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Either Pass or Pull Over

At one time or another, we've all been stuck driving behind someone in the passing lane on a thruway who toolled along, oblivious to the line of cars forming behind while they neither passed nor pulled back into the right hand lane. It seems that in driving, as in life in general, a good rule to get people to follow is *either pass or pull over*. When stuck behind someone dawdling along, we'd like them to either *get it done or give it up*.

by Marien Helz

Word Worth is a 2003 recipient of the Apex Award

The Other McCarthy Era

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A Rose



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for Allyson

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Either Pass or Pull Over

by Marien Helz

At one time or another, we've all been stuck driving behind someone in the passing lane on a thruway who tooled along, oblivious to the line of cars forming behind while they neither passed nor pulled back into the right hand lane. It seems that in driving, as in life in general, a good rule to get people to follow is *either pass or pull over*. When stuck behind someone dawdling along, we'd like them to either *get it done or give it up*. Annoying as these ditherers are, however, there are others who should command far more of our attention: the honkers and tailgaters.

At this point, the major cities in North America—and in much of the world for that matter—have multi-lane highways encircling them and leading outward toward the surrounding areas. At commuting hour, cars race at speeds from 75 to 100 miles an hour with barely a car length between them. This practice has resulted from time to time in horrendous pile-up crashes involving more than a hundred cars since they are all too close to stop in time to prevent being slammed into the car ahead of them. The wonder is that these multi-crashes don't occur more often, in spite of the skill built up by commuters to become proficient at driving a route they have internalized. The tailgaters who insist on driving too close behind the next car endanger hundreds of lives. With technology as highly developed as it is, there should be a method for determining distance between cars—and for focusing on that far more than on speed violations.

Many drivers pull in too closely after they have passed in addition to following too closely. The good drivers who try to keep the *one car length for every ten miles per hour of speed* rule in effect are constantly being cut off by tailgaters who pull into the space rather than allowing the correct distance. The tailgaters cause crashes and then go off leaving the scene of the accident they created.

Tailgaters are even worse when they are honkers. They cling to the bumper of a driver who is passing another car at a reasonable speed—usually somewhat above the speed limit—and lean on the horn. They want to go way above the limit, and resent anyone else on the road who adheres to the law. They also blast the horn on slow streets when the driver ahead of them doesn't jump the second before the stop light changes to green.

Someone did that to my father once. My father was a particularly good driver. For him, the car was an equalizer since his left leg had been crippled by polio in infancy, depriving him of participation in sports and many activities. When he drove, he could excel, and so he did, crossing the country many times in all weather. In approximately seventy-five years of driving, he received about three speeding tickets—nothing else—and had no crashes or accidents. Fools and poor drivers irritated him, but nothing annoyed him more than bad drivers who thought they were hot shots. Once one of those was behind him at a stop light, and the second before the light turned, the honker laid on the horn. My father pretended that he thought the honker was trying to be helpful and alert him to something wrong with the car, so he got out of the car, looked at the tires, walked around the car, looked at the other tires, looked over the car again, and then shrugged questioningly at the honker who sat chagrined as he waited.

On another occasion, my father was driving during a blizzard when a honker blasted past him nearly sliding into his car. It gratified him a few miles down the highway to see the other car with the driver sitting panting out of the door, white as the snow, after having spun out.

Macho fools have no place behind the wheel—especially in a snow storm. They take pride in thinking themselves above everyone, above common courtesy and common sense, and even above the laws of physics. One of them was once following one of my neighbors who was driving her twelve year old son home from school on very slippery roads during a severe winter storm. She is a particularly good driver, but doesn't especially make a point of it. A honker came up behind her, tailgating about a car length behind her bumper. She slowed down since she was not going to be pushed into driving badly, and realized that if the fool slid into her car, less damage would be done at lower speeds, and there would be less chance of personal injury to herself and her son. Perhaps because she was a woman, the honker thought he could get away with road rage and bullying, and laid on the horn non-stop.

