

Lee Hoffman
13 July 1971

S E L F - P R E S E R V A T I O N

Once again, in keeping with my usual policy, I find that I have come up against an impending deadline. It seems like all kinds of things conspire against me to keep me from successfully fulfilling my dream of eventually getting back on the ball in FAPA.

To begin with, there was the problem of stencils.

Bill Evans most wonderfully offered to mimeo the zine for me, and advised me of the model number of his machine, and like that, and I innocently ambled off to my friendly neighborhood stationer (a commercial type outfit, at that), supposing all would be well.

Hah!

In all, during the course of a period of some months, I ambled to any number of friendly neighborhood stationers, none of whom carried stencils for the Rex Rotary (what is this city coming to?)

Time passed. I hurriedly dashed off to Florida. I got back. I looked at the calendar and gasped.

Yesterday, I worked my way up, stationer by stationer, to the Bohn showroom. They seemed remarkably ill-equipped for selling stencils, but duty-bound, they finally managed it.

I walked in and was greeted by a quite pleasant switchboard operator. I told her I wanted to buy stencils for a Rex Rotary. She put in a call and asked someone to come into the showroom.

A young lady appeared, looking mildly distressed by my presence. I held out the sample stencil Bill had sent me and said something to the effect of, "I'm looking for stencils like this."

She took it gingerly and studied it thoroughly, then asked, "A box?"

"A quire?" I replied, hoping to impress her with my expertise.

"Will this be cash?"

I answered in the affirmative.

She then asked my name and address, which she took down. Carrying my sample stencil, she disappeared into the back room. I stood there. I looked at the tasteful display of adding machines. I looked out the window. I fantasized her checking out my name and address with the FBI-

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computer lists of people who might possibly consider publishing subversive literature. I imagined she might be hunting around for someone who knew how many stencils in a quire. I supposed she could have gone to lunch.

She returned and proudly presented me with a bare box of stencils and a bill. She even smiled slightly when I gave her the money in payment.

I collected my change, picked up my box of stencils (or quire, as we experts say) and ambled off down the street, greatly relieved that I had finally accomplished this task. Now I was confronted with the problem of what to write on them...

...and on opening the box, I discovered what might prove to be another problem: Life is not nearly so simple as it was back in the days when A. B. Dick ruled the mimeo roost. Not only are there now innumerable types of stencils with all kinds of holes in their heads, there would also seem to be all kinds of instructions as to how to use them in accordance with the model machine they're to be run on.

I have read the instructions carefully, but even so it is with some trepidation that I type these words, starting each page somewhat in accordance with the line indicated as starting point for model "D" machines. I hope it fits...

* * *

There will not be any mailing comments on the last mlg in this S-P. The main reason for this is that I didn't get the last mlg.

Sometime in May, I packed up and hied off to Florida. When I got back, I found a stack of junk mail. At intervals within the stack were little cards giving me first, second and final notice of a package the Post Office had considered delivering. Since the PO tells you nothing about a package on one of these notices, except that it theoretically exists, I figure maybe it was the May mlg.

Foosh.

* * *

Well, while in Florida, I did something I've been contemplating for several years now. I bought a house. To be more precise, I am in the process. I am presently awaiting the final papers -- the ones that tell me to send them great scads of money.

The house I hope I am buying is quite a nice one. Three bedrooms (one of which I expect to be renting out), two baths, living room, dining area, kitchen, Florida room, enclosed one-car garage with a utility area, and a caged pool. It's on a good-sized lot, and in a most convenient location (about a mile or so from the local beach, which is on Charlotte Bay), a short walk to a shopping center, a slightly longer walk to the library and the post office. The place

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has real live trees on the grounds (I'm looking forward to sitting under them and letting them breath oxygen at me).

It's pretty much the standard sort of house for down there. Concrete block construction on a concrete slab, with terrazzo floors. One storey, on a corner lot, set at an angle so that none of my windows face the neighbors. The way it is situated, my back yard looks out across a couple of other backyards, and a piece of canal, so there's no one directly behind it, either.

