

Remembering Arthur Silver: The PG Version

This composite article is derived from *Ring-tum Phi* articles by Sky Lininger in 1967 and Ned McDonnell in 1977 and reminiscences of Neely Young, of Washington and Lee's class of 1966.



ARTHUR SILVER has the past of a hustling comedian, the present of a general bon vivant, and the future of a mellowing legend. Born in 1890 in Ohio, Silver looked to show business for his career. Starting at 15 by singing ragtime love ballads in a Cleveland moving-picture show-place, Silver was soon touring nationwide on the vaudeville circuit. But around 1925, poisoned kidneys forced him into the Johns Hopkins Medical Center and out of show business. After convalescing in Lexington, the former actor opened Arthur Silver's Clothes Shop.

He adapted the hard way. One day in 1928 at a football game, Arthur neglected to stand for a rendition of the *W&L Swing*. After a smack on the head from a drunk upperclassman who mistook the middle-aged tailor for an impudent freshman, Silver learned the *Swing* in a day. As Lexington

expanded from three stores in the roaring '20s, so did Silver's reputation as a comedic salesman of avant-garde clothes ranging from the first denims stocked in the area to the craziest hats in town.

I used to love one of his tricks. He would wear a boater from his collection of hats, lean against a wall,



and proceed to put his thumb in his mouth and blow out. The hat would magically rise up from the back of his head. By the time I came to college [in 1962], few young guys bought anything from him as his

clothes were at least 10 or 15 years out of date. We went into his store just to chat with him, and hear him share stories and jokes.

Had Silver been able to sell his comedy, he might have made millions. But people's laughter satisfied him. Totally serene, at least on the outside, and knowing each day was another day of life, Silver even managed to impute sexual connotations to peanut butter. Silver turned away one woman's question, "What is life without a family?", by snapping, "Quiet." Silver has opinions on various topics. For example: On miniskirts, "a man can see what he's getting." On in-laws, "A man came into my store the other day and told me his sister-in-law was an angel. I told him, 'You're lucky. Mine ain't dead yet.'"

If you go to see Mr. Silver and there's a sign on the door saying, 'Out to Lunch,' don't wait! He's been known to put that sign in the window and then take a trip up to Philadelphia for a few days.

Two years ago [i.e., in 1975], encumbered by sagging sales, he closed his store. As with Packards,

vintage Bordeaux wines, and other luxuries of yesteryear, the popularity of custom-tailored clothing had given way to cheaper, mass-produced clothes.

But the humor, the love and faith in other people, the attachment to Lexington, the serenity, and the myriad of other qualities that make him a legend are fading in the old man, and he is seriously contemplating leaving Lexington. He feels that



Ad, Ring-tum Phi, 1937

Americans have become “meaner” since the mid-1960s. Silver shudders at the extent to which his compatriots “chase the greenback,” a drive which he feels reflects the superficial mentality of this country as it enters its third century.

If the legend leaves, Lexington will still seem the same but will simultaneously have lost something of value.