She slowed down more, trying to force him to pass her. He wouldn't pass. He just wanted to force her to go faster. Finally, she slowed down to five miles per hour to force him to pass—which he finally did. By that time, she was pretty angry, and she was able to handle snow driving very well. She followed him ten inches from his bumper for a mile blasting the horn all the way until he pulled over and stopped. He wasn't capable of driving very fast even though he

had tried to bully her into speeding.

She says that she still regrets the terrible example she set for her son by responding to the road idiot, but otherwise, the rest of us can take pleasure in a honker getting what he thoroughly deserved.

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The Other McCarthy Era

Part I

by Aurelia Carter

There is a moment frozen in time (via candid photograph) from the 1938 Academy Awards banquet in which the young singer and actress Deanna Durbin sits across the table from ventriloquist Edgar Bergen. Durbin, 17, was to receive a special Oscar that night for her work as a child star in movies, and Bergen had been chosen to present it to her. In the



photograph they're at dinner, talking: soup has just been served though neither of them has touched it yet.

Bergen, who looks tired from constant hard work, but fulfilled and happy, is holding forth on something gentle and interesting—and Durbin is leaning slightly forward, listening, intelligent and engaged. The unguarded portrait is so lively that, more than 60 years later, one can almost feel the weight and pinch of the satin ribbon in Durbin's hair, or catch the hothouse, petally smell of the flowers in Bergen's boutonniere as his graceful magician's hands play with the stems of glasses on the table.

It's a picture of two people at the height of their professions—on this particular evening they're allowing themselves to relax, to receive compliments on their achievements, and to celebrate the achievements of

their colleagues. After 1939, less was heard of Deanna Durbin; she still sang in films, but the bulk of her success had been in the '30s. Edgar Bergen, on the other hand, when this photo was taken, was in the midst of a very sudden rise to great popularity: he was on the radio every week and appearing in about two movies a year. It had been found that the extremely witty ex-vaudevillian could make a national audience laugh, so the NBC radio network brought him back week after week following his first engagement on Rudy Vallee's *Fleischmann Hour*; finally they gave him a show of his own. Bergen was already in his late thirties, a fact which lent an attractive maturity to the casual, lithe humor that belied the enormous amount of work that went into it. He was intellectual, debonaire, and ever in calm, cheerful control of the situation. One felt that one could trust him implicitly.

Bergen's original name was Edgar John Berggren; his parents Nell and John had both come from Sweden, and owned a dairy farm in Decatur, Michigan. When he was about four, his parents took him and his older brother Clarence back to Sweden to visit for a year—the children returned speaking Swedish, naturally, and Bergen remained bilingual all his life.

He was born in 1903, on February 16th, so this year has marked his Centennial. In celebration, there have been international conventions focussing on his life and career—the two biggest being the annual conferences of the International Ventriloquists' Association, in Las Vegas, and of the Vent Haven Museum in Ft. Mitchell, Kentucky. As the most famous ventriloquist ever, Bergen is credited with revitalizing a profession which had fallen into antiquated clichés before vaudeville died out; literally thousands of individuals have taken up 'vent' to one degree or another after being inspired by Bergen and his apparently effortless hilarity. Of course, there have almost always been other extremely talented, innovative, funny ventriloquists around—Arthur Prince, The Great Lester, Señor Wences—the thing about

Bergen is that he was a performer and personality who happened to use ventriloquism: entertaining came first, and the specific skill was almost incidental.

As Bergen related to various interviewers from various media at various times in his life, he began imitating voices and animal sounds to amuse classmates in school; eventually someone informed him that he was a ventriloquist. "Not knowing what a ventriloquist was, at the time, I agreed," he later recalled. He checked the definition, assented more confidently, and sent away to Sears, Roebuck for the *Wizard's Manual*—a booklet explaining some principles of hypnotism and magic (including how to cut off a man's head and put it on a platter a yard from his body, an effect which, so far as we know, Bergen skipped), as well as ventriloquism. He tried all three but was most successful with ventriloquism, in which he had a head start, though he loved magic and continued to practice it for the rest of his life. Soon he was performing with a papier-mâché dummy: or ventriloquial figure, as they're more correctly known. As he got better and more professional gigs he wanted a more professional figure, and paid Chicago woodcarver Theodore Mack (and Son) a painful \$35 to produce one based on sketches Bergen himself had made of a streetwise Irish newsboy named Charlie.

