ARTIE CUTS OUT
by ARTHUR BAUMAN
as told to PAUL WALLIS

This is Arthur's story, in his own words, of school, Youth House and the Student Strike of 1950 as he told it to me. Those who write about youth are usually adults. Arthur is sixteen and I am twenty. The adult writers analyze the youth in order to find out how to make them behave better. I was able to edit his story not because I have been to college, but because I believe that what Arthur and people like him have to say is what counts today. I have not tried to analyze the experiences. They speak for themselves.

Paul Wallis
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In junior high school somebody would ask a question. The teacher would say, "Arthur, what's the answer?" and most of the time I knew it, except that my marks were never any good because of my conduct. I wasn't too popular until I got into high school. That's when I first started making friends because all the way from elementary school up I was with more or less the same group of guys, and they remembered how I was in elementary school—just a brain.

In junior high school I didn't get into many fights. It would be a one-sided affair. Three or four guys would come up to me and call me all sorts of names. "Hey you Jew b---d." Or "Hey you fat slob," or "Hey you brain," or "Hey professor," and they'd just start shoving me around. I couldn't do anything. The only thing I had was to go to the principal and whenever I did that I got in worse with the guys. I went to the principal three or four times a term and the kids would give me dirty looks when they were called down. The principal always told them that if anybody touched me he would hold them personally responsible and they would pay for it, so by the time I got into eighth or ninth grade there were four or five hard guys in the school making sure that nothing happened to me. But they hated my guts.
When I first got into high school nobody in there knew me. I was the only kid from my neighborhood in there. I A.K.'ed around the first term I was there because everybody was telling me high school is the thing. That’s where your permanent record sheet starts. If you want to get into college you have to get good marks and recommendations in high school. The principal of the school annex got up and said in his introduction speech—Hello, hello, little kiddies, we’re glad to welcome you to our big fat school. He told us about the tradition of the school—greatest school in the city and so on. I didn’t know it was crap at the time.

In the first term I kept a lot to myself because I was the same guy who was snubbed by most of the regular guys in junior high school and the only ones that would be my friends were those from the special progress class and they were a bunch of jerks.

I expected the guys to look at me and just walk past, and maybe make one or two friends and that’s all. So I kept to myself and answered questions when the teacher asked me because I was disgusted. I figured high school would be like junior high school. I was also awed because the guys walking around looked like monsters to me. Gigantic six-foot two, six-foot three, heavy beards . . . I was pretty much in awe of these fellows and I was a little scared of them because of the deals I’d been getting in junior high school. I said to myself, “I guess it’s natural for a guy who keeps to himself pretty much to sooner or later become friends with a lot of guys.” I knew when you keep to yourself for a while in a place, whether you want to or not, somebody is going to try to get acquainted with you.

I was down in gym one day. In one corner the guys from third or fourth term were choosing up sides for wrestling. One of the kids came over to me and said, “Do you want to be on the wrestling team? We need a good man.” I didn’t know what they were talking about. For a minute I thought they were kidding around. Then I said, “O.K.” I was a little scared, in fact I was very scared. I walked over with a brave face and said, “O.K., charge!” Everybody went at everybody
else and I jumped in. I finally got hold of one kid who was short, thin and wiry—hard as nails and a good fighter. He was a very friendly guy who had talked to me once or twice before, not as a friend but a passing "Hi." He looked like a tough guy and I wouldn't have fought with him for anything. Most of the fights were over and now it was just between me and this guy. It turned into a regular wrestling bout with the guys standing on the sidelines. The fight lasted for about ten or fifteen minutes but I remember when it was through my arm hurt like hell and my ear hurt like hell but the other guy gave up.

The only reason I fought was because the guys were standing there watching me. If I chickened out then, there in third term, that would have been the end of everything. I had to fight. There I ranked myself with that step. The kids were all in different levels. I ranked myself with that third or fourth term level.

My first grudge fight was after this. The other guy had been in the school for the first and second terms and had a lot of friends in school. (I came in in third term because of junior high.) In the art room this guy picked up my eraser and one guy I knew said to me, "You going to let him get away with that?" I said, "What the hell are you doing with my eraser?" So he said, "I'm using it. You don't mind, do you?" I said, "Yes, I do." And he said, "O.K., I'm going to meet you at the station after school."

The whole day kids kept coming over to me saying, "He's going to kill you." I was really scared. I didn't know what was going on. The kid was probably a monster or something. I didn't know that it was all a build-up business to get me to chicken out because the other guy was also very scared. At the station I met three of my friends. They were all fourth termers and they were pretty big guys. They said, "We heard about your fight. Break him in half." Now it was done. That was all. I almost fainted because these three guys knew about the fight and they were going to wait and see me fight the guy. He finally showed up and we started fighting and everybody was standing around watching. Well, I finally beat him
and I was finally accepted in high school.

One day some of my friends from high school and I were horse-back riding in Prospect Park. That was the only time that I met someone who hated me from junior high school. I rode ahead of my friends and this guy from junior high school came along the path facing me. He said, "Hey you slob, what are you doing down here?" I said, "O.K., walk away before something happens to you." He said, "What are you going to do, hit me?" And then my friends came along and they beat the hell out of him. I met him later on in a neighborhood pool room and now we're kind of friendly.

As I said before, I was mostly an A.K. in third term. I got a high average. I didn't do any work, but I A.K.'ed. I didn't have many friends in third term. I had some friends in gym and outside but the guys who were in my classes weren't too friendly. But I did have friends in my English class. I didn't A.K. there. I didn't like the teacher and he didn't like me. One day this teacher, Mr. Burns, returned a composition that I wrote and he said to me: "I marked your paper. I gave you an 82." I asked him why. He said, "Ninety-two and 10 points off for attitude." He made a joke out of it but it wasn't a joke. The teachers kept telling me that they didn't like my attitude.

