

First Impressions of America

“Looking back over my life from the vantage point of my eighties,” Claude reflected, “so many people have come and gone that it is very difficult to call any one person my best friend. Friendship is as fickle as love, fluctuating and changing constantly, and friendships exist on many levels. Another important factor is the question of equality — most relationships are not necessarily equal. One person may care more than the other, all of which further complicates the selection of a best friend.



When it comes to Earl Rosenblum, whom I met in the elevator of a hotel in downtown Cleveland, Ohio, sometime in 1938, he certainly qualifies as “best friend” for at least some periods in my life — though I am still not sure whether he ever considered me a serious friend. Strangely, knowing Earl for some sixty years, I am not sure that he ever considered that anyone could be his friend.

One evening in the fall of 1938, Earl offered me a ride home when we left a meeting of the Cleveland Ski Club. I was then renting a room with a refugee family in Cleveland Heights, which was on the way to Earl’s home in Shaker Heights, habitat of Cleveland’s wealthiest families.

On the way we discovered that besides skiing Earl liked cycling, and I suggested that he join me on a bike trip the following Sunday. From then

on, off and on over the next sixty years, Earl was part of my life one way or another. What impressed me most was that Earl, who came from an enormously rich family — owners of a department store in downtown Cleveland — disliked the material comforts inevitably a part of such a heritage. As a result he was forever at odds with his parents and relatives, who did not understand him.

As an example of what an oddball he was, when his family offered him an executive position in his father’s department store, he opted to become a night watchman. Moreover, during the war he earned a high



commission in the navy but then resigned to enlist in the marines as an ordinary soldier, feeling he could not provide the leadership his position required.

He came to New York whenever he had leave and it was then that he became part of our gang and joined us in cycling, canoeing, and skiing, which were our main activities during that period. Eventually he married Lisa Grad (a regular member of our Friday night folk dance group), got a job as a physicist with MIT, and raised a family. We saw less of him during that time, but periodically the family would spend some days with us at our house on Nantucket. Once or twice they even visited us in New Jersey.

Still later in life, fed up with the demands made upon him by living in an urban society, he abruptly left his family and friends, bought a pick-up truck, and drove West, where he eventually bought forty acres of land in the redwoods some 150 miles north of San Francisco. It was then that we

heard and saw even less of him, though on occasion there would be a letter telling us about the progress of the house he was building for himself on this land, which featured this metal wood-fed stove.



Not until the mid 1980s did Earl actively resurface in our lives. On our urging he left his redwood retreat once a year and came East to Tenafly to visit us for a couple of weeks. During these

prolonged visits we had ample time to renew a fading friendship and get to know each other in depth, and I marveled at how talented and unusual a person he was. His talents were not only physical (he repaired, improved, remodeled and fixed everything in our home that had failed to function since his previous visit), but also intellectual, his input proving invaluable in helping Mo-Li with her doctoral thesis. He also helped me solve business problems and edited many of my manuscripts, teaching me to become a better writer. This went on for about ten years, then Earl retreated once again into his shell. Holed up on his forty-acre hideaway in the redwoods and claiming he had gotten too old to travel, he could not be persuaded to continue his much-appreciated annual visits.”

For his part, Earl, didn’t write much about his friendship with Claude, but assuming Claude’s voice with unerring wit, he once offered this loving appreciation of Claude:

"I'm too tired and I can't work as fast.
I still have a few things to do, but...
There's too little time (maybe only a couple or so decades),
Yet I want to...
Write some more, about several critical subjects,
Write more about my past life,
Write up some more stories,
Say more about a number of subjects,
Recover more of my family's "stolen" artworks
Keep all my newer and older friendships active,
Make more new ones,
Travel some more, to places previously visited
And to new ones,
Vacation at familiar and unfamiliar places,
Keep up on my skiing, hiking, biking...
Keep up on sports I've engaged in in the past or never,
Climb more mountains,
Hike to familiar and unfamiliar places,
Win our lawsuit,
Help keep our business going, or end it gracefully
Renovate, finish, refinish Farview and our summer homes on Nantucket
and in Westhampton,
Complete, continue or start any number of other activities, projects, etc.
So there ain't enough time for everything,
And this is the first day of the rest of my life!"

