

*Dave Crook, a married veteran from Lancaster, Ohio, leaves us no doubt that he has known a man.*

## TOM GORDON: A PORTRAIT



Ted Shaw

By DAVID L. CROOK

After Tom Gordon left, my wife closed the door, emptied the ashtrays, straightened up the living room, and we got ready for bed. While I was in the shower, we talked about the evening. Sue was amazed—even now is not sure that Tom was real. But I've known him for seven years, and I can't say I'm not puzzled at times. Tom is a person who stays in your mind. He is a conversation piece in any company; then later, when the company has gone home, he is still there — in your mind. That's the way it was the evening he visited us. We talked about him in a general way, and then we spoke of other things. But when the bed light was out and my wife asleep, Tom came back to my mind.

The summer after I graduated from high school, I worked for George Richards, a civil engineer, to help pay for college. Richards had signed a contract to survey part of a pipe line

that was to be laid across Pennsylvania from Texas to New Jersey, and I got a job on one of his crews. Our job was to stake out the right-of-way and prepare a basic strip map—but first we had to

probe out the old line that had been laid some years before. This was done with steel probe rods and old army mine detectors. Then we chained off the distance, measuring the roads, fences, powerlines, creeks and other obstacles, natural and man-made. Ours was a four man crew; the foreman, who kept the field book; two probers, and a chainman. Tom Gordon was the foreman and I was the chainman.

I had spoken to Richards early in the spring, telling him that I would like to get a job for the summer that would be out-of-doors. The evening of our high school commencement exercises, he called and said to be at his office at 6:30 the next morning. Mother packed a lunch big enough for an entire crew, and I was at the office at 6 a.m., ready and waiting. About 6:20, the two probers arrived. One of them, Bill Farmer, a dark haired phlegmatic fellow, I had seen around town before. The other was a person I did not know—a red-faced, balding man of about forty-five, and Bill Farmer introduced him as Amos Burdeen. We talked, got acquainted, and waited.

Richards came, unlocked the door, and we all went in and sat down. While he was explaining the wage scale to me, he kept glancing at his watch. Precisely at 6:30 Tom Gordon walked in. He was wearing an undershirt, seersucker pants that had no knees, brown and white oxfords, and no socks. He was about 5'4" or 5'5" and probably weighed 165 or 170. His hands, arms and shoulders seemed a little large for his body and legs. His light brown hair was sun-bleached and coarse, and stood up on his head like a mane. He appeared to be twenty-one or twenty-two, but later I found out he was thirty.

"This is Dave Crook, the new man for your crew. Better put him on the chain," Richards said.

"Tom Gordon," he said, shaking my hand. "We better get started."

We chained a half a mile or so that day while I was learning the work. Half a mile isn't much chaining, but my legs, back and arms ached as if we had covered thirty miles. That evening on my way home, I fell asleep in the car. When we got back to town, Tom woke me and said, "If you last a week, Dave, you've got it licked," and was gone.

I lasted the week out and found he was right.

By the middle of June we had to travel so far to get to the job that it became necessary to move to the next town. The first place

we stayed was a two room cabin in a second-rate auto court in Easton, Pennsylvania. Tom and I had one room of the cabin, and Burdeen and Farmer had the other.

Tom had spent a lot of time traveling and he knew how to do so easily and economically. He carried his clothes, toothbrush, tooth paste and razor in a paper sack, and said the only thing you really need to carry on the road was a toothbrush. He gave me no little ribbing over my wardrobe—as he called my suitcase. The only difference between his work clothes and dress-up clothes was age. He wore old slacks, faded sport shirts and oxfords on the job all summer. About the middle of the summer he bought a new outfit, and began to wear the clothes he had been using for dress to work in.

We would get in from the job about 4:30, have supper and go to the motor court. It took about two hours for all four of us to get cleaned up. We would lie around telling tales or playing nickel stud poker. About 7:00 we would get dressed and go downtown.

Usually we stopped at a drug store on the main street, for an ice cream soda. After that we'd go to a bar across the street for a drink or two, and then to bed.