Generally the kids like to come to Mr. Burns' class. Even though I didn't like him I enjoyed his class because there was no monotony. He let you talk in class; he let you kid around in class, but you couldn't go too far. He gave us a test every day. Every once in a while he gave us a spelling test. One hundred per-cent passes, 98% fails. They hated his guts when he did things like that. He was generally liked by most of his pupils but he was disliked when he took over the lunchroom. He was a tyrant there and gave out more detention than anyone else I ever knew. In the classroom he was a lot of fun. He used to tell jokes and kid around, but he always had third term kids. I don't think he would have gotten along so well with the seventh and eighth termers because they don't like teachers in general. The third term kids are not as experienced. And they are easier for teachers to become friendly with but sixth and seventh term kids don't like or dislike individual
teachers—they dislike teachers as a rule. Every now and then you’ll find some teacher whom they like but not while they’re teaching. For instance, they might like a grade advisor but as soon as they get into that grade advisor’s class they dislike him.

There was one teacher who I felt was a nice guy because I never had him for a class. I saw him a couple of times and he helped me with some things but the other guys didn’t like him. I was talking to these friends of mine and they told me about this teacher. I told them I thought that Kruger was a nice guy and they said, “What are you, crazy?” I said, “No. He’s a nice guy. What did he ever do to you?” So they told me.

They were standing outside of the building smoking, just before school started. They had about 15 minutes to get in before the late bell. Kruger came down and started to talk to them. “How’s your mother and how are things going?” and he spoke about a movie and school work and so on. Just interesting subjects in general, things that were good enough to hold their attention. He was being a regular guy. They offered him a cigarette. He took it and smoked it. As they were smoking together the late bell rang. Kruger said, “O.K. Drop those cigarettes and get inside. You’re late! Get your late passes.” They had to get late passes. Lateness is a pretty serious offense. Kruger wouldn’t let them off even though he knew damn well that he purposely did it. From then on, they hated his guts.

The fights with teachers usually start for no good reason when you look back on them. It’s just that it builds up inside you to such a point that you can’t hold it any more and you just yell it out and naturally the teacher isn’t going to take it. She has to yell back because her dignity and her control over the class is at stake every time she yells at a kid. If she loses one argument, she’s through. She’d never get along with the kids again.

They pull so much dictatorial crap over you. They tell you to do things for no good reason. They should have no right to tell you to do them.
I remember in junior high school I had a book with me. A joke book with 1000 jokes. I was reading the thing during a study period and the teacher in charge came over to me and told me to close the book. The bell rang and as I was walking out of the room, I opened the book. The teacher came over to me and said, "Give me the book." I asked why. She said, "I told you not to read it."

I said, "I'm not reading it in your class. The bell rang."

She yelled, "Give me the book!"

I yelled back, "No!" and a big fight started. She threatened to send me to the principal. I told her that I didn't care. It was a major battle, and finally I started thinking of some good, fat insults, and made them pretty sharp. She started screaming, "Get out of the room. Hurry up! Hurry up!" So I walked out. The next time she saw me, she didn't mention it.

I remember another thing that happened in junior high school. One day the shop teacher said to the class, "You S.O.B.'s get into line." One kid said, "You can't call us S.O.B.'s, you S.O.B." The teacher said, "Hurry up. Get into line." So we all said, "The hell with you," and walked out of the room and went down to the principal and told him that "So and so is calling us S.O.B.'s. He's cursing all over the place." We got up a petition and got it signed with about 300 names from all over the school. Every kid we asked signed. On the top of the petition it said that we wanted him thrown out of the school. Nobody could swear at us that way. Who did he think he was cursing at—school kids? Doesn't he know there's a law against it?

It finally ended up with nothing happening to the teacher. We were told, "Who do you think you're fighting with—a teacher? He never called you S.O.B.'s and you know it." The teacher said, "I never called them anything like that." It turned out that it was all forgotten. The principal who had been looked at as being a nice guy up until this incident was disliked intensely from then on.

I once asked Mr. Burns why he took off for punctuation when he marked a composition. He said, "This is English. You have to prepare yourself for getting a job." And recently
I took the English regents. They gave us a list of topics to write on. "The U.N." or "My Home Team" or "The Farm Bureau in My Community." I wrote on my home team. You don't have to know what you are talking about so long as you give them what they want. I said to the teacher, "Can't we write about something besides this stuff? These topics are crap."

He said, "I know, but we're not looking for you to write what you want to write. We're looking to see how you can please your boss which is what you're going to have to do in your later life. You're going to have to write about what he wants you to write about, and do a good job of it. What you want to write about means nothing to us."

The same thing was said to me in a different way by Mrs. Berg, a mean old lady who I had for English in 5th term. She tried to put on a nice act. One day I told her that the books that we were being given to read were stupid. I told her I didn't like the crap about the old lady in the meadows or Gulliver the Dog. She said, "Well, better stuff comes later, when you go to college." I told her that I wasn't the only guy in the class, that I may go to college but what about the other kids. She said, "Well, if they want to read, they can read too." I said, "Look, I have the books at home. Where are they going to get the books?"

"Go to the library."

Very sweet. "Go to the library." She knew as well as I did that these guys weren't going to read unless they had a reason to. And I wouldn't have read unless someone told me to.

She finally said, "The Board of Education sets down standards and we have to give them to you. They know better than you do about what you need. That's all there is to it. If you do what they say, you pass. If you don't, you fail."

I said, "You're giving us things to read that maybe two people like." She said, "The majority." I asked, "Whose majority?" She said, "The average student." I said, "Whose average kid? Name me an average kid in the class and tell me what he likes." "B" is supposed to be average. If they say "C" they're making the kid stupid. If they say "A" they're
making him a genius. So they say “B”. “B” is the average kid. Most of us were “B” students. None of us wanted to read the things that she gave us.

They wouldn't give the kids other things to read. Too deep for them. Only teachers can understand. The words are too big for the kids. As usual, this discussion turned out with her saying that I had a bad attitude.