Earlier, in fact in 1942, Earl had written a more sober but equally sincere reference letter to the Chairman of the National Ski Patrol System urging him that, "because Claude has always displayed the utmost love for the U.S.A. and his completely democratic viewpoint allows him nothing but hatred for all things connected with



dictatorship, I am sure that if Claude Bamberger obtains an assignment to the mountain troops, he will, because of his particular abilities and interests in that field, be a valuable member of the U. S. Army.”

The time would come when Claude and Mo-Li began to take in bad news about their friend, Earl. The messenger with the news was Earl’s daughter, Rosie, who, with her husband, Willie, would care for him with exquisite attention and every practical remedy possible over Earl’s declining years. In the beginning this meant travelling to Earl’s home again and again to fix up his place, sort out a regime for his medicines, and even get him



to the hospital when he fell. Finally they got him to move in with them and renovated their home to accommodate him, build a handicapped-accessible and equipped bathroom for him off his room, and setting up a satellite TV set up for him.

Still, the small strokes and ultimately dementia took their toll. Claude volunteered to send Rosie a VCR on the topic and some Scottish short bread that Earl liked. When it became more difficult to talk to Earl on the phone, Claude and Mo-Li would talk or correspond with Rosie, which Rosie described this way: “You know, I think this is really good therapy for me! I enjoy writing to you. Thanks for being a friend.”

In the end Earl was moved to a hospice where he would die in 2004. Claude’s reflection afterward was to the point: “There is no way to tell what fate has in store for us, but it seems that life flows on; as one relationship wanes, another may be in the making.” And in this case that new relationship — that new friendship — would be with Rosie and Willie Bosco (above).



Claude introduces the Bill and Betty Green this way: “I count them among my very first friends after I set foot in the United States in January of 1938. I met Bill at a gathering of a handful of adventurous characters who were the founding fathers of what became twenty years later the very large and popular Cleveland Ski Club.

What was so remarkable about this group was their enthusiasm for something that really didn't exist. Ohio, with its undulating farmland and pastures, is for the most part very flat, and its winters are largely without snow. In the late thirties, skiing was in its infancy, and in Ohio, without snow and without mountains, the ski activity was mainly restricted to raucous meetings in some German restaurant, where the group would gather to drink a lot of beer, sing songs, and make some faint attempts at yodeling. Nevertheless, there was some serious interest in organizing a ski trip of a primitive sort at a local golf course.

Shortly after I met Bill Green, who was then interested in biking as well as skiing, he met Betty, who was a member of a bicycle club on Cleveland's West Side. We hit it off well together from the very start. While this outdoor stuff was relatively new to Bill, Betty and some of their friends, it was very familiar to me from my Swiss camping days, and soon we became an inseparable group, meeting each weekend for long hikes, bike trips, and later on white-water kayaking — all sports virtually unknown in the Cleveland area."

Betty Green tells us more about their lives and about their relationship with Claude: "My Bill was an exotic welder who helped NASA put a man in space. I took a crash course in drafting at Case Western Reserve and got a job in the Engineering Dept. at NASA. In 1952 we organized and led our first ski trip to Aspen. In 1960 we formed an agency that we named High Adventure Tours. Between 1960 and 1970, while still with NASA, we helped organize and led charter ski tours for the Central Ski Association. In 1972 we left NASA and expanded our own tour agency. We took plane loads of skiers to the most famous European ski resorts. We've always gotten a great deal of satisfaction in planning tours eager, healthy for people who enjoy the out-of-doors —whether it's hiking, backpacking, kayaking or skiing — to take them to places they have never been before. Highlights for us: skiing the glaciers on Mt. Blanc or to Zermatt in the shadow of the Matterhorn; helicopter skiing in British Columbia; all the exciting rivers we



kayaked; the years we skied at Vail; then bicycling through Ireland, England, France, Germany, Austria, Canada, Australia and all over the U.S.