Assuming all goes well and the people who are presently in it will get out, I intend to be moving down as quickly as possible. With luck, I'll be there by the time you're reading this -- or at least I'll be on my way -- though it may conceivably all take me till September. There are a mess of things to be taken care of first -- not the least of which is moving over a dozen years of accumulated possessions (not counting the ones I had before I came here).

* * *

FLYING IS FUN, EVEN IF IT'S ONLY IN AN AIRPLANE:

The take-off in a Boeing 727 is one of the kickiest things I know of. Like, there is this big fat chicken of an airplane, and first it meanders out onto the strip. There, assuming it doesn't have to queue up half an hour to get a slot, it perches at the starting end of the strip and works itself into the proper mood to get off the ground. It starts to sing, going up and up in pitch until it is into this high screaming whine that proclaims its power and ambitions.

Other big fat chickens and even you Fat Alberts beware! This big chicken is going to do her thing!

Squealing with joy and power, it gathers up its skirts and begins to hotfoot it down the strip, wings flapping. Faster and faster, with the whalloping great wings bouncing up and down and up and down, and I am not quite certain of the instant it gets its wheels off the ground, but sort of suddenly it's higher than it was. And then the ground is dropping away with a marvelous rapidity.

Up she goes and during the first few moments, I can feel a complete lack of coordination between my stomach and the plane, and I wonder if one sea-sick pill was enough.

She seems to go up in stages. I feel like she's reached a level. But no, she's still climbing. There is a small bump, and I have the impression she is passing through various levels of air, and I'm feeling the transition.

She's well up, and I look out the window, and I think she's on the step now, but then I realize she's still climbing. The world

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is beginning to look like a map. Not a contour map, either. It has lost its dimension. I glance around, almost expecting the next state to be pink on its side of the boundary line.

And on and on the big chicken goes until she is in the clearest sky ever made, and the only things around her are wispy white clouds of ice crystals that play games with the sunlight. She has finally reached altitude. She's a bit above thirty thousand feet now, and she settles on the step, relaxing her screaming engines, and I decide that one sea-sick pill really was enough after all. It is smooth and easy. And when the hostess asks me if I'd like lunch, I say "Yes."

LANDING IS ALMOST AS KICKY AS TAKING OFF;

The first stop is to be Sarasota. Then we go onto to my stop, which is Fort Myers. After a fond farewell, the plane will proceed to Miami and I will proceed to Port Charlotte.

The big chicken has been happily doing her thing while I ate, had a second cup of coffee, and stared out the window at an ocean that looked like the imitation Morocco binding of a distant book. (What title, I wonder. And I wish I'd brought my copy of FATE IS THE HUNTER to re-read on the trip, but then probably nobody on board would have read it anyway, so I whistle "The High and Mighty" but I whistle quite badly so I do it under my breath.) And then, somewhere in the general vicinity of Charleston, S. C. we turn back to the land, and, it seems, we commence landing procedure.

First there is a change in the pitch of the engine. I peer out the window. I've specifically asked for, and gotten, a seat behind the wing because I've been here before. This is my favorite part of the whole show. Now is the big moment.

The wing begins to come apart.

First there are the Fu Manchuian trap doors in the tops of the wings, which open enough for the trolls inside to peer out. They're only cracked open, only for a moment. Satisfied, the trolls begin to push out the flaps. The tiny bits of metal that are the ailerons make an almost imperceptible movement. The flaps slip out further. The wing's internals become visible. Screw jacks winding away, the flaps reach their limits. The plane slows. The engine pitch changes again.

The plane stops.

At least, according to my stomach, the forward momentum has ceased completely. I feel suspended motionless in mid-air. The roar of the engines has decreased to a point where they seem almost silent.

I look out the window at the ground below.

After a moment, the motion begins again. We are descending. We

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pass close enough over Tampa to take a good look at it. We are coming in toward Sarasota. It is all getting closer and closer and I wish I were better in geography. I look at house tops, streets, swimming pools. Those things under us are trees. We become level with the tops of them. A flash of sunlight off water. Tree tops on either side of us. A sense of acceleration now. The closer we are to the ground, the faster our speed seems.

