

## LANDSLIDE...1960

In 1960, I was about to graduate high School. We were headed into the last semester and there would be a student-body election to set the last senior officers. It was a farewell administration, looking forward to presiding at the graduation and partying. There were two candidates for president, each mainstream 'good guys' representing tribes with solid credentials. One was from the more aristocratic set, college-prep... and bound for Princeton. The other was a jock, a football quarterback with a frat-boy style and overconfident grin. After a few days of ho-hum campaigning, there appeared a few slapdash posters that announced "**Weasel for President**": something odd was brewing. Weasel was Jim Allender, a thin James-Dean type who was taking primarily shop classes and always a little close to flunking academics. He was a *character*, someone with a gift for the style of a Fifties working-class hero. Hanging out at C's Drive-in and driving a cool car...a reputation for maybe a little outlaw life. His friends were the guys with the best duck's-ass haircuts, really swooped and long enough to make grown-ups edgy. Jerry Lee Lewis might have been his idol.

My own circle were the lower-class brains. Science-fiction, making our own gunpowder, our own brandy-still with chem lab equipment, hiking around tidepools and all over the ranches that are now in the Point Reyes Seashore. We were merry pranksters but we competed for grades and test scores. A couple of us were getting to good schools on scholarships...but we were a little odd for the Preppy set and a little innocent for the Weasel crowd. The majority of students thought the Weasel posters were a joke. In fact it *was* funny, the idea that someone named Weasel with lousy grades would run against Tom & Dave. After more posters went up, and the artwork got noticeably better, some of the more officious preppies got upset. *'This is making a mockery of our election. Weasel isn't on the ballot, they should take the posters down.'*

Right about this time a jolt of energy passed between two different circles on campus...and a new life form was born. A couple of Weasel's friends were beginning to see something more interesting about this prank. They started thinking *why the hell not? Why are we pariahs here? The hotshots think this is a joke. But we're their equals aren't we?* One had been placed in the upper-tracking courses and was conversant with the 'good' students...he met a daughter of an ILWU union leader, Lee Goldblatt. The impression I got back then was that this was the divine spark, Lee & Erik Wooley getting together and deciding to make a point. They went before the Student Council with a signed petition to get Weasel on the ballot, with a week left to campaign. Although there was much fussing and the school paper carried stories of people needing to respect our traditions etc...they could not cheat on the due process, and he was put on the ballot.

Then the posters got serious. They had *issues* on them, like, "*Better treatment in the student court*" and "*This school doesn't belong to the 'popular' set*". When the election day came, no one could talk about anything else. Elections were done right after a general assembly in the outdoor amphitheater. Candidates made their speeches & then we voted in boxes on the way out. Most people thought the charade would end there. Weasel probably wouldn't try to make a speech...or if he did it would be foolish. When the speaking began, the other two guys were perfect of their types. A reasonable very adult and well sculpted address came from Tom...and a smirking, buzz-word laden, spirit-booster speech from Dave. Looked like a toss-up. Then came

Weasel. He was dressed in a suit jacket and looked grave. Stepped up to the mike and started right out like this :

*"Fellow students! You no doubt have thought that this was a prank. Well maybe it started out that way, but now it isn't. Because along the way here I have seen how prejudiced and snobbish these people are who think they are always supposed to be in charge. And I want you to know that people like me are just as worthy of the rights of being a student as those who are headed for Stanford. For too long they have lorded it over us! If we get sent to student court, who is it that judges us? Is it our peers? Do you ever see any longhairs or Negro students on that panel? I mean think about it. There's a big new world opening up beyond our little school. Negroes in the South are demanding the right to ride on the buses and vote, people are saying the A-bombs should be eliminated. You don't have to be an aristocrat to speak out in this country! I'm calling on all you Negro students, all you who come from working class families and are sick & tired of the snobs running this school, vote for me. I'm serious now. I will be a good president, I will speak out for you in the student government and we are going to change some things around here!"*

It was stunning. He talked for about ten minutes in perfect attunement with the crowd and ended up with a huge ovation. In my circle people were divided, some still wary of him, but most of us appreciated the way he had cut through all the pabulum. The preppies were incensed and rushed around firming up votes. When they came up to me, I realized I was *supposed to* vote for Tom. There was a tacit alliance of the 'good students' which his friends felt should remind me that a vote for Weasel was betrayal. But his speech had suddenly put a filter on my hearing and I could see the class differences that had always cleaved through the campus scholars. And I had had a whiff of the brewing protest movement, & seen how it might divide up the world in a new way.