Claude introduced us to the Cleveland Orchestra and all the wonderful and fulfilling music that has been part of our lives ever since. Biking was our first outdoor activity together— our bikes piled high with gear heading out to southern Ohio, Indiana and all the Youth Hostels around Cleveland. He was usually the “Guide” whether it was biking, hiking, boating or skiing. And I still can remember him bringing his old folbot to Cook’s Forest for us to have. That was the start of all those wonderful trips on rivers and lakes in Michigan, New York, Pennsylvania, Maine, etc. And it was with Claude that we had adventures skiing many mountains and glaciers in Europe and at many resorts in the US. Nor can we forget our visits with him after he left Cleveland. Our first was to his apartment in New York, where we arrived at 2 a.m. after hitchhiking and riding a street car. Then came Long Island with his mother, Nantucket and even a summer house in Maine.”



“The first time I set eyes on the Burger family” Clause recalls, “was on a rainy Saturday night in October 1938 while working for as a delivery boy for Uberstein’s drugstore in Cleveland, Ohio. They had ordered some potatoes chips, cokes, toothpaste and a prescription all of which was usually delivered by the stores in those days. I had been hired only a month before, because I had a bicycle and agreed to work for a flat salary of \$ 8.00 a week, waiving the right for payment of overtime at the based on the minimum wage of twenty five cents an hour according to the laws at that time.

When I rang the Burgers’ doorbell, a very pretty 15 year-old girl opened the door, and when I said with my limited English, “Delivery from Uberstein,” she was apparently thrilled by my heavy German accent. She had a very shrill voice and yelled into the back of the house: “Daddy you got to come and see this,” as if I were an exotic animal in the zoo.

Subsequently Mr. Burger, a small, gentle creature, appeared, took my packages, and recognizing my German accent asked me to come in. In 1938 German-Jewish refugees were still a novelty in the United States, and Jewish people were interested in getting some first-hand information about what was actually going on in Nazi Germany.

I was asked into the living room and introduced to Mrs. Burger, who had never met a real German refugee. So I answered some questions about the persecution of Jews in Germany, of which I knew very little. Shirley, being totally disinterested in what was being said, would occasionally interrupt,

shrilling: “Daddy, isn’t he cute!” — a statement that would be followed by a pained silence.

As I made regular deliveries to the Burger home during the following twelve months, I got to know Shirley much better. Although considerably less interested in Milford, her 12 year-old brother (r. with Shirley), I learned from his most recent letter to me that he, in fact, found me quite interesting. He said: “Now you and Shirley may remember things differently, but I can only speak of my own recollections. As I try to look back to a time more than sixty years ago, I remember meeting you on Glenmont Road in our neighborhood one day in summer on your unusual light-weight-looking



bike with its skinny tires. You seemed to be going from house to house, probably trying to sell something.

Anyway, Claude, at that point in time this was probably the first contact you had with the Burger family. Given your now-well-known enthusiasm and personal interest in people, we struck up a relationship right on the street. And if memory serves me, I led you to my house to try to sell something like raspberry syrup (?) to my

mother.

From this meeting it seems to me you quickly discovered I was a tennis enthusiast and also a bike rider on my heavy Roadmaster with fat tires. Cleverly putting two and two together, in no time you arranged sunrise games of tennis at Cumberland Park. And you even went so far as to let me use one of your bikes for an overnight bike hike with you as the leader and head chef — a memorable experience for a young impressionable boy.

And so you charmed yourself into the Burger household, where as luck would have it, father Sam Burger discovered he needed someone with energy and quick intelligence to help him in his hat manufacturing business. Fortunately for you, you knew there was a much bigger world out there, outside the hat factory, and so you left us for the East Coast a little while before I left for the Navy and WWII.

Now, having rediscovered you six or seven years ago, I find it really interesting to compare my impression of the young Claude I knew those sixty-some years ago with the man I met in Tenafly again.

What's really interesting is that the essence of you, in my mind, had not changed one bit over those years. I saw the same enthusiasm, intelligence, energy, and deep interest in people that was my memory of you as a young man. You're now worldly — wise and traveled but still keeping the innocence of that youth."



Jim Wattenmaker, when he wasn't skiing, hiking and "wandering the world," created and ran an advertising agency while his wife Bev, after a long teaching career, founded something called Adventures in Real Communication which set up Homestay experiences for international students coming here and American students going abroad. Son Jeff made it big in Silicon Valley and his wife, Pam, makes spectacular sculpture constructs.

