and pull the wagon box sideways to the left after we get it up on the jack again and if that won't do it.

So I said yah that's what I was thinking we could do, and so we tried that and what a bunch of cracking and popping and moaning, but the box was back on the running gear enough to ride that way. And then he says how we can get the spare tire out of the pickup truck and put it on the wagon just to get it back home. And I said yah we sure couldn't pull it back on that busted tire or we'd end up needing a new wheel too. So we did that, put the spare tire out of the truck on it.

Then I said maybe I'd drive the tractor back home and he could drive the truck, and how I'd take it nice and easy going back and he could drive along behind me and honk if anything happened. So I drove the tractor and wagon on up the road and got to Jack's farm and turned around in his barnyard. And of course Jack was there and I had to tell him all about how my kid dumped the wagon over by the corner and he laughed and I sorta laughed and then went back toward where Clyde was waiting for me in the truck by the corner.

So I goes around the corner nice and easy to show him how he should of done it the first time, and heads on home. Then I look back and see how Clyde's gotten the truck stuck in the ditch trying to turn it around.



# The Motorcentaur

## Creating Nothingness

by Alan Harris

A THIN HIGHWAY, one endless strand of concrete cobweb, stretches across the desert, dividing nothing into two halves, two equal portions of nothing which when added together amount to less than the line which separates them, as a zero is worth less than the circular visible line which to the eye symbolizes pure nothing, essence of nothing, the zero itself a degradation of the idea it represents because it is there, it is.

At the furthest visible glimmer of roadway in one direction a minuscule dark point appears and exceedingly slowly grows less tiny and gradually assumes the recognizable proportions of a motorcentaur. As he comes closer, his muscles and bright paint reveal him to be a young and powerful motorcentaur. The hum of his motor is now audible above the silent whitenoise of the desert.

He slows down and stops and leaves his motor idling. His eyes scan in every direction and he can see nothing (for we ourselves are present but are watching him in spirit and not in body). He has stopped midway between two vast nothings on a presumptuously visible concrete line, presumptuous because no true line is visible, having no width.

The only two evidences of the passage of time are the allegro staccato pops of his idling motor and the adagio of descending sun, the two beating an arid counterrhythm and together contrasting against the beatlessness of the surrounding nothing.

The motorcentaur is the giver of all and receiver of all. His motor emits pops that only he can hear, that only he would want to hear, and that only he ignores—ignores as he does the beating of his heart, the breathing of his lungs, the blinking of his eyes against parched air.

He is scanning, horizontally scanning, focusing on each trillionth and less of a degree of which three-hundred-sixty arbitrarily comprise his possibilities of horizon. Now he scans a vertical circle from blue-white zenith around to yellowwhite nadir, and on around to zenith, stopping a trillion and more times within each three-hundred-sixtieth of verticality.

As if bent on seeing and affirming all possible points, he methodically fills in all of the circles between horizontal and vertical, thus creating his world, his living and present nothing. His glance summons forth each minute section of absent nothing and transforms it into a positive nothing, a nothing which is.

He, by looking at every possible point around and over and under him, creates the lack of everything except himself, and he obliterates even himself by identifying with his new creation. He and nothing merge. Like Pygmalion and his statue, the motorcentaur and his creation are now joined for not just eternity but eternity.

He revs his motor to an intense aching whine and pops his clutch and strains against the intruding concrete as if to erase impudent it with his rubber tire. He turns and speeds off the road to his right onto the flat hard-packed sand. He races and swerves, veers in all directions, banking hard to avoid not banking hard, turning quickly and missing by bare inches points he would have crossed if he had not turned exactly that quickly. His motor growls and his gears scream but still mesh perfectly as he shifts quickly

through them, picking up speed which is measured against nothing, carries him over nothing, heads toward nothing and away from only that line of road which arbitrarily divides nothing into two equal halves.

Tense with determination, he steers himself around imaginary obstacles and reaches imaginary goals in the very nick of imaginary time. Sand squirts from beneath his wheels and falls back down, forever dislocated from its eons-old position. Suddenly, in one tremendously tightened toothjarringly taut turn, he reverses his direction just in time to miss the profound abyss of not having turned just then. He roars up through his gears again and heads back toward the highway as fast as his motor and wheels can propel him, nothing being now invisible to him because of the windstream which pastes his eyes shut and squeezes out of them tears which provide the sand wherever they happen to fall with the only moisture it has received in perhaps three billion years.

He blasts onward toward the road, that sliver of concrete which taints his abstract nothing by its mere presence, and reaches it in record time—not breaking any records because none exist, but setting one inviolable unmatched record which will stand forever, inviolable because it too does not exist and unmatched because it, as nothing, cannot be matched by anything. He has, in the midst of pure nothing, burned out a speed record which will stand forever because it does not exist.

Meanwhile, his momentum has carried him across and far to the opposite side of the road. There he bilaterally repeats his previous maneuvers of dodging obstacles and just arriving at certain points at exactly the right moment, and again he snaps himself around with incredible agility and heads back toward the road, this time slowing as he approaches it. He need not try to break his unbreakable record. Stopping on the road, he allows his exhausted motor to idle for several hundred pops. The sun has apparently descended into the exact portion of the sky which it astronomically should occupy at this exact moment.

He glances about at his vast nothing, not thoroughly, as he had when he created it in that spurt of unbounded solipsistic fecundity, but instead, choosing random points in it and spot-checking for impurities. In his state of exhaustion he can scarcely decide whether he sees nothing because nothing is present or because nothing is absent. Finally, though, he satisfies himself that his nothing is truly present. He revs his motor again and turns down the road in the direction from which he has come.

Slowly now he recedes toward the horizon, seeming to the retina of our spiritual eye to grow tinier as if striving to become a perfect point which has no length or width, and thus no presence to the senses. The waning hum of his motor melts back into the silence of the desert. The exact moment when he disappears is not isolable, but eventually he is gone. The sun is nearing the horizon. The concrete road line dividing nothing into two equal sections is still orangely visible, but corrupt as a line to the extent that it is visible.

# The 1943 Munster Bombing Raid

In the words of B-17 Pilot Keith E. Harris (1919-1980)

Transcribed from cassette tape by Linda Harris

Edited by Alan Harris

ON THE MORNING OF OCTOBER 10, 1943, I was then flying in the 570th Squadron in the 390th Bomb Group [piloting a B-17F called the "Spot Remover"]. On this morning, October 10, we'd flown two missions on the two preceding days; October 8 we went to Bremen and October 9 we went to Marienburg over in the Polish Corridor. And the morning of October 10, we were assigned a new plane, #783; it was a B-17G with a chin turret, a brand new airplane. That wasn't so bad, but when we saw the squadron setup, why, our number wasn't in it, and our plane and one other were posted over on another board. And up above these numbers was written, "To fly with the 100th."

Now, the 100th group had a real bad reputation as far as coming home was concerned, and I immediately appealed to the colonel, Colonel Edgar Wittan, who was later killed in England, and told him that I didn't want to fly with the 100th. He said, well, everyone was going on the same mission, and I should go over and fly with them; if I didn't like the way they were flying, I could come over and join the 390th again. He said they were real short of planes, and they wanted enough to make a group.

We took off before the 390th on a mission to Munster in Germany; it was on Sunday, a nice sunshiny day, a beautiful day, beautiful fall day. The target was a built-up section of Munster, and I thought it was rather inappropriate that this large set of steps to one big building in Munster was picked out as the aiming point. I'm not sure now whether it was a church or not, but it seemed to me that it was.

Anyway, we took off before the 390th and flew over to where the 100th was assembling. They had 16 planes in the air when I arrived, and the other plane from the 390th had some kind of trouble, either real or imagined, and went back and landed at our base. I circled in formation with the 100th and got in position and took the #5 spot in the high squadron off to the right and above six planes; there were six in the lead, six in the low, and five of us in the top squadron. We got the group all assembled, and the wings started to assemble, and two of the planes from the 100th dropped out. And so then I was in the #3 position, or #2 position; I went up to #2 position in the high squadron.

Just as we started to cross the North Sea, why another 100th plane turned around and started for home (aborting, they called it in those days), and the remaining two planes were just side by side, and so I pulled up in the lead and I led the high squadron, which then consisted of two airplanes. The other airplane was a 100th group plane and had a square D on its tail and we had a square J on our tail.

We crossed the North Sea, or north edge of the English Channel, and headed into Germany. We had a little fighter support for protection until we got just about to the coast. We went in and headed about towards the Ruhr, the Ruhr Valley. The formations were pretty tight; our group was leading the wing, which consisted of three groups, and the 100th was a little bit lower, and then came the 390th and then the 395th.

Well, we had just turned at the initial point to head towards Munster; we were still about, oh, 20 minutes away from the target, and we were heading northeast. We made a shallow turn to the left and were heading northeast; the sun was behind us. And seemingly out of nowhere two fighters came in from

about 6 o'clock, a little bit high, and they shot up the lead plane of the group, of the 100th group, and on the radio gun, the handle dropped and just pointed right straight up in the air, so we figured they were in trouble. But when we looked in the plane, we could see in the windows. We were close enough; we were about, oh, maybe 200 feet from it. There seemed to be a lot of activity, but it was... it didn't make any sharp turns or anything like that as if it was going to leave the formation.

The only thing it did do was slow down, and when you are leading a group and you slow down suddenly, it causes quite a consternation among the other pilots. We slowed down with them. I just had the one man on my right wing, and he was able to stay behind me all right; that was the most difficult part of formation flying, was the slowing down, because if anyone in the lead slows down, it takes a little while for the others to keep from overrunning.

Well, not only did he slow down, but he started losing altitude, and we stayed with him for about, I imagine it was about four minutes, and the fighter attacks were really getting fierce then; they were coming in from the sides. And after we had lost about, I imagine, 2000 feet or maybe 3000 feet (we still had our bomb load, of course), the 390th group passed us, and they were about 2000 or 3000 feet above us. And by that time, our lead plane was smoking pretty badly, and the other 12 planes were still staying in formation, scattered out a little bit by the fighters and the slowing down of the lead plane.

Well, right then I took my group commander's advice, and I said, "Well, this is it," so we put on full take-off power and closed up the cowl flaps as much as we could, and we started to join the 390th. And the man on my right wing (who I think his name is Rosenthal, but he was written up in the "Stars and Stripes" as the only survivor of the 100th mission), he stayed fairly close, so he evidently put on full power too. And we climbed it seemed like an eternity before we could ever catch the 100th, I mean the 390th, and this plane on our right wing stayed fairly close, and there were several fighter attacks on our two planes at this time. However, I think most of them were finishing off the 100th, the 12 planes that went on down with the leader.

As soon as we put on take-off power and started to climb and saw the opposition and the position we were in, we dropped the bombs. And, as far as I know, my right wing man did too. By the time we had reached the 390th, they had already turned right into the bombing run. They turned a little left to go into the bombing run; we were able to cut 'em off a little, and they had about 16 planes left at that time. We dropped into the #5 spot in the low squadron, and I lost track of the other 100th plane; I don't know where he went, the remaining 100th plane.

We flew northwest, mostly west, from Munster, and the fighter attacks were just ferocious; the guns were just going all the time. And we had one fighter who came in head-on from 12 o'clock level, and he wasn't firing. Just before he got to us he kind of dropped down and we raised up a little bit, and I still think he must have been shot, because he did not shoot at us at all; he just flew right through the formation, the bottom half of the formation.

