



## The View From Right Field

by Rick Ohler

A bi-weekly column in the

*East Aurora Advertiser*

(The world's best hometown newspaper)

### “The Great American Hair Wars”

Column 233/February 6, 2014/East Aurora, N.Y.

Even though my three kids have graduated from East Aurora High School, I still get up there now and again as a sportswriter for the world's best community newspaper. These days, most of the current students have no idea who I am, just another gray-haired—okay, white-haired—old man in the stands, Blue Devils cap atop my head, jotting down notes and cheering for the good guys, and girls. I'm sure these 21st century teenagers have no idea why, as I look at them, I shake my head and chuckle at the way they wear their hair. It's fascinating: some have their hair colored purple, some have shaggy hair, some long, some have buzz cuts or shaved heads; even the occasional Mohawk shows up. It seems that today, anything goes. All I can say to them from my 63-year-old point of view is, “You're welcome.”

Let me explain.

If you had peered through the window of our living room at 472 Oakwood Avenue on that Sunday evening 50 years ago, February 9, 1964, you would have guessed that Norman Rockwell had painted the scene. In the red leather armchair would have sat my dad, 44 years old, smoking a pipe and sporting his Marine-short brush cut that my mother had given him with her ever-ready Oster Home Barbering Kit. Mom, age 37, with her apron still cinched about her, would have hovered by the doorway to the dining room, some of her never-ending chores no doubt awaiting her in the kitchen. Perhaps remains of a chuck roast dinner might still be visible on the table. On the couch, the well-worn, spring weary, but still serviceable faded red couch, would have been Michael, age three, Jason, age 11, and me, the eldest at 13. We, too, would have been nearly hairless, victims, as well, of the Oster clippers. That Oster, with which Mom could shear her entire family's hair in under half an hour, had paid for itself many times over.

In front of us would have sat the used, unreliable, black and white, rabbit-eared TV that Dad had bought for twenty bucks from our neighbor Irv Toner, who had the electronics shop on Main Street next to the Globe Hotel. Tonight, were crossing our fingers that the TV would turn on and that the vertical hold would work well enough for us to watch the Ed Sullivan show.

The Beatles would be introduced to America that night on the most iconic of TV shows, and after that, the world would never be the same.

To my dad, the Beatles “Please, Please Me” and “She Loves You” sounded like so many mallets pounding on garbage cans and cats being stepped upon, while the way they shook their heads to show off their long hair caused him to utter his signature sign of disgust, “Gack!” Mom pretended to be horrified, but the tapping of her foot told us otherwise. To Jason and me, it was a call to arms.

Not long after the Fab Four’s triumphant American debut, I fired the first shot over the bow in what became know as the Great Hair War. Looking around to make sure Dad was not in earshot I said, “Mom, I don’t want brush cuts anymore. I want to grow some hair like Ringo.” My brothers joined me in calling for the end of mandatory shearing.

We lost the early battles of the Great Hair War; after all, schools could still tell you when you needed a haircut in those days. Remember Wilson Curry’s legendary 1966 fight with East Aurora High School over his right to have long hair as a rock musician and front man for the Nomads? That made the *Buffalo News*. Eventually, though, my grandmother, Dad’s mother-in-law, sided with us kids. “Dick Ohler,” she said. “you can’t tell these kids how to wear their hair for the rest of their lives.” No dummy, he relented. A little. By ninth grade I had a tiny wisp of a bang falling down on my forehead. By tenth grade Mom had abandoned the take-no-prisoners approach on the sides and back when she cut my hair, and let a little volume into my coif. By senior year, well, take a look at high school yearbooks from 1964 and 1968 and you’ll discover a sea change: the brush cuts were out; longer hair—neat longer hair—had become the norm.

When I went away to college in the fall of 1968 and no longer had to face my dad every day, I stopped getting haircuts altogether. In my mind I was being a non-conformist; about 75% of my generation followed suit. By Christmas break, we were pretty scraggly; by summer, we looked like these frightening, alien beings that straight folks had taken to calling hippies. We were treated accordingly, and it got ugly. Insults—Commie pinko, sissy, and other sobriquets not suitable for a family newspaper—came our way. Invitations to fisticuffs became routine. At a local bar, one I visit these days with enough frequency to call it my Satellite Office, the management offered to cut my hair with a chain saw and brush trimmers. Adults in East Aurora I had known most of my life, parents of lifelong friends, refused me entrance into their homes because of my disreputable appearance. My father was reduced to saying, “I don’t have the right to tell you how to wear your hair, but I do have the right to tell you that you look like hell.”

It took a while to win the Great Hair War, but win we did. The last time I visited the Satellite Office I stood between a 50-something Moogie with a waist-length pony tail and a fellow with a purple-spiked Mohawk and piercings aplenty. Fifty years ago? Not a chance. When I see teenagers at the high school—free to do have as much or as little hair on their heads as they please, I say, “From John, Paul, George and Ringo—and me—you’re welcome.” Then, feeling baldness conquering my own pate, I add, “And man, am I jealous.”

