

MY UNFORGETTABLE PENN ENCOUNTERS

By Lee Gordon, C'68

It seems both remarkable and thrilling that four evocative events from my days at Penn still resonate in a meaningful way today:

FRESHMAN YEAR 1964/65: A GREAT ROCK AND ROLL ENTERTAINER

It is Skimmer Weekend and I am entranced by the handsome black man on the stage in the middle of our football haven, Franklin Field. As a freshman, I can't believe my eyes and especially my ears when I hear "Johnny Be Good" ring out. We are, indeed, "Back to the Future". There he is: Chuck Berry, one cool cat, dazzling our classmates and the entire Penn community. What a sight! Charles Edward Anderson Berry is 20 years older than I am, but I feel that age-wise we are in sync. Suddenly, a fraternity boy type jumps out onto the stage and Chuck, cool as ever, engages him into his act. This will be the first time that the love of my life, my irresistible beautiful Sandy, gets to feel the rhythm of Penn's campus. Sadly, three years later, Sandy will be with me at my 36th Street apartment the weekend of April 4th when the shocking assassination news rings out across the campus and the world.



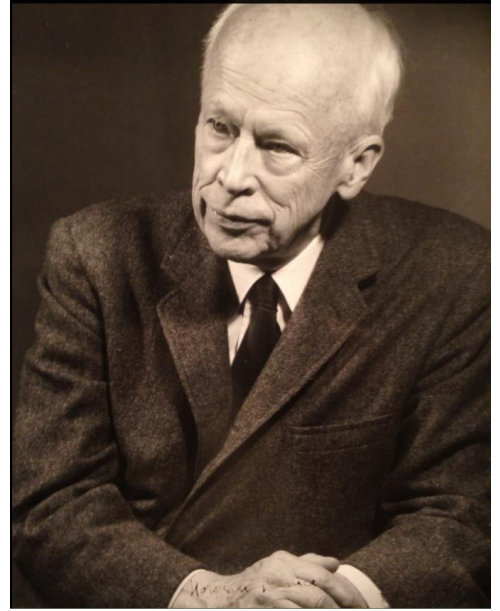
SOPHOMORE YEAR 1965/66: A GREAT CHILDREN'S TV STAR



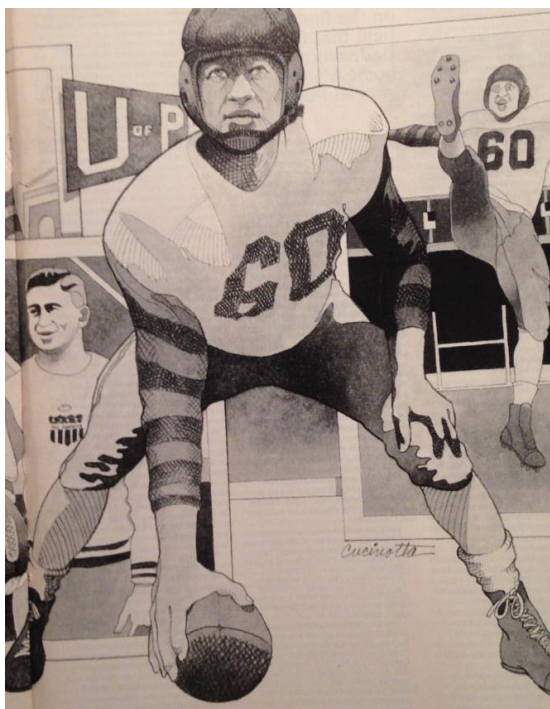
The intellectual ferment growing inside my callow brain steps back as I eagerly await a return to my childhood innocence. There he is, decked out in his cowboy shirt, with his V-shape tassels prominently displayed. Robert Emil Schmidt is actually from Buffalo, but Buffalo Bob Smith is definitely from the Old West. "Howdy Doody!" we all cheer as we await the return to our youth and innocence that is so vital for our well-being. I have my real live Howdy Doody puppet at home, safely secured in my shoebox, along with another puppet, the first love of my life: Princess SummerFall WinterSpring. Buffalo Bob recounts the antics of Howdy Doody, Clarabell and Mr. Bluster. But I want to hear about the Princess. "Well", says Buffalo Bob in a muted tone, "I'm afraid I've got some sad news to tell you. Princess SummerFall WinterSpring was killed in a car accident about ten years ago." I am shattered. Later I learn that Judy Tyler was killed in 1957, just two years after James Dean's fatal crash. Two 24 year old stars, gone forever. Young people aren't supposed to die so young. The Vietnam War will prove otherwise.

JUNIOR YEAR 1966/67: A GREAT POLITICAL IDEALIST

As our country's war in Vietnam is being ramped up by LBJ and as we sink waist deep into the big muddy, Penn's Connaissance lecture series showcases an unsung American hero for peace. The silver haired man in our presence has been our country's "canary in the coal mine" for more than a half-century. Slowly and with dignified grace, Norman Thomas unveils his promise of America. It will be a painful presentation to our generation, as we discard the fraudulent myths and accept the hard truths about the history of the United States. The struggle of labor, the rights of the dissenter, and the unyielding prejudice against many ethnic and racial groups have occupied much of Norman Thomas' lifework. At the time of his lecture, the United States is gripped by Cold War politics, having nuclear weapons at the ready to be used against our implacable Soviet foe. Mr. Thomas, I ask in the Q & A session, "when will the US and Russia cease to be enemies?" Remarkably, the prescient Mr. Thomas replies: "In 25 years, you will see a true rapprochement between the two countries when they find that they share common interests." So it turns out that Norman Thomas was an amazing mathematician as well: a quarter of a century later the Soviet Union collapsed.



SENIOR YEAR 1967/68: THE GREATEST PENN ATHLETE OF ALL TIME



At 6 foot 4 plus inches tall, my four year roommate Mark Rosen was an imposing basketball center. As his point guard in pick-up games at the Penn gym, my job was to fire passes into Mark for easy layups. One afternoon, a rather hefty man in his early 40's, wearing a zipped up jacket, asked me if he could play in the next round. No problem, said I, as I threw the basketball into Mark's grasp awaiting the inevitable layup. Not so fast. As the older gentleman posted up with Mark, the newcomer imperceptibly moved his left hip into Mark's body, knocking my roommate over and splaying him on the ground. Mark limped around for the rest of the game. In the locker room, I approached Mr. Zipped Up Jacket Man and remarked: "Sir, I'm in awe of your strength. Nice to meet you -- I'm Lee Gordon." "Hi", he responded as he shook my hand, "I'm Chuck Bednarik." So here I was in the presence of Penn's most famous football player and NFL Hall of Famer -- the last of the two-way footballers. Fortunately, my roommate escaped the full wrath of Chuck. If you have any doubt about the power of "Concrete Charlie," check out 1960's famous sports photo of this Philadelphia Eagles star linebacker looming over his victim -- a concussed Frank Gifford.