

City by City

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Maple Shade



"Welcome to Maple Shade." Thomas V. Hartmann.

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If Maple Shade, New Jersey, is to be famous for anything, if there is any reason it makes it into the history books, it is for what occurs there in the early morning hours on June 12, 1950. That's when two 20-year-old classmates from Crozer

Theological Seminary in Chester, PA, go out for a ride in the country with their dates. They pull off Route 73 to Mary's Café on Main Street. It is 12:45am. They sit down to be served.

The young men and their dates are black, and the waitress proceeds to ignore them. The men walk to the counter and order beers. The barkeep, Ernest Nicholls, also the owner, tells them the "best thing" would be for them to leave. The young men refuse, and sit back down at the table.

"I want you out of here!" Nicholls shouts, and takes out a pistol; other accounts say he takes out a shotgun. "I'd kill for less!"

He chases them out to the parking lot. He fires into the roof; other accounts have him shooting into the South Jersey sky.

The four leave, frightened, then angry, and drive down Main Street to the police station and file a complaint, which all four sign: Pearl E. Smith and Doris Wilson, who list their occupations as teacher and policewoman, along with the two young seminarians from Pennsylvania: Walter R. McCall and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Nicholls is arrested. The Camden chapter of the NAACP files suit. The case is dismissed three months later, however, when witnesses from the bar—three Penn students—refuse to testify.

Most King biographers categorize the incident in Maple Shade as a formative epiphany. Some people even describe Mary's Café as the birthplace of the modern civil rights movement in America.

Maple Shade is a place that is pleased with its small-mindedness. It was and is a working-to-middle class town, proud of its outsider status as a blue collar island in a sea of richer towns: Cherry Hill, Moorestown, Haddonfield. There are other poor towns in South Jersey—Gloucester, Vineland, parts of Camden—but Shaders never mix with other towns, rich or poor.

“There’s a carload of people from Cinnaminson at the custard stand,” somebody would say while sledding on a hill. “Let’s help beat the shit out of them!”

Growing up, the King story was told to me with either tempered shame or perverse pride. Race certainly has a lot to do with it: Maple Shade is overwhelmingly white, born out of white flight after the war, had KKK marches in the 1920s, and is currently home to a leading white power record label. It’s also not, to use a term I have always hated, white trash. Still, I’ve sat next to old-timers in bars who said that King and his friend should have known better, that they were just a couple of black guys coming into The Shade. You don’t go to The Shade, one man told me, much less a local bar at one o’clock in the morning, if you’re a black guy.

It wasn’t clear to me if this man was talking about 1950 or the present day.

My mother’s parents moved to The Shade and bought a house on Melrose Avenue after the war. My grandfather, who spent the Depression eel-fishing in the Schuylkill River and World War II aboard the USS Crescent City in the Pacific, worked a series of jobs there: milk man, non-union welder, and, finally, printer of New Jersey Turnpike toll tickets. Any homogenous blue collar town builds a wall around itself, circles its wagons, marks off its own territory. It made sense that, when folks from Philly’s working-class neighborhoods—Kensington, Fishtown, South Philly—came to Maple Shade, they brought insularity and prejudices with them.

My mom grew up in Maple Shade. My dad met my mom on Market Street in Philadelphia, where she worked as a secretary and he was stationed in the Navy. He came courting at my grandparents’ house, which was by then on Mecray Lane. And when they married, they moved five blocks down the street. My father worked as a local delivery truck driver, my mother a part-time secretary at the Catholic elementary school that she and then my sister and I attended. My father loaded up 18-wheelers on the night shift, brutal work, on a Teamster’s wage. We grew up comfortably, in the United States of America, oblivious to what we didn’t have or couldn’t afford. “Like most Americans,” H.L. Mencken wrote, “I’ve spent the better part of my life laughing.” Growing up, Shaders were clannish, but also no-nonsense and helpful. Every family knew every other family by siblings or neighborhood.

Shaders had the sidewalk sale each September and the Jaycee Carnival each summer; they bought rubber parachute men for their kids at the 5 and 10. Shaders worked hard and went home, or they went to a bar—there were so many bars along one mile on Main Street (20) that Maple Shade was rumored to appear in record books. Shader guys played baseball and football and drank beer in the woods. Shader girls joined the cheerleading squad or played field hockey and drank beer in the woods. I played trombone and wore glasses that remained tinted indoors. I prayed to Our Lord Jesus Christ that my family could afford the monthly payments for me to go out of town to Catholic high school. I could not play baseball well and did not drink beer in the woods.