While this was going on, the 390th lost two more planes from fire and from enemy aircraft, and we moved up to the #4 spot in the low squadron. And it must have lasted about 20 minutes, I guess, before some 51's and some 47's came over just about, oh, they were inside of the Netherlands, I guess, a little ways, but, of course, they couldn't go clear to Munster, and we were naturally very tickled when they showed up and then the German fighters left. And just about the time they showed up, we lost another plane from the 390th in the low squadron, and then I moved up to #3 position in the low squadron and there were, I think, five in the lead and five in the high.

Two more planes were lost on the way home, and when we got back to the 390th airbase it was all socked in; it was all foggy and cloudy, couldn't see a thing, so we went on to the base where the 100th was stationed, and there were three of us landed there that I know of. I landed first, and then William Cabraile landed in "Eight Ball," and his plane was shot up a lot worse than ours; he had an engine out, and he ran off the end of the runway—but I don't think there was anyone actually seriously wounded in his plane as there were none in ours.

We went into the debriefing room, and of course there were a lot more debriefing tables than there were crews to fill them; there were only three crews in there, and we had just started our debriefing and everybody was certainly relieved to be back on the ground. Our plane was not flyable; I mean it wouldn't take off again without a lot of repairs.

And while the intelligence officer was questioning us on the enemy attacks and the bomb strike and things like that, why there was a telephone call, and they wanted the pilot of the 390th plane that flew with the 100th, and so I went in this office and picked up the phone and said, "This is Lieutenant Harris," and the voice at the other end said, "This is General ... "(I cannot remember his name now) [*very likely it was General Curtis LeMay—A.H.*], but it shocked me so when he said "General" I just about fainted. And he wanted to know what happened to the 100th; he said there were 12 planes missing, so I told him everything I knew about the mission, and he wanted to know how far into the mission that they were shot down and things like that. After I had told him everything I knew, why he said, "Thank you," and I hung up; that was the extent of my conversations with generals.

I went back to the debriefing table, and the boys made their claims. We had five fighters shot down, confirmed that day, from our plane, which was at that time the most, I guess, on any one mission. The whole group shot down 57 fighters claimed, although I am a little suspicious of some of these figures myself. I only know of actually two that were shot down by our gunners that I could see; of course, the pilot's compartment of a B-17 gives you a very limited view of the enemy attacks unless they are head-on or from the side, and the only one I saw that I could confirm was completely demolished was one that came up from about 11:30, low. Oh, he came up at an angle of about 30 degrees, and I think it was the navigator that got him, but the others, of course, I couldn't see. The top turret gunner got one, the tail gunner got one, and I think one of the waist gunners got one, maybe the ball turret gunner; anyway it was a big day, and we were really tickled to be back on the ground.

The pilot that flew the plane for the 100th, I didn't even get the plane number, everything was so mixed up when we were on this mission, and later on in the Stars and Stripes, there was an article, this must have been around the 1st of November, probably, 1943, if you care to check on it, and the name of the article is "One Out of Thirteen," and he wrote the whole story about the mission, his part in it, and he never even mentioned me, which I thought was kind of an oversight, but I suppose he thought that I was not even from his group so I didn't count.

But anyway, we were... no one was hurt, physically, but for two or three days there we didn't feel like flying again. In fact, the next mission was going to be to Schweinfurt, and due to the fact that our plane was shot up so badly, they gave us another new plane, and this was one of the newer ones where they left out a lot of the fancy trimming, along about November of 1943, and this one had... oh you could see down into the bombardier's compartment from the pilot's compartment, and there were a lot of things that were really not...I suppose they weren't necessary, but they made our old B-17F a nicer airplane to fly.



We took off on the Schweinfurt raid, and we got up to altitude and checked the guns, and one of the ball turret guns wouldn't fire, and one of the tail guns wouldn't fire, and we were leaking oxygen someplace; we generally carried about 400 pounds of oxygen in the main tanks, and it was already down to less than 200, and so we turned around and came back. That was the only mission we aborted except one to Paris in September—we took off and a push rod broke in the number 3 engine and started shooting out a lot of oil, so we feathered it and came back.

But Schweinfurt wasn't a bad trip for our group; they only lost one plane, and as far as I know, all of the men on that crew were interned. One of them, I think it was the copilot, it was his 21st birthday, and he was a little reluctant to go too, and they were kind of kidding him about it, but uh, he did go but I guess they saw all the chutes open from the plane. I think it was flak that got that one.

The mission the day before Munster, on the 9th of October in 1943, was the longest mission we had done, except for the one to Regensburg when we landed in Africa, but this one to Marienburg, we took off from England and we flew north, and we crossed the peninsula of Denmark, oh, about half-way up. Then we went down along the south coast of Sweden, well, we could just see Sweden, and went over Bornholm Island. We turned southeast and we crossed the coast, oh, maybe 100 miles before we got to Marienburg. We headed southeast, and on the bomb run at Marienburg there was no flak and no fighters, and we went in at 12,000 feet, our group, and the other two groups had bombed the aircraft factory there.

Well, it was a real good bombing; the accuracy was just outstanding. Practically all the bombs were right inside the aircraft factory works and the buildings, and I heard later on that there was even a POW camp right across the river—the river kind of bends around this factory, and they didn't get struck at all, and all of these bombs landed very close, I suppose within 500 feet of the aiming point.

That was about an 11-hour mission, I think; we got home about dark, and we crossed the Danish coast on the way home. We had let down to probably 5,000 or 6,000 feet, and there were some—two or three—twin-engine fighters came out and they stayed just far enough behind so our tracers would not reach them, although a lot of the planes tried to reach them, and they were firing 20 mm cannons into the formation. I didn't see them hit anyone, but I could see these flashes when they went off behind the planes below us, and, oh, it looked like a flashbulb go off and then there would be a white puff of smoke about as big as a basketball when they fired, when they exploded in the air.

We got out (and this was when we were just about over the coast—well, it was the south edge of Denmark, I guess) and we got out over the water and there were six planes, 109's, came out, and they flew down along the lead squadron out far enough so they were out of gun range, and they flew out about, oh, I suppose probably four miles in front of the plane, and they all six turned in formation and they went right through the formation in a head-on pass, and the group that they went through was about 3,000 feet below us and about two or three miles ahead, and we had an excellent view, and with all the tracers and 20-mm cannon shells going off, and as far as I know, everyone was unscathed because there were no losses in the 17's, and these six planes flew on back over the coast towards the east.

Marienburg was a real good mission for us. We didn't lose any planes at all, and there wasn't much damage—a few bullet holes but not many—and if it hadn't been for the fact that the next day we were going to Munster, why, we would have really started enjoying our missions over in the ETO [European Theater of Operations].

Editor's Note: Sometime after my father, Keith E. Harris, died in 1980, our family discovered the above story that he had taped on his own, probably in the 1970's. It offers an insider's view of how it was to fly a bombing mission in a B-17, where any such mission could end in disaster, and many did. In his narration Dad used the word "Mariensburg" repeatedly as one of his bombing missions, but in the [www.390th.org](http://www.390th.org) Web site this city is listed as "Marienburg." Dad piloted his requisite 25 missions in the European Theater of Operations (ETO), then came back to the United States to become a B-29 trainer as World War II was ending. He was later transferred to a base in the Philippine Islands for a year or two, following which he opted for a discharge from the Air Force in 1947 with the rank of Major. He spent the remainder of his life more quietly: farming the family acreage near Earlville, Illinois with his brother, Robert E. Harris, driving a school bus route for 29 years, and, with his wife Margie, raising a family of four children—Alan, Kathleen, Donald, and Dale (oldest to youngest). For a first-person account of his initial year in the Air Force (1941-42) see the next story: "Air Force Odyssey Before Flying B-17s." —A.H.

For statistics, photos, and other stories about the 390th Bomb Group during World War II, visit [www.390th.org](http://www.390th.org)

To hear Keith's audio narration of this story, go to [www.alharris.com/stories/munster.mp3](http://www.alharris.com/stories/munster.mp3)



# Air Force Odyssey Before Flying B-17s

In the words of B-17 Pilot Keith E. Harris (1919-1980)

Transcribed from cassette tape by Linda Harris

Edited by Alan Harris

I WAS BORN ON OCTOBER 13, 1919, which would have made me 21 years old on the 13th of October in 1940. When the draft was originally proposed, the signup was for young men who would be 21 by about the 10th of October or September, something like that, in 1940, which would have excluded me. However, along about July or August of 1940, this was changed to include anyone that would be 21 years old by the 20th of October or some such date, which would have included me in the draft. Therefore, I decided to enlist in the Air Force rather than getting drafted in the Army.

Along about September 20, I went up to Aurora and talked to the folks there. They said that they had a place for me—I guess they always do. And then about the 25th of September in 1940, I went to Chicago and took the oath in the evening, and we were put on an Illinois Central train and sent to Chanute Field in Rantoul, Illinois. We got there sometime after midnight on the morning of the 26th, I believe, of September, and they issued us a pillow without any pillow cover and two blankets, and indicated we should spend the rest of the night in a six-man tent, which there were several of at Chanute Field at that time.

It was cold. Oh, it was awful cold. We had this pillow with no pillowcase and one blanket under us and one blanket over us and left most of our clothes on, and we got up in the morning and it was really cold.

They didn't have any basic training for us there at all; they just kind of moved us around to the different medical briefings and things like that. We took our shots and, oh, nothing actually much happened for about two or three weeks. We just stayed in the tents. A few odd things happened, like a couple of the tents would catch fire from the stove in the center. Our tent didn't have a stove, so we didn't have to worry about that, but there was always a little excitement when a tent caught on fire; they were pretty close together. Some of them I seriously think were arson or just something to do.

Along about October, why, I had applied for Link Trainer school, and it didn't start until January sometime. Maybe it was December; I don't know. Anyway, in the meantime they put me on to work with the fire marshal on Chanute Field, and I just can't remember his name. But there were a couple of others in the same group. One of them was named Eates, and the other was Connor, and we'd go over to the fire department every morning after we got done eating breakfast, sit around there and, oh, polish the trucks or go around and check the fire hydrants and see if the water hadn't leaked up near the top so they'd freeze. It was getting along toward winter and it was pretty nasty. Wasn't a bad job, though; I really enjoyed it. And the fire chief, I can't think of his name now, but he was a real nice old civilian, and he took good care of the firehouse. Of course, we didn't go on fire calls. We were just kind of slaves around the house.

And then about December, well let's see, I came home on the day before Labor Day, no, not Labor Day, Armistice Day, in 1940, and I hitchhiked back—oh, it was about 140 miles, I guess, 120 maybe. And on the way back, I was riding with a fellow and a storm came up, and the wind blew, and we were heading south on Rt. 47 and his hood came unhooked at the front end. It was an old Mercury, and it just came up and just covered up the windshield completely, and he ran off on the right-hand side of the road and got it stopped—didn't hit anything—and we got out and wired it down and went on.

We got back to Chanute and they just moved us in the barracks, and it really snowed—this was the 11th of November, 1940. Really, really was a bad day; cold and snow, and the wind blew out of the north-west, blew about half of the tents away, and there were fellows from the tents moving in and doubling up in the barracks, and we considered ourselves lucky to already have been assigned to a barracks. Of course we didn't know that in less than a month there'd be measles and scarlet fever and just about everything breaking out, and when that happened in a barracks, this barracks was quarantined, and that would last all the way from 48 hours to five or six days.

