"Saturday's Child Has Far To Go"

MARY ELIZABETH BLACK

The courthouse square of our town is always crowded on summer Saturday nights. Cars are wedged neatly around the four sides of the square in every available parking place, the shops and groceries are ablaze with lights, and horns honk wildly as little children dash across the streets to join their friends in playing tag on the courthouse lawn. As one makes one's way through the crowd, women with bundles of all sizes and shapes and grocery bags with celery peeping out of the tops jostle one from all sides. Farmers dressed in faded overalls and toddlers licking ice cream cones bump elbows with girls in too-short skirts and soldiers in from the nearby camp. Everyone seems in a great hurry to go nowhere, except the teen-age boys and girls, whose destination is well-known.

In every town there is a rendezvous for the younger set, where they meet on Saturday nights. In our town it is "Pop's." The boldly-winking red neon sign and the sound of Harry James' trumpet blaring above the din of the crowd make the place unmistakable as one walks toward it down the street. Then is seen the gleaming plate glass windows on which is written "S. J. Papadakos' Confectionery." Lolling in front of the door, looking at the array of candies and nuts or, more often than not hooting and whistling at the passers-by, are groups of boys in soiled cords, clog-hopper shoes and bright plaid shirts.

One has to elbow through this crowd to gain the entrance. Just inside the door is the soda fountain and its fascinating display of metal spigots. Opposite is the candy counter. The rest of the available space is taken up by booths and white-topped tables, with a small space left in front of the gaily-colored juke box where couples are dancing in a close proximity of heat and noise and smoke. The light is dim, coming from soft yellow and green lamps placed along the side of the room. The walls are painted in faded scenes, comparable to those on a calendar sent out by a mail-order house. Alternate with these pictures are mirrors on which are plastered "Try Our Sundaes—15c," or "How About a Luscious Malt—20c?" Above the strains of "Cow-Cow Boogie" come the rattle of dishes, the sharp ring of glasses and the dull metallic clink of silverware. There is a monotonous undertone of talking, broken by loud laughter and, now and then, a piercing shriek.

And everywhere, sitting with their feet propped up in the booths or leaning on the juke box or dancing on the postage-stamp floor are boys and girls in red, yellow, or bright green sweaters.

Sitting in the corner with a crowd of boys listening eagerly to her every word, and sipping daintily at a coke, is Jill, the "glamour girl" of the crowd. She wears only Station wagon sweaters in soft pastels and would walk all over town to get a hair ribbon to match them exactly. She wouldn't think of wearing anything but Pancake makeup, and her collection of turquoise Indian bracelts reaches from her wrist to her elbow and is the envy of every girl in town. She wears her hair long and drooping over one eye like Veronica Lake. Her pet peeve is not wearing lipstick and nail polish to match.

Standing aloof to the crowd surrounding Jill is the football hero of the town, Johnny. He talks avidly to old Steve, the proprietor, of how Tony Hinkle's team beat
the great Notre Dame, nonchalantly trying to appear unconscious of the admiring glances of all the girls. He knows he can get a date with any of them. A letter sweater with padded shoulders is his bait. His language is full of "T-formations," "blocked kicks," and, most of all, Johnny. The least of Johnny's worries is the fact that he usually flunks all his courses.

From the dance floor, Judy's voice can be heard above the blare of the music, as she tries to attract Johnny's attention. He is her idol and Frank Sinatra her ideal. Judy has the dirtiest pair of saddle shoes in town and the largest number of autographs on her Panda bear. Her pet raves, next to Johnny and "Frankie" are Sonny Tufts and Helmut Dantine. Judy can always be found here on the dance floor at Pops learning the latest jitterbug steps with Joe.

Joe is the best dancer in the town, meaning he can do the most contortions. He is never seen without his little red and green cap perched precariously on the back of his head. With a total disregard for Esquire, he wears Argyle sweaters and covered with painted names and slang expressions, and on a very conspicuous spot, is a bright red patch. Joe dotes on boogie woogie and Harry James — and, incidentally, doesn't think Harry did so bad when he got Betty Grable.

This is the future generation of America. In these seemingly aimless hands lies the destiny of the greatest nation on earth. All over America, in places just like "Pops", they congregate and laugh and smile and dance. But are they as worthless as they seem? They have their own lines of slang, their own special likes and dislikes. They want fun and love crowds and people. But they are simply normal and human and healthy, just as America is normal and human and healthy. Yes, this is what they are today, but what will they be tomorrow?

Five years ago on every Saturday night "Pops" was filled with a similar group. They did "Susie Q" to the tune of "Flat Foot Floogie" or dreamed to the strains of "I Let a Song Go Out of My Heart." The Jill of that day wore a tight sweater with a triangular scarf knotted around her neck. She clumped about in wooden shoes and had her hair done in page boy a la Ginger Rogers. The Judys five years ago sighed over Nelson Eddy and Tyrone Power, and over the football hero of the crowd who strutted around with his varsity letter just as Johnny does now. And another Joe argued avidly over the relative merits of Benny Goodman and Artie Shaw.

Today that Joe is lying face down in the swamps of Guadalcanal, and the swing music that once rang in his ears is supplanted by the drone of an occasional scout plane as it flies over the remnants of the battlefield. And Johnny is leading his squadron in nightly attacks against Fortress Europe, and is wearing medals instead of letters. Loud-mouthed, good-natured Judy is working twelve hours a day — no longer in saddle shoes but in nurses' oxfords. Jill has settled down to one man, an army lieutenant, and has exchanged her vain dreams of wealth and position for hopes and beliefs in their future together.

And when that future comes the Judys and the Johnnys of today will prove their worth just as the Jills and Joes of yesterday have done. And five years from now, on Saturday nights, a new group of boys and girls in just as bright clothes will pack "Pops". They will lean on the counters and sip cokes and talk and laugh and smoke and dance on the crowded floor as the juke box sends forth some popular song of tomorrow. And life will go on as usual in our town.