

A short sociological treatise by an expert on the customs of high school life wherein the following is posited: Back in the *real* 'Happy Days' . . .

# ...Richie and the Fonz Didn't Really Like Each Other

By RALPH KEYES

My aunt called the other day, the one I haven't seen since she was in bobby socks. "Wow," I told her. "I haven't seen you since you were in bobby socks."

My aunt laughed. "I'm glad you remember," she said. "I keep trying to tell my kids that that's what we wore, but they won't believe me. They think we all looked like Fonzie. Kids just don't understand. People like the Fonz were outcasts."

Exactly. This is what's so fanciful about *Happy Days*, *Grease*, *Sha Na Na* and every other attempt to improve upon our memory of high school. Guys like Richie didn't hang around with guys like Fonzarelli. There was too much at stake. Like losing all your friends. Being turned away at the country club door. And horrifying your parents. ("It's not that we don't like Fonzie, dear. It's just that he might stain the sofa.")

Now that *Grease* has made its comeback and *Happy Days* has been renewed for its umpteenth season, isn't it time we got it straight that their real-life prototypes were shunned more than revered?

I found this out in a fairly interesting fashion. Through my junior high school years we lived in Puerto Rico. Most of my friends there were military brats. Our "look" was the Fonzie look. Gob Vaseline jelly onto your hair (not oil; jelly), add water as hot as you could stand it, comb quickly and boom! Your hair was set for the day in a lovely D. A.

This was the look with which I entered high school when we moved back to the States in 1962. My new classmates' reaction was not enthusiastic. After sliding across my oil derrick of a hairdo, their eyes wandered over my T-shirt (sleeves rolled), dropped low to the Levi's (belt loops removed) and settled on the pointy-toed shoes. Then their mouths sighed and their feet wandered off.

I remember trying out for the school

RALPH KEYES, whose hair these days is short and dry, is the author of *Is There Life After High School?*

paper early in my sophomore year. Beneath his short, dry hair, the editor gave me a wary look and said they'd be in touch. They weren't.

Over Christmas I decided to try a social experiment. I bought some plaid shirts: muted olive. And chinos. Then Vitalis. Finally, I went to the barber. When school resumed I looked like the Kingston Trio.

So disguised, I again tried out for the school paper. This time they were thrilled to see me. God, do we need help, they said. Why didn't you come sooner? And that very afternoon I started writing headlines.

This is what makes me laugh about the Happy Days. Not the clever antics of lovable Fonz and his plaid-shirt pals, but the dingier truths they keep swept under a hubcap. Here is one sure truth: There is no more class-conscious setting in America than high school. Where you live, who your parents are, and especially how you *look* sorts you indelibly into place for those three or four years.

As one graduate of the Happy Days recalls the scene: "If you wore a letter sweater and belonged to a fraternity, it also meant yearning for popularity, good grades, college and technical virginity. If you chose to rebel and wear a black leather jacket, you surrendered any claim to being class valedictorian, but were compensated by being able to go 'all the way.' No hood ever wore penny loafers, and no 'nice' girl every wore pin curls to school under a scarf tacked to the back of her head."

Years ago, A. B. Hollingshead's classic study of *Elmtown's Youth* confirmed that, principals' pieties to the contrary, social boundaries in high school were if anything more rigid than those without. Cliques were based on class, and there was little flow between them. "Most high school-aged boys and girls have a good understanding of the class system," Hollingshead reported with exquisite understatement, adding: "The higher-class person . . . tries to limit his contacts with persons of lower prestige than himself."

Like Fonzie. Since he's still holding

strong in the ratings, can we risk facing the fact that the Happy Days weren't? This show is somewhere between a fairy tale and a hoax. It flatters the American conceit that everyone gets treated the same regardless of race, creed or choice of hair dressing. It pretends that people talked to each other who didn't. And it lies that appearances didn't matter.

I once spent part of an afternoon on a shopping mall bench getting color commentary on the passing parade from a high school girl sharing the bench. A few years out of school myself, I wondered if things had changed. They hadn't.

"See that guy?" my companion whispered. "He's basically a greaser. You can tell by his hair. But he's trying to go hip with that headband."

Next we examined a sweet-looking gal with two not-so-sweet-looking guys who were wearing what she called Cuban Fence Climber Boots.

"Now you see," said my young friend, "she's probably just a regular gal and she came here and those guys showed some interest in her. No . . . Wait! She's a greaser." There was no appeal.

But how can you tell?

"You can tell by the way she's wearing her eye shadow."

In my own case Vitalis alone wasn't enough to win respectability. One problem was that I didn't drop my greaser friends. They were the only people to take an interest in me, the new guy, and to this day I feel grateful. Also lucky. Because among those friends were some of the gentlest people I've known. The only thing, though, about them was their appearance. For most people this was enough.

After school one day I went to ask an English teacher about getting into her Honors class. I thought I qualified. But I made the mistake of having with me a buddy from her Remedial class. The teacher looked us over coolly and said there was nothing she could do. Transfers were out of her hands.

Later, this teacher discovered that we had interests in common — peace and civil rights, for instance. Then she

looked me over in a whole new light. And, without irony, the teacher said that now she regretted not snapping me right up for her class that day. She hadn't realized. . . .

People keep telling me that things are different now, that labels aren't what they used to be in high school. I guess they're right. After hearing this a lot, I asked a group of high school kids in a medium-size Southern city what their crowds were.

"Well," was the response, "there's the preppies, the jocks, the greasers and the pies."

"The pies?"

"Yeah, you know — the freaks. The kids in bib overalls."

"Why do you call them pies?"

"You know — like hip-pies."

Maybe some day someone will produce a movie, a play or a television program that tells the truth about high school. I keep wondering why this hasn't happened yet, and why we glamorize in retrospect those considered least glamorous at the time. Probably there's no way to make exclusion colorful, and little entertainment value in class conflict. Or perhaps those involved in these shows simply know not. Henry Winkler, after all, went to a private school where they wore uniforms. Winkler says that if he had ever met someone like the Fonz back then, "I would have pretended I was blind, so he would leave me alone."

Sometimes I wonder if there isn't a touch of remembered envy in today's hood-glamorizers. Maybe the people producing these programs are fantasizing friendships they would like to have had at the time if it hadn't been for all that . . . grease.

I hope that kids who are getting their social history from television gather that it's both fun and a crock. Those days were no happier than these days. Crowd boundaries were different but every bit as rigid. Maybe more so. An innie was an innie and a hood was a hood, and, except to fight, they never mingled. The Fonzies of the world weren't considered colorful. Just greasy. And everyone kept their distance. ☺