One day Mrs. Berg ran towards me. She said, “What have you got in your pockets?” I said, “None of your business.” She said, “Empty your pockets.” I said, “No.” She asked if I had any matches. I told her that I did. She looked all around the floor and in my desk and couldn’t find any burnt matches. She said that somebody was burning matches. I didn’t smell anything and neither did anybody else. Nobody was burning matches but Mrs. Berg smelled them. For the next three weeks everybody burned matches. She couldn’t stand the smell of wooden matches so everyone brought matches and passed them out before the class.

One day I was walking down to the subway. Mrs. Berg was right behind me. We heard the train pulling in. I started to run. She said, “Arthur, I'll pass you if you hold the door open.” I felt like throwing up when I heard that. I walked in the train and happily watched the doors close. I waved goodby to her.

Next day I told her that I couldn’t hold the doors open but not to fail me because of it. If I would have said what I wanted to say and what she knew I meant, she couldn’t have passed me. It would have been humanly impossible for her to pass me if I said what she knew I meant. What I meant when I told her not to fail me because of it was that I was going to make a big stink about the whole thing if she did fail me, and she knew it.

One day there were a lot of scraps of paper on the floor. She told me to pick them up. I said, “No. They aren’t mine.” She said, “Pick them up!” I said, “No.” She said, “You pick them up or you get out of this class right now and don’t come back.” I said, “Goodby,” and I walked out and I didn’t come back for the rest of the term.
I had her again the next term. I remember one incident that happened in class. We were supposed to read a play. A kid stood up and said, "The last four pages were missing so I didn’t read it."

She said, "‘F’. You’re getting a failing mark. You didn’t read the play because four pages were missing, one tenth?"

He said, "Pages were missing. You couldn’t get the whole story. What good is it?"

She said, "Another ‘F’. You’re answering back.” He sat down and she said, "Anybody want to speak on his behalf?" One kid got up and said, "I think that he’s right. I know that if pages were missing I wouldn’t read it.” She said, “‘F’. Poor argument.”

I stood up. I was 7 ‘F’s’ in the red. I said, "I’m not looking for any ‘F’s’, and I don’t care for that kid over there but I just think that he’s right. The main purpose of writing a play was to put across a point or a moral. And the moral is usually contained in the final part which was missing from this so the whole thing would be nothing but a waste of time. You wouldn’t get the final outcome. You wouldn’t get what the story was building up to. You’d have thirty-one pages of nothing which have to be supported by the last four pages in order for it to mean anything.” I went on for a while.

She said, "All right, I’m taking off your 7 ‘F’s’.” I’m giving you two ‘A’s’ besides, and I’ll take off the other fellow’s ‘F’s’.

The next day I got some more ‘F’s’. It kept on going that way; it was horrible. It was like the Negroes in the South who have to keep owing the owner something. They always owe him something. They can’t get out of it. You always owed her ‘F’s’. You had to do some terrific work to get rid of the ‘F’s’ and everybody tried to get rid of them, so she always had something over your head.

Nobody wants any homework. They figure they have their five hours mapped out for them. They do their time and they get out and that’s all there is to it. When they’re through they don’t care anymore. Of course, the A.K.’s did their work. One guy in particular. He took an authoritative attitude towards the rest of the kids. I heard him complaining one day
about a teacher, “That son of a gun only gave me a 97% this term.” That got me mad. I felt like slamming him.

The kids drift along. They don’t go out of their way to do anything. That’s why these teachers like it so much when someone brings in an extra report—extra work that they weren’t assigned to do. You’ll find that no one does this except the A.K.’s. I did it a few times when I wanted a higher mark. I did this once for Mrs. Berg.

She liked me after a while. One day she wanted to talk to me about something so I stayed after class. She said, “I understand you. You’re putting on a big front but you’re really a sweet kid underneath.” I said, “Thank you, I appreciate it. I try, but it’s hard. Things don’t work out the way I want them to.” She said, “It’s all right. I understand.”

I had a lot of friends in that class until she started in. Whenever anyone didn’t know something, she’d yell my name. Whenever she wanted somebody to do something like write something on the blackboard or do a special report, she’d call on me. I got into a big fight right in the middle of the class. Somebody started saying, “Teacher’s pet!” I walked over to him. I grabbed him by the arm and said, “You dirty S.O.B., if you say that once more, I’m just going to kick your teeth in. I’m not going to wait. Now. Say it now!” Mrs. Berg was standing in front of the room and she kept on saying, “Stop making a scene out of this, Arthur, it’s nothing.” I walked back and said to the kid, “I don’t want to hear anything from you again.” So the teacher said, “You shouldn’t get overwrought about things like that, Arthur.” They started chanting “Teacher’s pet!” in the back of the room so from then on I cut out of that period. I didn’t go back there any more. I met some of the guys later on up in the pool room and became friends again.

There used to be about 50 kids up in this particular pool room every day. We had a sign up once: “Boys High Annex”. The same guys every day. Every now and then some others would come in. There is one other pool room and that place is packed also.

There’s tremendous tension inside the school between the
teachers and the kids. The teachers are always complaining that the first and last periods of the week are the worst. The first period on Monday and the last one on Friday. Also the first one in the day and the last one in the day are very bad, but not as bad as the others.

About 500 kids cut out and go to the movies every day. On the average, I'd say that for at least one period, at least 750 kids cut out of school every day. A lot of them cut out for 8 periods. They cut out against the school. You have your friends and you stick with them. If you walk into the cut-card office, there are at least 5 stacks of about 120 in each stack—and not every cut is reported. And it's not the same kids all the time. It's a full-time job to be cut-card teacher. Different kids will cut out on different days.

Some guys cut out 5 days out of 5. The whole pool room crowd did this. But we never got cut-cards. Mel, one of the guys, worked in the cut-card office. He used to bring the cut-cards up to the pool room and the pool room owner would give him free time on the tables for bringing them up. It worked hand in hand. As soon as a kid stopped going to the pool room he stopped getting his cut-cards.