One evening we varied our routine and ended up in the bar about 10 p.m. A few boys we knew from the right-of-way crew were there, so we sat down with them. Payday was one day past and everyone was buying drinks by the round. After an hour or so things began to get out of hand. Finally the bartender said we had to leave, so we went to another bar. By midnight, the right-of-way boys had left us, and we continued on alone. Because of my age I couldn't get served at about every other place we stopped, so Tom would order a full round and then drink my share. As the last bar was closing, he bought six beers to go and we headed for the cabin. Everyone seemed pretty sensible except Tom. He insisted on driving, threw the bottles as he emptied them at passing cars, and kept up a constant chattering. Banks and Farmer were out cold or asleep in the back seat, when Tom spoke.

"Somebody give me a pimp stick!"

I handed him a cigarette.

"I can't smoke it dry."

The very moment I got it lighted for him, he threw it out the window, tilted his head back and began to sing in a not-unpleasant tenor: "I sing of Olaf, a glad objector—"

"Gordon, I don't care who you sing about, but for Christ's sake watch where you're going!"

"Whose warming heart recoiled with war—"

"Tom, would you please watch the road?"

"And sir, while kneeling upon this rag,  
I will not kiss your goddam flag."

We finally got to the motor court and Tom parked the car in the middle of the driveway. While we walked to the cabin, he kept talking about finishing the job, once it was started. As I unlocked the door, he said goodbye and stomped off.

"Let him go," Burdeen said. So we went to bed, but I left the door unlocked.

Half an hour later Tom came back, singing at the top of his voice. He stumbled up the porch—the song petered out in the midst of a line; he began to cough and I heard him get sick. He came in, fumbled for the light, and when he couldn't find it, began to undress in the dark.

"You all right?" I asked.

He didn't answer.

"You better unlock the door."

Again no answer.

"Do you want a cigarette?"

Still no answer but the sound of a dead weight hitting a cot. I got out of my bed but he was sound asleep when I reached the light. During the night he was sick again, this time between the bed and the wall. In the morning he told me to get the car while he made with the mopping. When I stuck my head in the door I saw him mopping—dry—with the sheet off his bed.

We spent most of the next day under shade trees. When we came in that evening, our suitcases and Tom's potato sack of clothes were on the front porch as though waiting for the moving van. We finally found rooms that night, but we had to split the crew up—Tom and I in one house, and Farmer and Burdeen in another. To my knowledge Tom didn't drink any more that summer. But during that one evening—I computed it later—he drank twenty-four bottles of beer and at least a quart of other mixtures and blends of alcohol.

The rest of our time in Easton was rather uneventful. All of us were trying to save money and for that reason we stopped going to the bar. Instead we'd go to the drug store and then back to our rooms. Tom and I talked for hours in the evenings and gradually

the story of his life began to emerge and fall into a chronological pattern.

He was born in 1920, the sixth of seventeen children. Both of his parents are living, as are thirteen of his brothers and sisters. All seven of Tom's sisters have married, and he explained with pride that not one has been divorced, although one died in an automobile accident. All of his brothers—save Tom and the youngest Gordon, age eighteen—have married and like their sisters, none are divorced. Two of the brothers died in World War II, and four of the eight boys now living have college degrees. The miracle in all of this—as Tom put it—is that his father has never been regularly employed *because he could never find a job he really liked.*

The summer of 1936, Tom got tired of home and hunger—there had never been an abundance of food on the Gordon table and the depression made matters much worse—so he traveled the country, riding the freight trains. He often talked of the jungle camps and knights of the road. One day on the job we were crossing a railroad when a long freight came lumbering down the line. Half way back, on top of one of the cars there was what appeared to be a pasteboard box.

"I wonder what's in that box?" I said idly.

"What will you give to find out?" Tom said.

"Two-bits."

"It's a deal."

With that he walked up the cinder bank and waited. He waved to the engineer and fireman. Then, as the first box car rumbled up, he took a few quick steps and swung on the side ladder. He climbed to the top, ran back the train to the box, picked it up with some effort, looked in, put it back down, climbed down the side ladder and swung to the ground, then waved to the brakeman in the caboose. The train was doing at least thirty-five miles an hour, and when he was on the ground again he was about a hundred yards down the track. When he walked back I asked what was in the box.

"A hobo's head," he answered.

"A what?"

"A hobo's head."

"What in the hell is a hobo's head?"