The big chicken has her wheels out now.

She touches the earth.

The trap doors on the wings fly open. The wings are unfolding in every possible direction. Flaps out. Flaps up. Flaps down. A straining sound in the engines. A struggle of powers. The pilot braces his heels and drags his feet.

Forward momentum. How much does the big chicken weigh? I don't remember. The question is academic. The feeling is there. The struggle of powers, the tremendous battle to drain off all that dynamic energy.

Scream, you chicken. Dig in and hang on.

She stops. Rolls gently. Outside the window, men in Mickey Mouse hats and plastic ear muffs are shoving the boarding steps up to the door.

The plane sighs into a soft whine, and the pilot's drawl is falling from the P.A. overhead, telling us that we've arrived 20 minutes early and that, since this particular chicken isn't air-conditioned, he recommends that those of us who are continuing with the flight wait inside the terminal.

Exchanging smiles with the stewardess, I step out into the roaring blaze of the Florida sun and peel the light jacket I wore out of New York. I think about how I should have told my folks to meet me in Sarasota instead of Fort Myers, and then I think, Gee Whiz, I'll have the fun of another take-off and landing today. So I make a pit stop in the terminal, check the take-off time, look over the paperback books (a big display of John D. MacDonald), and then go sit outside where I can keep an eye on my big chicken, lest she get away without me.

And I think to myself that I hear a lot about ol' Fat Albert, the 747, with his multiple levels and choice of movies and winding staircases and whathave you, but I've never been on one. So far my loyalty is all with the 727, the plane that made air travel practical for me.

Back in the days of the trips by air. I would have loved it, except that I was always deathly ill. No amount of dramamine could see me happily through even a short hop.

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It took the 727 to get me into the air and down again with my stomach intact.

Big chicken, I love you.

* * *

FROM PORT CHARLOTTE, FLA., TO NEW YORK CITY IN ONLY TWELVE HOURS:

Fortunately, I wasn't in a hurry. There was no particular time I had to be back in NYC. I chose to leave Florida on the 8th of July mainly because my folks normally drove into Fort Myers on Thursdays anyway. A friend of mine, Aaron Rennert, had spent his vacation in Fla., and was returning with me. Fortunately, he wasn't in any hurry either.

I should have been forewarned by the fact that I had no difficulty whatsoever in reaching the airline by phone and making my reservation, but when the time came, we went blithly off to Ft. Myers expecting the best.

We left Port Charlotte early, hoping to evade the rains that were impending on the horizon, and got to Ft. Myers in plenty of time to check in, pick up reservations, and all that. Then we sat around, watching the rain over toward Ft. Myers Beach, and the thin drizzle that passed through the airport.

About ten minutes before our plane (Flight 436 from Miami) was due to arrive, the P.A. advised us that the flight had been held up in Miami, awaiting a connecting flight, and would be about a half hour late.

We sat around. We watched the Executive Airlines flight to Tampa, a two-engine prop-jet, take off. We drank Cokes. We counted our fingers. We counted each others fingers. We listened for the whine of a big chicken coming in.

A half hour after the announcement, we were all sitting tensely listening for the plane, when the P.A. harrumphed and announced that flight 436 had definitely left Miami and should be along in about half an hour.

It was.

I kissed my folks goodbye and clambered on board, grabbing a window seat just aft of the nigh wing, where I could watch it come apart in mid-air. Aaron settled in beside me. The crew loaded quickly, and we were off with a jolt.

The weather wasn't really bad, but it was crummy. Rain and winds and, off to one side, lightning. The flight from Ft. Myers to Sarasota is usually done at quite low altitude for a 727, but this time we went up a lot higher than usual. To evade the messy weather, I supposed. I figured that was why we made that strange full circle of the field before we set down in Sarasota. Now, I'm not sure.

