

Looking Back to Beaver and the Head: Male College Nicknames in the 1950s

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Studies of nicknames have neglected social fraternities, and most have been done by outsiders unable to assess the feelings of those who bear nicknames. I questioned members of a social fraternity to which I belonged in the late 1950s to find out how men felt about their nicknames then and now. Nicknames were found to be either endearing or critical, functioning as social controls.

This article resulted from the convergence of two unrelated activities in the fall of 1990. First, I was copyediting the essays assembled and edited by James K. Skipper, Jr. and Paul L. Leslie for the special issue of *Names* devoted to nicknames (December, 1990). Second, I attended a reunion of my college fraternity, a gathering of aging men from the classes of 1956 through 1962, years which happened to fall evenly on both sides of my own class of 1959. At one point in this evening of entertainment and reminiscence, a member of the class of 1960, whose nickname was "The Pope," proclaimed: "Let's have a nickname quiz." A few names were shouted, such as "House," "Bear," "Moonglow," "Groceries," "Beaver" and "the Head." "And don't forget 'the Mook,'" the Pope said. But we soon went on to other things, and everyone except me — and perhaps some of those whose names were particularly memorable and perhaps painful — forgot about nicknames.

Since I was thinking quite a bit about nicknames as a result of reading the articles in *Names*, the idea of taking a close look at those nicknames that members of our group used for each other fascinated me, and I began to think of ways of looking at the names that I and

others in my group remembered and to determine how to assess attitudes toward those names then and now.

The nickname issue of *Names* is a good starting place for any research on nicknames. The theoretical suggestions made by Leslie and Skipper, the critical survey by Holland, and the annotated bibliography by Lawson cover almost everything that has been written about nicknames. Curiously, though, I was unable to find any previous studies of college nicknaming. The closest models were studies of isolated societies such as villages (Foster), or prisons (Jackson). The only book-length study of personal nicknames (Morgan, O'Neill and Harré) focusses primarily on adolescents in Britain; even so, the principles outlined there have been useful in this study. The authors compare, for example, the British boarding school to the concept of a "total institution," as defined by Goffman, where a large number of people are kept together full time. In such an environment, nicknames appear more frequently than in more open societies (Morgan, et. al., 48-49). A college fraternity is much more open in the sense that members react with people outside of that community. Nevertheless, members are expected to follow fairly strict social patterns, and nicknames function, as Morgan et. al., point out, "to publish what is acceptable among those who promote such names and who direct their contempt upon those unfortunate enough to be their bearers" (69).

Nicknames in a college fraternity, for the most part, do not appear to be contemptuous. In fact they seem to function in a way similar to those in village societies, such as Foster's Mexican community or the Falkland Islands community studied by Massola. Foster generalizes about how nicknames and other "modes of address" and "speech forms" reflect social distances:

[They] reflect the ways in which members of a community perceive the social relations and particularly social distances on which the life of the group is based. Not only do they reflect the perception of distance, but they also reiterate and reaffirm these perceptions for those who interact in a particular situation, thereby setting the stage so that the behavior that follows will be guided by a common understanding of what is appropriate. (107-08)

Nicknames are “manipulative,” Foster observes, “but rather than countering they accentuate the relationship as it is perceived to be: more intimacy if intimate, enmity or contempt if distant” (119). Thus, while nicknames in a close group are often used as terms of endearment, they are also used to establish a “pecking order,” especially if there is no fear of retaliation when the name is used by a person of superior status or strength (120).

Most nickname studies have been done by anthropologists looking at a society from the outside. Holland, Skipper, Leslie, and Wilson all emphasize the need to understand the cultural milieu in order to understand the nicknames. Another need, pointed out by Leslie and Skipper, is to document the nicknames of ordinary people to supplement the public nicknames of such groups as athletes and musicians as they have done. Finally, Holland suggests that there is a danger of simply classifying without sufficient awareness of how the bearers of nicknames regarded them. “For this reason, the study of nicknaming practices must proceed in the direction of greater collaboration and engagement between researchers and subjects” (267).

