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Sunday Brunch In Bombingham

BY DAVID VEST

Late one Sunday morning, on September 15, 1963, I left my apartment at Birmingham-Southern College, on the west side, got in my slate blue Karmann-Ghia, and drove across town to Mountain Brook, where I liked to eat at a place called The Buttery, a long-gone deli that served outstanding steaks, great fries and big jars of pickled green tomato on the tables.

My route took me past Legion Field, across the tracks and down 8th Avenue toward city hall and the municipal auditorium. As I crossed 16th Street I was vaguely aware of a commotion a few blocks to the east, down by the church. Hungry, wanting to stay out of traffic, I avoided the area and drove further north before cutting east and heading over Red Mountain. The radio in my car was turned off that morning. I figured there was nothing on but preaching, and I wasn't interested.

Sunday was my luxury day, the one day I didn't have to get up early or show up anywhere later. I played all week in a nightclub, 9 till 2 a.m. except for Saturday nights, when we quit at 12. After a couple hours sleep (or not) I worked from 6 a.m. until 7 on a live TV show. Classes (I was a full-time student) began at 8. I ate a lot of benzedrine and dexedrine. I was 19 years old.

Once in a while I'd catch a movie at the Jewish Community Center. If there was no bomb threat, the movie would end in time for me to scramble to my gig. Otherwise, we'd all stand in the lobby joking about death and terror while the cops looked under the seats. I'd stay till the all-clear signal and head on down to Bryan's Lounge where I played piano in a five-piece jazz band.

We were used to bomb threats in Bir-

mingham. Not from suicide bombers, these people were far too gutless for that. These were sneak bombers who counted on a community (and a police commissioner, and a governor, and a country) that would help them get away with it.

It never occurred to anyone to call the bombings terrorist acts because they were all perpetrated by the oppressor group, not the underdog. Or, as we'd say these days, by extremists within the establishment, over whom the visible establishment claimed to have no control. The local authorities always viewed the bombings (officially) as "repugnant" (a favorite word of the colluding classes) and "regrettable". More distant authorities demanded that something be done to stop them, orders that often smacked of boilerplate.

In the time between the end of the Second World War and that Sunday morning in 1963, there had been sixty-five bombings of the homes of civil rights leaders and activists. For some reason that number has stayed in my mind. Possibly because none of the bombings had ever been "solved".

For some reason Birmingham-Southern itself had been spared, although many of the bombs had exploded within earshot of the campus. This is surprising on reflection because the college had a reputation (far better than it deserved) locally as a "hot-bed of communism" and a "nest of agitators".

It was true that the college chaplain, Don Shockley, would sit in the cafeteria with students now and then and talk about something like the George Jackson case, but that's about as far as it went. Howard Hall Creed, my favorite English professor, would volunteer to teach courses at all-black Miles College (well before anyone from Harvard
(*Bombings continued on page 2*)

on a busman's holiday made it chic to do so). Once in a while you might meet a student who had read John Beecher's poetry (Beecher had been expelled from academia for refusing to sign a "loyalty oath" later declared unconstitutional).

But we were certainly not activists. What we were was Southern liberals, above it all in our protected little enclave. Radical ideas were calling to us, but we hadn't really heard them yet. As for taking it to the streets, there was something slightly vulgar about that sort of thing. We were all for equality, but not for disturbing the peace and making a racket. We were certainly opposed to being beaten and arrested. So we sat on the hill (actually calling ourselves the Hilltoppers) and lent the movement the "mental equivalent" of support without exposing ourselves to dogs and hoses and cops wielding saps and billysticks.

We did, though, have a communist cell at Birmingham-Southern. Actually, it was just off campus, literally across the street out by the old football field, in a little house. They had a color TV and a liquor supply and a drop dead blonde who would meet you at the door and say, "Nice to see you again. It's Jack Daniels, isn't it?" and you knew that yes was the answer to any question she was ever going to ask you and you made yourself comfortable and watched the football game and flirted with her. I never heard anyone discuss politics in that house.

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Driving over the mountain I looked up at the big cast iron statue of Vulcan holding up his torch, with its red or green light to indicate whether there had been a traffic fatality in Birmingham. I wonder whether it ever occurred to the city government to have the light indicate whether there had been a bombing within the past 24 hours.