In our civics class I had picked Capital Punishment as my term paper, and had gotten totally convinced in my reading about it, that all state executions were immoral. At San Quentin just a few miles away, the case of Caryl Chessman had been in the news a lot as his execution date neared. His was the perfect case for the evil of capital punishment. There was questionable evidence, the crime was kidnap with assault, not murder. He was a self-educated effective writer who produced four books in jail, thereby making a case for being spared as a rehabilitated and useful person. One day the County DA came to our class to lecture on civic responsibility. He was in charge of the Chessman case. In the question period I asked him why the State *still believed in capital punishment when it was proven that it had no deterrent value?* He got stiff with me right away. I kept it up a little and said I thought it was a crime to execute Chessman. He was very angry and cut me off. After class, he buttonholed me in the hallway. *"You are headed for trouble young man do you know that?"* "No." *"Your ideas are dangerous, they undermine the rule of law and respect for our legal system"*. I told him I was merely taking an opinion on a public issue. He told me to come down to his office. That I needed to be set straight and he was willing to do the setting. Otherwise he was sure I'd come to great trouble. (He was so right) (He was completely wrong)

So ...I voted for Weasel. And I wasn't alone. He won in a landslide, the largest vote total in the school's history. When the results were announced, it had the effect of revelation. All that talk was suddenly cut through by the truth about elitists. They are vastly outnumbered, those ones

with the *noblesse oblige*. They can't win in a fair vote. The Sixties was quivering there, embryonic in its rhetoric, panache, and skill.

The talk amongst 'good students' centered around whether Weasel would be an embarrassment: "*What will he say at our graduation? ..... He'll represent our school at County-wide meetings*"...?? Mostly people settled down with it, assuming that in fact none of that stuff was important anyway. An interesting thing developed as the year went on. Every time Weasel did have to speak publicly, he did a fine job. He had a good voice, and a natural sense for the rightness of timing and length that always came through. The best such time for me happened in May when the Chessman case had come to a head. He was scheduled for execution on May 2<sup>nd</sup>.and there had been a vigil for weeks at San Quentin. As the day got closer I wanted to be out there. On the eve of execution, a couple of friends & I stayed outside Quentin all afternoon and then with about a hundred others decided to stay all night. It was dramatic. Sometimes a Sheriff's car would come driving up and we would rush down to see if it was a pardon. There were some famous people there, folksingers & the like, and they had set up a microphone just outside the gates. At dusk, we were lying up on the hillside in the grass, getting our encampment ready...when we heard the voice of Marlon Brando. "*Greetings my friends... I fully support what you are doing here tonight. I completely oppose capital punishment and believe that the state of California is about to murder an innocent man. My heart is with you all*" wow. Brando, right over there! He was by far my favorite movie star at that point.

A little later there were some problems up above us on the hillside. Some young guys were throwing rocks and dirtclods down at the protesters. Yelling *go home Commies!*...and I recognized Marchini up there, my old rival in baseball. We had had a fist fight once over who got to play first base...in sixth grade. He had swung at me & missed, I had swung back, missed, he swung & missed, I swung, missed...but in pulling away, the back of my fist swiped his nose by accident, and he was suddenly bleeding badly. The fight stopped, he was taken away, I got to play first...and *I had given a kid a bloody nose!*

Anyway, there he was above us with some others of the C's drive-in set. A little later we heard the mike come on again, and this voice: "*Hello, this is James Allender, student body president of Tamalpais High School*". I had a sinking feeling that he was going to say something negative, that he had come there with Marchini and now was going to say we were wrong to be out here. Instead, he said: "*I just want you all to know: I'm opposed to this execution...and the entire student body stands with you tonight.*"

He had done it again! Said just the timely thing; countered the impression given by the hoods up on the hill...and said it eloquently. He was right there with Brando in our minds. Sent a thrill through the protest, a feeling of wild justification. We were 'The People'! *We had them outnumbered...*

In the morning came the answer we got so often in the ten years to come: an official car drove through the crowd and into the prison. No announcement was needed as we saw the shock on the faces of those by the car... No Pardon. Then they killed him.