"Don't you know?" he said. Then he changed the subject by explaining the art of boarding a moving freight train, and to this day I don't know what was in that box.

The summer he was nineteen, Tom had ridden a bicycle from Pennsylvania to Maine, from Maine to Virginia, and from Virginia to Pennsylvania. On this trip—he explained—he just wanted to see the countryside before he had to see from eyes corrupted by a college education. He did enter college that fall, his way paid by an athletic scholarship. But the athletic scholarship wasn't renewed because he wouldn't keep training rules and had been dropped from the team before the first game. Tom smiled as he told me this—and then explained before I could ask—he had won an academic scholarship for the next year. Then in the middle of his junior year he had been drafted.

During the war he had stayed in the States, due to some physical disorder, which he never explained to me. He didn't talk much about the army, except to say he had had numerous difficulties with army discipline, but was given an honorable discharge.

After the war he went back to college—or should I say colleges. He couldn't decide what to study, so he floated from one school to another. He had been asked to leave some of them, for reasons varying from hitting a professor during an argument, to being caught soliciting for three girls he was keeping in a house trailer. His G. I. Bill ran out in 1948. By that time he had attended five universities, had two hundred and fifty credit hours on his record, and no degree. He had majored—he savored this word—in engineering, mathematics, history and English. After he quit college he went to Mexico twice, had numerous jobs, and made his beginning on the pipe line two weeks before I started to work. That he had become a foreman of a surveying crew in two weeks' time he dismissed with a wave of his hand and the words: "I'd rather talk women."

There doesn't appear to be any place to begin to tell about Tom and women. As I said, he was unmarried. His reason for this, I think, he borrowed from Sherwood Anderson. It was: "Why buy a cow when milk is so cheap?"

His other advice concerning women was not to fool around with college girls. "Too predatory," he said. "They like to see a man at the breakfast table instead of the bedroom door. Me, I stick to unmarried school teachers."

This is the way it went that summer. He told me stories of freight trains, jungle camps, drinking, fights, jail—stories of the depression, college, and many jobs, and of course many stories about

women. He said that books are to be read, not put on shelves, and that money is only to be spent.

"I'm a consumer, not a collector," he told me.

By the middle of August we had completed the stretch of work sublet to Richards. The last day of work ended just like all that had preceded it, and when Tom said goodbye, it was as if we were to meet the next morning. I got ready to go to college and for the most part forgot about Tom. But when I went to school that fall I felt very wise and as if I possessed many secrets the other freshmen would be a long time acquiring.

It was not until the next August that I saw Tom again. One afternoon about four o'clock he called and said he would pick me up. Some minutes later he drove up in a late model sedan. I got in and we headed for a bar.

He looked tan and trim and could have been easily mistaken for a golf pro. He was wearing expensive sport clothes that would have been acceptable anywhere such apparel could be worn. We stopped at a neighborhood bar, ordered drinks, and Tom brought me up-to-date on what he had been doing.

After our surveying job had finished, he had worked on another section of the pipe line as an engineer and trouble-shooter. He had gotten a considerable wage increase, a sizeable expense account, and a company jeep for transportation. He said he had been saving money and was courting a war widow he met in a bar. Things went well with the widow until her children got on Tom's nerves and he left her. Then a few weeks later, he felt remorseful and went on a drunk that lasted from Friday afternoon until the following Monday. When he sobered up, he discovered he was in Philadelphia and had lost the company jeep. He walked the streets of Philadelphia for two days, and by the time he found the jeep he had lost his job.

He said that he was getting restless, so he took his savings, bought a used car and headed for Brownsville, Texas, to see one of his brothers who worked on the border patrol. One evening as he was on his way through Oklahoma he met a high school Spanish teacher in a restaurant. She was traveling by bus to Mexico City. He altered his plans and convinced her they should see Mexico City together. His money gave out after about a week of night clubs and bull fights, so they started on her savings. Just how long that lasted he didn't say. By the time he got back to the States he had no money, no car, and only the clothes he was wearing.

"I had put our last ten on a twenty-to-one shot and gave her the ticket," he said.

This didn't sound like Tom.

"Well the damn horse won. I stopped for a drink, and I haven't seen her since."

"You lost two hundred bucks then?" I asked.