Shaders are prickly about how they are perceived. As I write this, I know that my stepfather Bill, an honorable and friendly dude and Vietnam vet who was my mom's prom date in 1965 and reunited with her 25 years later in a marriage so Romantic and small town it makes me blush, will tell me again that I should "stop picking on Maple Shade," that I have it all wrong. My mother attributes her husband's boosterism to having never worked in town or raised kids there. If I had a chance to explain to him, I'd say picking on The Shade is only half the story, that in a way I had to hate the place in order to leave it, and once I did, I saw how it was the only genuine and interesting place I'd ever lived.

When I moved to New York to go to graduate school, I'd encounter union organizers, activists, poets, fresh out of colleges that all seemed to end with -n—Oberlin, Bowdoin, Wesleyan. They were ready to join the revolution, any revolution. I wondered, sometimes to their face, whether, if I could transport them via holodeck to some bar in Maple Shade, they would feel the same way about their cause, whether they thought that it was worth it to fight for Shaders' rights, these particularly crude people I love, moderate Democrats whose dads and moms worked as bricklayers, telephone linemen, jig and dye makers, plumbers, stood behind machines at coat factories, loaded coal trucks, operated heavy equipment, built ships. Every Shader I've known, much to their credit, saw through protest kids as people who had the time to march around out of noblesse oblige. Shaders don't put it that way. They just don't need or want help. They're doing fine on their own.

That independent streak is also Maple Shade's undoing. In *The Clustering of America*, Michael Weiss cites Maple Shade as an epicenter of "Blue Chip Blues," "middle class people with working class values" who missed out on the waves of economic changes since the 1980s. Most of the 19,000 residents have not completed college, he writes, and don't necessarily see the value in a degree.

"As long as the kids can learn a trade and make some money at it," Weiss quotes one Maple Shade parent, "then we're happy."

You don't need to be an actuary to predict where this goes. Twenty years after Weiss's book, the country's manufacturing base gutted, Shaders still fall behind the national averages of highest education level attained (some college, associate, bachelors, graduate). One of the Shade's many paradoxes is how such a tight-knit town with solid families fails to pivot from blue to white collar or service jobs. Among Shaders my age, those who stopped at high school have iffy jobs (mall jobs, bartenders, non-union construction), and college grads, who mostly left town, have good ones (teachers, bank managers, accountants). At my sister's 1985 graduation, I remember the principal handing out fifty-dollar scholarships for books to go to beauty school. One student was offered a full ride to Trenton State.

People didn't talk about college in the Shade. You talked about which car you would buy once you started working. But I didn't want to learn a trade. I didn't care about making money, especially after my dad was laid off from his job. In the early 1980s, the trucking and just about every other industry began to unravel. My grandfather drove my mom out of town to discount groceries to spend her Food Stamps without embarrassment. To be poor in Maple Shade is to remind others how they are just a couple paychecks away from being poor themselves.

In 1983, I was walking up to the Hilltop Diner to play some Defender when I met Tom Hartman.

I lived on 351 West Woodlawn, which ends in a curve, around a sewage processing plant, and continues up Park Avenue, and that is where Tom lived with his parents in a pink rancher. His parents owned a liquor store, and he was a senior at Maple

Shade High. I remember striking out to him in CYO. As a kid, his mom called in to check on Tommy, and my mom the school secretary would answer the phone to reassure her that her son is OK. I was admiring his metallic blue Chevy muscle car in his driveway, when I heard him shout to me from his front door.

“So, Nester, I hear you’re into music.”

Tom always wore nice clothes and the latest sneakers. He was a husky pants wearer like me, but he did not wear the usual Deep Purple shirt and sparse mustache. He carried himself like an athlete. He played basketball with dudes who beat me up. I was surprised he knew my name.

“Yeah, sure. I have 250 records and 100 tapes. I haven’t counted my 45s.” Such a catalogue list must have made Tom smile. Sure, you have a collection. But what’s actually in your collection?

“Are you into punk rock at all?”