Once you got onto, and over, Red Mountain, you were in a different world, one of money. Mountain Brook may well have been the richest community per capita in the country, as it claimed to be. Nearby was the Birmingham Country Club, which claimed to have "suspended or curtailed no services" during the war and boasted openly of never having knowingly admitted a Negro or a Jew.

A member of the club's board once approached me for a recommendation. Who should provide the music for an elegant soiree? I mentioned that Count Basie was currently on tour and was told that he was of the wrong "persuasion".

Mountain Brook had (and still has) a ritzy little main shopping area, a kind of mini-Aspen or perhaps even a Southern Rodeo Drive. Ted Brooks, a great guitar player and songwriter (his tunes were recorded by Wanda Jackson, Al Martino and even Elvis) and president of Musicians' Local 256, had a music store and studio there. It was Ted who later took me up to Nashville, showed me around Acuff-Rose Music and introduced me to Eddie Arnold and Jack Clement.

Around the corner from The Buttery were boutiques and clothing stores where I bought my famous black satchel and a good suit that made me feel like James Bond. Was I the last college student in America to wear suits to class? I may well have been.

I was feeling good when I sat down in my usual booth at The Buttery. The familiar Black man who doubled as waiter and cook brought me a glass of water and turned away without a smile. "I feel good!" I told his back. "Not me," he muttered.

This was unlike him. I had been under the impression that he was always glad to see me coming. "Is something the matter this morning?" I asked him.

"What kind of thing is that to say?" he said with an unmistakable tone of disgust.

"Beg pardon?" I grinned.

"You see something funny here?"

This sounded remarkably like a threat. It wiped the smile off my face and made me ask him directly what was wrong. In a moment or two he understood that I wasn't provoking him and said, "You don't know? You

didn't hear about it?"

I told him I had no idea what he was talking about.

So he told me about the bomb in the church, and the four little girls who were dead. He had a hard time saying it.

I told him I didn't feel like eating anymore. "I didn't feel like cooking it, either, but here it is just the same." Then he told me to eat, not talk, because he didn't want any more conversation.

I often think of that man, whose name I never learned, and how he went directly into grieving and not into rage, angry though he surely was. I think about how twenty years of bombings were unable to provoke the black community of Birmingham into violent retaliation, how people knocked down by hoses that could take the bark off trees came back day after day, holding hands and singing.

Not everyone felt quite so noble. John Lee Hooker spoke for many when he sang of wanting to "Get me a plane, fly over Birmingham, drop me a bomb, keep on flyin' on." Hooker always stayed at the Gaston Motel when he played Birmingham, in a room only a couple of blocks from the bombed church.

My boyhood friend, Kerry Pennington, attended the funeral, preached by Dr. King. News accounts said no white person was present — true within the margin of error, but Kerry told me he was there, sitting in the back row, and that his father had threatened to disinherit him if he went. "I feel it's my place", he said, in the quiet voice no one to my knowledge had ever heard him raise.

Two months later, JFK was dead in Dallas. I came out of the college cafeteria, got in my Ghia, and switched on the radio to hear the news on WVOK. The announcement that the president had been shot was followed by a joyous recording of "Dixie" played by a "Dixieland" band. In a few years some of the same Birmingham disk jockeys who greeted the Kennedy assassination with open hallelujahs would be smashing Beatles' records over John Lennon's comment that the boys from Liverpool were "more popular than Jesus".

Those who harbor terrorists are terrorists themselves, says the president these days, as the last of the suspects in the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing is hauled away, guilty. CP

David Vest now lives a blameless life in Portland,, pianist in CounterPunch's favorite Oregon blues band, The Cannonballs.

OUR LITTLE SECRETS

GUINEA PIGS IN FREEDOM'S CAUSE

No surprise here at CounterPunch about the recent disclosures of military testing of nerve gas upon unsuspecting members of the US military back in the 1960s. In the late 1970s the CIA made the mistake of responding to a Freedom of Information Act request by the Scientologists by contemptuously sending them a railroad car of shredded documents.

The Scientologists patiently pieced enough of the thousands of scraps of paper together to figure out that in 1951 the US Army had secretly contaminated the Norfolk Naval Supply Center in Virginia with infectious bacteria. One type of bacterium was chosen because blacks were believed to be more susceptible than whites.

