MANUEL LYKIN’S CHRISTMAS PARADE

Any kid growing up in or near Gaston, Indiana, (population 801 in 1950) in the 1940s and 1950s would know Male Lykins. His real name was Manuel, but everyone called him Male, perhaps because he looked a lot like a male hog both in body and face. He was a sturdy man, not so much fat as he was big of girth. His face sagged in the cheeks and under his chin, and he did remind me of a big male hog.

It turns out my mother had taught him in high school in Gaston in the early 1020s, shortly after she first started teaching. She said he was “slow” and had a hard time reading. She recalled an incident when all the kids in class laughed at him for reading the word “pedaling” as “pee-dad-il-ing,” as in “The boy was pedaling his bicycle down the road.” My Mother of course could not laugh.

Male dropped out of school in his junior year, a combination of problems with grades and the need to support his younger brother and sister. His father was dead. Male got a job working on the railroad, repairing tracks and things. The railroad liked strong, young men, my Mother said. The Nickel Plate Railroad went out of business in 1951, and after that male took odd jobs around town. One reason any kid growing up in or around Gaston would know him or of him was that he spent most of his days standing on the corner of Main and Maple streets in downtown Gaston.

I would see him up close on those Saturday mornings when I got my hair cut. Male would come in, sit and listen to the barbershop talk a while, then get up and put 50 cents on the lip of the cash register, and go into the back of the shop and take his weekly shower. He never said much but would kind of grunt when someone spoke and called him male, sounding something like a hog grunting.

Gaston started a women’s softball team, called a “girl’s” team back then. Somehow male became the coach. My Uncle Otto had gone to high school with him and told me he was a fair baseball player. So was my Uncle Otto, I believe, who was fast enough on foot and had a strong enough arm to play center field. Male with his muscular and squatty build was the catcher and play caller. It turned out he still knew a lot about baseball and softball, too. Since it was somewhat embarrassing to see Male coaching at third base in his ill-fitting white T-shirt, sometimes inadvertently displaying portions of his thick tummy, the School Board awarded him an extra-large shirt and a high-school athletic jacket with “Male” spelled on the back. Since Male had not graduated from high school and technically did not earn a letter in baseball, some in the community did not approve giving him the jacket, a man in his mid-40s. But he wore the jacket every day, even in the hottest weather, standing at the corner of main and Maple streets, and of course coaching third base. He was extraordinarily proud of it.

The Gaston girls, as they were known, played a game every Saturday evening under the lights, which the city fathers were pleased to erect. They played Wheeling, Mathews, Eaton, Hartford city, and even Yorktown, a suburb of Muncie. For a town of 801 people, the Gaston Girls drew big crowds. There was no admission fee, and there was little else to do on Saturday nights in Gaston, Indiana in the 1950s. The amazing thing was, the Gaston Girls won almost all their games. The reticent and normally lethargic Male Lykins came alive during the games. He flashed signals at third base. He trotted to the bench after each inning and to the third-base coaching box to start the inning. He actually talked, gestured, and chattered. Male was a different person, alive, purposeful, and confident.

Male and the Gaston girls not only took the league championship the first year (1948) but won it for the next 11 years, when the league was finally disbanded. Male and his team made Gaston as proud as Male was proud of his athletic jacket. All the young ladies wanted to play for Male, whom they called Mr. Lykins. One really fast throwing pitcher moved to Gaston from Eaton to be able to pitch for the Gaston Girls. Male had quite a gift for motivation and engendering confidence in his players. Male found himself a local hero, at least on Saturday nights.

It was 1956, at the peak of his softball coaching prowess that Male most unexpectedly filed an application to run for Mayor of Gaston. “What a hoot!” the *Gaston Weekly* editor wrote. His opponents were the then-current Mayor Armstrong, who ran a shoe repair shop downtown, and Mr. Stanley, owner and publisher of the town newspaper.

Mr. Stanley ran editorials in his paper expounding on his own qualifications to be mayor. He disparaged the shoe repairman as inadequate for the job, a do-nothing hack whose repair shop was next to The Gardens, Gaston’s only tavern. But Mr. Stanley’s editorials absolutely lambasted Male Lykins, “A man who couldn’t read, give a speech, or sign a letter, only grunt and look dumb.” Mr. Stanley wrote that, in contrast, he would improve the schools, build a skating rink for teenagers, would annex a small but well-to-do suburban housing area at the northern edge of Gaston, and pass a law to close down The Gardens. Mr. Armstrong ran on the platform that he would continue to run the town successfully and complete his unfinished business.

When Mr. Stanley himself interviewed Male Lykins for a news story, Male said all he wanted to do as Mayor was to have a Christmas parade. Mr. Stanley ridiculed the idea, writing “Whoever heard of a Christmas parade in the first place? Does Male think it’s the Fourth of July?” And so forth.

Well, Male indeed gave no campaign speeches, passed out no flyers, knocked on no doors—in fact, he didn’t even bother to campaign. He didn’t have to, as Mr. Stanley unknowingly and inadvertently was Male’s perfect campaign manager. When the election was over in November, Male Lykins had won the race by a considerable margin. He was truly the people’s candidate.

So in Gaston, Indiana, in the year 1956, there was indeed a grand Christmas parade. Male was dressed as Santa (though it was rumored he had his athletic jacket underneath) and rode in the back of someone’s 1956 Mercury convertible. There were almost more people in the parade than spectators in the streets. The parade went around twice, as the town was so small. It was a happy time, for everyone except Mr. Stanley, who was incorrectly rumored to have moved that winter to North Dakota.

And Manuel Lykins became the most-liked man I that little piece of Indiana. I can still recollect him shouting in his hog-like grunting voice, “Merry Christmas,” as he rode by me both times.

And Merry Christmas to all of you!