I finally started Link Trainer school, and we went from 6:00 in the morning until noon each day, and we'd have to get up before 5:00, clean up and make our beds, get breakfast and go to school. It was a good school—they had about six or eight Link Trainers and good instructors and we really enjoyed it. But training sessions were broken about three times by measles or scarlet fever, or something, and they dropped us back a part of a class once, and then we went at night for a while to catch up. And finally the first of April, around the first of April, in 1941 we graduated, and then we had about a week before they knew where we were going, and this was anxiously awaited, of course, by all the graduates.

And while we were waiting, they had to think of something else for us to do, and that was when I caught my KP; I had about three or four days in a row, or else I'd get theater guard—that was the best. You'd go stand by the door and see that they didn't block the aisles, and you got to watch the movie. But KP was rough. We'd go real early in the morning and we'd stay till all the way from 5:00 till 8:00 at night. I remember one day I cut over 4,000 pieces of cake in these large Army bake tins—they must have been about 24 inches wide and about 32 or 38 inches long. Had to cut 'em four one way and seven the other. I figured out it was over 4,000 pieces of cake I cut. Of course, that wasn't a hard job, but it was kind of monotonous.

And then, about the 10th of April I got my orders: 24th Air Base, Anchorage, Alaska. And the other two fellows that I chummed around with, one or them got sent to Alaska with me, and the other one got sent to Philippine Islands, Clark Field. I never heard how he made out after the Japanese invasion and capture of all those people who weren't killed, so I never did find out how or if he survived.

I was home [a farm five miles east of Earlville, Illinois] about the 10th of April for about a week, and I just fiddled around. They were starting to farm. Then on the 18th, of course, I got married; that was a big day. And on about the 21st or so, I got on a bus in Earlville, went to Chicago, and took another bus to New York City and went on the turnpike then—the Pennsylvania Turnpike was just new—and when we got to New York; I was stationed at the Brooklyn Army Base for a couple of weeks, I guess, and we just had clean-up details and KP and odd jobs like that, and at night we'd practically always go downtown, get on the subway, and go down to Manhattan Island and go to a show.

One day I rode the subway all day long for a nickel. Those were the days you could put a nickel in the turnstile and get in, and as long as you stayed and didn't change trains or anything like that, why, you could ride. So I took this nickel (and I had 20 cents left, I think, out of my paycheck) and stuck it in the turnstile and got on the subway, and I had a sandwich and an apple and I stayed on all day long. I think it was about 9:00 at night I got off, and I had gone clear up, way up past Harlem and out to Queens and out to LaGuardia Field and down to Coney Island, and just riding all day long. It was real interesting—I saw a lot of interesting sites. Go across the Brooklyn Bridge three or four times and up across the George Washington Bridge once. I suppose I probably went 200 miles all for a nickel. And, of course, we visited the Statue of Liberty, went up in the Empire State Building, did a little shopping, and took the

Staten Island Ferry; that was another nickel ride—seemed to be well worth it. It took about 20 minutes each way, I guess, and was pretty good-sized boat.

And finally they ordered us up from Brooklyn up to Ft. Slocum; it's an island, small island off New Rochelle, New York—I guess it is New Rochelle, NY—and it was rough. They had us doing something all the time. They'd make us get a haircut if we hadn't had one for two or three days. There was a bunch of old lieutenant colonels over there in charge of the island, I guess, and they'd just stand around and look for you to do something wrong and then they would immediately relay it down to you through the sergeants in no uncertain terms. We'd pick up paper on the parade ground, and we'd rake leaves, and just all the time—we were busy all the time at Ft. Slocum there, and everybody just hated it, and it was pretty hot—this was in June, I think.

Well, I think the colonel saw that we were all draftees and he had a strong dislike for us because draftees were coming in then and, just like draftees have always done, I suppose, they didn't really seem to fit into the colonel's idea of an ideal military life. And then about the latter part of June we got on a special train, must have been a hundred of us, an engine, three cars, and a baggage car, and we got on the train at New Rochelle and we took off for San Francisco.

See, at the Brooklyn Army base, they were going to take us around through the Panama Canal to Alaska, but when we got up to Ft. [?], well they decided they weren't going to do that anymore, so they took us to Ft. Slocum and from there we got on this train, and it went day and night steady. I don't know, it took us about three days, I guess, two-and-a-half days, it was a real fast train. Going through Texas some of the track was washed out and we had to go real slow. It was pretty monotonous. Nothing to do on the train, of course, just eat and sleep, read, tell stories. We got to San Francisco in the middle of June.

The sergeant who was in charge gave us a big briefing talk when we got off the train, and we went to Angel Island. We got off the train, oh I guess it was Oakland, no it was actually in San Francisco. Then we went down to the foot of the Van Ness Street and we got on a ferry, and it took us right past Alcatraz Island, and we went past this a little further out into the bay, and here is Angel Island, about three miles, I suppose, in diameter. It's got a mountain in the center about a thousand feet or so.

There's an Army barracks there, and that was almost as bad as Fort Slocum. We did KP there; we'd start at 4:00 in the morning, and after KP why they'd find something else for you to do, too, and they had real tough sergeants there. It was a real poor place to be. Nobody enjoyed themselves. The only thing that was good was they had free movies and Sunday you could get off and we had a ball team. Some of the other fellows and I walked around the island one Sunday; it was about, oh, I don't know, three or four miles, I guess, around the island, and then we climbed up to the peak, looked around, watched a China clipper, the flying boat, take off for China. This was in the latter part of June, 1941.

We could see both bridges from Angel Island and the skyline of San Francisco, and of course they'd let us go about once a week, or sometimes twice a week they'd let us take the ferry over to the mainland of San Francisco, and that was always interesting, going to see some of the sights in San Francisco.

And then, about the 20th of June or 25th, something like that, we got on the U.S. Grant, a troop ship, long and narrow, and we started for Seattle. And that took about a day and a half, I guess, and it really rolled. We got out, went underneath the Golden Gate Bridge and turned right and started up the coast, and we stopped in Astoria, Oregon. I don't know what they stopped for, but we went in there and they let us off the boat for awhile and we walked around town, but there wasn't much to see in '41, so we came back and got on the boat.

That night we sailed again, or no, I guess it was the next morning, and we got out to the—they had a pilot aboard, looked like he was 70 years old—we got out to the ocean from Astoria (well, it is the end of the Columbia River there, I guess), and the waves were really high. We were on the U.S. Grant. Out where we hit the ocean, there was a fellow in a rowboat, and the waves were at least 30 feet high, and this 70-year-old pilot—they stopped the ship. The boy in the rowboat came rowing up alongside and actually the water went up and down the side of the General Grant at least 30 feet—at least—and this old 70-year-old man went down the ladder on the side of the ship a little ways and this rowboat would go up and down, up and down, and then finally he stood there and held on with one hand and one foot, and when the rowboat was just in the right place and came up the side of the ship, he just dropped into it—and that would make anybody gray.

Let's see, the next morning we went in the Strait of Juan de Fuca, or whatever they call it, went past Port Angeles, and Whidbey Island, headed for Seattle. And at Seattle we were unloaded and sent up to Fort Blunt—that was an old Army post up in the north edge of Seattle, right on Puget Sound. We stayed there for quite awhile. We'd go down to Seattle; I think it was about four or five miles. I know I walked down one Sunday, down to the USO or YMCA or something, some kind of a thing they had for servicemen, played pool, things like that.

Seattle was pretty dirty—I suppose it just wasn't a very clean looking town. Fort Lawton wasn't too bad—they didn't work us too hard and we had a few odd jobs, but nothing that was really hard work. Moved a piano for a colonel once and helped mow the lawn, picked things up, moved things around. Spent the Fourth of July, 1941, in Fort Lawton, Washington, and had the day off, of course. We just walked around and looked at the sights and took pictures.

Then about the 6th or 7th of July, we went to Seattle and got on a little boat called the Clevedon—I think it was an Italian ship that was captured during World War I, a motor ship, 260 feet or something like that, and there were about 14 of us Air Force men on it and that was all, in addition to the crew. We took off for Seward, Alaska.

Clevedon rode pretty rough, although the water wasn't too bad that time, and we got to Seward one morning real early, went in. Real early in the morning we saw the rocks out at the opening to the bay, and it was foggy and looked terrible. This was in the middle of July 1941. We landed at Seward, and they just had one wharf there and a great big building alongside of it, and they just pulled up and tied it up and we all jumped off and went inside the building, stood around.

Pretty soon they said, "Well, we are going up to Anchorage by train." There are mountains all around Seward. Just west of Seward there is a mountain that goes up about 45 degrees, all covered with trees, and I suppose it goes up 2,000 feet anyway. Anyway, it looked dangerous. Looked like the snow might fall... I suppose the snow might have slid off if it hadn't been for the trees. Seward was a real small town. I suppose it was, oh, maybe 2,000. All wooden buildings. They'd had several severe fires, disastrous fires.

We got on this little train—it was pulled by a steam engine, and had about two cars, and we started up the mountain. We went past a glacier on the way to Anchorage, and it was ice and snow all around, right in July, on the mountains. The train went about 15 miles an hour, made a couple complete circles, crossed over itself, and then we got to the edge of the Cook Inlet, went across a bridge and got over on

the Anchorage side of the Cook Inlet, went right along the side of the mountain. Even the waterfalls coming down sometimes would splash in the window on the train, you know, would splatter in.

And we came to the end—we could see the end of the mountains up ahead, and we came to the end of the mountains (they were on our right) and there was a field and there was a fellow with a Fordson tractor out there plowing and I just about fell out of the train; I thought everything would be pretty primitive, but he had a pretty good size field he was plowing—I don't know whether he was going to plant it at that time of year. Anyway, he was plowing it.

We went on into Anchorage (I suppose it was probably a town of three or four thousand), got off the train, and they put us on Army trucks and out to Elmendorf Field. Elmendorf Field was the main base there, and right alongside of Elmendorf was Fort Richardson, the Army base. And we got assigned to the 24th Air Base Unit, met the fellows, and got introduced all around and assigned to a barracks, went and ate supper.

Next morning, we went to the usual briefing, and they said they had too many Link Trainer instructors for the machines—they only had one machine, one Link Trainer, and there were about five of us available to operate it, and three would have been the most they could possibly use. And by very judicious management, we were able to all be retained as Link Trainer instructors and we worked short hours. Link training was at the top story of a two-story combined hangar and maintenance shop, and they were just building the rest of the main part of Elmendorf Field then.

And while we were giving training, I experienced my first earthquake there on the top floor. I was operating the machine, the Link Trainer, and sitting at the table, and I felt the desk start to shake, and I started to get up and I kind of wobbled around. I sat down real quick and the dust rose up from the floor and the windows rattled and the Link Trainer was tipping one way or the other. The lieutenant who was inside, he raised the hood up real quick and said, "Who's got ahold of this?"—and it only lasted about 20 seconds, I guess, and it was done. You could even see the dust outside it had raised up from the ground. We heard later that two men in a cabin on the side of a mountain had fallen down into a ravine and they were killed, but that was the only serious damage.

