

# Flash from the Past: A Flippity Do Dah, A Flippity Day

02/14/2021

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## Proem

I wrote a story driving down from Detroit to Zihuantanejo, Mexico, in December 1971 with my dear friends, the Keeney family, Jerry, Peggy, Jenny, Becky, and Allie. I had wanted to drop out of college, but Jerry suggested I ask to do an independent study for the semester. My advisors agreed. My study: full Mark Twain immersion with the deliverable - two stories written in the style of Mark Twain. I read my first story to the tribe in Zihuantanejo on Christmas 1971. I was 19. I thought I had lost the story, but I found the manuscript a month ago tucked inside a book about Mark Twain, called [Mark Twain Himself](#). I wanted to give the book to my grandson, Oscar. Oscar and I read to each other for an hour each week. We read Tom Sawyer and now we're reading Huckleberry Finn. We started this pleasant ritual about a year ago when he was concerned about my Pokeman illiteracy. He's becoming more literate about Mississippi life in the 1870's than I became about Pokeman. Anyway, my brain needs a respite from COVID-19, health choices, politics, life. So, rather than an interview or a rant, I'm going to read you that story I wrote almost 50 years ago. This also gives me a chance to play around with the use of music on my podcast. What a hoot. Hang tight. Here we go.

## The Story

I live in Biggers where we believe in the American Way. Success is how we play the game. That's what I've been taught in school all these years and the actions of everyone here pretty well fits that bill. Biggers is out of the way, which is to say that strangers are strangers and it ain't often they chance to pass through here, exceptin' if they got lost finding the gas station off the highway about 10 miles down the road.

I was coming home from school the other day. Man, I hate school. They say a lot and make us do a lot, but somehow, I can't seem to make it all fit for me. You know, like that stuff about success. Be a man, make a man of yourself. They say that's the way to be, but it sorta rubs me wrong. When I told Hank, he said there was something wrong with me, but I'm still not sure. He seems pretty hard put to win those contests he tries out for. He built up his arms carrying wood for a few months so he could hammer that ball that's supposed to hit the bell if you're really strong at the County Fair. You hit the bell; all the pretty girls will like you more. Well, he tried and tried didn't really think he could do it and he was right. Still, it was a blow to him. Me, I didn't even try. I knew I couldn't, and I didn't want to care.



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Anyway, I was coming home from school and Hank came running over yelling about some weird stranger walking into town. Can you imagine that walking into town? No car, no nothing. I ran off with Hank to see what was going on and here comes this man, all dressed in black with long black hair, bushy eyebrows and a six-inch scraggy beard. Couldn't quite make out his age. Some said he was about 25. Some said he was 60. He was ageless. The first time I saw him he looked 150, straight up, yet tired. He walked as if he'd been all over, like Biggers was his place to get a pop and donut until the train got going again. The closer I got to him, the more it seemed he had it all over me and everything. Still, I didn't feel dumb by it. Not like in school with teachers. I just felt more hopeful for some reason. Don't know why, but it was funny. When I looked up at him again, he had the look of a woman about 25, really dug kids and would rather be with them than those fool adults. I took an immediate liking to him. His smile warmed me all over. I sorta said hi and it came out a squeak, but I knew he got the message. The whole town crowded around the stranger, but he didn't seem to want to talk to anyone. This sure put some people out, but that's their own fault.

He went over to old Mrs. Rogers place for a room and she said she didn't have any, which is a lie cause nobody stayed there in 10 years. Who'd want to anyway. Me and Mrs. Rogers have been having a bad time together ever since she told my mom she'd seen me smoking behind the post office. So, I said real innocent-like, what about that room above the shed? Mrs. Rogers gave me a look that would have soured a lemon, but I pretended I didn't see. The man got the room for \$5 a week. Heck, she should have paid him to keep all the mice up there company.

People were itching to find out about the stranger, but he didn't seem to care. He never left a name anywhere and never introduced himself. Couldn't read the scribbled name he put in Mrs. Rogers little book. So, I named him Neu, N E U. It just came to me all of a sudden. Sounded pretty foreign. Well, he was foreign. Couldn't have come from anywhere any of us had ever been, except maybe ornery old Captain Sellers who says he's been around the world.

