

Before I tell you my story, I would like to give you a little background on my family. My father was a switchman on the railroad who enlisted in the Marines for the duration of WWII. His time in service was added to his seniority and by the time I was born, his seniority with the Chicago and Eastern Illinois (C&EI - pronounced "seen-knee-eye") railroad line, provided a very modest but secure income. The line from Chicago had switch yards in Villa Grove, West Frankfort, and Mitchel Illinois. Villa Grove was the home of my mother's large family of four sisters and four brothers. When I was in the third grade (1956), as my much older brother went off to college at Southern Illinois University, the railroad company closed the yard in Villa Grove where Dad was the conductor (supervisor of switchmen). His seniority meant that he could bump switchmen with less seniority at other locations. So, we left our home in Villa Grove moved to West Frankfort. For years after that we visited Villa Grove frequently. We referred to it as "up home."

My story takes place in West Frankfort, Illinois following periods of transitions and refocusing of my interests. Over the next nine years we lived in three different rental homes in West Frankfort. My two sisters and I came to feel more at home there than our parents and made lasting friendships. In the summer of 1961, I looked forward to starting high school and playing basketball. The school had just hired a new varsity coach with a winning record. Basketball was a big deal in West Frankfort. Prominent community leaders were anxious to see their sons on the court. I was over six feet tall and could handle a basketball and shoot. Before basketball season, the varsity coach took an interest in me, encouraged me, and gave me tips. It made me feel like I had potential in sports. However, when the season began the junior varsity coach cut me from competition after one practice. This was the case for both my freshman and sophomore years.

This was the beginning of a major transition in my early life. At the start of my junior year I joined the math club and found geometry and trigonometry fascinating. I was especially taken with the method of mathematical proofs and the trigonometric identities. I was happy to have failed making the basketball team. I liked not being a jock. A few of the math club members were also members of the rocket club. None were into football or basketball. Building rockets sounded like fun, so I also joined the rocket club. I found myself associating with students who liked to think more. Some were members and officers of other school clubs like the foreign language club, the art club, and others. I found myself associating with more seriously conscientious, deep thinking students.

Here is where my story really begins. The high school conducted elections of officers for the next school year during the second semester. A few of the younger teachers expressed concerns about the process for elections, and word reached some of my fellow club members that the concerns were that the students didn't really elect the officers. In practice the teachers held their own election and the principal would simply report the results of their election. This did not sit well with myself and my friends.

After much grousing and wringing of hands, a plot began to form to protest the practice. It was decided that we would run a campaign for a fictitious person on a platform of honest and fair elections. A student office worker let us have access to the office mimeograph machine to make fliers to expose the practice. Posters were created by hand, featuring drawings of the Mad Magazine character Alfred E. Newman, requesting that students vote for him as a write-in candidate.

Yes, it is true. We ran Alfred E. Newman for Student Body President of the West Frankfort High School in 1964. My first political campaign. At that time, and even today, Mad Magazine was seen as a radically satirical publication iconified by the image of the fictional character, Alfred E. Newman.

The evening before the candidates were to speak in the auditorium, we assembled on the street between the gymnasium and the side door to the school at about dinner time. Finding the doors unlocked, we entered the school placing flyers in the vents to all the lockers and hanging posters in restrooms and discrete areas including the folds of the open curtain to the auditorium so that they could be seen when the curtain was closed before the event. We went home expecting to surprise everyone the next morning.

When we entered the school the next morning, there were no flyers and no posters anywhere. My first hour class was physics. Soon after the bell rang, there was a thumping sound increasing in volume coming from the PA system. Over the thumping we heard the words hell and damn in confusing statements from the principal as he dressed down the student office worker who allowed access to the mimeograph machine. The thumping sound was the mallet used to ring the chimes that introduced announcements from the office. However, on this morning no tune was played. There was just a loud demand that everyone and anyone having anything to do with the flyers and posters to report to the principal's office immediately. I can still see the look on Mr. Walton's face as three of his more studious students rose to leave the room.

As we arrived at the principal's office, we were shown into a small conference room. Only about eight of us reported. We all just looked and one another. Not sure what was about to happen. We could still hear the principal shouting in the main office through the closed door. When he came into the conference room, he closed the door and began shouting again. He called us unamerican, troublemakers, communists, and probably a few other names I've forgotten. He threatened to have us expelled. I seem to remember a reference to Siberia if we did this in Russia.

After a while, we were all sent back to our first hour class with a few minutes to spare. I remember Mr. Walton asking the three of us to stay a minute. He wanted to know what it was about. We told him and I will always remember what he said. "If that is the worst you do, you guys will be all right." Other than few small-minded students publicly repeating the names we were called by the principal, there were no official consequences for our acts. We quietly finished out our junior year.

The next year, the whole experience was behind us, but we did have a new principal. I was beset with another period of transition. I remember a feeling of panic at the beginning of my senior year. What will I do? I'll need to get into college, get a job to afford it, and choose a field of study. Mathematics? Physics? To further complicate the situation. The C&EI closed the switch yard in West Frankfort and we were to move in the summer to be near Dad's work in Mitchell, Illinois.

During the second semester of my senior year everyone was called into the auditorium for the speeches of candidates for the next year's officers. The Student Body President, Charlie Russell, introduced the speakers, but before he did, he explained that changes were made to the process as a result of events the previous year. He credited Alfred E. Newman.