The 18th Pursuit Squadron was stationed at Elmendorf when I was there, and they were our near neighbors on the runway, on the taxiway, and they had P36 fighters. I think they had a couple of 30-caliber guns and one over the hood, or one over the cowl that fired through the propeller. They weren't very formidable looking, but they were very maneuverable. Another thing about them, when it got a little later in the fall, they were awfully hard to start—they had a shotgun starter. They put a shell inside the plane someplace in a little case and closed it up, and then they'd fire it and the engine would turn about one revolution, and then generally it would stop. I have seen, oh, I have seen as many as 50 of those shotgun casings out on the taxiway there where somebody had tried to start a plane. And they had ropes that they would put on the props and two or three guys would take ahold of them and pull them through, and that also was a little futile. But once they got them in the air, nine of them could do a loop, and they'd all be in the loop at once. Then they'd do Immelmans and Cuban 8's and—a very maneuverable airplane. They were real pretty. I didn't know any of the pilots personally, except this one, Hazeltine, who I ran into about five years later in Clark Field in the Philippine Islands.

When I was there, I was kind of interested in navigation, and there was a navigating officer there, Lieutenant Bero, and he kind of took an interest in me, I guess, so he give me some forms and things to work navigation problems, and I built myself a sextant that I could, oh, I could figure out a position within



maybe 15 miles, 10 or 15 miles, which I thought was pretty good. He seemed to think that was rather surprising because I made it out of wood and with a protractor and magnifying glass and a level out of a carpenter's level and some batteries, and I had a little bulb in it. It was pretty accurate, but kind of a plaything.

And along about December 7, I guess it was, we went to Sunday dinner and the fellows across from me said something about they had a big—the Japanese were attacking Pearl Harbor, and one of the fellows across the table from me says, yea, he said, he started that rumor. And about 10 minutes later, it became pretty general something was going on, and before we finished our meal, the colonel came in and explained to us that from what he had heard, the Japanese were bombing Pearl Harbor; this was around noon on Sunday, December 7—and that night, it was black at Anchorage.

We actually thought we were next, and we had to have blankets over all the windows and no lights after dark and a lot of extra guards, and within a week, why, three of the Link Trainer operators (instructors) were put on guard duty—and in the depth of December in Alaska, was an awfully poor time to be on guard duty. Three or four nights I went out in the woods about a mile or two from the base and walked around about 500 50-gallon oil drums that were full of gasoline with a .45, and I would be accosted about three times during the night by the sergeant of the guard, and it was pretty cold. Well, it wasn't awfully cold, but cold if you had to stay out in it with snow on the ground, a lot of snow.

I think the coldest it got when I was there was 9 below. The days were awfully short. Along in December, we'd go to work—first part of December, we'd go to work at 8:00 in the morning in the Link Trainer office. Get up and eat breakfast and it was pitch dark. Go to work 8:00 and still dark; you couldn't see a thing. About 9:00, why it would start getting a little light in the east, and the sun would start showing. About 9:30 the sun would come up over the Chugach Mountains that were east of Elmendorf Field, and then noon wouldn't be too bad—sun would be shining—it would warm up a little. A lot of ice skating up there. Three o'clock or quarter after three, the sun would go down. You'd go home from work at 4:30 and it would be pitch dark. It did make a long night, and there wasn't anyplace to go really in Anchorage. Didn't have many—well, they did have Red Cross station or whatever you call it there, just before I left, but I just went to it once.

Along about January, they had a big call for pilots. Well, I immediately rushed over to the medical officer who said no, my visual accommodation was insufficient. I had a little trouble, so I immediately started eating carrots and taking vitamin A pills and all kind of subterfuges to become accepted. And then along the first of February they came out with the paper again—anybody who wanted to go could go, so I went and took the test and I passed and got my orders.

Around the first of March, I went down to Seward on the train, got on the St. Vehiele [?]. That was a huge boat, and we took off from Seward and went out into the Bay of Alaska, and it blew up a terrible storm, and it snowed, and it was just awful. And we were out about one day, I guess, till we got to—seems like it was Cape Spencer, I don't know for sure. Anyway, it was the north end of the Inland Passage. From then on down the west coast of Canada we went on the Inland Passage. That was a beautiful trip. It was cloudy and windy, but water was smooth and beautiful scenery.

We stopped at Ketchikan; I don't know why. We stopped there for awhile and one of the boys I used to know was running an Air Force crash boat there, and he came up alongside and brought some mail. I talked to him a little and he was surprised to see me, of course. There were about 30 of us going back to cadet school. We got back. We landed in Seattle again, must have been the middle of March 1941

[1942], and we were there maybe two or three days, and it had changed entirely. There were a lot more men there and it was a lot stricter, and it was just much worse than it was the summer before.

And around the 15th of March or so we got a train and we went by train to Santa Ana, California, down south of Los Angeles, and we put into a big holding base there, I guess, staging base. And there were a lot of men there. Some of them going to cadets and some weren't. And that was the first time I ever saw Bob Hope—it was around the latter part of March or the first of April of 1941 [1942]. He came and gave one of his early USO shows, I guess. It was pretty good. You know, he told a few shady jokes and they had several luscious-looking females on the program; it was well received.

Then about the first of April they shipped us out to Ontario, California. This is just east of Pomona, east of Los Angeles about 20 miles, and we were south of Ontario, this base is Cal-Aero Academy. It looked like at a country club. Nice one-story dormitories and two men to a room, and they had covered walkways all around, and everything was really A-1. PT-17 Stearmans.

We started training about the first of April, 5th of April, something like that, and I had about three different instructors before I soloed. The first one was named Gray—or Brown, Mr. Brown. He was an old farmer that lived near Ontario, and he farmed and he also taught aviation cadets just as a sideline. The first day he took me up we flew around awhile and he said, "There's a hawk down there. We ought to go down and chase him a little." I never got sick in a plane in my life and I didn't then, but that was about the closest. He said, "Check your safety belt and hang on; it might turn pretty quick." So I took ahold of the sides and he dove at this hawk, and the hawk was soaring about 400 feet off the ground, and he'd go around the hawk and turn in it seemed about 300 feet and he'd come back again and the hawk was, you know, rather seriously annoyed. One time, I thought we got him with the inner wing flying wires, but it just evidently was on the outside of the outside strut. Mr. Brown, he was laughing, having a big time. I imagine he was 45 years old or 50. He wore glasses, was medium size. He weighed about 180. Then he quit. I don't think that had anything to do with it.

I only had about three hours training from him, and then another instructor came. There was quite a turnover in instructors at Cal-Aero. And another instructor taught me for about six hours, and something happened; he got transferred to Basic. And the last instructor I had before I soloed, he was a real nice guy. I think I had about 11 hours when I soloed, 10 hours and 30 minutes, or something like that. Didn't bother me any. I always landed in the grass. If I was going a little bit sideways, why it would just slip.

Primary was a lot of fun. We did quite a bit of solo work after we had soloed once. And every once in a while you'd see an unauthorized formation go by. And when you are first starting to fly when somebody pulls in and flies formation with you, it is a little frightening—seems impossible that they won't hit you somewhere.

At the end of primary, we had a test by an Army instructor, and he took me up, or rather I guess I took him up. We flew around awhile, and he seemed to be satisfied with most of the things I did (some of them he kind of shook his head). We did lazy-eights and Chandelles and snap roll (didn't do a loop with him) and several other things and finally went back to base and he said come on the pattern, so I started to enter the pattern satisfactorily, I guess—he didn't say anything.

I got on the downwind leg and turned on the base and everything was all right, and I started to turn on the final, and he said, "Where you going to land?" And I said, "Right down there alongside the runway," and he said, "No, land on the blacktop." That was the first time I had landed on the blacktop, and I came



down with my normal 15-degree crab, I guess, and we hit the blacktop and it wasn't anything like landing on the grass, and it kind of skidded along sideways there, and I was sitting in the back fighting. He didn't touch the controls—I give him credit for that. He had a lot of nerve.

We taxied over to the ready room. He got out and said, "You almost ground-looped," and I told him, "Yes, and I never landed on the blacktop before." He said, "Well, practice that." And he got out his paper and he started writing down a whole bunch of things, and finally he said, "Well, it wasn't a very good ride," he said, "but Uncle Sam really needs pilots, so I'll pass you on the Basic." Naturally, I was elated.

From Basic, we went into BT-13's, low wing, fixed landing gear, Vultee's, nice airplane. That was the first airplane I flew at night, solo; that's a [?], especially when there is a lot of traffic. The only thing really good about it was Los Angeles—we were close enough to Los Angeles we could see it real well from the air at night. Of course, they didn't black out the west coast, so it was all lit up and it was really a nice sight, but we only had about a six-mile-square practice area, or four of them, rather, on four corners of the field, and it always seemed as though someone was closer to you than they should be, and it took a little figuring to say, "Well now, this is a green light," or "This is a red light," or "Which way is he going?" and you always worried about your instruments and how high you were. You had to maintain a certain altitude, and once in a while they'd let down somebody from the 6,000-foot altitude when you were flying in the 5,000-foot altitude, and it was always exciting to watch him go by. But, we didn't have too much night flying; it lasted about a couple of weeks, I guess. We had 60 hours of flying time in basic; they kept real close track of that. Got 60 hours in primary, 60 hours in basic before we moved on to advanced.

In basic training I saw my first crash. There was another fellow who was in the same class I was in. We were flying in an auxiliary field, landing in an auxiliary field one day, and it was pretty busy. I think they had about 12 BT's there, and they had an instructor on the ground with a control plane with the radio going, and I just taxied up and got out of my BT and was walking over the check in and tell him where I was. I looked over and there were two BT's on the final approach. The one in the rear, the furthest from the field, all of a sudden looked like he stalled and he made a sharp turn to the left and he started right straight down and disappeared behind a hill; it was about a mile from the field. We couldn't see what happened to him.

I rushed over to the control plane, and I said, "One of the planes looked like it went down," and so the instructor in the control plane called the other planes in the pattern and asked if they'd seen anything. No, they didn't see anything. They started counting the planes and he said, "No, I think they are all here," and I said, "Well, I don't." I ran over to the edge of this hill; it was a little way back from the end of the runway. Looked over the top and there was a lake down there about a half mile away—Fuller's Lake was the name of it—and right in the middle of it there was a landing gear of a BT sticking out of the water and part of the tail upside down in the water.

So then I rushed back and told him there was a plane in the lake, and just about that time he heard that there was one in, and we got in the bus that took us over there. And the bus went down pretty close to the edge of the lake and we jumped out, and by that time there was somebody, of course we couldn't tell who it was, out of the airplane and was sitting on the inverted plane right on the fuselage—he was, oh, about half out of the water and he was hanging onto the landing gear which was pointing straight up. I took off my flight coveralls and I was going to wade out; I didn't think it was very deep. And just about that time a rowboat came rowing down the lake real fast and they pulled over to the plane and this fellow was able to climb in and the rowboat brought him to shore.

His face was all cut up real bad. We couldn't tell who he was; it was Monty Powell that was one of our buddies, and he was gagging and spitting up blood and water. We laid him there on the grass and called for the bus to come on down. I took my coveralls off and we put those on him to kind of keep him from getting too cold, and then we put him in the bus, and he could talk. He said he just felt like he was all full of mud and he was bleeding pretty bad. We kind of bandaged him up and took him in the bus and we went up this hill where the ambulance was on its way then. Took him to the top of the hill and took him out of the bus and laid him on the ground, and I thought he was just about gone but he was still conscious.

