

*A near-penniless
country-boy/urbanite
wades onto a college
campus—awestruck.*

TOMMY MACK: A College Try

by THOMAS M. DIXON

Order the complete book from the publisher Booklocker.com

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/10130.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**



TOMMY MACK:

A College Try

A Memoir
& The 3rd book in the *Tommy Mack* series by:

Thomas Dixon

TOMMY MACK: A College Try
Copyright © 2018 by Thomas M. Dixon

The events herein are true, gathered from the best of the author's memory as well as written records. Many of the names and descriptions of people and places have been changed for protection of privacy.

All rights reserved. The scanning, uploading and distribution of this book via the Internet or any other means without the permission of the author is illegal and punishable by law. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

Printed on acid-free paper.

First edition, November 2018

Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-64438-373-5

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-64438-372-8

Please visit www.tommymackbooks.com for special requests, news of upcoming books, events, and other communications.

Permission has been granted for all photographs not created by the author. The author has full rights and privileges for use of the illustrations graciously supplied by Nathan Yoder of Yondr Studio. The author gives thanks to his wonderful editor, Susan Piperato, and the great publishing team at Booklocker.com — Angela, Richard, Ali, and especially Todd Engel, the king of cover design.

CONTENTS

Introduction.....	xi
I - THE ANDOVER AFFAIR.....	1
The Workplace.....	3
The Experience	15
II - DOVER	37
Freshman Exuberance.....	39
Changing Faces and Places.....	54
Love & Affection.....	74
III - RETURN TO ANDOVER	89
All Work and Some Play	91
About the “Y”	116
IV - RETURN TO DOVER	133
Sophomoric Realities.....	135
Life’s Choices.....	156
Rules, Ethics, and Foul Play	167
V - EPILOGUE	195
Tying Loose Ends	197
A Friend Indeed	209
Acknowledgments	237
About the Author	238
More About the Author.....	239
List of Illustrations and Photos	240

Introduction

This story begins in June 1971. For the past three years, I had planned, plodded, and prognosticated about my graduation from Conrad High School. My academic ranking left little to brag about. Nevertheless, I had mastered all necessary college prep courses, and, with state-funded tuition and encouragement from my dear friend Dr. Bob, I followed through with the paperwork and registered for the fall and spring semesters at Wesley Junior College in Dover, Delaware.

With all of that out of the way, I had little time to think or get excited about college life; Bud Morgan, another good friend, had lined up a summer job for me in Andover, Massachusetts, in a noble effort to keep me busy and out of trouble until my fall semester of college.

Wham!

So just two days after my last high school class, Dr. Bob had me boarding an airplane at New Castle Airport, headed for Boston and the Crown Estate, where I would be an assistant caretaker, working for Bud. It seemed that Mr. Crown, Bud's boss, wanted me up there right away. "The weeds are growing, and the grass needs mowing," Bud screamed over the phone, "so get your butt up here now." I guess money didn't matter to Mr. Crown, at least not at that point; he told me I could fly back to Delaware after two weeks of work, attend my graduation ceremony, then fly right back to Boston the next day. I found out later that my new employer had even paid the tab for my airline tickets. *What a nice thing to do*, I thought. *I think I'll like working for this guy*. And mostly, I did!

Wow! It's hard to believe that at that point, Bud, Bob, and I had been friends for only three years. Looking back, it seems as if we'd known each other for more like six years, at least, because so much had taken place in my life in the short time since I'd met them: my tenth-, eleventh-, and twelfth-grade years, for starters, which included three years of college preparatory courses, wrestling, and summer jobs working in the hot sun, not to mention family turmoil and my constantly being stressed out from dealing with the behavior of a delinquent younger brother and sister. Plus, should I mention that I also experienced three years of the usual teen angst? And let's not forget all the possible difficulties associated with being a teenager living on welfare; my family had found it necessary to accept government handouts of one form or another since well before I was born in 1952—right back to when F.D.R. established the welfare system in 1935. My alcoholic and abusive father, Harold "Sleepy" Dixon, had made sure of our dependence on federal and state aid. (For that story, read *Tommy Mack: An Appalachian Childhood*.) Eventually, in 1964, we were lucky enough to break free from Sleepy's clutches—or, so we thought—and immigrate to Delaware. (Read *Tommy Mack: Unsettled Years*.) But we moved three times during our initial seven years in Delaware: first to the town of Newport, then to a neighborhood called Richardson Park, and finally to the town of Elsmere—all of which bordered on Wilmington, the biggest city in the Small Wonder state.