Daughter Karen is a nature photographer with forest fires as a specialty and her man Steve, besides running a huge chunk of the U.S. arctic program, is a mountain guide and pilot. The beat goes on.

Jim writes of his friend Claude, "The challenges of Claudian friendship have been memorable if not always comfortable. They have always ended with that ingenuous smile of his that says, 'That wasn't exactly the way I remembered it' or 'You knew starting out that I am always for adventure; look how much fun you'll have talking about this near disaster.' Each of the adventures that follow started routinely with 'Come' and sooner or later turned into successful survival tests with disaster narrowly averted. (This



approach to life seems to relate to Claude's business career as well, as he tells it.)

Davos, Switzerland — 'Come.' We climb to the Rosen Hutte. Do we have a map? 'No, I have been there many times.' How long will it take? 'Only an hour up, less down.' Two hours later, we find the hut. We enjoy a non-view in the fog and start down. We seem to have lost our way, weaving through dense forest on our skis, a slight variation on the wonderful downhill run I had been promised. Three hours later we are still winding through the trees, and six hours after our start we arrive at a road — nowhere near where we had expected to be. We finally hitch a ride back to town where we regale the gathering crowd with stories of our exploit.



Near Pearl Pass, well above Ashcroft, Colorado — 'Come.' We climb the Backyard Slope (this after a climb from 7000' to 9000' that left all but two of us ready for rest; they would just watch.) Do you know where we go? 'No, but Otto Schneibs says it is the best skiing'. We go, zigzagging our way upward in full view of the spectators. It is beautiful, and I ignore my nagging doubts about the snow conditions. We enjoy the view, start down — through serious breakable crust. We zigzag/kickturn our way down. Fortunately our way is clearly visible before us. Unfortunately we are also clearly visible to our waiting companions. Our one-hour relaxed outing has turned into a 3-hour survival test.

Pontresina, Switzerland — We arrive in a pea-soup fog on only my second Alpine ski trip. I have no fear because I am in good hands. By mid-afternoon the soup gets even thicker. We can barely see the street from our comfortably elegant hotel room. 'Come.' Where are we going? 'We ski the Diavolezza.' Are you sure? 'Sure, I know this mountain.' We find the lift; it's operating. We pass the first tower, see nothing. We reach the top, see even less. We cannot see from one big orange marker to the next but somehow tell down from up. My guide stops at the edge of an unmarked precipice, by accident I'm sure. I realize that the Swiss idea of mountain safety is different than the American. We survive to tell the tale.

The Hudson River, upstate New York (on this adventure Bill Green gets equal credit). Our small flotilla of folbots starts out happily after our leaders have inspected the water level marks. The current is swift, the first few hundred yards are beautiful. Suddenly, an impenetrable rock maze looms in front of us. The rocks — inexplicably say our guides — are higher than the water. We hear screams and the sounds of Folbot ribs cracking like the Fourth of July. All but the few stragglers who had been warned demolish their boats and soak everything they own. We pull our boats out, spend days drying out, enjoy our riverside camp-out and return home. We survive and return to try with rubber rafts the following year.

Submitted here while still (amazingly) in command of all my limbs and most of my mind but with the proviso that I do not have to take another ski lesson from Claude Bamberger or follow the Claudian dress code!”

Jim even came up with an elegant (and large!) certificate of membership in the ‘hardly exclusive Claudian Survival Society’. It certifies that the person has survived at least two verified Claudian experiences and thereby is entitled to all rights and privileges, including the right to remain silent in the face of repeated importunings to participate in still another Claudian adventure. Mo-Li is identified as the Society’s President!



Lois Aaron begins, “My memories of Claude span 60 years and arouse two extremes of emotion: the lesser is that of discomfort while engaging in many outdoor activities with my husband, Chuck Aaron, and his “legendary” friend Claude when they were among the founding members of the Cleveland Ski Club.

In those early days, the Ski Club activities were primarily at rigged-up rope tows at a local country club, or in a farmyard in Kirtland which had occasional drifts of snow and persistent cow pancakes. But the Club also had a program for getting into condition, run mostly by Claude, who with great gusto led hikes, bike trips, and expeditions to Allegheny State Park, for “real” skiing! So a fraction of my early memories involve discomfort and wetness. (I was not an avid athlete, as you can tell, but I did have a fondness for boys who were.)