I first went to the pool room in fourth term. The guys don't let you get hustled while you're learning. You usually get hustled no matter where you go if you're not good enough. And the guys taught me how to play pool. Sooner or later you get to know everyone up there very personally. You go have a sandwich together or you go to the movies together and so on. I always came back to school to go to lunch. Then I decided a lot later, to hell with that also, and I stopped going back to school for lunch. Maybe it was because the prices were cheaper or maybe because things always happened in the lunchroom, but for some reason, for the first term or two I went back to school every day for lunch.

Every once in a while the cops raid the pool room looking for kids and for dope. Sometimes it happens outside of school. I remember once I was walking along the street with a cigarette in my mouth and a cop came along and pushed me against the wall and told me to give him my pack of ciga-
rettes. He took them and ripped open the top and looked at all of them and threw them away. They were good cigarettes.

Usually the cops are a couple of blocks away from the school. Usually they don’t stop you, but sometimes they do. But when they raid the pool room they make you take out your wallet. They look at how much money you have. If you have too much, they take you down to the police station. If you can’t prove you’re 16, they take you down to the school. They really mess you up. If you have any dirty pictures on you, they take you to the police station. The way I figure it is that the pool room owner just didn’t pay up that week, so they come down and they drag the kids out. It kills his business.

We’re fighting the teachers, we’re fighting the cops, we’re fighting our parents. We don’t fight the pool room owners. We’re friends with them. If they didn’t treat us right, the guys wouldn’t go up and play pool. Or they’d go up and rip the cushions accidentally with the cue stick.

Instead of working to get money, you figure the angle. You’re always trying to find the angle, and you’re always trying to see what the other guy’s angle is. You went out and robbed stores, you mugged people, robbed houses. And it was common. You needed money, so you got it. Not that you didn’t see anything wrong with it. You didn’t see anything wrong with it to your way of thinking. It was their tough luck. Their hard luck was our good fortune. If you want to shoot pool you want to shoot pool. You don’t care who gets hurt. They don’t care who gets hurt when you get pulled into jail. You knew that you couldn’t get but a month for anything short of killing if you’re under 16.

We don’t hate the A.K.’s just like that. They’re in a certain group that not only doesn’t think like ours, but never even comes into contact with it in any way except as superiors, so they think. When you know that they’re not your superiors and you know that by your standards you can beat them into the ground, what else can you think about them? As much as we bullied, we did things that would bother an A.K.’s conscience for forty years.
YOUTH HOUSE is a place where they send kids for observation before they get a hearing. Most of the juvenile delinquents go there. It's a rough place. There's quite a bit of homo-sexuality in there and there are fights every day and knives floating around and a little bit of dope. But all in all when I think back about Youth House I enjoyed myself up there. They have pool tables, a beautiful swimming pool, a gym and ping-pong tables. They have school. Every morning you go to school for a few hours a day, four or five, and play gin rummy or the teacher tells dirty stories. But most important there are a lot of other guys up there.

It all started in the pool room. Mel and myself were talking about not having much money to play pool with and how to get some more money. And we seemed to come to the same conclusion—go out and rob someone. Both of us had been throwing the bull about what we did before. I had told him about things I had done and he told me about things that he had done and both of us were throwing it. We were both novices at crime.

We decided to go out and burglarize something. This was on Friday. We were supposed to meet at 7:30 and we didn't
know exactly what to do. I got there at 7. I figured that he wouldn’t show up; I hoped he wouldn’t show up because I was scared. But when he got there my fears were alleviated and I decided to go through with it.

We walked around. We didn’t know what we were looking for, but we walked. We decided to look for a store to rob. We looked around and couldn’t find any store and when we finally did find one we were too scared to take it and we found various excuses why we shouldn’t rob it. Mel said, “Well, somebody may be coming,” and he looked around the corner. Nobody was coming but I said, “What about the other corner?” And then he’d say, “Well, a car’s coming past.” Finally we walked away, disgusted with ourselves. Then we decided on a mugging. We gave each other lessons on where to hit the person and how. A guy came along the street and Mel followed him and I was close behind in the shadows. Then Mel turned around and came back and he said, “Oh well, the guy probably has no dough anyhow. He looks kind of poor. He has shabby clothes on.” He looked O.K. to me. This sort of thing happened three or four times.

We walked along and saw a car pulling away from the curb. We had seen three people come out of a house. One man walked away and the other man and a woman got into the car and drove away. We figured, “O.K., we go in and rob this place.”

We rang the bell. An old lady was there and we said, “O.K., get inside. Don’t make any noise; nobody is going to get hurt. We’re just kind of hungry; we’re desperate men and we’re not messing around; we just want something to eat.”

The woman asked, “You really hungry?” and she was quaking in her boots. We were more scared than she was. We didn’t know what was going to happen. Being inexperienced we didn’t ask her for her money or anything; we just went through the house and took some things. We got maybe $30 apiece in merchandise out of the whole deal. We hocked the stuff. We were thoroughly satisfied with ourselves and we decided, we’re a success at this. We’ll have to try it again next week. This went on for four months.
One week we took a house. Then we decided to take another one. We had never taken more than one house on any particular day. Then we decided to take a third one. We got into the house and we found out that the only thing open to us was the cellar. We couldn’t get into the main house. And we started pounding on the door leading from the cellar to the house in order to break it down, and some lady next door heard the noise and called the cops. We ran into the cellar and we were picked up there.

I remember the first smack I got. They caught me first. One cop stuck a gun in my back and took me into the car and went back into the house. I was sitting in the front of the police car with the other cop. He had his gun in his holster, but he was talking to me with suggestive gestures. His hand was near his holster and he kept on patting it. I kid myself when I say he thought I was anything. I was just a punk and he was trying to scare me, and he did a pretty good job. He said, "Anybody else in the house?" I said, "No." He called, "Hey Joe, anyone else in there?" The other cop answered, "Yeah, we caught another one in here." He said to me, "Take off your glasses." I got them halfway off my face and he gave me a shot in the teeth that almost knocked my head off. I was a little more quiet from then on.