I had met Bud around the same time that I met Bob. I was sixteen years old at the time and working my second summer with the Youth Opportunity Center, Delaware's summer jobs program, in Wilmington. Bob and Bud essentially became Big Brothers to me, with each of them taking on and accepting the unofficial role of mentor.

Four or five days later, I had become familiar with the campus. I had met a few nice students, some overly sarcastic and not so nice ones, and a few curiously odd ones. I'm sure there were more than a few students ready to place me into one or two of those categories as well—or maybe a different one altogether. I had proudly collected my books: biology, inorganic chemistry, analytical geometry and calculus, and English composition. And I had attended all of my classes—at least once—and met all of my professors.

My biology instructor, Professor Terrance Higgins, was the most outstanding. He seemed to be at one with the subject, while also having the uncanny ability to lobotomize his students, pour in the subject materials, and close the lid—all before anyone, the dead and most inebriated included (there would be more than a few of these)—knew what happened. His lecture seminars in the lecture theater were the talk of the campus. Professor Higgins didn't cotton to students showing up late. Once he closed the door and the session had started, he wouldn't allow any latecomers without a written excuse. It wasn't unusual for some students to skip the class, relying on a friend's or roommate's notes instead. The professor's biology lecture class forced most of us to take notes faster than we could have ever imagined. I missed few, if any, of the Higgins lectures.

About this time, I began to get negative vibes from my roommate. He seemed to be rather immature, kind of like a big kid in a candy store, and rarely—if ever—discussing what we all were there for: you know, our classes, studying, an education. Other than being roommates, and Wesley Wolverines, we seemed to have so little in common. No fun at all. Hanging out with Phil became nothing more than a habit. I stuck with him because I just wanted to fit in.

Prior to attending Wesley, I had ventured onto the campus just once. That was with Bob, months earlier, when we did a quick drive-

through to make sure the small college and small town were what I'd want to call home for two years. (Dover just happens to be the capitol of Delaware, the nation's first state, which is often referred to as Small Wonder because it's the second-smallest state in total area, after Rhode Island.) I had liked what I saw.

The campus was located in a major residential community with stores, banks, a movie theater, restaurants, and laundromats, all within easy walking distance. Shopping centers, hotels, and fast-food restaurants were only a short commute away. Dover Downs Race Track, a unique dual-purpose facility designed to accommodate both horseracing and motorsports events, was close by, along with Dover Air Force Base, although I wouldn't set foot on either of those facilities until years later.

(Founded in 1873, Wesley College was named in honor of John Wesley, the founder of the Protestant Christian faith of Methodism. Initially a preparatory school known as Wilmington Conference Academy, it was renamed Wesley Collegiate Institute in 1918 when it became a two-year college. Its first four-year degrees would be conferred seven years later in 1978, and master's degree programs would be added in the 1990s.)

* * * * *

My appointment with Mr. Wells was for two o'clock in the afternoon. His office was located in one of the old, well-maintained, and possibly historic homes that surrounded the small college campus, where early 1900s Queen Ann and Colonial Revival styles of architecture were typical. I noted that the fresh coat of paint on the front porch's tongue-and-groove floorboards didn't seem to tighten them up much. The floorboards squeaked louder than a locust with a

bullhorn as I walked across to the front door. Bells jingled when I opened the heavy wooden-framed glass door, reminding me of the old-fashioned general stores often seen in some Westerns. Once inside, I noted the numbers on the two downstairs doors: Room 1A was on my left, with 1B on my right. Since I was looking for 2B, I closed the door and proceeded up the stairway directly in front of me. With youthful vigor and spring in my stride, I bounded up the steps, noting that the stairway squeaked and complained even more than the porch. Without question, the squeaks were due to age and wear and tear from the high volume of student traffic. I must have traversed the stairs way too fast that day—if I had moved any slower, I would have had time to prepare for what awaited me at the top.

She was sitting on an antique navy, velvet, chaise lounge, head held high with shoulders squared. Her back stood unsupported, straight as a board, as if waiting to be captured on canvas. Short, silky blond hair curled forward at her neckline, then slightly upward near the jaw, accentuating an uncommonly smooth and dainty neck and face. Were it not for a hint of freckles about her cheekbones, her complexion would have been angelic.

“Oh, I, I’m sorry,” I stuttered, somewhat startled by her awe-inspiring presence.

“That’s okay,” she said, smiling and looking as pretty as could be.