I recall a rainy, early a.m. cycle across Cleveland to the west side home of Betty and Bill Green, and a further ride (or did we get a lift from a truck driver?) to the port of Sandusky, where we got on a ferry to Kelly’s Island for a damp night of camping out (sans tent).

A few years later, when Chuck was serving in the army at Aberdeen, Maryland, Claude visited us, and we had another bike ride, interrupted by a surprise snowstorm. But hey, we were young and carefree, deeply appreciating that, by the luck of the draw, these men were not clawing their way up the Italian peninsula or storming the beaches at Iwo Jima. A little wet snow was inconsequential.

Then there was sailing with a confident Claude near Rehoboth Beach; when halfway out on the ocean, he confessed that he hadn't manned a boat since his school days in Germany.

But the stronger and more persistent memory of Claude is one of warmth and hospitality, a constant that has remained through the decades, in many different locales. He so enjoys being a host, overwhelming his friends with good food and Gemutlichkeit. (I cannot give him all the credit for his capacity for friendship; he was fortunate to have had a wonderful "Mutti," whom I was lucky enough to know.)

I first met Claude shortly before my marriage, when Chuck and I walked out to Coventry Road to visit a friend of his who had escaped from Hitler's Germany and was working nearby (either at Uberstein's drugstore down the street or for Mr. 's felt hats factory. I remember sitting with Chuck on a huge bed in a little room, Claude serving us tea and delicious pastries from Newmark's bakery. After the war, when he had moved to New York, he introduced us to our first coffee house (Greenwich Village?), hosted us at the ground-floor flat he and Kathy had in Brooklyn Heights, and put us on the plane for our first trip to Europe.



Later there were visits to Nantucket, where we had wonderful feasts on the beach — one fabulous clambake, which he and Chuck managed together, with clams and lobsters and corn, and lots of little kids running around, ours and his and those of many friends. I recall that Stephan was about three at the time.

When we bought an inn in New Hampshire he visited several times; one year he arrived in November, our off season, with a charming young woman from Malaysia whom we instantly fell in love with. And even there in our own home they provided hospitality, doing the shopping and chopping and cooking for a sumptuous Chinese feast. Another memory is of driving through New Jersey on our way to Washington, arriving at the Bambergers' home for a real banquet, our first experience of roast suckling pig with an apple in its mouth.

When Chuck died in 1978, Claude and Mo-Li drove up for the memorial service in New London, first stocking up at Zabar's on the way in case the mourners didn't have enough to eat. But more importantly, at the service Claude spoke spontaneously and sincerely about his friendship with Chuck."

Claude then responded in kind to her warm thoughts: "I consider Lois a lifetime friend, although we rarely see each other. When we do meet, a very friendly rapport is established immediately, as if we had seen each other only the day before, not months or even years earlier.

Lois is accurate in describing the beginning of a lifetime friendship, first with her husband, my friend Chuck, and later with her in her own right. Both Chuck and Lois were what one would describe as "characters" — very unusual people.

Chuck worked first as a life insurance salesman (he talked me into buying insurance I could ill afford at the time) and later in the family envelope business, which he found very boring, but all his life he had the ambition to get into the ski business somehow, and as I shared his feelings he came to me with all kinds of proposals, all involving investments of money, which neither of us had.

The most notable event was when one day he called me excitedly, to say that the old Hotel Jerome in Aspen, Colorado, had been offered to him at a bargain price. That was before Aspen became the world famous resort it is today. That was one of the many opportunities I missed in my life. Ultimately Chuck and Lois reached their lifetime goal by actually buying an inn in New Hampshire. The upkeep, yearly maintenance, and constant anxiety about the weather almost killed both of them. However, the story had a happy ending when after a number of years they sold the inn at an enormously appreciated price.

Lois was always a warm, intelligent person, always interested in whatever subject was at hand and interesting in her often different approaches and opinions. She has always been supportive in the ups and downs of my life and I valued her friendship greatly.”

Friendship has a good memory.