This afternoon, Mr. Graystone, the mayor, went to him and asked him his name. Darn if he didn't say that some people called him Neu. He threw a twinkle in his eye to me when he saw me. I almost let loose in my pants. Now I really wanted to know more about him. I started wondering if maybe he couldn't answer my questions about the things they taught in school, especially about being a success. Heck, he sure was one. I didn't know at what, but whatever he thought he was, I'll be darned if he wasn't a success at it. After the mayor finally got through his fancy hat that he wasn't going to pump Neu for any more information, he split and made everybody else leave, too. I went extra slow. When they were all gone, I slipped back into his room and stood there in front of him frightened yet knowing he dug me being there. He said he was glad I was here, and could I please do him a favor? I would've given up half a gallon of ice cream and stayed in school an extra hour every day just to be with him, let alone do something for him. I'll be darned if he didn't want me to get him on the agenda for the next



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town meeting the next Friday night. I ran off and told the mayor to fix it up. He didn't like me giving him orders, but he was about to shake to death with curiosity. So, he did it and only scowled at me.

Nobody saw Neu for the next few days, but that don't mean he wasn't thought about. You see, the town meeting is where everyone strings out their tall tales for putting this town back on the map. The mayor says for everyone to get into politics, even though I'm sure he's glad they aren't because if they were, he'd be out of a job. Anybody been better than him, but nobody cares enough except maybe Joe Cratcher, who owns the used car lot with four rickety old cars in it. But he'd be worse, and everyone knows it and so does Mr. Cratcher, so he doesn't get into politics either. He just tries to get the biggest dealership in the state, which is ridiculous cause he only sells one car a year and that's to the mayor who buys a city car to drive as his own to do city business, even though there ain't any because the County does it all now, see'n as Biggers is so small.

Well, Mr. Cratcher figured that Neu might give him a hint as to how to expand his business. Mrs. Rogers figured he'd talk about how to praise God. She's the most God awful, God-fearing person in the world. I'm sure God doesn't waste no time on an old prune like her. Old Lady Jenkins, the schoolteacher hoped she'd find a way to keep the kids quiet so she could cram some of them dusty old books down our throats. That's what she said, but I think she'd rather have built a fire, roast us all over. Bob hoped Neu would bring free booze so he wouldn't go broke on his next bender. But we all knew Neu wouldn't since he hadn't hardly any money and drinking didn't seem to be up his alley. Me, I didn't know what he was going to talk about, but I was darn sure I wasn't going to miss it even if I had to sneak out after mom and pop left for the meeting.

Friday night came and everyone finished dinner early and put their kids to bed by eight o'clock. Can you imagine that, expecting us all go to bed for real by eight? But we went, figuring it would give us more time to sneak out and find a good hiding place at the town hall. Nobody seemed to notice that we went without a fuss. If they'd been thinking at all, they would have known something was up. That's adults for you. They can't think past the cowlicks in their old greasy hair. Us kids snuck out and all crowded around some knot holes in the walls at the town hall. I got wise and went up in the rafters with Hank. We never told anyone about our place so we could sneak up there anytime we wanted and have plenty of room to stretch.

The meeting started and everyone gave their usual long-winded spiel until the ice-cold reception froze them up and they sat down, bringing us closer to hearing Neu. Finally, it was Neu's turn to speak. People were quivering with anticipation, each one sure of what he was going to talk about. I almost fell off the rafters, but Hank caught me just in time. Neu stood up, straightened out his wrinkled black frock, sighed and stepped up to meet us all. He slid the podium out of his way and took a long piercing look around



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the room. He saw me in the rafters, even though I was hiding. I swear he nodded in recognition of me, but nobody else seemed to notice. So maybe I just dreamt it. He shifted his weight and began.

***A flippity do dah, a flippity day. A flippity do dah, a flippity day.***

Everyone got pissed real quick. "What is this fake pulling on us? Who does he think he is anyway?" But Neu kept on going just a little bit louder.

***A flippity do dah, a flippity day. A flippity do dah, a flippity day.***

Honest, I couldn't help myself. I was so entranced. I started agoin',

***A flippity do dah, a flippity day. A flippity do dah, a flippity day.***

Hank looked at me like I really had fallen out of the rafters. Everyone looked up and saw us. They should have been mad at us hiding up there. It was against all sorts of rules to share. Couldn't get anywhere by breaking rules they always said. But they weren't mad. They just looked at us and looked back at Neu. Everyone was quiet - dusty road quiet, lull before a storm. It was all quiet except for the two of us singing softly:

***A flippity do dah, a flippity day. A flippity do dah, a flippity day.***

Then you know what? Everyone was hesitantly, slowly singing.