They brought us to the police station and brought us in front of the desk sergeant. They took our belongings from our pockets and turned up some interesting stuff. First they took the money we had made that night out of my pocket plus what I had in my back pocket that Mel never realized was there. He got mad as hell. He was fuming. He said, "You crooked S.O.B." He called me all sorts of a thief. Then they took out of his pockets about twice as much as was in my pockets and we almost had a fist fight right there. A cop grabbed me and slapped me and another one grabbed him and punched him. They took our names, asked where we had gotten the stuff and then they asked me, "Were you ever in jail before?" I said, "No." Then they asked Mel, and he mumbled something incoherent and they said again, "Were you ever in jail before?" So he said, "No. What do you mean!"
So the cop said, “You god-damned wise guy, you S.O.B.” They took him into the next room and I heard sounds that sounded like Mel was going to die any minute. And then he came staggering in and they asked again, “Were you ever in jail before?” He said “No,” meekly. And I laughed when I heard that because I was pretty happy to hear him getting the s--t beat out of him after what happened with the money. It almost developed into a fist fight.

Then we decided that we had to stick together. It was us against them. So they sat us in the next room and about five in the morning they took us down to Youth House.

They took us in and took our names and sat us down in a room they called the detention room. A small room with a table and three benches and some newspapers. It had an evil smell coming in because it was next door to the bathroom. They had us sit there until they assigned us to our floors. And the teachers kept coming in and asking us our names and saying, “Now listen you, don’t be wise guys when you’re in here, otherwise you’ll get the living s--t kicked out of you. We know how to handle you guys.” We answered, “Yep,” and were pretty meek. Then Mel said to me that if anyone tries to mess with us we stick together. We heard stories when we were in the police station, and before, about what happens to guys in reform schools as to turning into homo-sexuals and all that.

We were assigned to floor four. Right off the bat Mel decided that I was a slob, that he didn’t need me any more, that I cheated; I took money. He told me this later on. He then proceeded to turn everyone he could make friends with against me. And I proceeded to do the same thing. It started off with me being pretty unpopular with the guys on the fourth floor. Mel was a hard looking guy and he has the type of face that makes friends with guys who think they’re hard. He has a gangster’s face, which I don’t. Whatever he did, he turned quite a few guys against me. And I made some friends also. There were some guys I knew from high school up there. Quite a few of them. I was wondering where all my friends had gone to. I found out when I got up there.
The days were pretty long up there. A lot is crammed into a day and it seemed a long time before the second afternoon rolled around. I was in pretty good with a bunch of guys. We had become friends. Friendships and enmities really crop up in a hurry. You know a guy ten minutes and either you’re his bosom pal or you hate his guts and you’re ready to slit his throat. Tension is terrific. There were quite a few conflicts going on in Youth House at the same time. Black against white; Spanish against Negro; Jew against Christian; all of that.

Up in Youth House they had a newspaper. They’d have something like an inquiring photographer, but he didn’t take pictures. Usually he asked how we can improve Youth House. Six out of six kids said, take the bars off the doors. They once asked me what I didn’t like about the place. I said, “If I want a Pepsi-cola, I can’t go down to the corner to get it.” Tension is terrific, simply because the doors are locked.

It was the second day and I was standing with a guy and some other guys came over and said, “We’re coming around to your room tonight; we’re the Vigilantes.” I told them the first guy who walks into my room would get a drawer over his head. This kid, who is the head of a gang in Manhattan, a pretty big guy where he comes from, came over and said, “That’s two of us you have to fight.” He was my room mate at the time. Then another guy stepped over and said, “That makes three.” Then the five guys from high school came over and said, “That makes four, five, six, seven and eight.” A couple of other guys came over and the Vigilantes said, “O.K., we’re coming in anyhow.”

They were out to get me because I was Jewish. They were pretty anti-Semitic, anti-Negro, anti-Christian, anti-Ku Klux Klan, anti-Dixiecrat, anti-everything because of the tension, and they had to take it out on something. Being Jewish and a newcomer, I was it.

Our teacher on the floor was an ex-judo instructor from the Army. A terrifically muscular guy and very smart. He’s a cop now. Everyone liked him until they found out that he wanted to be a cop. He mentioned it one day, and from then
on everyone yelled out, "John, the peroxide blonde." He got pretty mad. He slapped around a couple of kids.

That night I called out, "John, leave my door open." You had a choice. Either you locked your door if you were afraid of anyone coming in and robbing stuff, which happened very often up there, or you could leave your door open. I yelled it nice and loud so the Vigilantes could hear me. I sat up with my room mate for about two hours and nobody even came near the door. All I had to do was let out a yell, and about ten guys would come running from all directions. Time passed and I didn't get into many fights except with the Spanish kids.

There was only one Spanish kid I was friendly with. He told me that any time I needed some help with any gangs to come around to his neighborhood. I never came around to ask them for help, but I know that any time I needed it I could get it. There are a lot of kids up there for gang fighting. Most of them are up there for truancy and quite a few for burglary.

Mel was pretty friendly with me the day we got out because he knew I had made a lot of friends and because I could get some gangs to help me if I needed them. At least individual guys in the gang to help me out, if not the entire gang. And all these guys could always massacre Mel and his friends. He told me to look him up when I got out and I told him to go to hell.

Finally I got sent into the judge. My mother and father were there, and right away I got sick to my stomach. Why the hell did they have to bring them in here. I hated to see them more than I hated to see the judge, because at least the judge was impartial.

I couldn't be sure of what my parents' feelings were. I knew my mother was crying and my father was giving me dirty looks right through the whole thing, and one minute I thought they wanted me sent up and the next minute I was sure they wanted me home. I knew if I went home, sooner or later, I was going to get hell for this. To the judge I wasn't
something to feel sad about or something to cry over. To the judge I was just something, not even a human being. He gets thousands of guys like me every month and it's just a name in the books. That way I would feel better. I'd have a better chance. That way I could talk; that way I could fight. The other way you say, "Look, ma," and she starts crying. What can you do? It happens every day. She weeps tears all over the floor and I'm to blame.

The judge gave me a big talking to. He looked at my IQ and said, "You know you have a very high IQ? How come a boy of your mentality and potentialities got into this mess?"