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We landed a little hard, but not enough so to arouse my suspicions. We rolled up to the terminal, the boarding ramp was snugged in place and all proceeded in what seemed a perfectly normal manner. I noticed that our Captain was one of the first people off the ship. As I watched him stride toward the operations building, I wondered if National had hired him through Central Casting. He was perfect. Stocky and broad-shouldered and grizzled. Not old or fat though. A man with an air of concerned confidence. A man you felt you could trust your life with, and might even buy a used car from.

Aaron and I were discussing the possibility of our making quick stops here and in Tampa and picking up a few minutes of the time lost before the plane reached Ft. Myers. We watched the new passengers board and saw the luggage stowed. We watched the luggage truck pull away. We awaited the return of our Captain.

He reappeared. With another officer and a ground crewman. They came toward the plane. No--they disappeared under the wing. More men joined them.

"They are holding a union meeting under there in the shade," I told Aaron. Time passed. I added, "It is a strike vote."

They left the wing and returned to operations. They came back and disappeared under the wing again. The stewardesses came around with Cokes for us all. The P.A. made soft music. The engines stopped.

We will be getting a new plane, I thought.

A young man from across the aisle went forward. He spoke to a hostess, then returned. Aaron conferred with him. He said he thought we would be getting a new plane.

We waited. We drank our Cokes. We counted fingers.

Suddenly the P.A. spoke up. Laconically, it advised us to take our belongings and proceed to the terminal building. It concluded "Transportation will be provided."

Outside, an Executive Airlines prop-jet was warming up. I saw our Captain disappear behind it. Sadly, I told Aaron, "Our pilot has gone on without us."

We wandered into the terminal and took seats by the window. The conference was still going on in the shadow of the wing. Someone took a piece of housing off the landing gear well. People poked and prodded the gear.

Aaron and I went into the coffee shop. The stewardesses off our plane were there having dinner. The young man from across the aisle was with them. We decided he was our security agent. Eavesdropping, we learned that our flight really had been delayed in Miami awaiting a connecting flight, and not because it took someone a while to hay-wire our nigh wheels on. I was pleased to learn that.

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We had coffee, then returned to the waiting room window overlooking our lame chicken. The P.A. called passengers going to Tampa. A series of Executive Airlines prop-jets ferried them on. Us through-passengers waited. A rumor began that we would get our new plane around 8:30 p.m. (we were scheduled into N.Y. at 8:45. I was glad I hadn't asked anyone to meet me. Even later, I got even gladder.)

Our Captain reappeared. A fuel truck pulled up and nuzzled its hose into the chicken. The Captain entered the cabin. But I didn't think they were going to load us back on board. Nobody had replaced that piece of wheel well housing yet.

The plane wound up. It taxied out. It took off. Slowly, it disappeared into the distance rain clouds, the gear still down. My sympathy went with our Captain.

Aaron and I returned to the coffee shop for another round. The waitress greeted us as old friends. When we left, she wished us well and said she'd see us later. We went to check with National. The man at the desk told us our new plane was due at 10:00 p.m. We sat down by the window and watched the Eastern flights take off.

Around 10:00 p.m., we were called to the National window. A crewman took our names. We asked for news. He hadn't any. We asked why he wanted our names. He said to find out how many of us were left. I wondered if National hoped we'd wandered away. Aaron suggested they give us all swanky motel rooms for the night. The crewman said it might come to that.

Ten minutes later the P.A. told us our flight was loading at gate 1. We dashed out and lined up. Night had fallen. We gazed hopefully across the empty field into the darkened sky.

Hark! A plane!

The whine of a big chicken!

She touched down, taxied over, rolled to a stop in front of us. In the cabin, I recognized our Captain. He shut her down to standing trim, then leaned forward, slumping his face into his hands for a long long moment.

My sympathy was still with him. I hoped they'd give us a new Captain on to Tampa.

Eventually, they got the eleven of us who were left on board, brought back our stewardesses, and equipt the cabin with an entirely new crew. I never saw our valiant captain again. I hope he got a good night's rest in Sarasota.

Our new Captain was quite apologetic over the P.A. He hurried us on to Tampa, where we picked up a mess more passengers and our dinners, which had also been waiting some four hours. We were invited to have free cocktails as the Captain's guests. (I declined gracefully.)