This question sounds corny now. Who isn’t “into” punk rock? But such a question in Maple Shade, where FM rock issued out of every bitchin’ Camaro or F150, where girls sat barefoot on Dodge hoods and sipped warm beer, where no one would predict they’d all be listening to country in 30 years—but they would be!—to ask someone a question about punk rock was like to asking if you read Communist literature in the 1950s. I said that I was, in fact, “into punk rock,” or at least curious, and he went back inside.

“I have Ramones albums,” I said. “That’s about it. My favorite new band now is R.E.M.”

“They’re alright,” Tom said. “But they’re too commercial.”

He goes back into his house, and brings out a short stack of LPs, all in pristine condition, some I read about in *Record*, *Musician*, *The Bob* and other music rags I subscribed to.

“Why don’t you borrow these and let me know what you think?”

If I could point to one moment where I was assured there was a way out of Maple Shade at least in my mind, where I could say there is a Before and an After, where someone or some force interceded and changed the way I look at the world, it would be when Tom Hartman handed to 13-year-old me the following records: Hüsker Dü's *Zen Arcade*, Stiff Little Fingers' *Inflammable Material*, the first Bad Brains LP, *Another Music in a Different Kitchen* by the Buzzcocks, Wire's *Pink Flag*, and *Snap!*, the greatest hits collection by his favorite band and soon to be one of mine, The Jam.

I turned around to go back to my house. I would never play Defender with the stoners from town again. I would stop listening to Foreigner and Billy Joel and Blondie. Some of these records were played so much over the course of the next two weeks that I had to go to Sound Odyssey in the Cherry Hill Mall to buy Tom replacements.

Whenever I am in the town's limits, I drive by my old house on West Woodlawn to see how the owners are treating the ancestral home. My wife has grown tired of these detours. My sister drove by once and offered the current owners to go to Home Depot to replace the closet door where our parents penciled in our heights growing up.

A couple years ago, I drove up to the Wawa on Forklanding Road, where all the Shaders used to confer in the parking lot with their monster trucks, and I saw a couple of people in colored mohawks. Colored mohawks! I had rocks thrown at me because I listened to Squeeze on my boombox, and these kids were openly embracing funny haircuts and—could it be?—one of them was wearing a Black Flag t-shirt?

It felt, somehow, anticlimactic. I didn't feel like a trailblazing pioneer as one of the few punk new-wavers in town in the 1980s; it was a means to escape the decrepit souls of my 08052 Zip Code. Still, it felt ingenuine how these young men were out in the open like this. They should be in basements, with headphones on, swapping import 45s they bought on trips to Third Street Jazz in Philadelphia. They should respect the provincial Maple Shade I knew. But now of course there's no

monoculture to rebel against, and these kids couldn't muster the wanderlust to escape the Wawa parking lot, much less start a revolution. If anything, the Shaders' stares they elicited were the same as if they dressed as Civil War reenactors.

This particular occasion was on the day I attended the viewing for my grandmother, who worked as the township manager's secretary for almost 20 years. Hundreds of people came. I wept openly as I hugged and shook the hands of Catholic nuns, policemen, neighbors, people I never saw before and will never see again.

We used to say that Martin Luther King was thrown out of The Jade, which is what Mary's Café was known as when I was growing up. Its last incarnation was as The Moorestown Pub, a name that's hilarious to anyone from the area. In a town with bar names like Jay's Elbow Room and the Jug Handle Inn and The Alden, anything with the word "Pub" in it sounded pretentious, and this pub was not in Moorestown. One of the country's wealthiest towns, named by Money magazine as the nation's Best Place to Live, Moorestown is also a dry town founded by Quakers. The bar closed, overgrown with weeds, then bulldozed into another ramp to the highway. One historian has started a petition to place a plaque there, memorializing the King incident.

I used to zoom past The Jade on my bike along a hill out of town as I made my way to my job at Sunshine Car Wash. "A Town Called Malice," a song by my new favorite band The Jam, blasted on my Walkman. I'd skid out on the iced-over driveway, crash into the tip box, grab towels from a shopping cart, and dry off the windshields of Moorestown doctors.

Also in 1950, the year Martin Luther King Jr. was run out of Maple Shade: my mother's parents take Sunday drives across the Ben Franklin Bridge, looking for a house in the newly formed Maple Shade Township. They call the new houses, built out of apple and peach orchards, "God's Country."

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