

THE WAY WE WERE

By Mark A. Chinn

I was driving down our street the other day in Northeast Jackson when a car drove by and I gently lifted my index finger off of the top of the steering wheel as the car passed. My 12 year old daughter Carly, ever the inquisitive sort, asked, "What was that?" I said, "What?" She said, "what you did with your finger, why did you do that?" I said, "I waved at that car that drove by."

Carly probed, "Did you know them?"

"No."

"Then why did you wave?"

Not knowing how to explain, I said, "Because that's what we do here in Mississippi."

"But why?"

Still unable to explain, I said, "Well, maybe its because I might know them and I don't want to take a chance on not waving at someone I know.....or maybe its just because it feels good to wave at each other. I don't know. It's just what we do."

"You're weird, Dad, you know that!"

This conversation caused me to wonder if the great traditions which have been distinct to Mississippi may be fading with the generations. I hope not, because its why I chose to live here.

I remember many years ago, my sister visited from Boston, where she was studying for several years at Harvard. She reported how when they got off the plane at Jackson, a nice man escorted them through the airport to where we waited for them. She said, "this man came out of nowhere and said, 'Hey, how y'all doin. Can I help you?' We asked him where to get picked up and he said, 'I'll show you.' We were so shocked. That would never happen in Boston.

A day or so later, we were in the Jitney and the cashier placed the last of her groceries in a cart, when a young man quickly grabbed the cart and started heading out the door with it. My sister yelled, "Hey, that's my cart!" The young man was startled and turned and sheepishly said, "Yes Mam, I'm taking it to your car for you. Is that okay?" She said, "Well sure." She turned to me and said, "What is going on here. This would never happen in Boston. I said, "you are kidding. Its just the way we do it here."

The next day, we visited my Mother, Ann, in Baptist Hospital. When we pulled up to the door, a guard awaited and we stopped and rolled down the window, "Hey, How y'all doing?" he inquired as he smiled. "Can I help you?" My sister rolled her eyes. She said, "Well, yes, we need a place to park." The guard said, "Well, there's plenty of spaces right there up close that I'll let you park in if you're nice." We said, "thanks."

The visit with Mother was over and we proceeded to the elevator on the sixth floor. When we got on, the people in the elevator smiled and seemed to chime in, in unison, "Hey, how y'all doing." My sister looked at me and said, "I can't believe this place."

The elevator went down only one floor and then opened. A large man, maybe 6'5" wearing boots, blue jeans and a cowboy shirt and hat was standing there. He was accompanied by a lady that appeared to be his wife. He took off his hat and smiled at everyone in the elevator and said, "Hey, how y'all doin?" Then they got on. The man and his wife began talking and sometimes seemed to be talking as though everyone in the elevator was part of the conversation. The elevator then stopped again two floors later, and the large man started to walk off of the elevator, escorting his wife with a gentle, large paw in the small of her back. As they stepped off of the elevator, he turned to speak and I remember wondering, "what in the world is he going to

say?" He smiled and said, "Thank y'all for lettin' us ride with ya." I about fell on the floor. As GOD is my witness, this happened.

Oh, by the way, if you were to guess what his name was that we heard in the conversation, what would you guess? You're right, his name was "Bubba." I just looked at my sister, who was in total shock and said, "Well, this is why I live here."

I know that we are all still pretty good about acknowledging each other as we pass, even if we are complete strangers, even though we may not thank each other for the opportunity to ride on the elevator. I know this because when I travel, I say hello to people on the sidewalks and they walk stoically by without a word, but when I get back to Jackson, they usually smile and say, "Hey" back. As a matter of fact, the change in response usually starts when I locate the gate in the airport for the plane to Jackson where I usually find people talking and laughing and telling stories because half the plane knows each other.

But, I am concerned about the wave in the car. I hope we don't lose it, even in big ole Jackson. If you aren't familiar with the wave, let me give you some tips. If you are driving with your left wrist resting at the top of the steering wheel, as most Mississippians drive, simply lift your index finger. This can be done quickly and requires little effort. If you know the person, you will have made sure you acknowledged them. If you don't know the person, you will have simply made someone feel welcome.

Another acceptable wave is "the mirror wave." This is executed when you are resting your right wrist at the top of the steering wheel and your left wrist out the window on top of the mirror. In that case, simply lift the first two fingers on your hand and the passing car driver will know they have been acknowledged.

Finally, if you should happen to be driving properly with both hands on the wheel—which is rare for Mississippians—you can wave by simply nodding your head backwards a little. This will suffice for any knowing Mississippian.

You might ask, "When should I wave." The wave is not appropriate for major thoroughfares such as Old Canton, or Ridgewood or Pear Orchard. There are simply too many cars. But when you pass someone on any neighborhood street, it is appropriate and even desired. You should also know that the wave is appropriate on rural highways where there is little traffic. Try it and you will find that you get a wave back, even if you are in the middle of nowhere.

Do NOT wave with your entire hand. This is not cool and will indicate that you are either a geek or a Yankee trying to act southern. I hope this article will start a *wave*, if you will of effort on everyone's part to preserve one of our really great traditions and the may daughter Carly will pass it on to her children.