East of Anadarko - Gerry Scott-Moore (1/7/25)

I was a hippie guitarist in the late '60s and studied music at a small-town college. The Oklahoma College of Liberal Arts, OCLA, was attractive because my sister, newly married and living off-campus, attended school there. I had visited her two or three times and had become friends with several of her classmates and buddies. So, I started with a minor social network.

The college was located in Chickasha, in central Oklahoma, 45 miles south of Oklahoma City, and 18 miles east of Anadarko, the "Indian Capital of the Nation," whose population was over 50% Native American.

Though fraternities were banned at OCLA, "social groups" were acceptable. The differences seemed obscure. Social groups had no houses where members lived, but they still had Greek names, such as Sigma Chi, which was the one I was encouraged to pledge. There was one for jocks, another for business nerds, and then there was Sigma Chi, the one for the "cool kids", whatever that meant. The members chose to discuss hip fiction, including Barth and Pynchon, smoke a little pot, worry about the draft, and try to catch a wave in the midst of the sexual revolution. Also, yeah, an education or whatever.

Immediately after graduation from high school, I began the summer semester, which was very quiet on campus. I met people and studied hard for the first time in life. I was delighted to escape my own small town's life and live in another. The campus had few townies, and many students were from out of state. It was a cloistered world dismissive of hicks, ass-scratchers, and those who lived for football and church. In my hometown, I had been seen as a "Yankee" from "back east", a smart ass, an anti-sports faux intellectual. In sum, a pariah. But at OCLA, I found communities that accepted me for my many non-rural qualities.

I was invited to keg parties by these quasi-fraternities. It was liberating, at age 18, to drink a beer without a lookout. Most of the guys from Sigma Chi were good-natured, smart and funny, so when the group asked me to pledge, I submitted to the traditional idiotic hazing and silliness that the process demanded.

At first, we pledges numbered seven, and for our first haze, they took us out of town, dumped us, and we had to get back on our own. From downtown Chickasha, you could be deep in the wilds within 15 minutes.

First, they blindfolded us. As I took off my glasses, I laughed and told my captor that without them, I had 20/200 vision; I was legally blind. He neither wore glasses himself nor knew what legally blind meant, so I was led along without a blindfold. I bumped around, arms extended, feigning total blindness, as they put me in the back of a pickup with the others, and rode in the whistling wind for 30 minutes. Finally, at some rutted dirt lane off an old county road, we came to a stop near a fence and got out in the moist summer night air.

We scrambled over the fence, and they led us through a dense wooded area and beyond, to gently rolling hills. The leaders took a circuitous route, periodically doubling back to add to our confusion. Of course, I watched it all. On the other side of a hill by a small pond, they stopped. They spun us around several times, rinsing our senses clean of direction, made us lie face down, and told us to count to 100 at the top of our voices. As we began to count, they departed over the hill and through the woods.

I crawled up the hill to watch them go. At the count of 70, I saw some taillights in the distance, which slowly began to move away. I told the others we were free, and we walked directly back to the road; it took us hardly two minutes. Just as we cleared the fence, a pickup passed by, and we waved it down. We explained to the driver, an old farmer, that our frat-brothers had dumped us here and we were trying to get back to OCLA. "Hop in the back," he said. We piled in and he drove us all the way back to campus, dropping us off in the parking lot of our dormitory.

As we got out, we could see a few of the guys who had dumped us approaching the front steps of the dorm. They had just arrived themselves, and were flabbergasted to see us; we were delighted. "Wait a minute, wait a minute", I yelled as they hesitated at the door, gaping at us. Catching up to them and passing through the front door, I said, "I just want to be able to say I got back before you". They were livid.

There were no other problematic aspects of the pledge period, just a few keg parties in another insufferably hot Oklahoma summer. The last of the official activities was the bona fide membership initiation. Surprisingly, it would involve again being dumped outside of town. I'm not sure how this became so fundamental to the process. In a small town, perhaps it's one of the few dramatic things that you can do to someone without obvious legal repercussions.

A number of guys had dropped out of pledging or flunked out of school, so by this time, only three pledges remained. There was me, Johnny Simmons, who was a black cellist from Orlando, Florida, and Mike Morningsong, a Native American from Anadarko. Both were good-sized young men, not hulking but sizable, athletic lads. Mike was straight-backed and truly red-skinned, not brown-skinned. It was kind of surprising at first. There had been some good-natured joking about we three being the minority segment of Sigma Chi. The group had never initiated long-haired hippies, Blacks, or Native Americans.

On the big night, we read some overly-serious palaver sprinkled with Latin, made some sort of vainglorious promises about history and brotherhood, allusions to blood and bone, and once it was all over with, they cracked some raw eggs in our underwear, rubbed molasses in our hair, and off again we went to the piney woods.

This time I found no opportunity to feign a handicap to shorten the return trip. The brothers spent plenty of time leading us deep into the countryside to ensure we were lost through the night. After the requisite count to 100, we started walking. We didn't know where we were, but could see by the moonlight and clear sky that we weren't on a working farm. Part of the area was heavily wooded. Since they had walked us through some trees before, I figured they had again, but Mike was quick to correct me. "They didn't walk us through any tres, just over open land," I asked how he knew. "I was listening. You can hear it when you're walking through a forest."

Mike was resolute in his course; he was going somewhere. I asked how he knew we weren't walking the wrong way. "The stars," he said. "Chickasha is this way." I looked up at the sky and, not to contest him but to find out, I asked, "Which stars?"

