

Driving Through Mississippi Wearing a Chin Beard in 1964

by Jerry Ratch

In August that year Andy and I and a student friend from Urbana, another math genius named Dave, drove Dave's old 1958 oil-burning (2 qts every 100 miles!) Ford 4-door sedan all the way down to New Orleans. I was still a math major at that time, though I abruptly switched to English after that. I was wearing a chin beard while driving through the South. This was in 1964, not long after the Klan had murdered Medgar Evers. A chin beard yet! Ah, the nerve of hot-blooded youth! But the drinking age was only 18 in New Orleans, and we couldn't resist the call of all that legalized drinking (even though I had fake I.D.'s my roommate at Urbana had given me.)

You and I had already consecrated nearly every foot of Fox River and then some. Even one time I remember when I was sitting right on the river bottom near the bank and you were on top and Fox River, you may remember, was not exactly the cleanest river in the Midwest. And it's kind of hard doing it underwater as it is, because water gets in the way of all the natural moisture.

Down in New Orleans in August, sweat dripping from the tip of our noses, it was so hot and damp all the time, and cockroaches were swarming over everything in the room at our hotel. We immediately went out to a bar and ordered our first legal drinks, and I remember a large cockroach crawling across the bar and it sped right up the side of my glass of amber liquor and dove into my drink. The bartender didn't bat an eyelash when I pointed at the roach struggling to stay afloat on an ice cube. He just whisked the drink away and replaced it with a new one. It was a practiced motion, as though he were doing it in his sleep.

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And he gave me a look as if to say, *"No big deal. Next!"*

But it was on our way home driving back up through Mississippi that I will never ever forget. Because that was where we met members of the Klan, and I remember thinking *"This could be our last day on earth!"*

We were sitting in a roadside café eating supper when a group of them came in the door. They took one look at my cute little chin beard that you liked so much (maybe because it tickled your thighs, I'm not sure) and they walked around the corner of the counter where we were sitting minding our own business, and the shortest one started chucking peanuts from the palm of his hand and hitting me in the chest, one peanut at a time. I remember just looking at the guy like "What the fuck are you doing?" but saying nothing, and he kept chucking his peanuts at my chest.

Finally, finally! he asked, "You boys aren't from around here, are you?"

"No, sir," I answered. I became very respectful all of a sudden. Besides, as you may remember, I wasn't a brawler by nature. I was a lover.

But he kept up the chucking of peanuts all the same. And he was a good shot to boot. He must have had practice at chucking peanuts, was all I could think. Some of them ended up hitting me in the head.

"You're not planning on staying around here, are you?"

"No, sir."

Neither Andy nor Dave the math geek, who wore thick bottle-bottomed glasses, were saying a thing.

"That's good," the leader said. "Almost done with your sandwiches there?"

"We're just about done, right guys?"

My trusty pals both nodded their heads.

"That's good. Give them their bill, Mabel. These boys are finished and in a hurry to skedaddle."

We paid our bill and left the café. We climbed into Dave's oil-burning Ford and pulled out of the parking lot in a hurry. As soon

as we got out onto the narrow two-lane road heading north, the Klansmen piled in their car and pulled to within 2 feet of our rear bumper with their bright lights on, and that was where they stayed until we passed a sign that read "You are leaving the city limits of Batesville (or whatever it was) the friendliest little town in all Mississippi," when they abruptly pulled off to the side of the road.

Then as a gesture of further Southern goodwill and get-out-of-town charm, the fellow flashed his headlamps, as if to say Good-bye!