Charlie McCarthy was ready in the spring of 1922, just as Bergen should have been preparing to graduate from high school. Unfortunately, he had been informed by his history teacher, Miss Angel, that he wasn't doing passing work and would probably fail her class. As his performance gigs were multiplying, he didn't feel too badly about his grades; in a student recital he even kidded the situation—Charlie was supposed to be another student, and Bergen asked him questions about how he was doing.

Bergen: Charlie, how are your teachers?

Charlie: I have Miss Angel for history.

Bergen: Miss Angel—that's a pretty name.

Charlie: Yes, well ... don't let the name fool you.
She grows horns at examination time.

The audience roared, and the next class day Bergen was asked to stay after in history.

"I didn't know you had those talents," Bergen later quoted Miss Angel as saying. "The world needs laughter more than it needs another history teacher. If you try, I'll help you graduate." He not only graduated, but Principal Brown (known as Square Deal Brown for his fairness and amiability) stepped in as well: "It'd be a shame to keep Charlie out of college just because you're stupid," he told the young performer, and helped him get into Northwestern University.

Bergen enrolled in Northwestern with a major in medicine, but soon switched to the School of Speech. He enjoyed the academic atmosphere, while occasionally getting called before the Dean for answering roll-call for absent fraternity brothers (who liked Charlie so much that they made him a member, too). "Charlie's voice carried on in ways that I could not," the introverted and well-mannered Bergen admitted, remembering times when said voice would disrupt college chapel programs. He was paying for his education with summer vaudeville stints, though, and via whatever engagements he could get with Charlie during the semester—and eventually the tuition became prohibitive. He went into vaudeville full-time.

"Charlie made traveling fun," Bergen said. "I'd take him into the observation cars on the train with me, and plague the passengers with small talk." Playing the West and Northwest on the Chautauqua circuit, under a tent, with other touring performers, the entertainer—now in his early 20s—had a fabulous time. Audiences were often unpredictable: Bergen long remembered one comprised solely of a woman and her dog ("and halfway through, the dog walked out"), and another of Native Americans who didn't speak English. ("Talk about laughs! ... I thought I'd never get any!") He quickly acquired the basics of knowledgeable performing, such as the principle that if you talk loud enough and fast enough no one'll notice how lousy you are, and continued to tour the whole country on more prestigious circuits. He also traveled abroad a great deal, performing in South America, Britain, and Europe; in Sweden he did his act in Swedish and even appeared before the royal family.



Critics noted that Bergen's sketches were personality- and situation-based—as opposed to consisting of a string of unrelated jokes and punchlines, as so many run-of-the-mill ventriloquist shows did. Although he was hardly the first to use the more sophisticated style, Bergen ultimately had an enormous influence on changing the clichéd way in which people viewed ventriloquism. Early on, Charlie could tease him about the profession's lowly, obsolete stereotype: "—Ventriloquist ...! Why, you went out with the bustle!"; by the end of Bergen's life, in the 1970s, *he* was the stereotype.

Ventriloquism, however, though fun, was not Bergen's goal. He intended to be a "real actor, whatever that is," or perhaps a musical-comedy star. Buster Keaton had become enormously popular in films with his deadpan character; Charlie Chaplin had the "Little Tramp" persona, and Harold Lloyd was Lonesome Luke for awhile before switching to the "Glasses Character." Bergen wanted to be known as a unique personality, too, and to that end produced his own silent short film, "The Lovin' Swede," which he hoped to use as a kind of screen test with motion picture companies. It never quite took off.

It takes a long time to develop a quality act; Bergen had one with Charlie McCarthy, and whenever he tried to go solo audiences and theater managers would recognize the less-practiced style. It's awfully hard to continue improving on failure if you have a definite success on hand, and Bergen never left the straightman/fresh kid combination for long.