IQ seems to be pretty important. They look at your IQ and they seem to classify you. If you have a low IQ, they don't give a damn what happens to you, and if you have a high one they give you the breaks.

The judge asked, "Have you read any books?"

I said, "Yes."

"What have you read?" So I told him of the books I had read in the last couple of years.

He said, "O.K. I see you are a reading man. I'm going to give you a couple of things to read. I want you to read Les Miserables." 1,180 pages. I counted them. "I want you to read Silas Marner and turn in a report." That's only about 600 pages. "I want you to read Thomas Jefferson Grows Up. Turn in a report." I didn't read any of them. I started Les Miserables, got to page 800, threw the book down and never picked it up again. I never turned in a report and was never asked for it.

There were quite a few guys up at Youth House that couldn't get out by order of the judge until they had made book reports on a certain amount of books. They were given books to read and they had to turn in a report and as soon as they did that they were let out.

He said to me, "I'll give you a choice. You can be sent to Hawthorne, get sent home on probation, or we can send you back to Youth House until we decide what to do with you. What do you think should be done with you?" I said, "I want to go home." He said, "I didn't ask you what you want to do.
What do you think should be done?” I said, “I think I should be sent home.” I was lying and I knew it. He said, “O.K.” I went home and my family gave me a raise in allowance the same way as they did when I ran away from home and came back again. The same old deal. Afterwards! We treat our little boy good from now on.

I remember the first time I ran away from home and came back. I was about 12. My mother gave me some soup. She was trying to be friendly. Sat me down and gave me a raise in allowance. A week later that ended. Two months later I ran away again. Came home and got the same raise in allowance again. A year later I ran away again. No raise in allowance this time. They felt my allowance was high enough. About three dollars a week at about fourteen.

Until I was fourteen, I had to fight to stay up a half an hour later. I had to fight for ten minutes. Then I said, “If I’m home, I’ll be home, and if I’m not home don’t expect me.” And every time she’d wait up for me I’d yell, “What the hell did you wait up for me for? I told you maybe I wouldn’t be home.” A couple of nights I came back at five, six in the morning. She stopped waiting up. Even when I was tired I wouldn’t come in. I spent a few tired nights just so she’d learn not to wait up for me. She learned. I never used to bring friends up to the house when my mother was home. I thought my mother might say something I didn’t like, like “Don’t forget to wash behind the ears.”

I tried once or twice to be friendly, but not for long. It isn’t easy. It’s a terrific strain—physically and mentally. Mentally because they say things and you want to yell back at them, you want to tell them they’re wrong, and you know they’re wrong. And physically because, when you start acting nice, they tell you to go to the store or to do this or to do that, and finally you decide the hell with it all, I’m not going, and there’s your fight all over again. I have nothing whatsoever in common with my parents and somehow I just don’t want to get along with them. I’d like things to go smoothly, but I say things sometimes when I know it’s going to start them off; I know they’re going to get mad, and I say it any-
how. And they do the same thing, although not as often as I do.

My father tried quite a few times to make a friend of me. I felt kind of lousy when he did. I didn’t like it at all. I knew that whenever I wanted to do something he’d slip me a couple of bills. He’d be kind of nice one time and the next time he’d be a real dog. He told me quite a few times that he gets reports on where I go. He came over to me one day and said, “You won’t believe this, but there was a time when you were acting so crazy that I was watching you for signs of dope and I’m still not quite sure whether you were taking it or not.” That got me kind of mad. It isn’t the fact of was I taking dope or wasn’t I taking dope, but where did he come off to say it. I just didn’t like him horning in. If I was taking dope, I just didn’t like it that he was making it his business. I knew I was wrong. I know he’s my father and all that stuff. And if I’m taking dope, turn me in. But I know a friend of mine who was turned in by his parents for smoking reeferers. He was sent up for possession of narcotics. His parents figured, "Oh well, the police, radio, television, etc., they tell us that they send them to a farm, they cure them. He has a lot of fun while he’s being cured.” All they did was ship him off to jail. And I knew my father would do the same thing. He’d turn me in. It made me pretty mad just to think of it.

After three or four weeks at home on probation they sent me to some psychiatrist. The first thing he asked me was, “What would you do if you were alone with your mother on a desert island?” I said, “Nothing. What would you do?” He said, “Don’t be a wise guy. It’s guys like you who give us trouble.” They were always saying this to me.

They gave me all sorts of tests—blocks, pictures and a written test. One of the kids with me refused to talk to him. They showed him a card and asked him what he saw on it. He made a big joke of it and said, “What are you, crazy? There’s nothing on the card.” But you’re supposed to see something, so most of the guys do. I did pretty well. I think that’s the reason I got out. The probation officer came up to me and asked, “Would you like help?” I said, “Very much.
I'd like to be like other people, but I just can't help myself,” and all that sort of crap.

This doctor has four or five kids. Once a week they come around at noon and sit around till about 1:30. You talk—nothing in particular, everything in general. When you go up there you get cakes and doughnuts and mess around—tell dirty jokes and so on. The doctor tries to make you think he's one of the boys, and I think he does a pretty good job of it. He asks you about your girl friends or your school. We once took a trip up to a State Park and he bought hamburgers and other things from his own money. He tries to put over the impression of being a nice guy, but I don’t know. I don’t like the guy too much. I don’t open up when I’m with him. Sometimes, though, you start talking and suddenly you find yourself going into something that you just don’t want to talk about. Once he gets the guys started talking, they talk. He gets you started on how you feel or how you want to feel, or how you did feel, what you want and what you don’t want. And then he finds out what you’ve done during the week. I’m always on my guard. If he kids around with a kid for 19 minutes and gets serious for one minute, I kind of think he’s done his job.

Going to him isn’t supposed to mean you’re on probation. But you’re still reporting to him once a week. He has the function of a probation officer. And in a round-about way he finds out what you’ve done during the week. The guys are always asking him, “When will I get off probation?” although we were supposed to call the times we saw him “meetings”. He always answers, “As soon as you have no more problems.” That means that you have to see him for an indefinite period, and it just goes on and on. The guys down there don’t talk about him much; they don’t care about him.