The towns of Savannah, Georgia and Avon Park, Florida, were targets of repeated army bio-weapons experiments in 1956 and 1957. Army CBW researchers released millions of mosquitoes on the two towns in order to test the ability of insects to carry and deliver dengue and yellow fever. Hundreds fell ill, with fevers, respiratory distress, still births and encephalitis. Several died.

This was the high tide of secret experiments by government agencies on unsuspecting or coerced human guinea pigs. As your CounterPunch editors described in their book *Whiteout*, CIA director Allen Dulles gave the late Sydney Gottlieb (boss of the Agency's Chemical Division) \$300,000 to test LSD and other potions, some of them lethal. Gottlieb passed some of the money on to Dr Harris Isbell, who ran the Center for Addiction Research in Lexington, Kentucky, thriving on the CIA subventions (funneled through the National Institutes of Health) and acting as middleman for the Agency for its supplies of narcotics and hallucinogens from the drug companies.

Isbell fed morphine and heroin to prisoners remanded to the Center, among them black heroin addicts into whom he also injected staggering amounts of LSD for 77 straight days, measuring their reactions as he did so.

CounterPuncher John Williams worked at the Center, and recently sent us

these reminiscences.

"I worked at the Addiction Research Center about thirty years ago. It was located in one of Lexington's white-picket fenced rural areas, 600 Leestown Pike. The head of the Center then was Dr. William Martin, MD (he replaced Isbell).

"My immediate supervisor was Harold Flanary. I worked there as a health physicist. My primary duties were the design, modification, repair and maintenance of laboratory equipment - primarily automatic injectors, stimulus generators and recording devices. I never worked directly with the prisoners, and in the two years I worked there, ran into perhaps three prisoners in ARC custody being "tested". The ARC was located in a complex that had a minimum security federal prison that housed both male and female prisoners (while I was there a famous Illinois Governor was incarcerated, I don't recall his name).

"Part of the prison also included a

larly with about a dozen psychiatrists, psychologists, pharmacologists, and neurologists, and we all talked a lot about our work.

(2) While I was there, there were at least three ARC prison riots from what I was told, each apparently effectively repressed.

(3) On the upper floor of the prison were housed about fifty World War Two veterans who were among the thousands on whom the VA performed lobotomies to treat "shell shock" (PTSD). Essentially, they were walking vegetables. This saddened me greatly as I am a disabled veteran myself.

(4) Much of the equipment I maintained was used to periodically inject beagle dogs, chimps, and monkeys. There were about a dozen chimps and monkeys, and close to fifty dogs. To keep the dogs in place, their spines were surgically broken. After a short time of what appeared to me to be great suffering, they died and were systematically replaced. Some were autopsied.

"Had enough?

"Sincerely, John J. Williams"

The psychiatrists at Lexington worked on M-Cubed, a drug 1000 times more powerful than LSD, to be used on Castro.

Clinical Research Center, with which I was not too familiar. The ARC prisoners were lifers bused in, and were not derived from the prison population there, which primarily consisted of frauds, embezzlers, forgers, other mostly white and white collar criminals. The prison had a major problem with female prisoners constantly turning up pregnant. The prison cafeteria food was some of the best I've ever eaten anywhere.

"Some things of possible interest to you:

(1) While at that time I did not realize that the ARC was a CIA operation, I suspected somebody big was behind us. The psychiatrists there talked about the development of a drug called "M-cubed". It was 1,000 times more potent than LSD, and it was designed to be used against Castro and other communist leaders. I used to eat lunch regu-

WHY REDS LIVE LONGER

Until quite recently one could look out into audiences and see 70-year and 80-year old Commies organizing for good causes, alive and kicking decades after the FBI agents and congressional investigators who persecuted them in the 1950s had keeled over from coronaries, lung cancer and kindred summonses by the Reaper. A few years ago when Sender Garlin died in Boulder at the age of 97, co-editor Cockburn described him as America's senior radical. When the dust settled, it turned out that the (still frisky) Most Senior was an emeritus prof at MIT aged 106. He'd been accused of trying to overthrow the Commonwealth of Massachusetts back in the 1940s, then as now a very sound ambition.

CounterPunch's theory is that Reds

(OLS continued on page 5)