It was mainly this suggestion of Holland’s that led me to undertake a study of a group with which I might collaborate, since I was part of that group many years ago and have the opportunity to determine how members of the group felt about their names then and how they feel about them now.

I attended a small Methodist college in a small city in the South Carolina Piedmont. The college now admits women, but in my years, 1956-59, the student body was entirely male — and entirely white. Most students were what we call today “traditional students,” starting college right after high school and finishing a degree in four years, although a number of older men, often married, many of them Korean War veterans, commuted locally and from neighboring towns. The college drew students from a limited region, mostly South Carolina. Students from more distant states seemed often to be athletes. Most of the traditional students were from middle-class backgrounds and many — perhaps most — were sons and even grandsons of college graduates. It was a very homogeneous group.

Social life centered on the seven national fraternities, although none of these provided rooms or meals for the members. Probably

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twenty-five to thirty percent of the student body belonged to a fraternity. Mine was made up largely of men from one region of the state, many of whom knew each other before going off to college. Most of them have returned to that region or have stayed in South Carolina — or at least in the southeastern United States.

Using my old yearbooks, a recent directory of alumni, and information supplied by the present dean of the college, who was one of our group, I identified about a hundred survivors of those years. Most of them entered a profession. Nineteen are physicians, eight are dentists, six are ministers, seven are lawyers (including a judge, an attorney general, and a former U.S. congressman), three are or have been in secondary education, eleven are in post-secondary education (either as professors or administrators, including a college president and a coach selected as national coach of the year a few years ago), five have had military careers (most now retired), one is a CPA, and one is a farmer. The rest have made careers in a variety of service and business professions, including engineering, research, publishing, sales, manufacturing, health services, and counselling.

My main concern with this project was to assess how each man who had a nickname felt about it while he was in college and how he feels about it now, after some thirty years. I was also interested in the reactions to and memories of each of the group to the names of others. To find out this information, I sent a letter with the following questions: Did you have a nickname in college? If so, when and how did you get it? How did you feel about this nickname when you were in college? Looking back, how do you feel about it now? Do people still refer to you by this nickname? If so, do people other than college friends use the name? Has your nickname passed on to any of your children? I also asked those who did not have nicknames or who did not remember having nicknames how they felt about that. Then I asked them to list three nicknames that stand out as most memorable. As a control, I asked them to list any notably memorable nicknames they could recall for students who were not members of the fraternity. I also asked for any comments about this subject they would like to add. I enclosed a list of all of the people I was able to remember and identify, and requested that the respondents write the nicknames they remembered next to the names.

I mailed this letter to exactly one hundred men, writing a short personal note at the top of each cover letter. Only three were returned by the Post Office as undeliverable. I am aware that mail questionnaires rarely receive more than thirty to forty percent response, but I thought that from my own fraternity brothers, with a personal note, the response would be much higher. Nevertheless, I heard from only forty-three. The least response came from the youngest class, those I had known for the shortest time and those who seem to me to have had the fewest nicknames. Since this study is specific and not statistical, however, the responses I did receive allow me to draw conclusions about the nicknaming process that I think are valid.

First, though, a note on how people respond to names. At the basic, "pre-primary" level, a name is a label, without regard to semantic content. If I am called *Tom*, I am *Tom* and at this level no one thinks of it as a form of *Thomas* or that *Thomas* is a biblical name and that it probably means 'twin.' These concerns enter at the primary conscious level. The secondary level of name awareness goes beyond meaning and looks for patterns and reasons, not just meanings, of names. A third level analyzes and even questions the whole process of name study. I found all three levels in the responses I received.