When I didn’t show up for a couple of weeks, he sent me a very personal letter. Nothing harsh. “The boys were asking about you at the last meeting. When are you coming down?” I showed this letter to one of my friends and he said, “What are they, kidding?” He showed the letter around to the other guys, and all of them almost cracked up laughing.
THE MOST IMPORTANT EXPERIENCES that I had were Youth House and the Student Strike of April, 1950. The thirty days at Youth House and the four days of the Strike. But the Strike is the more important.

On Tuesday, April 25, 1950, I was sitting in class. There was some noise out in the hall. Some guys were talking out there. It wasn’t that it was noisy, it was just that it didn’t sound normal. Every now and then I just got a feeling that it didn’t sound right. A couple of guys went over to the window. They heard noise outside. About 500 kids were going “Boo!” They were booing us because we wouldn’t come out. I didn’t know what it was all about at the time. Immediately the teachers told everybody to sit down and not make any noise.

“Nobody get out of his seat!”

“Nobody can go to the bathroom!”

They wouldn’t let anybody leave the room for anything. Meanwhile the guys from Alexander Hamilton were still going “Boo!” They stayed for about an hour and kids in the school were yelling “Strike!” Aside from that nothing much else happened. This was about the 7th or 8th period.

Wednesday we came into school and a special assembly
was called because of the strike. We went to the assembly
and the cops were around in the halls. The cops came in and
stood near the exits in the auditorium with their hands on
their hips. They weren’t threatening anybody. They were just
standing there. The rest of the cops were near the outer exits
inside the school.

The principal of the Annex got up and gave a talk on mob
violence. While he was doing it, everybody was chanting,
“Strike, Strike, Strike!” Then he started to read the Bible.
Maybe he got one sentence out before he was drowned out
by, “Strike, Strike, Strike!” Then the band struck up the Star
Spangled Banner. This time a couple of kids started singing
and they were drowned out by, “Strike, Strike, Strike!” The
chant was carried on in rhythm and when the Star Spangled
Banner began the guys just switched over from, “Oh say, can
you see . . .” to “Strike! Strike! Strike!” Even the A.K.’s
didn’t sing. A couple of them started to sing and the guys
told them to shut up, “We don’t want you singing,” and they
didn’t sing.

That day we went to our classes. I specifically remember a
French class where a guy went to the blackboard to put on a
homework assignment. And he just wrote—S-T-R-I-K-E. Little
things like that happened. People were writing “Strike” all
over the walls in crayon and all over the blackboards in chalk.
And they were yelling “Strike!” no matter where you went.
“We may strike tomorrow, don’t come to school!”

On Wednesday I had closer ties with the kids than I ever
had before. You’d lean over and whisper into any kid’s ear,
“Strike”, and he’d smile. When the teacher passed, you’d shut
up like you do with the cops. You felt the same way toward
kids at that time as you did when a squad car came by when
you were with a group of guys. You just kept quiet and talked
of nothing in particular. That’s the way we felt toward the
teachers that day even though they knew that we were going
out on strike the next day, or at least thought of going out on
strike. They couldn’t help but know it—we advertised it
enough.

I know that some of the kids I had not been too friendly
with I was more than friendly with that day. But friendly on
only one topic—STRIKE. That wasn’t the time to say, “Are
you going to a show tomorrow?”

The feeling toward the kids was entirely different that
day in distinction to the feeling toward the teachers. You
didn’t dislike the teachers any more or like them any more.
It’s just that you were close to the kids which was magnified
even more so during the time of the strike when we were
walking down the avenue.

As a teacher walked by I said in a nice and loud voice, “I
hope the teachers get their raise, that’s why I’m going out.”
He smiled. As we walked on a little farther I said to my
friend, “Gee, what am I, crazy? I hope the teachers get their
raise? Like hell I do.” Another teacher heard this. He looked
at me and said, “Like hell you do, huh?” and he walked
away mad.

On Wednesday we did things that we never did before.
Towards the end of the day, when things were a little
looser, when a kid raised his hand to go to the bathroom
other kids walked out with him.

We weren’t too bold. We didn’t figure anything big was
going to happen. But we were on the offensive instead of the
defensive as we usually were. We had gotten on the offensive
with the teachers. We were openly fighting with them. Al-
though the next day we were “risking our chances to go to
college to defend the teachers’ wages” as they said, on Wed-
nesday we were fighting the teachers.

One teacher was pretty happy about the Strike. She almost
cried. She said, “Thank you boys.” We laughed at her—a kind
of snicker went through the whole group.

The next day it was all made up to meet just before school
started outside the building. I remember getting off the train
wondering what it was going to be like, and if they were
going to be there.

I got off the train. Four or five guys were there waiting. I
waited there with them. A couple of other guys came and it
sort of built up till we had 30 or 40 kids. Then we got a
little bolder and the bigger kids went over to the door and
stopped the kids from going in and told them to get over on the corner.

They had a riot squad across the street waiting for something to happen. We weren’t doing anything wrong. It was before school hours. Meanwhile the president of the G.O., a couple of A.K.’s, the principal and another teacher were outside telling the boys to come in.

The Annex lunch room was a concentration camp modified. You were assigned to seats and there was no whispering. The teacher in charge, Mr. Burns, would call your table by number and if you whispered you’d get detention. I never cut out of the Annex. It was very strict. The Annex was just about the first out on Thursday—first, second, third and fourth termers.

We started walking toward the main building. At the main building we picked up some guys. Quite a few in fact. From the main building and the Annex I would say, rough estimate, that about a thousand or a thousand and a half went out on Thursday.

Then we went to Hamilton and got there before school started and we started pulling kids off the trolley cars. If they wouldn’t come off we’d pull them through the windows. The guys would hold the back doors of the trolley cars open and start pulling guys off like an assembly line. They’d just pull them off if they didn’t want to go. Some of the guys were so enthusiastic they were jumping out of the windows to get with us. The others we pulled out, but they came with us.