The ambulance came and they just bundled him right up and put him in the ambulance and took him to the hospital. The plane was just completely wrecked; the wings were torn clear off the fuselage, and actually the wing was in a different place. Landed almost—hit the water almost straight down. He stalled out on his final approach. Three days later he was out of the hospital. His face, his forehead was all scarred up real bad, and one of his eyes was pretty badly bruised, but he didn't lose any of his facilities and later on I heard he went into glider training.

We got an awful lecture from the medical officer of the base for moving him, for carrying him in the bus, but the ambulance—I don't know why, I suppose the ambulance could have gotten down there, but they didn't seem to think that they would. This bus was a pretty sturdy machine, and, of course, when we carried him in the bus, he was sitting in the seat, and I sat alongside him in my underwear mainly 'cause that was all I had left. Then we got him up to the top of the hill. He was all right, but I suppose it would have been better to leave him there—but we hadn't had any first-aid training and we thought the quicker we could get him to an ambulance the better. But he turned out all right. They did drop him out of the class, of course—if you wrecked a plane, you were automatically out.

And it was a real spectacular crash. He said he hit the water (I talked to him later)—when he hit the water he was doing about 200 miles an hour, he thought. He stalled on the final approach, and he got into the wing wash of the plane ahead of him, or prop wash, and he stalled it out, and when he went to put the throttle on, he claimed that it didn't take and had dropped off of the left wing and just made a left steep spiral right into the water. The instrument panel was all caved in. His head had hit right at the compass and it all caved in, and it was just miraculous that he didn't get a severe skull fracture. I don't think he even had what they called a concussion. He was just a real lucky boy.

**Editor's Note:** Sometime after my father, Keith E. Harris, died in 1980, our family discovered the above story that he had taped on his own, probably in the 1970's. The anecdotes and impressions given above illustrate his knack for storytelling. Dad later became a B-17 pilot (see "The 1943 Munster Bombing Raid" prior to the present story) who flew his requisite 25 missions in the European Theater of Operations, then came back to the United States to become a B-29 trainer while World War II was ending. He was then transferred to a base in the Philippine Islands for a year or two, following which he opted for a discharge from the Air Force in 1947 with the rank of Major. He spent the remainder of his life more quietly: farming the family acreage near Earlville, Illinois with his brother, Robert E. Harris, driving a school bus route for 29 years, and with his wife, Margie, raising a family of four children—Alan, Kathleen, Donald, and Dale (oldest to youngest). — A.H.

For statistics, photos, and other stories about the 390th Bomb Group during World War II, visit [www.390th.org](http://www.390th.org)

To hear Keith's audio narration of the above story, go to [www.alharris.com/stories/odyssey.mp3](http://www.alharris.com/stories/odyssey.mp3)

# A Farewell to the Piano

## Fifteen Memorized Minutes

by Alan Harris

THE PIANO CAN BE SEEN AS the perfect symbol of a conservatory of music. It is precisely machined and rigidly structured. By means of equal temperament, the piano's pitches are mathematically compromised so that no intervals except octaves sound exactly in tune—meaning that all eighty-eight of its notes are given an equal chance to sound mediocre.

May 7, 1968

Yesterday Mr. Banks, my piano teacher at the conservatory, reminded me again that I **have** to, it's the **requirement** that I, play fifteen minutes of memorized piano music on May 27 for my final. I suggested the short Bach piece that I have worked on intermittently, and he, after hearing me play it, thought it would be all right, but still had reservations because it only lasts about three minutes. So, fifteen minutes is now the sacred piano time. By the way, notice the more than superficial similarity between the two words "sacred" and "scared."

To think that every giant tree we see, whatever kind it is, has had its beginning in a seed that is usually smaller than the end of your thumb—somehow that thought is more impressive to me than the thought of playing fifteen memorized minutes of piano music.

This fifteen-minute requirement reminds me of that ages-old, ages-new cop-out wherein quantity replaces, or supersedes in importance anyway, quality. Or is it that quality is still the goal, but is to be measured in terms of quantity? Very lame, I would say. Few would refuse allegiance to quality, I suppose, but few also can refrain from applying quantitative measuring sticks to it.

To measure quality is like measuring the universe. To do so, the only unit of measure you can use is the thing itself which you are measuring. You can only say that the universe is one universe long, one universe wide, its exact value being one universe. The same principle holds for works of art, or intelligence, or aptitude, or skill, or preference. You can measure each of these only in units of itself. You can only try, and fail, to apply other units of measure to it. You can count and compare and make statistical charts without influencing or understanding quality.

For example, here at the conservatory this semester (a semester is exactly half of a something) we music students (music students must study music, whatever it is that "students," "study," and "music" may be) are required (requiring has a ringing, hollow sound to it, probably for the same reason that a decayed corpse does) to obtain 40 or more (40 is a nice round number because our numbering system happens to be based on ten, and four sets of those tens would be a nice number to connect with a requirement) recital (a recital is a battle staged by usually one performer who is required to impress an audience of listeners who are required to listen) credits (the root of which, I understand, means faith, or belief—you are not believed unless you ask the official near the auditorium door for a small slip of white paper which has on it, pre-stamped, the date of the recital and the number of credits—one credit for student recitals, two credits for faculty or visitor or special recitals—a slip which you are obliged to sign and give back to the same recital official after the performance).

So, 40 recital credits somehow measure something. What do they measure? They measure the number of times a recital slip was handed to a person in charge with a certain student's name signed on it (by or

not by that student) and later toted up by the secretary in charge of toting up recital slips. To me it is just as comforting to learn that some young tree has forty or more leaves on it. Maybe more comforting.

### May 13, 1968

I awoke this morning with a dull nag somewhere inside, prompting me to do something or telling me that I should be worried about something—but I couldn't immediately discern what it was. I have found lately that my worries follow a pattern—that is, I first feel a nagging doubt, a hunch somewhere inside me which does not feel quite natural, not quite comfortable. Thereupon I try to discover what is causing it. This detective work isn't usually difficult, because only a limited number of realities can cause me to worry. So I sort through the realities mentally, one by one, and try to match each one with this nagging feeling I have. Usually on the second or third try I am able to match the reality with the feeling, fitting them together like two pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. But if those pieces still don't quite fit, I go on to the next reality and try it.

At any rate, this morning I discovered that two things were bothering me: not having practiced the violin all week for this morning's lesson, and not having practiced the piano in preparation for the upcoming **fifteen-minute requirement** which I'll **have** to fulfill. I guess I've decided that I probably will play, or try to play, fifteen minutes of conventional piano music for the distinguished piano committee, so I need to get busy pretty soon and at least memorize something well enough that I can bumble through it.

I wish now that I had gone ahead and dropped my applied piano course a few weeks ago when I told Mr. Banks I was planning to, and was talked out of it by him. He waxed very liberal about my dilemma, or at least he appeared to wax liberal, and he told me that if I would stay on with him I could just use him as any kind of teacher or buddy I wanted for the rest of the semester, as long as I played fifteen minutes of pianalia for my final. I said okay with my head, but even at that moment my heart wasn't in it. I've continued to walk to the campus and have my lessons with him and chat about great composers and neat musical forms, but I haven't practiced the piano for more than an hour or two altogether since then. Instead, I've been writing down thoughts like these, profusely and from all corners of my head.

### May 27, 1968

For my piano final exam today I began by reading aloud a quotation from the book *A Year from Monday* (Wesleyan University Press, Hanover, NH, 1967) by the composer John Cage in his Julliard Lecture (pp 95-96). Cage quotes Zen scholar Dr. D. T. Suzuki as follows:

"Before studying Zen, men are men and mountains are mountains. While studying Zen things become confused: one doesn't know exactly what is what and which is which. After studying Zen, men are men and mountains are mountains.... Just the same, only somewhat as though you had your feet a little off the ground."

After reading this passage to the jury, I announced that I would play *A Farewell to the Piano* by Beethoven, followed by *4' 33"* by John Cage (during which the pianist plays nothing for that exact amount of time), followed by a composition of my own entitled *A Farewell to the Piano*. After the announcement, I did exactly that. No one interrupted, even during the silent Cage piece. It happened that my own *A Farewell to the Piano* matched Beethoven's note for note, but of course the piece was entirely different when seen as being composed by me in the 20th century (at least this was my intention). Also, the performance was unavoidably different.

When I finished my performance, Dr. Bedford Tompkins of the piano faculty asked me whether the Cage piece wasn't in three movements. I said I didn't think so. He said he had thought it was in three movements with some business about the piano lid being raised or lowered between movements. I said that if the composition is in three movements, I had left no break between any of them. No one laughed, so I could see that my remark had been both hilarious and not seen as such. Being finished, I left the stage and walked out into the auditorium as far as where the jury were sitting.

Dr. Tompkins then asked me, "Have you memorized any other music this semester?"

"I actually memorized the Beethoven prior to this semester, but there were no other pieces memorized this semester," I replied.

Dr. Dreyer, head of the piano department, then proclaimed, "Well, Fred, I don't think we can give credit for this type of performance. The applied piano course requires more than this as far as memorization goes, and therefore your performance has not been successful."

I thought about that for a few seconds and replied, "I think it's interesting that you think that. For me it was a success."

After mumbling something more about numbers and credit hours, Dr. Dreyer asked me, "So, would you like to try again?"

"No. I think I've done what I wanted to do."

"All right. Fine."

As I began walking out of the auditorium, I threw a quick glance and a weak smile at my piano instructor, Mr. Banks, who was sitting behind the jury. His face was red, even though he had known that I was going to surprise him—he had even asked me to. He met my glance and then looked down at the floor. I went home.

**May 28, 1968**

Dear Mr. Dreyer,

You will notice that I am writing you a letter. I have two reasons for writing you a letter instead of (or possibly in addition to) talking to you personally: (1) Cowardice (2) Relevance. I find that relevance is difficult to achieve, and if achieved, very difficult to sustain, in a personal conversation. As for cowardice, that also is bound up with relevance, being a major cause of irrelevance.

Let me make it clear that I respect you as a person, as I do all persons, so that there will be no element of antipathy which might lead you to burn this letter before finishing it. I do not know you well at all, nor do you know me well at all (but then, who knows whom well at all?). I should think that therefore we are equally (and literally) agnostic about each other. Agnosticism implies to me a large element of not knowing and a fairly large element of wanting to know.

You did not understand my performance of May 27 (yesterday). Neither did Mr. Tompkins, nor anyone else on the jury. Neither did I. So now that none of us in the room understood it, perhaps we can all



place ourselves on the same humble plane—ignorance—and continue to not understand it. I thought it was beautiful. You could have. If you had let yourself.

I would not enjoy having to be in your place, in your "position," and thus having to pontificate as to what has been, is, and will be acceptable. I would not want to have to deal in "credit." Do you know the etymology of "credit"? If I'm not mistaken, it is akin to faith or belief, in a person or anything else. I am not in your position. But you are. Somehow I believe that your position was filling you yesterday (rather than you your position—perhaps both) when you objected so quickly and so strongly to what I performed. I think that your reaction was unfortunate for you, in a deep sense. It was only unfortunate for me in a shallow sense (credit hours). You will not forget what I did. It will nag you. Follow you. Burn within you. Maybe.