I will return to the primary level in my discussion of individual names. At the secondary level, several responses answering my invitation to add any other comments reveal that people often think of nicknames and what it means to use them. A member of the class of 1957 wrote, "College nicknames are terrific and represent relationships that are both affectionate and, for the most part, descriptive." Another, from 1960, said, "My children have always been amused by how many of my friends have nicknames." Again, from that same class, "Everyone likes to be recognized and remembered and I think nicknames are a good way to do this.... Usually...[they] seem to spring from fondness and/or affection for the person so named." And from the class of 1962: "Frequently, nicknames are a product of a particular time and place and do not age as gracefully as we might hope. I have in mind the 70 year old who is still called 'Bubba' or 'Junior.'" An attorney from the class of 1956 sent a two-page essay on the importance of avoiding nicknames

in the adult world and a photocopy of a page from *American Jurisprudence* on the subject.

Responses at the tertiary level included several who were interested enough to ask for copies of this paper. A professor of forestry at a major university in the South said, "I wish some of my research was as fun as yours seems to be." From the class of 1958: "I'm curious about your interest in names, and nicknames, and having spent the past thirty years in and about 'trade' publishing, I wonder if there is a book in this." On the other hand, from a vice-chancellor of academic affairs at a small state college came this response: "Academic scholarship continues to amaze me. I am writing my counterpart at your institution to insure that he knows that University travel funds are being used for this very important work." He wrote this after dutifully responding to the questionnaire.

The number of names remembered over this thirty- to thirty-five year period varied with the classes. My class, 1959, was the only one overlapping the whole study group; hence the memories for that period appear to be strongest. Naturally, many people remembered nicknames for themselves that others did not, and in some instances only a few close friends remembered names. Except in unusual circumstances, however, I will consider only those names that were widely remembered. In my sample of forty-three responses, seven names appeared with a frequency of more than twenty, and an additional eight appeared with more than ten. Those with over twenty are *Sonny*, *Shot*, *Head*, *Speck*, *Bear*, *Groceries*, and *Beaver*. Those with ten through nineteen are *Mook*, *Votes*, *Moonglow*, *Toby*, *Fog*, *Weasel*, *Pope*, and *Sambo*.

I think this list is a fairly accurate representation of nickname usage in this group. It is difficult to determine whether those people who did not indicate a nickname didn't remember the nickname or didn't remember the person. Nevertheless, if my own memory has not weakened as much as some of the respondents claimed theirs have, these fifteen people were as well known by their nicknames as by their real names.

Since I asked for explanations of the origins of these names, it is appropriate at this point to provide some of that information.

The most frequently remembered name was *Sonny*. About this name, the bearer wrote

I understand [that] it arrived as my name before I arrived to claim it. Apparently Mother referred to me as Sonny before I was born. As I recall..., it was 'Sonny' before birth and probably 'Sunny' after birth. As I understand, I had a happy disposition. Hard to believe. At any rate, when I began to write the name, I used 'Sonny.'

He goes on to say that he didn't particularly like the nickname, but his real name was *Cermette*; even so, "if I were going 'round again I think I would use my middle name [*John*] or initials."

Shot was the second most remembered. When he was born he only weighed four and a half pounds and his survival was uncertain. The doctors said, "Hotshot will make it;" this became "Littleshot," then "Bigshot," and finally just "Shot." I knew Shot when he was four years old, and that was his name then. Only later did I know his real name was *Clyde*. He is now a dentist, and he still prefers to be called Shot.

Both *Speck* and *Bear*, like *Sonny* and *Shot*, probably brought their nicknames to college with them, but I did not receive responses from them to verify. *Speck* had numerous freckles, and *Bear*, short and cuddly, bore a resemblance to a Teddy Bear, a name which was an occasional variant of *Bear*. *Beaver* also arrived with his nickname already established, coined, he says, in high school when his sister's boyfriend teased him about his two big front teeth. He did not mind this name then, he says, and he doesn't mind hearing it now from old friends, although it may have bothered him more if everyone had been aware of its origin. Interestingly, he does not remember any influence from the popular 1950s television series "Leave it to Beaver."