We went to Prospect Heights and started yelling for the girls to come out. The teachers were standing at the exits trying to stop them. A few girls rushed out, knocking the teachers aside. Some girls jumped out of the first-story windows. We pulled others out of the windows. It was the demonstration itself with all the guys outside that brought them out.

Then we started to go across a big avenue. We must have had at least 2000, 2500 kids at that time. They stretched for a few blocks. We started to cross the avenue and the cops came along. They disregarded all traffic signals and when half of us got across they waved the traffic on to cut us off. They almost did a good job of it. After a couple of minutes,
we just rushed across and forgot about the cars. The cars
stopped for us. And we got together again.

Then we went to Brooklyn Tech. We booed them just like
Hamilton booed us. Some kids came out—very few. The rest
were stopped. Then we walked on. The last school we came
to was Westinghouse. We wanted Westinghouse to come out.
We wanted all the support we could get. On the way we
picked up signs or window-shades and wrote on them, "Boys
High is Here" and things like that. When we got to Westing-
house they were going crazy. That was real fine. They were
jumping over the fences. They were coming out of the win-
dows, down the fire-escapes. One kid turned in the fire-alarm,
and they let the kids out of school.

There were never the same kids leading. It was always
changing. Everybody was pushing to get up front, that's why
we went so fast. I remember it was 12 o'clock and the day
was half over, and I felt I had gone through a week of fun.
I was at the front at the beginning and I remember being a
little antagonistic when some guys drifted in front of me.
But after a while it just didn't matter where you were just
so long as you were there. You could be in the back or you
could be in the front—the thing was you were in it.

Then we tried to get onto the Manhattan Bridge. We
rushed the cops who were standing there. One cop blocked
us and one cop stood behind him. Because it was a very
narrow passage there and we were all kind of afraid of a cop,
we couldn't get past them. They were still cops so we didn't
hit them too hard. We rushed in and he raised up his billy
and then we ran back. Meanwhile there was a reporter stand-
ing on a big pedestal to the right and the back of us. Every-
time he raised his camera about 500 kids would turn around
and start yelling and maybe get into a mock fight. And they'd
yell and scream and wave their hands and smile. The reporter
didn't want that. Everytime he raised it again they'd do the
same thing. I still don't know if he finally got a shot. I was
doing my damndest to get my picture into the paper also.

We decided to take the subway. I don't know who decided
it. But the subway was right there and all of a sudden there
was a kid in the middle of the street directing traffic. He stood right in the middle of the block, waving half of us down one entrance and half of us down the other. The word was passed around what train to take across the bridge to Manhattan. We took the train across. We got there before there were very many kids there. Then it began to get crowded and everytime another group of kids would join us a big scream would go up and everyone would yell. We'd see kids coming fifteen blocks away and everyone would yell them on.

There wasn't much trouble. I was surprised at the time that no gangs were taking advantage of the strike to loot stores. I was very surprised. I guess everyone was too pre-occupied. There were other things to be done. A couple of people went over the fence into Foley Square and everybody rushed in. We started yelling things like, "We want Willie—Shot!" or "We want the Mayor of Miami."

They had a big guard around the Mayor's house. They thought the kids would go out to Gracie Mansion for him. He was scared from what I hear. At Foley Square the cops were having a gay time riding into us on horseback. Swinging billies and stuff like that. I remember a cop on a horse pushing a girl, and about five guys came over and tried to pull him off his horse, and they got him down. Most of the guys were mad. When they first went there they weren't mad at the cops. They were yelling at City Hall but the cops were the enemies. City Hall wasn't coming through the crowd at us. The cops were.

You turned your head and all of a sudden you were part of a strike. Everybody was asking everybody else what school they came from. We were singing school songs. One school would start singing their song. Another school would start to sing and try to drown them out. Then—every once in a while—the songs just dissolved into something like, "O'Dwyer we want Police Protection!" We all felt close. I felt like I did in a fight when I threw a punch and I knew that ten guys were ready to jump the other guy if anything happened. We weren't afraid and felt good.

Then the cops slowly got us into little pockets and we
began to break up. And even though the strike was over for the day, and the cops knew it, they kept us moving. They told us, "Get out of here. You have no business around here. Go home."

Friday I went to the movies. The newspapers ran headlines about Friday: "SMALLER BUT NASTIER". I'm sorry now I wasn't there.

Saturday was our day. We stayed home.

Three or four days before the strike I never thought anything like that was possible. The teachers thought the same way as I did. They thought we'd never do anything like this. One day everything was nice and quiet and the next day people yelled at you because you didn't walk out of the school—called you a coward because you didn't tell the teachers to go to hell and walk out. The teachers figured that we couldn't do anything like that.

The A.K.'s tried to go through channels. They went with committees to City Hall with petitions. All signed. Very nice. They waited on line to speak to the Mayor and said, "Dear Sir." We said, "We want Willie—Shot!"

At the time the Strike happened I thought nothing of it. I figured it was impossible to happen and while it was happening I didn't see where the big thing was. I didn't see it as anything so big because it was so easy. If it would have meant any effort on anyone's part they wouldn't have done it; it was more or less a holiday. If we had to go through channels and we had to do this and do that and bust our chops to start it, we wouldn't have done it. As it was, the guys just walked out of the building.
About the Student Strike

"You turned your head and all of a sudden you were part of a strike. Everybody was asking everybody else what school they came from. We were singing school songs. One school would start singing their song. Another school would start to sing and try to drown them out. Then—every once in a while—the songs just dissolved into something like, 'O'Dwyer we want Police Protection!' We all felt close. I felt like I did in a fight when I threw a punch and I knew that ten guys were ready to jump the other guy if anything happened. We weren't afraid and felt good."

About School

"One day there were a lot of scraps of paper on the floor. She told me to pick them up. I said, 'No. They aren't mine.' She said, 'Pick them up!' I said, 'No.' She said, 'You pick them up or you get out of this class right now and don't come back.' I said, 'Goodby', and I walked out and I didn't come back for the rest of the term."