"Yeah, but it was worth it, I guess. She was beginning to bother me."

He hitch-hiked back to Pennsylvania, drew unemployment compensation for a time, and then got a job as foreman on a highway job from Reading to Allentown. That job was finished in August and Tom decided to go back to college. He had enough money to take care of one year if he sold his car. He wasn't sure what he was going to study, but he said he wanted to take some courses in psychology and philosophy for certain.

"Why psychology?" I asked.

Tom's face slowly wrinkled with the grin of a home-spun philosopher.

"So I can figure that school teaching babe out and save two hundred bucks the next time."

"And the philosophy?"

"Oh I read a book on Taoism while I was drawing unemployment, and I want to have a look at some philosophy."

"You going Oriental?" I asked.

"No, but these damn Christians annoy the hell out of me with their smugness, and I want to have a few rocks to throw at them now and then."

When we parted that evening, Tom said we'd have to keep in close touch with one another. I didn't see him again for two and a half years.

During my junior year my father died, and I quit school to run the business he left.

About a year later Tom walked into the office. He was working in Reading at a factory as pattern and die designer. We had dinner together and as usual he brought me up-to-date. He had gone back to college and had stayed there for a semester and a half, then his money gave out, and he had been caught in the wave of futility that seemed to be going around at that time. Denying his own best instincts—as he put it—he took a job with a finance company as chase man. Six weeks later he went to Florida. When he came back to Pennsylvania he got the job in Reading.

"Guess who I met at the race track a couple of months ago?" he said.

"I don't have any idea."

"The school teacher who took me for two bills in Mexico. I was ready to pop her one when she handed me ten twenties and said, 'Thanks for the loan.' She has a dandy apartment in Reading, and I'm living there, collecting interest on the loan."

Tom and I saw each other every month or so until the middle of the summer.

He had become quite interested in music—especially jazz. Every so often on a Friday or Saturday we would go to Philadelphia or New York to hear some band or combo. Early in the summer we decided to go to Chicago to hell around for a few weeks. It was to be a vacation trip with excitement. We set the date to leave, and I made the arrangements at home. As the time for us to depart drew close, I realized that I hadn't heard from Tom for several weeks. The day we were to leave came—but not Tom. About a week later I got a post card from Nevada. It was a woman going to Reno for a divorce this time. Before he got back I had been drafted. Now, after having been in the army, I don't see how Tom ever managed to get an honorable discharge.

While I was in the army I met Sue and we decided to get married. We sent Tom an invitation and got a telegram from him just before the wedding. It read:

"Don't buy—price of milk hits all time low. Goodbye old pal. We'll miss you when you're gone."

He came to the reception but didn't go through the receiving line. Instead, he stood at the door, caught my eye and waved. Then he was gone.

Before I got out of the army, Sue and I decided I should come back to college. Last summer we made the arrangements and came to school in the fall, and last Sunday Tom Gordon knocked at our door.

He hadn't changed much, and he looked to be twenty-five instead of the thirty-five he is. He was wearing a brown suit and tie and his hair, which had gotten darker, still rose on his head like a mane.

The three of us sat down and talked. Tom was on his way to Pittsburgh to a new job. He had been offered \$900 a month as a designer with a large metal-products company. What was more amazing, the job he left was the one in Reading, and—he explained

with an almost apologetic smile—he had been there for four years. Then the old twinkle came back to his eyes and he began to talk about school teachers and Mexico. He had a new car that was full of clothes, books, records, and a phonograph. He had bought a piece of land and built a house near Lake Wyandotte. He said his drinking was now limited to good whiskey. He couldn't take beer, wine or rot-gut any more, and for the first time in his life, he has begun to plan for the future.

He was going to work for another three or four years, then build a house in Florida, and live there in the winter and in Pennsylvania in the summer. He had begun to study again, philosophy and Eastern theology. All this he told us in a few breaths—then he talked of going to Europe or Africa. Then, while we were eating supper, he said maybe he would go to Mexico and get an Indian woman who couldn't speak English, and marry her. He wanted to know what I thought about reincarnation, and said he was glad to see we didn't have a television set.

Later, at the door, leaving, he said he would come back in a month or so and take us to see his house at Lake Wyandotte. I wonder how long it will be.

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