In 1930 Warner Brothers' New York-based Vitaphone company made a film version of "The Operation," Bergen's vaudeville skit with Charlie as a cocky newsboy stricken ill and himself as the doctor. Eleven more short Vitaphone movies followed, between 1930 and '37, all of them based around sketches that Bergen wrote and performed with Charlie. (One of them was Mortimer Snerd's screen debut.) Meanwhile, Bergen continued to tour in vaudeville—though by the 1930s vaudeville was being squeezed out by sound films and radio shows, and performers had to find other venues. Bergen decided to try nightclubs, and put himself and Charlie in full evening dress in an attempt to better fit in with the cosmopolitan audience. (He'd originally thought of using *Esquire* magazine's dapper, white-haired, handlebar-mustached mascot Esky as a dummy; he asked permission and the publishers said yes, but at the last minute they reconsidered and said no. Bergen was grateful for the rest of his life.) Charlie, generally an all-American character, was even given a slight English accent to go along with the monocle.

Nightclubbing was generally reasonable, upscale work, in the 1930s, if unsteady, and of course one had to deal with intoxicated and/or indifferent audiences. At one point, at Chicago's Chez Paree, at a discouraging 3 a.m. show, Charlie suddenly turned on Bergen. "Who told you that you could ever be a ventriloquist?" he ranted furiously, as Bergen acted surprised and not quite sure what to do. "Bergen blushed, fidgeted, tried to put his hand over Charlie's mouth. 'Don't shush me!' Charlie continued ... [he] then turned on the customers and told them they were a disgrace to civilization," *Time* magazine hilariously related in a 1944 article. Charlie went on yelling, disgusted, as Bergen, horrified, set him on a chair and backed away in abject embarrassment. The patrons died with laughter, though the management wasn't sure about the whole thing. "I'm sorry—I just had to get that off my chest," Bergen apologized backstage.



The Chez Paree work led to an engagement with Manhattan's Rainbow Room, which led to society hostess Elsa Maxwell's invitation for Bergen (with Charlie) to heckle Noel Coward at a party. That went over very well, Coward delighted, and soon agents were arranging for Bergen to appear on Rudy Vallee's NBC radio program *The Fleischmann Hour*, sponsored by Standard Brands, on December 17th 1936.

"All week people have been asking me, why put a ventriloquist on radio?", Vallee began by way of introduction. "Why not?", he answered, carefully describing Charlie McCarthy and explaining that both McCarthy's and Edgar Bergen's voices were coming from Bergen. The show went splendidly, the national listening audience liked "them" very much, and they were invited back for the following week.



Bergen was thrilled about the request to return, but asked \$100 more for the next appearance because he was using up all his comic material; on stage you can say the same things day after day since the attendees are different, but once you tell a joke on radio it's gone—the same people will tune in to hear a performer the next time, and he or she must use new gags and situations to keep up the audience interest. He was given \$50 more, and invited back again for the week following that. Genuinely concerned about the material issue, he asked for a further \$100 for the third appearance. He was given another \$50 more, and invited back *again*. All of America, apparently, was listening to Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy.

Attune to the circumstance, Standard Brands hired Bergen for the new *Chase and Sanborn Hour*, to debut May 1937 in a Sunday evening time slot on NBC. Others set to appear regularly on the program were Don Ameche, Dorothy Lamour, conductor Werner Janssen, and, as the biggest star on the program (as

James Curtis describes in his excellent 2003 biography of Fields), W.C. Fields. It was a spectacular array, and additional guest stars would appear weekly. At first Bergen was terrified as to what he'd do about material for a regular show: "but I learned that you never know what you're capable of until you have a deadline." He moved to California, and never looked back.

*The **Other** McCarthy Era Part II to come in October*

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A Rose for Allyson

by Charles Miess

His hand trembled slightly as he wrote the words "Affectionately, Joe" at the bottom of her card. Joe had especially selected this card for her birthday knowing that the sentiments expressed were more for a lover than for a casual friend. His stomach was in a knot as he carefully placed it on her kitchen table along with a single white rose tinged with red at



the tips of the petals. "The die is cast," he said to himself solemnly. "Tonight will be the moment of truth." Joe knew that time was running out for him and that she might be his last chance for happiness.

