

Finding Ralph C. Mannuni Part I

“What’s the Mannuni Cup?” **George E. Fox ’61** asked, after my icebreaker announcing myself as a past winner of the award.

That’s a funny response, I thought. George is attributed with creating the fictional DKE brother, **Ralph C. Mannuni**, who appeared from time to time during my years on campus.

“The prize is given to the worst player in the annual hockey game between the brothers and pledges,” I explained. “Post-match, the pledge drinks a beer from the cup to the rowdy cheers of all!”

George laughed, “It must have been invented after my time in Ithaca.” Ironic how Mannuni’s legacy grew, while George remained largely anonymous to many later DKEs like me.

Alumni President **Mike Furman ’79** suggested that I profile George, “a consistent and longtime dues-paying alum, celebrating his 60th Cornell reunion this year.” Not surprisingly, related DKE manuscripts mostly glanced over George in favor of his alter ego, Mannuni.

I agreed. It is about time to tell George’s story.

Falling for Cornell and DKE

George, who recently turned 82, grew up in a small town in the rolling hills of western Pennsylvania, “during a unique slice of time, before TV, before computers and before the internet! We had to invent our own activities.” That mindset would follow George throughout his young life.

When it came time for George to leave for greener pastures, brother-in-law and DKE brother, **Don Rutherford ’47**, encouraged George to consider Cornell. “Upon first visit, I fell in love with Cornell, rural Ithaca and the lake of course.” With a first-rate electrical engineering program, George chose Cornell.

George’s affinity for DKE soon followed, “With its variety of people and majors, DKE was neither a jock house nor an animal house, the perfect anti-fraternity, fraternity with a core group of Korean war vets.” At first, “It was a little scary,” George revealed. “I was one of only two pledges out of 20 to come from a public high school. The rest were private school graduates.” George had to play catch-up academically, “reading a college algebra paperback in the john.”

Outside of the classroom, “My peers like **Bill Nuckols ’61** and I gained practical, on-the-job experience with companies like IBM, GE and Raytheon as part of Cornell’s engineering co-op program,” George told me. “Professor Strong would visit each co-op, and if he found that a student was being asked to ‘sort bolts,’ he would let the supervisor have it!” A trade magazine published George’s research at IBM as a sole author, “unheard of today.” George even managed to join the men’s chorus at IBM.

At the DKE house, George learned about himself, and therein continued a pattern of mild-mannered George being elevated into leadership roles. “My private school brothers had lived a regimented life away from home. For some, joining DKE was akin to a coiled spring being released!” George would provide direction, becoming the only three-term Delta Chi DKE president, including one term as a graduate student. “That’s what brother and historian **Bill Fogle ’70**, tells me,” George said sheepishly.

An Inexhaustible DKE Run

“DKE burnout while on the Hill,” is how George explains his ghostliness and Mannuni’s celebrity over the decades. I see what he means: Owner and operator of “Deke’s Garage” (at 13 South Ave. with its own letterhead), to fix motorcycles; master welder, with a torch and workshop at the house; radio amateur, communicating worldwide out of Barton Hall; rifle marksman, practicing on woodchucks in the farmlands; flagman for Sports Car Club of America at Watkins Glen; two years with Cornell’s marching band (thus avoiding then required ROTC) and six years of concert band, playing the baritone horn.

George worked so closely with and ordered so many parts from Triumph Motorcycles, “they wrote to offer me a dealership in Ithaca, not knowing I was only a student.” George paved new roads with his own motorcycle, “solving the problem of storing my bike over the winter by riding it up the DKE stairs to my second floor study.” Other DKEs and fraternities soon mimicked George’s antics.

And, when a young lady wanted to turn her car into a convertible, George obliged and torched the car roof right off. “I don’t know what became of that young lady or the car,” he pondered. With Ithaca’s long winters, I can only imagine.

We all owe a debt of gratitude to George, who lived at the house for seven years from 1958 to 1965. When the DKE alumni wanted to close the doors on the financially-troubled house and chapter, near the bottom of academic rankings among fraternities, George rose to the rescue. “With the support of a core group of brothers, we banished those who refused to pay dues and otherwise caused trouble.”

The alumni initiated a fundraising campaign to continue the resurgence. Still, the house had to be sold to Cornell for a dollar due to the circumstances. George continued, “Working with a university-hired contractor, **Chuck Graves ’63** and I redesigned the third floor, combining the two wings, adding a modern bathroom and larger shower room.” So, we have George to thank (*or not!*) for the community shower.

During this time with all eyes on DKE, George became known as the “Troll.” He explained the unflattering moniker. “At parties we were not allowed to close our doors with young ladies in our rooms. I *trolled* around opening doors.” Good-natured George did not shy away from the nickname. The legend grew, his workshop beneath the spiral stairway leading to the kitchen became “the Troll’s room.”

Sailing with Ralph C. Mannuni

“I don’t know anything about that,” George again befuddled, this time when I informed him that Mannuni had been depicted by statesman John C. Calhoun in DKE composites over the decades. After I botched Mannuni’s name in a note to him, George replied deadpan, “I believe the original spelling of his name was lost when Ralph entered the country through Ellis Island.” I chuckled, hesitantly.

What does George really know about Mannuni? I had my doubts.

Finding George E. Fox Part II

Sailing with Ralph C. Mannuni (cont'd)

George eventually explained, "Ralph C. Mannuni was a name I came up with to remain anonymous when four of us at DKE were considering the purchase of a sailboat for a post-graduation trip." It also turned out to be useful. "Whenever a brother received a call about a boat for sale, they knew to come find one of us." They did buy a boat, "but the salesperson never did meet Mr. Mannuni."

