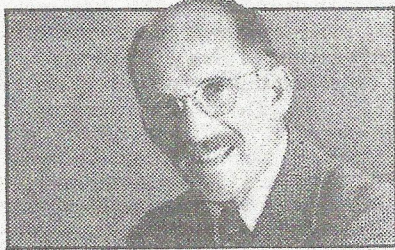


Behind the lines



By George H. Gurley Jr.

Punk is just one more style

They came hurtling down the incline at Eighth Street and Grand Avenue on their skateboards like five zombies sprung from Pandemonium.

Their clothes were so covered with designs and slogans that they looked like tattooed men from a distance. Their erratic hair styles identified them as members of that species known as punks.

They were more than happy to grant me an interview. They tossed their skateboards into the back of their battered station wagon and followed me to the office.

I got a perverse pleasure in leading the five exotic savages through the august halls where your newspaper is created. Production came to a standstill. A collective gasp was uttered. Was it possible that Gurley had sired quintuplets? Were these fiends his kids?

A hush fell over the vast coffee break we interrupted in the cafeteria. I effected a casual look, as if I were on familiar terms with these messengers of Satan.

They ranged in age from 17 to 19 and had come from Springfield, Mo., to hear a band playing at the Foolkiller. They wore bandannas, black leather with metal studs, flannel shirts and ratty jeans.

One was completely bald. The others' hair was shaved in variations of the Mohawk theme. One had cockatoolike locks hanging over his eyes. Another apologized for the condition of his hair.

"Everyone thinks it's a dead squirrel," he said. "When I go to the mall, I have it spiked with hair spray." His jeans were covered with skulls, names of bands (Void, Peace Corpse, the Meat Men) and other vivid, macabre embellishments.

"He spent more time on his jeans than Da Vinci spent on 'The Last Supper,'" one of them said.

They said that their costumes were derived from a California band called Suicidal Tendencies. They were "hard core" rather than punk. Their scene was fragmented into subcultures such as Straight Edge, Bent Edge, Nazis, Skaters, Peace Punks and Skin Heads.

You didn't have to identify exclusively with one group. You picked what you liked from various groups and designed your own personality. The emphasis was on individuality. But the costume facilitated making friends with others of the hard core persuasion.

"For instance," said the Straight Edge, "I identify with Peace Punks, but . . . I skate." I asked whether a Bent Edge was a wayward Straight Edge.

I don't identify with Straight Edge at all," Bent Edge said.

I asked them about their philosophy.

"We believe . . .," one of them said. "Let's see. . . ." He looked at the others. "What do we believe? We're against racism . . . and what else?"

"Whatever's a problem," Skin Head said.

"I'm against everything," said the one with hair in his eyes.

They agreed that they were against war, nuclear arms and President Reagan. At the same time, their music glorified violence. And their dancing style was not of the ballroom variety.

"People think we're slam-dancing," Straight Edge said. "But it's called 'thrashing.' It's a way of violating one another's space, the social mores of kinesics. It breaks down barriers, promotes physical contact. It looks violent. But if someone gets hurt, we stop and pick him up."

Escorting them to the door, I felt like an intrepid explorer who had emerged from the bush with some wild men from Borneo. We caught some of my wide-eyed, scandalized colleagues discussing and describing them.

"We like that," Skin Head said. "It sets us apart."

But they were really just typical middle-class American teen-agers looking to raise a little hell, looking to outrage a few adults. As the British — who are not as threatened by their own punks — say, "They all turn out to be good Tories in the end."

I thought, what is inherently respectable about our button-down collars, our wing-tip shoes and our ties? Wouldn't a wild man from Borneo gawk at us?

And I realized that there was probably only one way this skinhead could prevent his own kids from going hard core. I would have to show up at home with a safety pin through my nose . . . and what's left of my hair dyed magenta, chartreuse and mauve.