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The flight proceeded to Kennedy a little roughly, but without further incident. And all in all, I thoroughly enjoyed it. I hadn't flown at night before through clear enough weather to see the ground. The lights were beautiful. And it was much fun trying to decide what those cities were. Again, I wished I were more up on my geography. What town that size lies on the south side of a body of water that shape, huh?

We got into Kennedy in the small hours of the morning. National got our luggage to us quickly and we located a Carey bus that would transport us from the airfield to Manhattan. It was in the hands of two cheerful maniacs, one of whom loaded our luggage, and the other of whom drove as if he were trying to make up for the time we'd lost on the flight.

Surviving the trip into town and the taxi ride home from the East Side Terminal, I arrived at my door approximately twelve hours after I left Port Charlotte.

* * *

Among the things awaiting me when I got back from Florida was the advice from Bob Toomey that I go to see a movie called THE WILD BUNCH. I did.

Subsequently, we now present:

THE SPECIAL SELF-PRESERVATION ANNUAL FILM SUPPLEMENT

featuring

SOME NOTES ON THE WILD BUNCH

by Bob Toomey

It's not too difficult to see why a number of people have been turned off by Sam Peckinpah's The Wild Bunch, or why any number of others have been confused by it.

First of all, it's a Western, and not a "class" film.

Secondly, it is very violent, very very violent.

Thirdly, for a certain segment of the filmgoing populace, there might be a problem deciphering the film's attitude.

Fourthly, for a certain segment of the filmgoing populace, there might be a problem deciphering their own attitude towards the film.

The Wild Bunch is a Western. If it is not a Western, it is nothing. Bonnie and Clyde was a Western, but it was possible to ignore the fact.

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Little Big Man was certainly a Western, but it was possible, if necessary, to defend it as something more, or even as something else, perhaps as an historical film, perhaps as social comedy. Going back a bit further, to a film with subject matter similar to that of The Wild Bunch, we could cite Lonely Are the Brave, the one where Kirk Douglas gets run down in the end, you should pardon the expression, by a truckful of toilets, thus proving that the West has closed up its old frontiers, and presumably has found itself with new frontiers of a different sort. Whatever, Lonely Are The Brave was plenty significant, you bet, suitable grounds for defense.

But what about The Wild Bunch? It is distinctly a Western, and makes no artistic bones about it. It is a Western in the classic mode, excluding the Saturday matinee errata that most of us probably grew up on and loved, the mode of lost horizons, the end of the dream, the encroachment of civilization. Leave us not argue the morality of encroaching civilization though, it's too much like arguing the morality of sunlight. Sure and overexposure can kill you. So what? So it's there, so guard yourself as best you can.

A Western in the classic mode. The Wild Bunch is an outdoor Western, not one of the recent products of clever or not so clever studio sets. It takes place in and around South Texas and Mexico, circa 1913, and was made by a man who knows that border country well, having been born there. Furthermore, it is spare, hard, mean, cantankerous, funny as heck, profane as hell, and most intense. And violent.

The Wild Bunch has been criticized more for its violence than for any other reason, maybe more than for all the other reasons put together. Why? Is it because it is outside the classic mode of the Western to be violent? Hardly. The classic mode of the Western is violence. Is it because The Wild Bunch is so much more violent than Westerns generally are? Again, hardly. I seem to recall endless slaughters of Indians endlessly circling wagon trains in endless wagon train films. What, then, is it about the violence in The Wild Bunch that makes it different, that makes it so hard to take? In a word, the violence in The Wild Bunch is graphic. It looks like real violence. When people are shot, they bleed, they bleed a lot. The bullets explode through their bodies. A knife slits a throat and blood fountains out. A woman is trampled to death in the dust of a street. People die in slow motion. You see it all.

The question is how to react. We aren't used to seeing it all. Or if we do see it all, surely not so much of it. There is lots and lots and lots of it in The Wild Bunch. The film opens with a massacre and ends with an even greater massacre. I couldn't begin to count the death toll. Hundreds, at least. So many that the reaction becomes very strange. To begin with, you sit there stunned by the certainty of it. By the end of the film, the climactic slaughter, you have come to exult in it. And I can see how people might be frightened by this sort of atavistic surrender.