I took a seat across from her in a wooden, antique chair and tried my damndest not to stare. *Oh, boy!* Could such a young man refrain from breathing and not eventually die? So, in an effort to breathe, to break the painful silence, to sanction an excuse to gaze upon such a lovely countenance—and not stare—I struck up a conversation.

Her name was Kathy, and she too sat waiting to see Mr. Wells. Strangely enough, we both were there seeking to round out our curriculum by participating and receiving extra credits through Wesley’s dramatic arts program. As our conversation continued, I

found myself becoming more and more anxious to make a date. *She'd be a lot more fun to hang out with than Phil—I'll bet.* I sensed the clock ticking, and pretty soon Mr. Wells would be calling her into his office. No, sir. Instinctively, I did *not* want this fish to get away.

I was elated when she accepted my awkward invitation to join Phil and me for dinner at the cafeteria that evening. Indeed, I had no sooner secured the date, when Kathy was called away.

Ten minutes later, she walked past me saying, "Bye, Tom. I'll see you in a bit."

I traded places with her in the chair in front of Mr. Wells.

"So, Tom," he said, "the note from my assistant here says that you would like to earn credits in the dramatic arts. Is that true?"

"Yes, sir, I've been thinking about it for some time."

"Do you have any recent experience on stage?"

"No, not really; just some small bit-parts back in junior high and grade school."

"Well, Tom, at this point I'm sure we could find a place for someone with your enthusiasm. What does your class schedule look like on Thursday afternoons from 4:00 to 6:00?"

Oh crap!

"Uh, Mr. Wells, I have chemistry lab for the rest of the semester from 4:00 to 6:00."

"That's too bad, Tom. It appears that your science credits, at least here at Wesley, will have to take precedence over the stage."

At this point my demeanor belied my disappointment.

Standing up, I said, "Oh, well, I guess that's that."

Mr. Wells shook my hand saying, "I wish you luck, Tom, and welcome to Wesley."

Echoing student chatter clashed with the rattle of food trays, utensils, crushed ice, and water glasses at Dulany Hall. All of the students

were beginning to settle into their routines and most were beginning to harvest a few new friends. Some friendships were beginning to mushroom into small cliques. This was especially true among the football players, since they'd had a considerable head start over the rest of us. Following introductions inside the cafeteria lobby, Phil and I were enjoying the company of Kathy and her roommate, Sharon, while wading through the food line. Sharon led the way with Kathy behind her. I came next, followed by Phil to my left. The line was experiencing more than the usual jostling that day, and I couldn't help wondering why. The answer was forthcoming when one of Phil's football buddies butted in line to say hello and help himself to another serving of mashed potatoes. I looked down the line to my left, then to my right and behold, there were several football players twisting, fidgeting, and bumping the people next to them. The bigger the jock, the more exaggerated his gyrations. If I hadn't seen them eat the same chow I was eating, I would have sworn the kitchen help had spiked their food with uppers. Most, including Phil to my left, looked like they had ants in their pants, or bladder issues, the way they were all twisting, turning, and fidgeting. Annoyed with it all, I rushed to gather up my food, anxious to get to a table and out of harm's way.

In spite of all that, we four enjoyed our meal together, and it was time well spent getting to know each other. Phil was doing some serious flirting with Kathy. I could tell she enjoyed the attention, but not so much as to be rude to me. I sensed she had some class.

Having finished dinner, we headed into the gushing and bustling heart of Boston. After circling several blocks, three times, we finally found a parking space and walked five blocks to the theatre. I was elated to see that Bob had secured prime tickets. We took our seats in the forward mezzanine section. I have no recollection of the show, other than we enjoyed it.

The play ended around 11:30, and we followed the crowd toward the exits, down the stairways, and out one of the side doors into the busy streets.

“Hey, you guys, where are you going? This isn’t the way back to the car.”

Bud stopped and turned to face me. “We know that. Are you ready for your surprise now?”

“Oh! I guess so.”

“Just follow us. We know where we’re going.”

The three of us walked briskly down Washington Street, pausing with the crowd at traffic lights and intersections. I couldn’t help noticing a couple of homeless men lounging on various heat grates, their faces drawn and gaunt, no doubt from poor nutrition and overindulgence in alcohol, or whatever. One more hour and they’d most likely have passed out. Everyone seemed to be in a rush to reach their destination. Hawkers stood outside adult clubs inviting us and others in to see the show. They must have tuned-in to the hungry, curious look on my face. One man addressed me directly. With a wink, he motioned me with a wave of his arm, saying, “It’ll be a show you won’t forget, young man.” I began to think that one of these places might be the surprise my two friends had waiting for me.