But, a word or two about what I was doing. Am doing. I was (am) posing a serious question, a deep one, maybe an ultimate one. Parallel to these three gradations of seriousness: what is music?, what is art?, what is life?

The introductory quotation with which I began my performance was rather crucial to the understanding of what I played. If you don't remember it, I refer you to the bottom of page 95 and the top of page 96 of *A Year From Monday* by John Cage (I memorized those page numbers, by the way, if one needs evidence that I am not incapable of memorizing).

Playing the Beethoven piece was parallel to the understanding that before the study of Zen, men are men and mountains are mountains.

The period of 4' 33" of silence by John Cage (and I thought it hilariously irrelevant how many movements of silence there were—and yet relevant) was parallel to the study of Zen, in which one is not sure what is what, and which is which.

The final composition, my own, was parallel to the understanding that after the study of Zen, men are men and mountains are mountains, except it is as though your feet were a little off the ground. Mine were. Yours could have been. If you had let them rise.

You might accuse me of plagiarism. You might say that my *A Farewell to the Piano* composition contained exactly the same notes as did Beethoven's. That is correct. The notes were the same. But my composition was composed in the twentieth century, in 1968, and Beethoven's was not. Does not that make a rather cataclysmic difference between them? My performance of this piece was unavoidably different from my performance of Beethoven's, which you could not have failed to notice—unless you were merely listening to the notes. I doubt whether you were. Even if you were only listening to the notes, the mistakes were different. And that is significant. You might ask to see whether I have written my composition down on paper. I have not. Beethoven has saved me the trouble. And of course, music does not exist on paper; it exists in the air. And then it doesn't.

In light of these comments, perhaps the last thing you can successfully accuse me of is superficiality. And the last thing I can accuse you of is openmindedness. So far. My hope is that on the day my mind closes to new experiences, new possibilities—I will die. Because if I don't die then, I will be dead anyway.

Thank you for at least allowing me to finish my performance. You do not know how much it meant to me. Or to you.

Sincerely,  
Fred

### **Epilogue**

Before my jury performance, while Mr. Banks and I were waiting for Drs. Dreyer and Tompkins to make their appearance in the auditorium, Mr. Banks had asked me, "What grade do you want for this course?" (liberal all the way)

"A letter grade," I replied.

"In other words, I'm going to have to make the choice?"

"Yes."

A month later in the mail I received an "I" for Incomplete.



# Pin Money

## A Truck Stop Adventure

by Alan Harris

JACK AND I GETS TO TALKIN over breakfast one day, and he tells me since I gotta be doin somethin or other, minds well be makin some extra pin money, he says. Hogs ain't payin and the corn don't look good this year, he says. All weeds and no rain since back almost May. Corn curlin up and all. And how the kids is all gone now so it's no big chore to keep them out of trouble. Times is hard for us farmers, he says.

So I tells Jack how I can't figure it. The city folks is drivin more and more Cadillacs and here we set, makin less and less every year. Nope, I can't figure it.

Well, nothin happens for a few days, but then Jack's out mowin one day, cuttin down oats for the diverted acres on the government plan, and comes in and says how I really ought to be workin in town for pin money. How the hog market is and all. And the corn so sicklike. So I says okay and I gets a job at Marge's truck stop restaurant down by the main highway, waitin on tables and helpin out in the kitchen if need be. Midnight to eight in the forenoon is all I can get on as.

So there I am all night, and Jack workin all day, and we wonderin what each other look like almost, while the city folks is drivin more and more Cadillacs. Makin pin money at a truck stop from midnight to eight in the forenoon. But the job's all right. The guys that comes in is all right. They ain't no truth to what you hear about truckers bein always after the waitresses. None of them never not once troubled me none. They're okay.

And Marge's daughter Janie is who I work for on my shift. She's okay too. Just a young kid and all, but she got some sense. She knows how to talk to them truckers, too. There might be a rough one once in a blue moon, but she knows what to do. She knows the words to say.

After I been there a few weeks, one night Janie's out of the restaurant makin a night deposit at the bank and me mindin things there by myself, and this young guy comes in sayin how everybody oughta get down on the floor cause this is a holdup. And I say how I'm the only one there and business sure is slack tonight. And he says shut up and empty out that cash register in a paper bag or he'll blow my head off. And then I see he's got a gun in his hand and I start to get all shakin and can't say anything right and how we ain't got no paper bags right handy.

I rings up no sale on the cash register and then I remember how Janie has took all but some loose change to the bank for the night deposit. So I tells him there's not much in here and it'll just have to do him till sometime when there's more. And he ups and slaps me on the face and calls me a dumb bitch, just them words he uses, and puts the change in his bluejeans pocket and walks out and drives away fast.

Some young kid. Was never weaned right, I says to myself. Can't go around like that to people, hittin em and callin em dumb bitches and then walkin out with all the loose change. How we gonna sell anything, we ain't got change? What if some trucker comes in and plunks down a dollar bill for a cup of coffee? There we are. No change.

Pretty soon Janie comes back and I tells her how this guy hit me and called me a dumb bitch and walked

out the door with all the loose change. So she ups and right away calls Marge out of bed, and pretty soon the place is jumpin with Marge and Janie and Harry the town cop askin me what this man looks like and me tellin them how he hit me and called me a dumb bitch and walked right out the door with all the loose change.

He was never weaned right, I told them. And how he was kind of young and black-haired and sick-lookin and nervous, but that's all I know about him. And calls me a dumb bitch and walks out the door with all our loose change so a poor trucker can't even buy a cup of coffee or else we can't collect for it.

Well, come breakfast the next forenoon, I tells Jack how this all happened to me that night. Jack stares out the window awhile, and pretty soon he says how the hog prices ain't quite that bad now and it's lookin like rain in the northwest—kind of puffy like, he says. So he allows as how maybe we don't need that extra pin money after all. We can sure use some rain, though, he says.

# The Raid on Frank's Cigar Store

## A True Story of Ice Cream and Justice

by Alan Harris

WOOD FRAGMENTS FELL from the door frame as I pushed open the door of Frank's Cigar Store Wednesday noon. The lock had been broken off.

"What is the nature of your business?" demanded an authoritative voice from behind the cigar counter. It belonged to a tall man with horn-rimmed glasses who wore a cardigan sweater.

"They're raiding the place," explained Frank, longtime owner and operator, who was standing behind another counter, visibly agitated.

"Ice cream," I blurted out finally. "I always come over here at noon to buy some ice cream."

The store was a confused muddle, with plainclothes detectives pulling cabinets open, flashing their cameras, ordering people around. A United Parcel deliveryman brought in a package and was hurriedly escorted back out by detectives.

Frank's wife Dorothy was protesting loudly over the way they were pulling the place apart. "Just calm down," a detective told her. "We're trying to keep this as impersonal as possible. We have to look at everything."

"Ice cream?" I was asked.

"I work across the street," I explained.

Frank's Cigar Store on 8th Street in LaSalle catered to all types of people. It contained a soda fountain, pinball machines, candy, cigars, cigarettes, lottery tickets, and books and magazines of "all kinds."

"Anything that's been printed, we got it," Frank once told me.

"I've got to have your ID," the detective told me. "Come on over here."  
He led me to the soda fountain.

As he copied things down from my driver's license, he demanded, "Where's Earlville?"  
I told him where I lived. Beside my name and address he carefully wrote the words "ice cream."

Suddenly he turned friendly. "This place will be open tomorrow. Come back then for your ice cream. We're a little indisposed right now."

I walked out, stunned.

Later that afternoon, after the raid was over, I walked back over to Frank's to buy my ice cream. Dorothy was there but Frank was gone.

"They arrested him and put him under \$500 bond for having gambling paraphernalia," she explained as she dipped the ice cream with trembling hands. "They were going to take me too, but I was too ornery. They were afraid I'd cause trouble. Besides, they didn't want me to have a police record. I said I didn't care—as old as I am, it wouldn't make any difference anyway."

Asked where they took Frank, she said, "Out to District 5-A on I-80. He's never been arrested before."

It was butter pecan ice cream.

**Author's Note:** The above story ran in the Thursday, September 26, 1974 edition of the Ottawa (Illinois) *Daily Times*.

# The Time I Was Late

## Initiation into Chronology

by Alan Harris

DECEMBER SNOW covered the ground, and many sidewalks were not yet shoveled. And I was late—I was going to be late for school. The earth might implode like a broken light bulb or explode like a cherry bomb, but I still had to be on time to school. I had never been late.

My report card for my first year of exposure to institutional learning was monotonously filled with A's in the rows for the subjects and 0's in the rows for days absent and 0's in the rows for times tardy and checks in all the rows for good deportment. My parents never said much about these great accomplishments, but I knew they were secretly proud of me by the way they never scolded me about school. They always got a sort of funny smile on their faces when I would bring home my report card, the kind of smile that is pretty flat and a little turned down at the ends. Then they would say, "Well, that's pretty good. Do you like Miss Larson?" And I would say "Yah." Then they would sign the report card and put it back into its brown envelope and give it back to me saying, "Now don't lose it." And that was like telling me not to lose my right foot.

Grandpa Green had told me when I started to school that he would give me a nickel for every A I got on my report card. So every six weeks I would write him a letter telling him about all the A's I got. An A in reading, an A in arithmetic, an A in spelling, an A in writing, an A in whatever other subjects I was taking, or were taking me. Nine A's, I told him one time at his house. He said, "Let's see, how much do I owe you then?" "I don't know." "Well, a nickel is 5 cents, isn't it?" "Yah." "Well, then, how much is 9 times 5?" "I don't know." "That comes to 45 cents, doesn't it?" "I guess." Then he would dole out the 45 cents or whatever the amount happened to be for that six weeks and like a good thrifty boy I would put it in my little silver metal bank that locked up with a key and I didn't have the key.

But I was going to be late for school. It was cold out and the big hand on the kitchen clock was getting down close to 4 and I had to be at school by the time it got to 6 and Mom was helping me put on my jacket and boots and hat with built-in earflaps and leggings and mittens and I was watching the clock and saying hurry up and I was finally ready to go but just before I got to the door Mom asked me if I had a hanky and I said no and she said wait a minute you've got to take a hanky and she ran upstairs to get one and I sort of had to go to the bathroom and the big hand kept on moving and I had never been home this late before and I stood there holding my lunch pail waiting by the door and finally she came down and helped me put the hanky in my jeans pocket underneath my leggings and then she kissed me good-bye and I ran out the door and kept running down our long street that ended at Mrs. Richards' house and my boots were heavy and I couldn't keep running like that so I walked awhile and then I ran some more and I was running past Charles Johnson's house and I got to the tracks and looked both ways and ran across them even though I was never supposed to run across the tracks because I might fall down and get hit by a zephyr because somebody else had done that once and I was still trying to run but I could hardly even walk and on my Mickey Mouse watch that Grandpa Green had bought me one time at the drug store the hand was down to 5 and I was only as far as the Ford garage and then I heard the first bell ringing at school and I never before realized you could hear the first bell at school from that far away and I started to kind of cry and I was puffing and running and my boots were too heavy and I was kicking snow as I ran and walked and ran again and I started down the last street that led to the school but it was the longest one and I couldn't run any more but I had to so I ran some more and the hand

was almost down to 6 when I finally got to the big playground and it was empty and I had never seen it empty before and I stumbled up the steps and when I was in the cloakroom tearing off my coat and boots and hat and mittens and leggings the second bell started ringing and everyone was supposed to be in his seat facing forward with his hands folded on his desk and not talking when the second bell rang and I walked into the room just as the bell stopped ringing saying hopefully to Miss Larson that I was almost late wasn't I and I collapsed into my seat and was sick all morning.