Only two of the seven most remembered nicknames were actually given during college years. One of these is *Head* or *The Head*. According to him, during his freshman year a junior "saw me walking to the chow hall one day and hollered 'Hey Head' because of my sway. The name stuck." Others remember differently: "large round head on a short body," or "because he had no neck to speak of — still doesn't." Either way, Head did not and does not mind the name, which is still used today but only by old friends.

I did not hear from the man remembered as *Groceries*, so I don't know how he felt about the name or how he feels about it now. Several respondents attributed the name to his habit of eating food sent to other people from home. I remember his tendency to eat most of the food on his cafeteria tray before he reached a table.

The eight names in the next highest group include only two that were probably in use before college, although I cannot be sure. *Toby's* real name was *Otto*, but few people knew that; I didn't hear from him and thus don't know the origin of *Toby*. *Sambo* is a natural variant of a real name, not *Samuel*, but legally *Sammy*. Since he was short and fairly dark complected, the name *Little Black Sambo* was frequent; that was further shortened to simply *Little Black*. *Sammy* responded, but, curiously, did not acknowledge a nickname, even though thirteen of his fraternity brothers listed *Sambo*. In fact, to the question, "If you did *not* have a nickname, how did you feel about that?" he answered, "It really did not matter to me." I can only conclude that he did not look fondly on his name at the time.

I did not hear from the man known to twelve respondents as *Fog*, who became a college president. The name came from his deep voice, one said, but several others attributed it to his apparent denseness, perhaps a natural attribute for college teaching and administration.

Only the people in his own class remembered the name *Votes*, which came about because he ran, successfully, for freshman class president with signs all over campus advising to "Vote Stokes." The assonance with his last name probably contributed to the staying power of the nickname. *Votes* continued his interest in running for office, and was president of his medical school class for four years.

Moonglow was a glee club soloist and lead singer for a very popular rock group. He attributes the name to the type of music and the effect it had on audiences. Having witnessed this effect, especially on high school girls, I can say that the name is somehow very appropriate, especially as the song "Moonglow," carrying connotations of sexual magic, was popular during this time. He believes that more people from his college days remember his nickname than his real name, and he is not displeased to hear it used now, but only by friends from college.

The response from the man who was called *Weasel* is one of the most interesting. He picked up the name during his freshman year, "probably the result of some mischief for which I was trying to evade responsibility." "Weasel," now a professor, looks back to his name — and in fact to his whole college career — with some embarrassment. He held the highest scholarship the school offered, but managed to graduate with only a 2.001 GPA. The weasel is an unpleasant animal, and one of the respondents noted that the name was appropriate because "he was one of the most devious students" at the college. But "Weasel" was proud of the name and would even use it as his signature: "I was stimulated by the response of people to my practical jokes, mischief, and amusing behavior. The nickname was a form of recognition and something to live up to." But in looking back, he says that he has "come to believe that the nickname contributed to my irresponsible behavior and lack of motivation.... I'm embarrassed by the nickname now, and it evokes more pain than memories of good times." Once, he relates, the dean of students

called me to his office to discuss my nickname. He said that it was harmful and that no self-respecting girl would marry someone known as a weasel. He told me a story about a relative of his who lost the love of his life because of a pejorative nickname.... At the time I thought he was being nosey, stuffy, and off-base to say what he did. Fortunately, my wife..., whom I had known since high school, could see past a nickname.

The two remaining names in this group are curiously interrelated. *Pope*, sometimes called *The Pope*, like *Weasel*, was known for his rebellious ways. He remembers receiving his name his freshman year:

My father was a Methodist preacher. I behaved as badly as possible to live *down* that heritage (regrettably). My friends and fraternity brothers, noting my behavior, gave me the name as an antithesis of my behavior.