I didn’t know it then, but in the 1960s, Boston’s red-light district had been kicked-out of its deeply-rooted West End section to make way for a bold and not-so-beautiful redevelopment called Government Center. As a result, the peep-shows and prostitutes had

resettled on the fringes of the theater district in an area that soon became known as the Combat Zone.

The Combat Zone, an area centered on Washington Street between Boylston Street and Kneeland Street, opened its many doors to people of all races and sexual orientations, and in the process, allowed for the slow and painful degradation and disuse of the historic and majestic theaters lining lower Washington Street. The Boston Opera House (Savoy Theatre 1965-1978), the Paramount Theatre, and the Modern Theatre (originally called the Dobson Building in 1876 but demolished and rebuilt in 2009-2010)—all three were listed as endangered by the National Trust in 1995.

We had walked a seven-block loop, arriving at the intersection of Charles and Boylston Streets, when I saw it.

“Wow! Look, you guys, there’s a Playboy Club up ahead.”

“Yep, sure is,” Bud proclaimed. “What do you say we go in?”

“Sure. Hey! Is that the surprise?”

They both smiled, saying nothing.

“Do you think they’ll let me in? What’s the age limit?”

In 1974, the legal drinking age (LDA) for beer in Boston was lowered from 21 to 18. The LDA for wine and liquor remained at 21 years old. This was the summer of 1972; I was six months away from turning 21 years old.

“Don’t worry” Bud said, “I can get you in as a guest with my key.”

“Key? Bud, you never told me you had a key to the door of a Playboy Club.”

“Well, I do, but it’s not a door key, silly. It’s just another term for a club membership.”

“Oh.”

“I also have a key for the Playboy Club in New York City. Come on, let’s go in.”

We all shuffled into the club, pausing just inside the door to allow our eyes to adjust to the dim light. Bud led us to a counter where one of the pretty bunnies sat waiting. Perched on a bar stool, her long and shapely legs were crossed at the knees, one leg pumping up-and-down nervously, as if waving hello.

“May I see the Playboy key, please?”

Bud presented his key, paid our admission fees, and led us up a narrow stairway to the second floor. He eyed a good table across the room and, on the way, we passed another gorgeous bunny shooting bumper pool with a middle-aged gentleman wearing a white shirt and gray sports jacket.

“Hey,” I said, “that looks like fun.”

“Don’t get too cocky, now,” Bud warned as we took our seats, “cause, she can wipe the table with you, Dicky.”

“What makes you so sure, Bud? Have you seen me shoot pool?”

“No. Have you ever played bumper pool?”

“No, but it can’t be that much different from regular pool, and I’ve played plenty of that.”

“Have you ever played pool with a sexy Playboy bunny?”

“No.”

“Well then, you’re already behind the eight ball with two strikes against you. Add the fact that these girls are hired and trained to win, and they’ll not hesitate to clean your pockets. It’ll cost you five dollars per round with one of them. If you win, the house will pay *you* five dollars.”

We watched another bunny as she finished waiting on a table and began sashaying our way.

“Hey, Bud, give me a few minutes watching that bunny play that man. I’ll figure it out. It wouldn’t be smart not to size up my opponent before challenging her.”

“Now you’re talking street smarts, Tom.”

“Good evening,” she purred with a sexy smile, “I’m your Bunny Dianne.”

“Good evening,” we all chimed in.

“What would you gentlemen like to drink?”

“I’ll have a Scotch and water on ice,” Bud bellowed.

Bunny Dianne looked to Bob.

“I’ll take a glass of your house Merlot, and one of your snack menus, please.”

“Damn Bob,” Bud cried, “we just had a huge dinner three hours ago.”

“So what, I’m hungry again.”

The bunny smiled, chuckled, and focused her sparkling blue eyes on me.

“Uh, I’ll take a tall strawberry, rum daiquiri. Do you make those here?”

“Yes, we do, it’s one of our—”

“Tom,” Bob interrupted, “I think you ought to stick to Coke for the rest of the night. Remember, you’re supposed to drive us home in a little bit.”

“Oh!” I said, somewhat puzzled. Quick on the draw, I went along with the ruse: “Okay, if that’s what you want. I’ll have a Coke then, miss.”

The bunny smiled and walked away.

“Damn, Bob, why’d you say that? She was going to make me a daiquiri.”

“Well, I thought she was more likely going to ask for an I.D., Tom.”

