

AGGIES REMEMBER

A MICKEY MOUSE PICNIC DAY

BY PETER STEKEL '75

When I was a small child, my favorite ride at Disneyland was the tram from the parking lot to the main gate. In my family, we called it the "Mickey Mouse." When I grew up I wanted to drive the Mickey Mouse. I could have chosen to rappel down the Matterhorn in a Tyrolean hat, but the Mickey Mouse was what I wanted. As the cab belched black diesel exhaust, I would pull four long railroad cars filled with people. We would navigate the parking lot, articulating and disarticulating around curves as I barely avoided clipping the bumpers of Edsels and Cadillacs or crashing into inattentive walkers.

Arriving at Davis in 1973 I had yet to fulfill my dream. During my first Picnic Day I watched as families were shuttled around campus on trams that resembled my childhood object of desire. Inquiries revealed that the driver of the tram was a student volunteer. So was the tour guide who spoke authoritatively into a microphone, "That is Mrak Hall" or "Note the plaque by the engineering building that says $E = MC^2$."

The very next Monday I volunteered to be a tram driver for next year's Picnic Day. I would have two hours on the UC Davis Mickey Mouse. The next 12 months were spent in planning my tram driving escapades. Should I hijack the tram and go careening through campus with Klaxon horn blaring? If I jumped the curb by the cork oaks encircling the Quad, panicked tourists diving for cover to avoid being ground beneath my wheels, could I disappear behind East Hall before the campus cops caught up to me?

Oh, the dreams! Oh, the plans I made! The magic day arrived. All I needed to do was pick up the tram keys from the previous driver in the parking lot beside the high-rise dorms.

I got there early and met Julie, my tour guide. She carried a tall plastic water bottle and was dressed to impress. I was dressed to distress, having had lots of time to create an

outrageous costume befitting my position. I'm not sure what upset Julie most: my psychedelic raiment, the feathered plumes extending from my head or the bandoliers draped across my chest. It could have been the cavalry saber dangling from my turquoise belt. In any event, we didn't get along with each other from the get-go.

Julie had a stack of note cards and a route map. She kept the former and handed me the latter. "Note each red X," she instructed. "You will stop for exactly 20 seconds while I read from a card." Disappointment cascaded over Julie's face when I told her I didn't own a watch. With no small amount of trepidation, she handed me hers.

Our guests began to arrive, singly and in groups. I greeted each person with a bow and a flourish of my scarf-festooned sleeves. I offered my arm to the ladies and commented, "Thy noble steed awaits!" Some adults ignored me. Most entered into the theater of the event. Small children pointed at me and laughed. Julie glared.

When the two long cars were fully peopled, Julie launched into her shtick. She welcomed everybody to Picnic Day, gave a synopsis of her favorite events happening that afternoon and previewed the upcoming ride through campus. Finishing, she gave me a formal nod of her head.

I turned the ignition key. The engine sparked into life. After releasing the hand brake I floored the accelerator. The automatic transmission responded with the swiftness and grace of a Galápagos Island turtle.

We sped away at velocities designed to give toddlers pause for reflection. We did a few turns around the parking lot, narrowly avoiding an encounter with several large American automobiles that were parked in stalls designed for Datsuns and Toyotas. This served as sufficient practice for my steering, and then we were off!

We made it to the fourth, maybe fifth,



Stekel in 1975 in his "dressed to distress" Picnic Day outfit.

stop on Julie's map when the tram developed a mind of its own. I honestly don't know what happened to it. The last thing I remember was a young boy, or it could have been a young girl, saying something about wanting to see the cows.

In the haze of memory—or was it a dream?—I recall a barn with open doors. The tram fit quite nicely through the opening, though the front end was out long before the back end was in. From the air we must have resembled a hot dog within a barn-like bun.

Then I recollect things really getting out of hand. I recall a large brick building with lots of windows. There are many steps leading up to the front door; the front car makes it just fine, but they present some difficulty for the rear car of the Mickey Mouse. Some of the passengers singing a frat drinking song rock the rear car back and forth so that it comes off its hitch. The car starts to roll down a slight incline but soccer players from a nearby field run to the rescue.

By this time Julie has lost her note cards, and the contents of her water bottle have been poured over my head, perhaps in the mistaken belief that the driver needs waking up or some cooling refreshment.

I admit, I may have exaggerated here and there, but it has been 25 years. Memory, as any historian can tell you, is a fragile thing and subject to the whims of time and interpretation. One thing I can say for sure: My stint in the driver's seat of the UC Davis Mickey Mouse was the answer to my very first dream in life.

Peter Stekel '75 is a writer and humorist living in Seattle.



Do you have a campus memory to share? Send it to UC Davis Magazine, UC Davis, One Shields Ave., Davis, CA 95616-8687. We pay \$150 for published articles.

Should I hijack the tram and go careening through campus with Klaxon horn blaring?