Fourteen people remembered the name *Mook*. In his response to me, "Mook" acknowledged the name, but to the question of how he felt about it then, he said, "I did *not!* like it." And how does he feel about it now? "I still do *NOT!* like it." To the question of the origin, he suggested that I ask *The Pope*: "he was the first to my

knowledge to use the name. Perhaps a combination of my size, athletic involvement [he was a football player] and from the N[ew] Y[ork] C[ity] area contributed to its origin." In fact, no one in our group had any idea of exactly what a "mook" is, but the word seemed appropriate. He still seems to resent the name. "Pope" reports that a few years ago "Mook" asked him not to call him that. "I naturally refused," "Pope" wrote. "I felt his request further demonstrated his 'mookishness.'"

A few other names appeared less frequently but are nevertheless significant. I did not hear from *Skeeter*, whom I knew from my home town (he was rather small as a child); nor from a man whose last name is *James* but who was called *Dames* because of a speech impediment; nor from *House*, so-called because of his weight; nor from *Scoad* or *Scoady*, because of his alleged physical and moral habits. Thus I don't know how they felt about their names. *Jiggs* admits to having looked like the husband in the comic strip "Maggie and Jiggs" (actually "Bringing up Father"). He was indifferent to its use at first but came to like it, but it has not been used since his college days. One was known as *Big Ass* or just *Ass*. He admits to being proud of that name then and now, although it is no longer used. He received it his freshman year, but he's not sure if came about as an abbreviation of his last name (which is *Askins*), from his physique, or from his personality. I think all three played a part. Another man, now a dentist, was known as *Bugs*, from *Bugs Bunny*. He was a fast runner, and he had an overlapped front tooth that protruded when he smiled. He enjoyed the nickname in college, he says, but such names are "appropriate only for college days, not professional adult life."

Finally, a man named *Warren* stuttered; he was known as *Wa-wa-wa-warren*. In his response, he did not acknowledge this name.

The nicknames used by the members of this fraternity group are neither strikingly unusual nor original. In fact they are probably fairly typical of the names used by similar groups then and now. While many — most — of the names call attention to physical features or behavioral characteristics, even to the point of being "painfully appropriate" as Jackson observed among prison nicknames (50), most of them carried little or no pejorative feelings. My investigation also bore out another finding of previous researchers,

that nicknames "accentuate" relationships. If the relationship is intimate, the nicknames intensify that intimacy; if the relationship is distant, then the name may express "enmity or contempt" (Foster 119). "Beaver," the "Head," even "Weasel" were among the most popular men in the group. They also, significantly, came from the region of the state that most of us came from and thus shared most of our values and assumptions. The three members whose nicknames were often used with more enmity than endearment, "Mook," "Groceries," and "Pope," were from New York, Indiana, and Florida respectively, and were often regarded as interlopers in a closed society, despite full official acceptance into the fraternity.

One respondent noted the large number of animal names and suggested that we were "really a little bit more civilized than *Animal House*. Maybe...it shows the rural background of most of us." Yet, I don't think there was any real sense that the names were animals. "Bugs" was a comic book image, and "Beaver" was more caricature than animal image. "Mook," "Head," "House," and "Pope" were not in a different phylum from "Weasel" and "Bear" in our system of classification.

It is also worth noting that only a few people in this group took on the role of nicknamer. For those people who actually received their names in college, three frequently were cited as responsible for creating the names and making them stick. In each case, the namer was clever, charismatic (even "Pope"), and in a position of some authority, such as pledgemaster or fraternity president. As Kehl pointed out in his discussion of nicknames in China, people who are "clever at creating nicknames...function powerfully to define inappropriate or excessive behavior" (summarized by Holland 262). On the social training ground that is a college fraternity, such controls over behavior, by means of nicknames, exerted a powerful influence over what we become in later years.

I hope that this close, anecdotal look at nicknames in one small place at one period of time has given some insight into the process of nicknaming and that it has helped somewhat to narrow the gap, as Holland has urged, between scientific inquiry and "those human dimensions of life which ultimately we seek to understand" (268-69).

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