Beyond the violence, the film is filled with an accumulation of careful detail. There are no empty moments, no stretches of dullness or inattention to things of the period. Peckinpah immerses the film in life

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far more than he immerses it in death. But for some, I am positive, only the death is noticable.

The attitude of the film? Somewhere in the course of the opening credits a line is thrown away by a character who is never seen or heard from again. He says, approximately, "It's not what you intended to do, it's what you did that I didn't like". I think this is the attitude of the film. The vast gulf between act and intention. There are no "good guys" in the story, or "bad guys", not really. There are the sympathetic and unsympathetic characters, the protagonists and the antagonists, and that's all. You may have your favorites, I do, but to call any of them "good" or "evil" would be forcing a redefinition of those terms, if, indeed, they have any definition to start with. I won't detail this, or the plotline. Peckinpah doesn't moralize at any point, and the expressed philosophy is so simple that many might feel it is inadvertant or just plain banal. Suffice to say that by using death as a marker, he manages to mark off the meaning of life, and shows almost perfectly that each gives its ultimate meaning to the other. I don't call this simple, I call it basic. Never have I seen it more tangibly affirmed, nor can I ever remember a film that affected me more deeply than this one. Everybody should see it at least thrice.

A final note. The performances throughout the film, from the most minor of minor characters on up, are uniformly excellent. The casting is absolutely superb. Particularly fine are Robert Ryan (in a pivotal role), Warren Oates (who is hilarious), and Jaime Sanchez (also in a pivotal role). Not far behind are William Holden and Ernest Borgnine, neither of whom I like very much, but both of whom somehow transcend their usual blah screen images here. Ben Johnson does very well in giving some substance to the least delineated character in the film, and Edmund O'Brien is the last word in crotchety old men. The rest are merely great.

-- Bob Toomey

LeeH again:

So of course I went to see The Wild Bunch.

It was paired with The Professionals (which I'd seen before) and they made an interesting bill. They're both set in roughly the same place, and period, and both concern a group of men together. The Professionals was an example of taking a lot of fine old familiar ideas and arranging them to push the audience's buttons, filling in long gaps with the usual spectacular scenery and Elmer Bernstein grandeur.

The Wild Bunch had no long gaps. It was an example of taking a lot of fine old familiar ideas, peeling away the triteness and exploring the basic values which made them worth using in the first place -- the whole thing done as a smash bang action adventure.

The Wild Bunch opens with a familiar sort of scene: the robbers are riding into town to pull off a job, but there is an ambush waiting for

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them. Seen it before, huh? Not the way Peckinpah does it.

There is a natural born basic cruelty in children. The violence committed by children in their innocence may not be evil in motivation, but it still hurts.

The Wild Bunch is, indeed, violent. It is ruthless toward the audience in its violence. Watching it, one might get the impression that violence is not always very nice.

The violence is so strong and makes such an impression that I am not surprised some people feel it dominated the film. But it is only a part of the total. The picture itself is about the relationships among men: about the individual's code of honor (not the Gene Autrey code, but the kind real people sometimes have). Throughout the picture, Peckinpah explores the theme of a man's word, his bond, his obligation.

The film doesn't answer questions concerning morality, human frailty, and the like, but rather explored them. Value judgements regarding the characters are made only as a matter of expediency in connection with secondary characters. About the people shown in depth, we must make our own judgements, if judgements must be made. Whether the robbers are good guys or bad guys is not an issue. And I, personally, didn't feel that the good or evil of encroaching civilization was an issue either. Peckinpah wasn't dealing with questions of good or evil at all, as far as I could see, but rather with questions of human beings.

And he did a damned good job of it.

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This has been the August 1971 issue of SELF-PRESERVATION, edited by Lee Hoffman, mimeoed by Bill Evans. It arises from sheer desperation. At the present moment, the editor's address as of publication is unknown.

Lee Hoffman
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