Joe was a private person, Joe was a perfectionist, and Joe was a lonely man. He spent his life alone, but not in the usual sense, as he had married twice and had had children both times. And, it's not that he didn't like people. Joe was kind, generous, and sentimental almost to a fault. Like the time he repaired the refrigerator door for the single mom down the road and discovered that she had little more than a half jar of mayonnaise and a quarter loaf of plain white bread for her two hungry kids. Joe didn't charge her for his work, and later that day she found several grocery bags heaped with food outside her door. Joe appreciated a gracious "thank you,"—he wanted no more than that. Although he wasn't entirely aware of it, he feared that if anyone got too close, they could look into his soul and see him for the imperfect person that he was. From a distance, Joe could create the kind of image of himself that he wished to be.

Joe firmly believed that somewhere in the world there was someone for everyone. And it was his misfortune never to have found that *imperfect* woman who would be his *perfect* soul-mate. He spent his life daydreaming of that exquisite union filled with unconditional love. At 55, Joe was still in pretty good shape. He prided himself on his physical agility and his skill as a jack-of-all-trades. Those were some of the reasons Joe chose to be a home handyman for his second job. Perhaps another reason was Allyson.

Ally had recently inherited her Aunt Jane's home and property in the country. She lived there alone as her aunt had done for so many years. Joe had contracted with her to paint and repair the old two-story farmhouse. For the first two weeks, Joe scraped, primed, and repaired the outside of the house. Now he was ready for the part he liked best—painting. Joe was disappointed that Ally would not be home that afternoon. She was celebrating her thirty-sixth birthday with her dad and brother and she would not be back until late that night. Although she was nineteen years younger, Joe felt a growing attraction for Ally.

He already missed her cheerful "good afternoon you handsome man," each day that he started work.

Joe never failed to blush before replying "hello yourself, you good-looking woman—when are we going to run off to Australia together?"

"Whenever you're ready," she would return almost like a challenge.

Ally had a pleasant round face with fair skin and shoulder length brown hair. Her soft brown eyes reminded Joe of a young doe in the forest. It would be lonely working without her nearby. He was afraid, though, that to her, he was just a nice old man—and he was painfully reminded of that fact each morning when he looked into the bathroom mirror to trim his graying beard. Joe didn't feel old, though, and he sometimes forgot that he was.

The late afternoon sun was warm on his red-checked flannel shirt as Joe struggled with the heavy extension ladder. A

large boulder that served as an accent for Ally's flowerbed was directly under the peak and in the spot where he wanted to place the ladder. Reluctantly, he moved the ladder to one side and made his way up.

He stopped briefly near Ally's bedroom window. He could see her bed and her vanity and all the feminine things that seemed so foreign to his bachelor existence. Yet, they excited him in a way he had not felt in a long time. He imagined her sitting there fresh from a shower and brushing her shining hair. He could almost see the smooth curve of her breast through the opening in her half-buttoned pink bathrobe. He imagined her turning and chastising him playfully with her eyes as she slowly buttoned the top of the robe. Joe unconsciously started whistling "You Were Only Fooling, While I Was Falling In Love," as he continued up the ladder.

With the ladder offset, painting the peak would be difficult. Joe was not one to give up easily, however, nor one to avoid risks. He reached over, opened the attic window, and placed one foot on the windowsill with the other on the top rung of the ladder. To keep from falling backward, he placed his left hand on the inside of the eaves and with his right, dipped the four-inch brush in the can of white paint that was precariously hanging from the top of the window frame. "White is a good color for Ally," he said to himself. It was then that he noticed the bees.

Yellow jackets were entering and leaving a small hole where the eaves met at the top, and were apparently unaware of Joe's face no more than six inches away. Joe had a healthy respect for the sting of a yellow jacket, yet he knew that if he didn't breathe on them or move too fast they would not attack. Nevertheless, he felt edgy and vulnerable as he slowly and awkwardly painted around that hole. His senses were at a high state of readiness for any indication that the bees were annoyed.

At that moment, a hummingbird happened to fly by and pass within inches of Joe's ear. The hum and throb of its wings created an instant image in his mind of a giant bee about to plunge a two-inch stinger into his head. Joe reacted just as one would while waiting intently in front of a phone, expecting a call, and then it rings—he jumped. Joe tried desperately to regain his balance as the ladder started to slide along the wall. Like a movie in slow motion, Joe felt himself falling.

