

Shop Class
by
James Gregory Maynard
Rev. April 2020

One of the results of President Roosevelt's mid-thirties efforts using lavish government spending to stimulate the economy was the construction of a new high school perched at the top of Union Hill. It was of the customary two-story, long rectangular, brick and mortar, box-shaped design where the gym protrudes perpendicular to the east from the center of the long academic corridor. On the north end which housed the science and home economics labs, the building bent L-shaped to the east. Since the original construction, the school board ordered two additions built on the complex. The first, an annex to the south, was one-third the length of the original building. The second is a completely separate two-story building dedicated to the arts and trade related classes.

A road winds in a box Z-shape between the shop building and the gym to the south. Across from the gym, on the south side of the shop building, a large ten-foot wide by twelve-foot tall steel roll-up door lays open allowing the warm fresh mid-April spring air into the Metal Shop. From the opening, comes the droning chatter of juniors and soon to be graduates, expending more effort to get out of work than needed to complete it.

Directly through the door behind a ten by eighteen foot wire mesh cage, against the inside wall, Mr. Moore sat on a tall metal stool in front of a tall metal desk. Surrounding him were racks, cabinets and bins holding sorts of metals, tools, welding supplies and an assortment of expensive power tools. Only a few of the seniors were allowed into Mr. Moore's office. Gib, one who was, waits beside the desk for Mr. Moore to finish the list of materials he was to pick up at the local welding shop.

"Gib-boy!" Mr. Moore shouted authoritatively without looking up from his note (Curiously, Mr. Moore called everyone by his first name plus "-boy", i.e., Pat-boy, Rex-boy, Jim-boy, etc. I often wondered if he was from the south or just using these name tags to either foster a father son like relationship with the students or to let us know we were not yet men. I suspect it was the latter because I now recognize that most of us had essentially the intellect of eleven or twelve-year-olds in men's bodies.)

"Right here, Mr. Moore," Gib replied, standing next to Mr. Moore, startling him from his concentration on the list.

"Oh, yes, you're right here, that's good Gib-boy." Mr. Moore scratched his baldhead in his usual way and gave the familiar twitch of his mouth as he stood up handing the material order to Gib.

Gib respectfully looked at his slightly shorter leader, trying not to focus on the peculiar tick twitching away at Mr. Moore's upper lip. Everyone had great respect for Mr. Moore - after all, what seventeen or eighteen-year-old male, at least the manly ones, did not revere a man who could expertly work a lathe or mill to shape cool stuff out of metal, or

could arc weld steel, Mig weld and more impressively Tig weld aluminum. Aluminum, mind you, is very difficult to weld.

That said, Mr. Moore's physical features, his strange way of communicating, combined with that nervous tick thing with his mouth (With those tiny, beady looking dark brown eyes, if he was completely covered with light gray fur you might mistake him for a rabbit—a common nick name for him) left him open to humorous fun, albeit, generally, not mean spirited.

“Gib-boy, take the keys to the panel truck and get these supplies from Ziegler Welding.” Gib was one of the few students in our class that Mr. Moore trusted to make these runs, and for good reason. Although a spirited young man, well liked by everyone, Gib was a very good student and most trustworthy.

Four unnamed students (to protect the guilty), who were not trustworthy, were standing around the front of the early fifties Chevrolet panel truck, and overheard Mr. Moore's directions to Gib. For unknown reasons, the hood of the truck was open. When Gib came out of the office, he asked the guys to shut the hood for him because he had to make a run to Ziegler's.

Unable to resist an opportunity to mess with a classmate, one of the guys reached into the engine compartment and snatched the coil wire out as Gib climbed into the cab, then slammed the hood shut. Behind the wheel, Gib ground away at the starter, pumping the gas pedal with nary a spark of the engine, while the band of pranksters leaned against the office fence.

Hearing Gib's failed attempts to start the old panel truck, Mr. Moore strutted out to see just what the problem was. By now, because of Gib's happy throttle foot nervously pumping away, the smell of gasoline permeated the office. His nose a twitching and a smug smile on his face, in recognition of another opportunity to demonstrate his superior manhood - the sensei, demonstrating aged techniques to his disciples - Mr. Moore strutted to the driver's side door, his tinny voice deepening, “Gib-boy please step out and let me show you boys how to start a flooded car.”

The happy band of pranksters began fidgeting nervously, realizing that after a few tries Mr. Moore would no doubt raise the hood and find that the coil wire was missing. Mr. Moore hit the starter button and the motor turned the engine over with an oscillating growl, “rr-rr-rr-rr.” After the first failed attempt, the chap holding the coil wire stepped forward with his hand up for Mr. Moore to stop. He quickly lifts the hood and the rest of the gang gather around the engine compartment as if to analyze the situation, while the keeper of the coil wire stealthily slips it back into place.

Popping his head from under the hood, the prankster closest to the driver's side door gives Mr. Moore the thumbs up. Mr. Moore pushes the gas pedal to the floor and hit the starter button again. This time after a few revolutions, the engine sputters to life, spewing a black cloud of partially burnt gasoline out the tail pipe.

Satisfied with his demonstration, Mr. Moore, recognizing yet another teaching opportunity, sticks his head out of the cab and yells, “Gib-boy, let me back er out for you, and I will use only the side mirrors. You boys need to learn to back up using only your side mirrors. So watch closely to see how it’s done.”

“Yes, sir. Thanks Mr. Moore.” Gib politely bowing to the master.

While those two were settling who was to back the panel truck out, one of the pranksters stepped behind the truck, grabbed the nearby chain fall and pulled it to the back of the truck. As luck would have it, the I-Beam on which the chain fall traveled back and forth the length of the shop hung directly over the rear bumper. He lowered the large hook until it slipped under the bumper, he then raised it until it snuggled up to the bottom edge, just as Mr. Moore shifted into reverse.

Slowly releasing the clutch, the truck began moving backwards against the tension of the chain fall causing the back of the van to rise higher the farther backward it traveled. The natural laws of physics dictated that the arc of the truck’s ascension would eventually result in the tires losing the friction they had with the concrete floor, thusly allowing the van to swing forward. That is, until the now faster spinning tires reengaged with the concrete, launching the truck backward in an ever-higher arc.

Behind the wheel, focused intently on the side mirrors to guide him out the door, Mr. Moore did not sense the rear end of the truck rising off the ground and so was quite startled, letting out a strange squawk, when the truck started forward only to shoot backwards, tires squealing, throwing him nose first to within an inch of the steering wheel. He jammed both feet against the floor board to brace himself. The right foot of course was directly over the throttle peddle, mashing it to the floor.

The little six-cylinder engine racing, tires smoking each time the pendulum motion brought them back in touch with the floor, sending the back of the van higher off the ground and the pranksters scrambling for safety. After the fifth or sixth cycle (it was hard to count them), Mr. Moore was able to get his bucking stallion under control (actually, I think he inadvertently flopped his foot down on the clutch peddle while trying to brace himself allowing just enough time for him to hit the brakes stopping the truck less than an inch from the fence, in front of his desk.)

While Mr. Moore sat dazed, staring directly at his desk through the wire fence, one of the pranksters loosened the chain fall from the bumper and pushed it across the shop. Visibly shaken by his ordeal, Mr. Moore stepped out of the truck and walked around behind it, without making eye contact with any of the entire class now gathered around the scene. As he walked by Gib he said softly, “Gib-boy, I think you’d better back that truck out yourself.” Then walked directly to his office, sat at his desk and scratched his baldhead.

The students dispersed to reassemble in hidden corners, behind welding screens and just outside doorways, bent over laughing silently, tears streamed down their cheeks.

What a start the summer break.