"All of them. If we were going west, those…" he motioned at the stars on his right, "would be yonder", he waved to his left. After a minute, Johnny asked him, "But how do you know we need to go east?"

"Ain't nothing but flat land and farms east of Chickasha. You gotta drive west to find country with even a bump in it. Besides—smell that water? That's gotta be the Washita River. There's no water east of Chickasha, just Bitter Creek, and in summertime it's bone-dry."

Johnny and I were impressed and reassured by having a local and a Native American in the lead. "Wait a minute," Mike stopped dead in his tracks. "Quiet!" We held our breaths. "There's a bear around here," he said. I could feel sweat pop out on my forehead. Mike sniffed at the air. "Either it's a bear, or maybe... maybe it's a black Labrador; it smells like a three-legged dog." While I was still confused, Johnny started laughing, "Any pale-faces with fire-sticks?" Mike laughed, and we continued hiking. It seemed like an isolated country, but when we found a wisp of a trail, we were eager to follow it.

If I were a Native American or from the country, maybe I would know how the sounds of the night are different. Suddenly, Mike was very happy; he had heard a train in the distance. "So what?" I asked. "Are we taking a train home?"

Again, Johnny was quicker on the uptake than I, "Where there's a train--there's tracks!" Within fifteen minutes, we were walking on train tracks with nothing but open country on both sides. Over the next hour, we had a curiously personal conversation about our lives and feelings, which I don't think we would have had otherwise. Perhaps it was made easier by not being able to see each other's faces in the dark.

I might have started it. I told Mike that in Ardmore, where I had lived, we had the Chickasaw Nation reservation outside of town. Each morning, they brought in three buses of Native American kids to attend high school. But these kids never said a word to anyone. The teachers did not call on them, and if they did, which I saw only once, they refused to respond. Not one word. I told Mike that he was the only Native American I had ever heard speak. Mike said they didn't speak when there was nothing to say, and most of the time, there wasn't.

"Besides", he said, "talk with white people usually gets you trouble, no matter what you talk about." Johnny was quick to affirm this about black life in Orlando.

So the two of them swapped stories about ill-treatment, being refused service, and being threatened at a hot-dog stand or movie, being shamed with their girlfriends. They shared stories about friends who had been beaten for some minor offense and now walked with a limp, or were no longer right in the head. I chimed in about being bullied by fascist farmers and rural types when my bands played at small-town dances at Moose Lodges. Mostly Mike and Johnny were talking to each other, making distinctions in racism visited on rural Native American versus urban Blacks.

Soon, we were walking down a long incline, and when we spotted street lights, we began whooping and laughing. At street level, we saw it was a tiny town; none of us knew which. Wandering at random, we found a commercial street comprised of about two blocks of sagging buildings, including a dilapidated hardware store and a weathered diner. Foot-sore and hungry, we entered the diner. We could smell potatoes frying and hear the sound of clatter and chatter from a couple of tables. The sound abruptly stopped. A pale and tired-looking waitress in a well-faded apron came to the front and asked, "What can I do for y'all?"

I said we wanted a bite to eat, but she was already shaking her head no. "I could seat you, fetch you supper, but these ol' boys," she tipped her head slightly toward a table of guys at the back who watched us in sullen silence, "they'll likely kick your ass proper. You'd best move on." Mike asked if we could get some water. "Sure thing. Y'all just step outside and I'll fetch it." As we waited outside, the fear rose that the "'ol' boys" might come out first, but the waitress soon showed up and handed us three big paper cups of tap water. With no apparent malice, she said, "Now y'all git," and closed the door behind her.

Within a block or two, we were out of the tiny commercial district and searching for a highway. Johnny was in front, and I was in the rear when an old Ford pickup driven by a black man approached us. Johnny flagged him down. The man slowed, smiling amiably, but his eyes rose up, saw Mike and me, and his smile disappeared. He turned back to the road and drove on.

Soon enough, we saw signs to Highway 62 and figured out where we were. We began plotting our route back to Chickasha, still 15 miles away, when a police car slowed down nearby. "Well, here you are!" said a white cop, his window down, as he pulled over and eyeballed us. "Seems like I'm the only one that didn't know y'all were in town. So what kinda trouble you boys up to?" Johnny and Mike fell back as I approached the car window. I explained that we were from OCLA, were pledges for a fraternity that had dumped us off in the country, and we had walked for an hour or two to get here. I pointed at the molasses in my hair to underscore the truth of my story. I said we were only trying to get back to campus.

"So you a college boy, huh?" He scratched at a full day's growth of beard. "Them too?" He called Johnny and Mike forward to tell them the same story. He asked them where they were from, what they were studying, and even the names of their professors. But he didn't seem to be listening to answers, just noting tone and nervousness. When they finished, he told us to get in his cruiser; he'd drive us back to Chickasha. While he drove, I was in the front seat, the only one who spoke, trying to sound collegiate and full of youthful pep. We remained frightened; none of us quite believed he was driving us back to campus. He frequently looked at Johnny and Mike in the rearview. But he did indeed drive us back to the dorm. He wasn't a bad guy, I guess, but he took no special trouble to be a nice guy either.

Once, in late autumn, I bumped into Johnny between classes. Neither of us had continued with Sigma Chi. Me, I didn't want to pay the thirty bucks in dues just to drink beer with incoming freshmen. Johnny said, "Why would I want to be a member? So I can put eggs in somebody's underwear and spend a weekend night driving them to hell and gone? Hell, I'd rather watch TV."