In an instant his life passed in front of his eyes. He was playing with alphabet blocks on a worn linoleum floor; he was in his dad's shop working on a home-made telescope; he felt salt air in his face and saw waves breaking from the prow of his navy ship; he was giving his first child a piggy back ride; he was placing a rose on Ally's table; and he had time for a hundred thoughts in-between.

The muffled crash of the ladder and paint can below brought Joe back to his senses. He found himself hanging precariously from the half-rotted sill of the attic window, not quite sure how he got there. Joe prayed that the sill would hold up under his weight, but found it surprisingly easy to pull himself up, through the window, and into the attic.

Joe's heart was beating wildly, but his face was pale and drawn from his near-death experience. When his heart finally stopped its fearful beating, he noticed a folded staircase attached to a trap door that went down into the house. He tried pushing the door down from the top. It must have been locked from the inside, as it would not open. Holding onto the rafters above, he jumped on the door but it still wouldn't budge. He spotted an old trunk in a dark corner. Perhaps there were clothes in it that he could tie together and make a rope to escape through the attic window. Unfortunately, the latch of the trunk was locked firmly. "Damn," thought Joe, "if only I had my tools with me." Joe calmly surveyed the remaining inventory in the attic: an old doll's head with a counterweight to open and close the eyes; a few dust coated pine boards; an ancient lampshade with thick wire frame and a covering of torn, yellowed cloth; and a long empty box that reminded Joe of a coffin.

The house was set back from the road and had a century old maple partially blocking the view of the highway and the neighboring farm. Joe had no choice except to wait for Ally. It would soon be dark and she would be coming home.

Joe was not a superstitious man, but he was spooked easily when alone at night. He couldn't help thinking of Ally recounting Aunt Jane's story that she often saw nighttime apparitions of her dead mother and sister standing in her bedroom doorway and smiling. With the full moon now throwing eerie shadows through the old maple and into the attic, Joe was starting to feel a sickening fear deep in the pit of his stomach. The yellow moonlight glimmering from the vacant eyes of the doll's head didn't help matters. Then, the voices started.

Unearthly voices seemed to emanate from inside the house and from outside the attic window. Joe buried his ears in his hands, but the ghostly sounds were not something heard. They were more like vibrations from another dimension that penetrated directly to his soul. The strange utterances seemed to be excited with his presence as they swelled and subsided around him. His terror mounted until he forced himself to think of Ally.

He remembered their first meeting when they shook hands on the agreement for his work. Joe could have sworn that she held his hand for an instant longer than was necessary. And he thought he saw an unspoken message in her soft brown eyes. Joe remembered the playful flirtations of the past two weeks. He wasn't sure if Ally was probing his feelings for her,

or just teasing an old man. He thought of the card and the rose and tried to imagine her reaction when she would find them. He fantasized holding her in his arms and visualized the smell of her hair and the scent of her perfume blending with her soft white skin.

The sounds ended as abruptly as they had started and left Joe in a deathly silence. Now Joe started feeling cold. The rational part of him wanted to believe it was night air from the open window. His fearful mind, however, suspected the chill was Aunt Jane and her ghostly kin passing by. He shrank into the corner terrified while keeping an anxious eye on the coffin-like box in the other corner.

After what seemed an eternity, Joe heard the trap door being pulled open and saw the stairs extend downward. He covered and listened with a mixture of fear and expectation to the muffled footsteps ascending the stairs. A form appeared through the opening and he froze until the moonlight glowed upon the face of Ally. "Ally! Ally!" he cried with relief, "God, am I glad to see you!" Ally continued up the stairs without answering.

"Ally, it's me, Joe, I've been trapped up here for hours," he continued. Ally went straight for the attic window as if Joe were not even there. She clutched his rose in her hand. Ally silently looked out at the moonlit splotch of moist white paint covering her flowerbed. She saw where it splashed up to unite with the dark red stain on the large rock far below. Joe watched in bewilderment as she gently closed the window, held the rose to her breast, and wept.



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