***A flippity do dah, a flippity day. A flippity do dah, a flippity day.***

Ever so slowly than quicker and louder until they were singing to give you goosebumps.

***A FLIPPITY DO DAH, A FLIPPIDITY DAY. A FLIPPITY DO DAH, A FLIPPITY DAY.***

It was like 90-degree weather in the middle of winter. People were smiling, hugging, and kissing each other. They actually dug the isolation and silly ways of Biggers. Mrs. Rogers even climbed up to the rafters and shook my hand. That ain't peanuts for a 200-pound woman.

The meeting didn't last too long or rather it lasted for a few days. It just spilled out into the streets and homes and everywhere. Mom hummed, as she did her work.

***A flippity do dah, a flippity day. A flippity do dah, a flippity day.***

We sang it out on the playground at the top of our lungs.

***A FLIPPITY DO DAH, A FLIPPIDITY DAY. A FLIPPITY DO DAH, A FLIPPITY DAY.***



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But like any good thing, special good thing, some people didn't dig it. Mr. Graystone, the mayor, and Mr. Cratcher started questioning whether it was proper to be singing all the time and not working hard. I have a sneaking suspicion they were jealous of everyone. Nobody seemed to care a lick about used cars or town politics. Nobody appreciated their status, treated them as equals. Imagine that, the mayor and town used car dealer, prominent people, and nobody was paying them any special mind.

Well, so it went. First, only a few people were thinking about it. "Maybe we are being sort of silly and childish. I mean, actually singing some stupid song all day, not even a proper song with words and a definite tune. Adults acting like kids."

It hurts me to tell you about it. It spread faster than that little ditty did. Pretty soon only kids and Bob, but Bob only sang it on his benders, and nobody ever thought twice about him!

One day somebody suggested the Neu was at fault. "Why it was him that started it all with that catchy tune. He's been causing the complete collapse of all respectability in this town. The kids don't even pay us any heed anymore."

I say, Neu was the best thing ever happened to me! I began getting the feeling that maybe I didn't need to be cool and successful. I dug singing and smiling and dancing. Maybe there isn't anything wrong with that. I wasn't winning any contest at the County Fair, but what the heck? I couldn't do it anyway. And if I could, what for? Nothing! Not for me, anyway,

After the next town meeting everyone ran Neu out of town. It was either that or 30 days for contributing to the delinquency of a minor. That was Old Lady Jenkin's idea. We were all harder than hell to handle at school.

He left without a hassle, same as he came in. He winked goodbye to me and walked on. He knew things were different here now, just a wee bit.

I kept wondering what was in it for him. Maybe he digs walking, singing and black clothes. Well, me? I don't know. This town ain't no good for me anymore. I'll stick around till I'm old enough to split on my own. And then, well, we'll see when that time comes.

I'm going down the road a bit, got some thinking to do. See you later.

***A FLIPPITY DO DAH, A FLIPPIDITY DAY. A flippity do dah, a flippity day.***

## Reflection

Rediscovering this story reminds that I was never a man's man. I didn't get macho. I never fit in to adolescent or young adult traditional sex roles. Probably because my Dad was a closet homosexual and my extended family never set macho examples. Fortunately, Peggy Keeney introduced me to Women's



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Lib in my teens and Jerry introduced me to and included me in Men's Liberation. Men's Liberation was how does Women's Lib impact us men? Jerry has started a Men's Lib group. I was very much the youngest guy in the group and the only one not in a relationship. My group fellows ranged from 24 to 55, all with partners active in Women's Lib. Yet, the support and self-reflection were formative for me. In fact, I was in an August 27, 1971, Life Magazine article, *You've Come a Long Way, Buddy*, about our Men's Liberation group. After this independent study, I dropped out of college altogether for a year or so and traveled to Columbia, South America and British Columbia. My dad died in 1972, I met my wife shortly thereafter, and enrolled in Nursing School. A completely different trajectory than I imagined in Mexico. I'm delighted to be introducing my love of Mark Twain to my grandson, Oscar. This one's for you, kid. Happy Birthday!

***A flippity do dah, a flippity day. A flippity do dah, a flippity day.***



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