# Maiden Voyage

## An Adolescent Noah

by Alan Harris

FOUR SEPARATE INNERTUBES from four separate cars lay discarded in four separate fillingstations in Jarvis, Illinois, which in turn lay about seventyfive miles west of Chicago and roughly four thousand miles from the hot molten leadandnickel center of the particular planet on which Illinois lay.

In the Jarvis Public Library lay a littleknownamongscholars book of summer projects that purported to relieve boredom of boys who wanted to make something besides noise and girls (being too old for the former and too young for the latter) but did not know exactly what project would satisfy their curious but lazy minds.

Whitey's Tavern in downtown Jarvis contained a handysix of beer stacked neatly among piles of lookalikes, all of them produced on the same impersonal but perfect assembly line in Peoria, the beerbelly of the Midwest. Since this was July and the weather was hot, it would not be long before this particular chink in the pile would be reached, and essence of hops would then gurgle down some sweaty farmer's appreciative throat.

Five eightfoot onebysix pine boards extracted from the heart of a deceased Northern Minnesota pine tree which for sixty years had stood tall and insignificant among other tallnesses and insignificances and then been felled with a few concatenated snarls, lay in repose at the Jarvis Alexander Lumber Company like corpses in a mausoleum, neatly filed by size and worth, dead but maybe someday useful for something.

An extensive collection of shop tools lay in the basement of a brown house on Brown Street gathering moisture and age and rust from lack of use and lack of proper care (being stacked willynilly in boxes, hung from walls, and stacked on workbenches rendered unusable as workbenches by the plethora of tools cluttering them), including Sears Roebuck bandsaw and jigsaw and tablesaw and drillpress and woodlathe and countless small handtools such as hammers and screwdrivers and wrenches.

Indian Creek flowed muddily south past the east end of Brown Street just at the point where you think you're not in town anymore but you still might be—where you can hear cars slowing down for the residential twentyfivemileanhour speedlimit but you can also hear town boys out by the railroad bridge trying out the new .22 rifles that their fathers have given them because every young boy should know what it's like to have a .22 rifle and be able to hunt and besides (wink) maybe he'll kill himself with it.

Through the east end of Jarvis the creek was full of suspended field mud from yesterday's rain, some of the richest mud in the world. Further south, at the sewage plant down past the golf course, the creek took on the usual cargo of processed human excretion and refuse which did not so much disgrace it as enrich its mud with more fertility. The carp and suckers and bullheads and thousands of smaller fish not worth separate names but just called as a category "sunfish" seemed to thrive on the richness of Indian Creek, as though they accepted their small-stream provincialism in order to avoid the crowded conditions and polluted waters of the Illinois and Fox Rivers, and especially the Mississippi.

Tom Summers (not Tommie because he was now 14 and too old to add an "ie" onto anyone's name including Mommie and Daddie and he expected to be accorded the same catalexis in return and as with



many boys his age he became quietly but quite upset when someone failed to delete the "ie" when referring to him, in proportion to the amount of unsureness still remaining in him as to whether he was a Tom or a Tommie) was the son of John Summers, a town farmer descended from a long line of farm farmers. John Summers and his family of six lived in town because the old farmhouse was falling apart but John continued to farm the same land east of town that had been purchased in 1872 by his great-grandfather and farmed ever since by successive Summers generations—that is, bought and farmed by Alexander Summers and son John Alexander Summers whose youngest son Robert then farmed it and handed it over before his death to the John Summers who was Tom's father and mentor and critic and eternal but invaluable gadfly whom he called simply Dad.

Dad had built an orange boat for Tom's sixth birthday and it was so sturdily constructed that to this day it leaked no water and was as safe as ever. This boat was pretty all right, to hear Dad tell it. And Tom thought it was all right too but the trouble was that he couldn't take it out just anytime. It somehow had to be gotten over to the creek, and Dad with his car happened to be the handiest gettertothecreek there was. And this wasn't only when Tom was six. This was all the time.

Well, Dad was always watching Tom when he paddled this boat around the creek, and was always telling just how to do it—how to avoid the rocks that didn't quite protrude from the water but were sure there, how to stay in the same spot while rowing against the current, how to paddle backwards, even how to have fun. And it wasn't a lot of fun to have someone all the time telling him how to have fun. In fact it wasn't fun at all to have that kind of fun. But he reasoned "I'm not having fun, but not having fun this way is more fun than not having fun chopping up worms in the back yard or throwing rocks at birds (and invariably missing) or watching ants wandering around in the grass." So he guessed he really kind of was having fun at the creek by not having fun in a more fun way than not having fun at home would be.

When he was fourteen Tom decided to build himself a catamaran, or at least what the book he borrowed from the library called a catamaran. Resembling a water spider, it would be made of four long pine boards which radiated out from under a sturdy central seat which also served as a main brace. At the end of each of the four spiderleg pine boards was to be a mount for a horizontal innertube. This innertube, or rather these innertubes, these four, were what would provide the buoyancy to keep the thing afloat. Anyway, he began to build the catamaran, following the instructions wherever it wasn't practical not to follow them.

Tom followed some parts of the instructions exactly. With a coping saw he cut rounded corners on the parts of the pine boards that curved down to the braces which held the innertubes. Cutting these nice curves served no purpose except to conform to the sleek look of the catamaran shown in the book and also to weaken the whole structure, but for aesthetic reasons Tom thought he would go ahead and cut them out—that is, cut away those portions of wood that when gone would leave the curves in what was left. And boy did he make the frame solid at the joints. Woodscrews all the way, countersunk, driven in with a vengeance, tightened up to where the screw heads snapped against the edges of the countersink.

He reached the point at which he didn't so much decide to stop building the catamaran as just stopped building it because it was done enough. He mounted the innertubes onto its "feet" and carried it over his shoulders uptown to the gas station to get the tubes inflated. Then he returned past home with his new seaworthy spider and headed east for a private launching. From the front porch Dad noticed Tom carrying his catamaran with fat innertubes past the house toward the creek, and thought he would just tag along behind Tom a ways to see how it all worked out. Which he soon did.

Tom, without much ceremony outside of wiggling the awkward structure down the steep bank next to the creek, prepared to launch his catamaran from what his family had always referred to as the launching rock. He now secretly knew how Noah must have felt. As he set his handiwork upon the water of Indian Creek and climbed on he could hear boards or joints or maybe screws kind of crackling, but everything held together. He dipped his paddle into the water and pulled—it was the same paddle he had always used for the little orange boat. When he pulled on the paddle, however, the catamaran moved just a very short distance forward, so Tom naturally thought he must be stranded on a rock. But no. As he continued to paddle with the craft moving along very little by very little, he realized that this thing just plain paddled that hard. Not good news.

Dad was by now standing on the launching rock holding a can of beer from Whitey's Tavern because this had been a hard day of haying for him and he drank beer only and always after haying. But Tom didn't like to see him drink even one beer, ever—it made Tom very angry inside to see Dad drink at all. It shook his confidence in him. Dad said, "I told you you should have made it more streamlined or it would be too hard to paddle."

Tom was perched there above the water on his very solid seat, trying to think of some smart answer to a dad that would stand on a rock by the creek with a can of beer and say something like that. But as usual he couldn't answer the truth with some smart answer and feel right about it so he kept his mouth shut and paddled some more—but the paddling wasn't any easier. And worse yet, when he turned the catamaran around and tried to paddle back upstream toward the launching rock, even at top speed he was barely able to master the current.

Finally, though, Tom did reach the launching rock and took the catamaran out of the water and took it home and put it in the shed where it rotted for a few years and then became pretty good firewood.

# The Accident

## A Morning's Mindstream

by Alan Harris

WHEN THE WISPY CRUMPETS of goodness deserve the sweet kiss of death and live on with all people who like me because I'm good and Marilyn swings her blonde hair over my lips with speed pushing our convertible with joy excitement fun turn the corner while the barn goes by and horses laugh as I curse my head and see the folly of scattered weeds dying in the sun and honeybees are stuffing their honey into the hive oh honey it's a quarter to seventy-six trombones led the alarm clock is better than nothing but not much I love you in the kitchen getting breakfast lazy husband dread anticipate herding the crazies at the hospital the brightness of the sun against our wall at \$60 a month a bargain if you think about it and look for underclothes and find them and put a Freudian leg through Jungian drawers I'm sick of Freud and automatic contorting and flipping around gets your clothes on faster than a camel's eye of a needle how come some one and some two humps but religion is often a good force while Faulkner is a Christ for other writers his long fingers rake the mud where lungfish walked and as he looks down the funnel of historical mutations and says what he sees you'll wonder where the yellow went when you brush your teeth with Pepsodent, Pepsodent, Pepsodent say it hot and write education textbooks about experimental experiments and number off the ideas of mankind in a neat column but blink the stereo speakers and flowers on top fertile artificial Easter egg the dark winter morning and morning and morning creeps in this petty race of rats and Poe's scented ropes break apart just in time for breakfast Wheaties are so orange and crinkly and light the green tablecloth is dirty with stains of the finer things of life that give us pot-bellies thank you God for everything my third grade Sunday school teacher taught me that but she didn't mean it and I do because even though I'm no holier than cow in the greenery of the sumptuous summer pasture now is frozen over but we still have the milk of human kindness big teats give watery milk but little teats give pure cream with sometimes some vodka molecules mixed in between the milk molecules to help us see the truth and not have to worry at all about the six count them six meanings of Eliot's patient etherised upon a table one an anesthetic two an impotent modern man dressed in sterile white three a heavenly sunset symbol like a little man so patient he could walk up and down stairs and worry about his tie pin while broads come and go and look at Michelangelo's pictures of naked men in dark corners and then go to parties to see who can be the artiest and suavest of all sunsets as his trousers fail to wade into the sea of life and fail to play around a little like a crab that never drinks coffee or gets pinned to the wall by a stare or gets scared seeing a hairy arm in front of a light or worries about sawdust on the ocean floor at all at all et cetera and so forth but never back always forth and fight the silly war like a battery shorting itself out wasting all its energy heating up the wire and canceling itself out like two kids who get orders to kill each other because of opposite polarity so do and then their parents cry but one side wins so that kid becomes a martyr and the other kid does too for a losing cause so is even greater and the generals get another man each from the warehouse called the draft of hot air and Biblical references justifying the murder of other men as long as they're on the other side and the other cheek always wins except when it doesn't and then gets slapped to a bloody pulp but not between the teeth of love which proves that sonnets can be manufactured as a joke and appear profound and get all kinds of meanings read into them and everybody has a good laugh but maybe the words had some meaning anyway or else just sounded good who knows why paranoids are always afraid of cops maybe they personify death or God or Dad or Khrushchev or the devil or a mental hospital nun with a clipboard I wish I could work somewhere besides the crazy bin of course it's almost sacrilegious to compare a mental patient to an animal but sometimes I wish I hadn't gone to the Brookfield Zoo where the snakes stuck out their tongues and slimed around while the animals outside looking in tapped the glass and ogle-eyed and pointed like they'd never seen this animal before well I hadn't but