Rules, Ethics, and Foul Play

“If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer.... Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.”
—Henry David Thoreau

For me, it has proven perfectly fitting that the famous quote written above was included on page two of the 1972 Wesley yearbook. As you might have guessed, it holds special meaning for me.

Having earned a 2.688 GPA for the first semester of my sophomore year, I made a vow to improve upon that, knowing I could do better.

So, considering that, I hit the books hard come January of my second semester. I also signed-up for another seven weeks of judo/aikido classes with Sammy at Dover Middle School.

Near the end of January, I began to see an increase in dormitory infractions by various students. Loud partying was the major issue. I had noticed an increase in the noise level toward the end of the previous semester but attributed it to the varied pressures of finals testing. Back then, with finals and the other problems Sammy and I were having, I didn't have the time or energy to make an issue of it. I did tell Glenn, however. He said, “Give them a break, Tom. They just need to wind down.” So I let it go.

Now things were getting way out of hand. Some students were partying two and three nights during the week, times when most students wanted to study or sleep. Sammy and I also noticed the

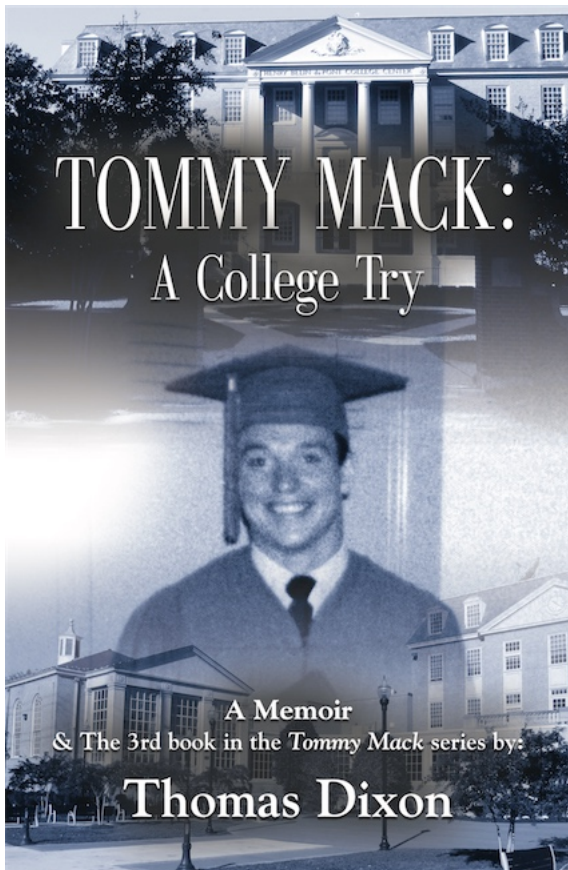
library was more crowded than usual with students studying. She said, “Yeah, the library should be for research. It’s getting pretty bad when you have to go to the library to study.” That’s when I realized I had to take a stand. Hell, every student needs sleep, don’t they? What made things worse was the fact that Glenn didn’t seem to want to support me. So, three days after trying to talk to him with no success, I reported two students to Mrs. Schuster for drinking and partying in the dorm. I helped her catch them red-handed.

Things were quiet around Budd Hall after everyone heard about those two students being put on probation. The dean of students made sure of that: “One more infraction and you’re out of here.” I assumed the infractions were reported to their parents. Maybe they were fined and warned, but I had no proof of that.

Late one afternoon, Jim and I were returning from dinner at the cafeteria when we found ourselves locked out of our room. Our key didn’t seem to work. We went to Mrs. Schuster and asked if the lock to our room had been changed. She said there had been no locks changed and, whenever she did change a lock, the person was notified beforehand. Jim and I camped out in front of our door for more than an hour waiting for the locksmith. Meanwhile, we found it quite irritating that several students walked by snickering and chuckling about our predicament. Soon, we were chuckling along with them. That was until the locksmith arrived and told us he doubted there was anything wrong with our lock. He said, “Let’s see if someone has pulled the penny-lock trick on you guys.” Yes, it was the penny-lock trick. I was like—*what?* Sure enough, as soon as he pressed in on the bottom of the door with the toe of his shoe, the penny fell out of the door jamb onto the floor and rolled into view.

I said, “Damn, Jim, what are they going to do to us next?”

“I don’t think they’re doing it to us, Tom. I think they’re doing it to you. I’m just going along for the bumpy ride.”



*A near-penniless
country-boy/urbanite
wades onto a college
campus—awestruck.*

TOMMY MACK: A College Try

by THOMAS M. DIXON

Order the complete book from the publisher Booklocker.com

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/10130.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**