George learned a lot about sailing on Lake Cayuga, where he crewed for brother **Tom Linville '62**, racing star class sail boats versus Olympic sailors. "If we didn't finish last, we considered it a victory." Fresh from completing his masters in aeronautical engineering (his thesis took second in a Texas-based competition) and a year teaching physics at SUNY Cortland, Captain George and brothers **Bill Hinds '61**, **John Cole '61** and **Beman Dawes '63** sailed the high seas for a year. Fittingly, the 35 foot long by 22 foot wide sail boat came with the name *Tiglon*, for half tiger and half lion (*rampant*, no doubt.)

It seemed a daunting expedition to me, sailing around the clock from Fort Lauderdale... past Miami and west along the Keys... north to St. Petersburg, where the crew refurbished the boat over six months... then to the Bahamas. George did not disagree. "Any sailor can give you 50 scary stories. Sailboats like our trimaran have two stable positions, right side up and upside down." George and crew experienced "St. Elmo's fire" sparks a foot long formed by thunderstorms, and strategically situated a handsaw to help them escape should the sailboat capsize.

The crew survived, "with no GPS back then, traversing by 'dead reckoning' and celestial navigation." The boat made it to Bermuda then Boston, without George though, who ran out of money. Feeling the pull of Cornell, George returned to consult his Masters advisor about pursuing his PhD.

Falling for Jo

Aside from all of his fast-moving activities at Cornell and DKE, George had his fair share of mischievous episodes and quieter times.

Ithaca's gorges and Cornell bridges played a role in George's sophomoric behavior.

One late night, four of us thought it might be fun to drive over the suspension bridge (a foot bridge) spanning Triphammer Gorge. So, we drove up the foot path and encountered a set of steps of railroad ties. Three of us got out and lifted our VW bug, one end at a time, up the steps. We then all got in and drove onto the bridge, which was barely wide enough for the car.

When we got about halfway across we see someone walking towards us, who was apparently paying no attention. Suddenly he looked up, and we realized it was a campus night watchman carrying his time clock used to punch in at various stations. His look of first incredulity and then panic was unforgettable. He then turned and ran back off the bridge.

The VW made it safely over and back. They wised up next time, better protecting their lives at least.

Once we rolled an old piano we had in the bar down South Ave, on down Stewart Ave to the bridge over Cascadilla Gorge. We managed to somehow lift the piano over the railing and drop it into the gorge. The last chord was fantastic!

Summers were a slower time, when DKEs shed their coats and ties, which were required on campus during the school year. "I loved summers in Ithaca living in the Deke house. There were only a few brothers and we had great times enjoying the Ithaca area." George continued to reminisce. "We planted a vegetable garden on a level plot above the tennis court. We swam in Beebe Lake. I would cook a pot of beef vegetable soup on Sunday which would last us all week."

Quieter times included drinking Ballantine Ale and Guinness Stout while listening to Bach with fellow engineer Howard Elder. George described Howard's Baker Tower as "a labyrinth of short hallways, steps up and down and rooms at different levels. It is like a stone fortress and totally soundproof, so we could listen to music at a good volume without anyone complaining." On a chance visit from Howard's sister Jo, George met his future bride.

Jo, separated from her husband, visited her brother and Cornell to take a computer programming course, looking to make a better life for herself and her six young children. It is easy for me to see how George followed his heart and did not find the situation daunting. The couple is still going strong, 54-years married with the addition of 18 grandchildren and 16 great grandchildren.

During those responsible family years, George completed his PhD in aerospace engineering at UConn, where he "built a major shock tube facility from the ground up." It later dawned on George, "while most people say their work is not rocket science, I had actually been doing rocket science!" Jobs were limited though, with one offer from the Army to build fuel-air bombs to take out Vietcong tunnels in Vietnam. George, a maker and connector his whole young life, declined, "I did not want any part of it."

George and Jo settled in on their careers, both working for the State of Connecticut. George, rising to Executive Director of the Office of Information and Technology in the Office of Policy and Management (OPM), with a staff of 35, mostly IT Managerial Professionals. Jo, Director of the Business Office Support Systems Group in the Department of Administrative Services, with a staff 45, mostly IT technical professionals. Post-retirement, the duo formed "JAG" (i.e., Jo and George), to consult on IT matters.

George's DKE burnout years a distant memory, lifelong DKE lessons were not forgotten. George surprised his technology team in a first meeting, saying, "I really don't like computers." For all his talents to imagine and fix things, people and relationships made George most happy. "Leading the DKE house I learned to work with and enjoy all types of people with different interests and abilities."

I am glad to fade the shadow of Ralph C. Mannuni and scratch the surface on George E. Fox and his DKE-period adventures. "I have wanted to write about my DKE experiences, but never seem to get around to it," George exhaled as our chats wended down. "My DKE stories would probably fill a small book."

Even so, George will never be able to fully escape from his more famous, imagined brother, Ralph C. "What ever became of Mr. Manunni's sail boat?" I asked.

"After our trip, I purchased it from the others. My family and I enjoyed many years of sailing on that good-old boat."

Of course you did, George.

In the bonds,
Joe Marraccino '91, December 2021

* George E. Fox lives in Storrs, Connecticut. Ralph C. Mannuni lives nearby. Say hello at george.fox@att.net.