they had so they were spoiling the whole thing but I liked it anyway I'll go back someday and get disillusioned and cynical about it and then I'll wonder why I went back but more than that why I get disillusioned and cynical about things that don't amount to much since a lot of people enjoy zoos so why begrudge them a little fun I love a good woman like her who's always puttering because she's dedicated to the ancient myth that the women should do the household work while the men sit around on their overstuffed chairs slouched back so far they can set their beer cans on top of their beer-bellies with no falling off and wonder why they're not as vigorous and virile as they imaginarily once were or actually once were sometimes trucks can really foul traffic up that idiot didn't even look before he pulled over the big galoot of course Volkswagens like mine don't count sort of like the ants that people step on even when the ants aren't in the way whoever tripped over an ant anyway people are just cruel and they have to feel like they can conquer something so they step on an ant and then listen closely so they can hear the crunch or the squish depending on how big the ant is and if they miss and it gets away they get madder than a general who loses a couple of enemy soldiers but if he ever finds them they may as well hang it up like the time Uncle Pete told about in World War II when they'd caught this guy and brought him into camp and were sitting around drinking beer and laughing while this guy was really scared because he spoke only Japanese and he thought they were going to torture him but pretty soon a couple of them came over to him and motioned for him to go yes we set you free they say in sign language but he got all nervous and thought they would kill him if he ran off but they said no no you go on now we're setting you free just run along back to your own camp so he hesitated a little but then ran as fast as he could away from that camp and some of the red-blooded clean-living American soldier boys opened up two submachine guns on him and he was in three or four sections before he hit the ground and they had a good laugh but not Uncle Pete who wonders why we sort of forget about these incidents when we talk about evil Communists and concentration camps and cattle cars and all that malarkey "met him in a restaurant once in Beverly Hills" "Beverly Hills yeah well Lyle is is uh is uh a member of of of a little outfit that we have and uh li-little organization comprised of Ralph Snyder, Lyle Randolph, uh Charlie Grady, and yours truly" I wonder why I ever turn that radio on there's only one good station and it doesn't play any worthwhile music until 8:00 just when I'm getting out of the car the whole world must be against me or something but it's my own fault for not getting an FM radio or else just driving to work without any music at all then I'd have to think or watch the road and we couldn't have that unless the morning view were a little more beautiful than it is with the haze hanging over Peoria I wonder if the cops are out this morning with their radar they really probably think they're smart when they catch somebody coasting down the hill at a little over 60 one guy has the radar and checks the speed while the chase car is about a quarter-mile further along getting the message and flagging down the driver who is probably late to work already and doesn't need anybody telling him he's going too fast or anybody telling him he shouldn't do this I wonder what a cop says to a guy when he gets him inside of his patrol car where they always look like they're discussing free will versus determinism or whether US Steel is a solid investment or whether sex is really a major problem on today's college campuses except you can see that the driver has a sort of defensive but cool look on his face while the cop is trying to be friendly as he sternly attacks sort of like a cat with a mouse out in open territory or an American soldier with a Japanese prisoner but cops always seem afraid that people are afraid of them so they try to be friendly and nonchalant yet still slap a fine on you which is mainly why people are afraid of cops well let's get out of that circle and onto this ramp and see if there's anybody coming no well we're safe till the first stop light and who knows what will "30 Speed Limit" okay "Right Lane Ends Ahead" okay so everybody else now gets out of the right lane which doesn't really end ahead and into the left lane where they have to wait for about 38 cars to make a left turn in front of them as those cars in turn have to wait till the oncoming traffic has all passed and by that time the light is red again so you're still 38 cars behind the light until you get wise like me and pull into the right lane which didn't really end so here I go sailing by all those drivers that believe in signs because their mothers taught them to with the only

advantage being that they will not get to their busywork office jobs quite on time and thus will not waste quite so much time dictating nothing letters to nothing people on nothing subjects now already here's the beautiful little intersection of College and Main and here I am in the right lane and here's a green light so I'll just chug on through and drat I never could figure why they let guys park up ahead there it's a menace to what is she doing hey she hit me and she isn't even going to stop to exchange information well two can play this game and I plan to get her for not only hitting but running that's about the least courteous thing she could have done not that women are usually very concerned about courtesy men are supposed to look out for them and throw their coats down in front of them well I'm not throwing my Volkswagen down for her Chrysler to run over although maybe she thought that's what I was doing oh turning a corner are you well fine but you forget that I can turn corners too you didn't disable me that much I see you yes don't pretend like you don't know what happened a Chrysler may have a thick hide but you had to hear that bump just as well as I could oh here you give up do you well I'll just pull into this parking lot right here beside you and we'll have a nice little chat what a lovely day for an accident don't you think I do yes lovely well go ahead and get out of that tank I've got to get to work there now you're out "Did you hurt your car?" how much gall would it take for her to say that how much Lord "Well either I did or else someone else hurt it but I'm not just sure yet" "You pulled into me. I just kept going straight in the same lane and you pulled left into my lane" "Yes mam but if you had only noticed that I was trying to avoid an illegally parked car and if you had only noticed that there was nothing coming ahead of us and if you had only pulled over a little to the left we could have avoided this" "Well you pulled left into me" "I'd rather not argue about this mam the insurance companies can decide whose fault it was but could I please have your name and address and the name of your insurance company" "Really I'm late to class already" then we exchange insurance information "OK I have to get to class it didn't hurt my car so there won't be any claim against you" how much Lord how much gall would it take to say it that way she should have had somebody take away her candy or paddle her when she was a toddler or at least when she was a child of sixteen the impudent irresponsible coed oh I forgot to remind her that it isn't considered correct etiquette by Emily Post to put a dent in the left front fender of an orderly's Volkswagen and then drive away as if ignoring it erases everything in fact cops don't even consider this lawful and that's exactly who's going to hear about this you go to class and climb your ivory tower another step or two but you're not done with this and I'll give you a one-year warranty on that including all parts and labor I'm so mad I can't see straight hey get ahold of yourself and watch the road or you'll get into a worse accident here by the mental hospital I hope none of those patients see me pulling in that one guy should never have been given a grounds pass the other day he wanted to know what kind of car I drive I'm sure so he could smash the windows how did I ever get this job I must have read way too much T.S. Eliot before I flunked out





## About Alan Harris

When Alan Harris was born on Sunday, June 20, 1943, his father, Keith E. Harris, was piloting a B-17 in bombing missions over Europe while his mother (Margie) worried about Keith lovingly from Illinois.

Schooling in Earlville, Illinois (Alan's home town) was interesting, useful, and generally free of creativity (do what the teacher says, get the good grade). From 5th through 12th grades he played the trumpet in the school band and enjoyed the contest trips. His father drove a school bus as part of his living (farming was the other part), and if Alan happened to ride on his father's bus, he had to very much behave.

Illinois State University was where Alan became chagrined over how a student with a full class load could possibly keep up with all of the assignments given in said classes.

He felt he was a pawn in a game, though with judicious time-shuffling and corner-cutting he plowed along and made respectable grades amidst all the worries.

A bright spot at ISU was taking a contemporary American poetry class with Dr. Ferman Bishop. Through him Alan discovered depths in poetry that he had never dreamed of in high school. E. E. Cummings took him for zingy flights of in-your-faceness. T. S. Eliot, whose symbols even had symbols, fully baffled him. Robert Frost was slyly charming. Emily Dickinson's mastery of rhyme and meter for conveying soul and spirit made the young poet's heart go funny. Alan started "being a poet" in his sophomore year (1962) at ISU. Poetry had been previously unneeded in his life but now was available to carry parts of his soul that he hadn't realized were there.

After graduating from ISU in 1966 there was the little matter of having to earn a living, which took the form of two years of high school English teaching, three years of tuning and repairing pianos, and (after a 1976 MS in Computer Science at Northern Illinois University) about 25 years of computer work (programming, in-house computer training, newsletter editing, help desk, and Web development—all for Commonwealth Edison Company in Chicago).

During most of that vocational stint before retirement, Alan continued to write poems. Even with the whirl of commuting it was still possible to emote at home. He launched his current Web site ([www.alharris.com](http://www.alharris.com)) in 1995 with a few poems, and eventually has populated it with almost everything he has written. As a poet, essayist, story-writer, and photographer he has spurned the print publication route, having seen the excruciations gone through by other writers trying to make a big name and big money for themselves via magazine and book publishers. With the Web, there's instant publication, moneyless communication, and a worldwide potential audience. Of course, the literature has to stand on its own feet to get readers, but it's always there for those who seek it, or just happen in, or get sent in.

Alan met his wife Linda at ISU in 1962 and they were married in 1966. Linda has worked as a school speech therapist, insurance medical office worker, and medical transcriptionist, in addition to being a conscientious wife, mother, and grandmother. They have a son, Brian, who is a Tucson percussionist.





## About Keith E. Harris

Born on October 13, 1919, Keith Eldred Harris was raised on a farm 5 miles east of Earlville, Illinois, a small farming community of about 1,400. His parents, Robert and Theda Harris, farmed the family land until their sons, Robert, Jr. and Keith, were old enough to help out. Keith's sisters were Dorothy and Phebe. Keith attended a country school through eighth grade, and later graduated from Earlville High School in 1937. He was married on April 18, 1941 to Margie Green, and they eventually became parents of four children: Alan, Kathleen, Donald, and Dale.

In 1940 Keith enlisted in the (then) Army Air Corps, and his description of the ensuing year, which included working as a Link Trainer instructor at Elmendorf Field in Alaska, can be read in his story entitled "Air Force Odyssey before Flying B-17s." During the time he was in Alaska, World War II broke out with the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, opening the way for him to take basic pilot training in California

and B-17 training in Spokane, Washington. His 390th Bomb Group was stationed in Framlingham, England, from which he piloted a total of 25 bombing missions over Germany and other European countries. The odds of surviving 25 bombing missions unscathed in 1943 were formidable. Keith vividly describes his experience of the Munster mission in his story this book, "The 1943 Munster Bombing Raid."

In 1945 Keith returned to the States and began training B-29 pilots. But since the war was then ending and B-29s were not seen as needed, he was soon assigned to Clark Field in the Phillipines. That assignment being not much to his liking, he opted for a discharge from the Air Force in 1947 with a rank of Major.

Keith then rejoined his family in Illinois and resumed helping his father on the farm. In 1948 he and Margie bought a large home on Brown Street in Earlville, the better to raise their expanding family.

Having always had a good rapport with children, he took a position as school bus driver for the Earlville schools, a part-time job which he dovetailed with his farming of 200 acres. He managed this vocational combination for the next 30 years.

Keith enjoyed woodworking in his basement. He grew especially fond of building grandfather clocks, one of which he built for each of his seven grandchildren, plus another twenty or thirty for friends and relatives around Earlville.

He had a mechanical knack for fixing things. If a neighbor child would bring him some broken toy, he would reassure, "I can fix anything but a busted balloon." and then fix it. On the rare occasion when something just wasn't fixable, he would shake his head and say, "This is a busted balloon."

Margie, Keith's wife, was an able mother, cook, and housewife in addition to serving as librarian at the Earlville Public Library for over twenty years. At age 59, Keith found that he had a brain tumor, and despite heroic trips to Mayo Clinic in Minnesota, he passed away on November 3, 1980 at age 61.



Captain Keith E. Harris beside his B-17 called "Spot Remover"  
Dec. 21, 1943