

# ***Summer of '69 in Moochville***

*By Brent Green*

I rock 'n' rolled into 1969 at age 19: young enough to be uninhibited, old enough to be reflective about lapses of inhibition. Bounded by 6 caressing 9, the final year of the sixties turned epochal, oozing innuendo and liberated promises as rigid Texas traditions collided with gritty young adults keen on relaxing too many uptight values.

Houston in 1969 lacked abundant summer jobs. The baby boomer age-wave had flooded the job market that summer, and even Ronald McDonald offered scant opportunities for students eager to fry hamburgers. I spent a couple of fruitless weeks scanning newspaper ads and filling out employment applications, feeling oppressed by my dad's practical expectations that I get a summer job — any job that would get me up in the morning and out of the house.

One day I discovered a newspaper ad with an alluring headline:

***STUDENTS!***

*Win a Trip to Madrid, a New Mustang Convertible and  
Cash Awards! Great Career Opportunities!*

The scintillating staffing ad encouraged highly motivated students to attend a kick-off rally at a downtown hotel. Slackers need not apply. Two days later several hundred scholarly opportunists packed a ballroom. I had arrived early to snag a good seat, epitomizing in my demeanor extraordinary enthusiasm. I needed this job before I understood its dimensions and strictures.

Bob Oliver and Richard Harris escorted a rapt audience through an elaborate spiel. Quaffed and expensively dressed, the middle-aged men suspended disbelief that any summer job could be so promising in such a shitty employment market. They made it all seem possible whatever it was. Younger acolytes, already part of their team, bubbled with confident gusto and shared earnest testimonials. Bundles of money would be paid. Status would come with almost effortless work. Other intangible rewards would follow: self-esteem, marketing knowhow, worldliness, and powerful people skills. And don't forget about an all-expense-paid trip to Madrid or a 1969 Mustang convertible. It took an hour before the bombastic hosts finally revealed their bottom line:

they were offering commission-only jobs to peddle a newly published home library named Merit Students Encyclopedia, published by Collier's.

Jobless and tense over escalating parental censure for being jobless, I accepted the job once I was selected, which meant that I had been willing to stick around following the presentation and proclaim my faith in materialism. "I'd love to win the Mustang — in fact, that's what I intend to do!"

Dad thought it would be an enduring formative experience, although he wasn't destined to lug a briefcase door-to-door in sizzling heat and humidity while invading track-home sameness from Galveston to El Paso with the immense yawn of southwest Texas in-between.

Following a day of exhaustive training in Houston and a homework mandate to memorize a presentation script word-for-word, the summer of a lifetime unfolded into the Lone Star State's untrammelled and sometimes ignorant byways. The entire Texas sales force journeyed by day, hip-hopping towns from Houston to El Paso during a god-awful searing summer. We traveled in a caravan of four sedans and a convertible packed with positive but penurious students trying to make a buck and get through the summer.

Our crew featured interesting diversity. David, a Harvard divinity student, could cite poignant scriptures to defrock any argument that the Vietnam War was morally justifiable. Sarah, a towering hippie chick with waist-length hair and Twiggy legs, became proficient at selling books beyond logical explanation. And Ed, an unemployed rock 'n' roll DJ with a velvet baritone voice capable of seducing bored housewives, had been a roadie for the Southern-rock group *Lynryd Skynrd* when the Florida band was still known as *My Backyard*.

Bob and Richard targeted neighborhoods populated by ticky-tacky box houses lined up in symmetrical rows, pastel stucco or fiberboard exteriors, swing sets in backyards, Corvairs or Chevelles parked on driveways. They scouted for indicators of patriotism, naivete and ambition, the Trinity of door-to-door sales success.

*Moochville, U.S.A.*

They crawled middle-class neighborhoods in their luxury vehicles — displaying ostentatious arrival statements for the benefit of nosy neighbors — while selecting suburbs lacking convenience stores. We couldn't then escape into air-conditioned comfort and wile away evenings playing pinball games. At 4:00 p.m., they deposited us at strategic cross sections of uncaring, uninviting expanses of monotony.

Briefcases in hand, neckties knotted, chicks' make-up seductive but understated, we knocked on doors for six hours and returned to our drop-off spots promptly at 10:00. Our mission between drop-off and pick-up was to get inside as many houses as possible and sell books. A Texas blast furnace

inspired us to keep knocking on doors and ringing doorbells, sometimes for six unfulfilling hours during nightmare dry spells.

Both Mom and Dad Mooch needed to be present and willing to answer qualifying questions. Our explicit purpose was to give away encyclopedia sets. Yes, absolutely free of charge for the lucky family that met requirements for such an incredible gift of learning. We weren't selling anything.

We qualified victims as to their suitability for this lofty honor, a beneficent gesture from Collier's, the educational brand they could trust. We called it "sample advertising." Their *only* obligation—assuming the books delivered everything we promised—would be to write an enthusiastic testimonial for use in company advertising. A slight-of-hand arrived about the time Mooches visualized their kids trotting off to Stanford or Harvard, thus liberated from the same ticky-tacky existence as their parents' plight. The qualifying pitch made certain that parents *highly valued* education for their children. We asked again. Several times. They declared allegiance to prescribed moral commitments before we arrived at the final closing question.

Social psychologists call this powerful sales tactic the Foot-in-the-Door Technique. This involved coaxing captivated Mooches, gaining concurrence with core values such as the importance of learning, knowledge, and higher education. The more that Mooches affirmed verbal agreement with qualifying questions, the more likely they would feel obligated to go along with a final large request to fork over serious money for their very own encyclopedia library, plus a two-volume dictionary, plus a twenty-volume set of The Harvard Classics.

Sales manager Richard Harris — who was unrelated to the famous actor but relished the name association, sporting black Ray Bans and radiating Hollywood swagger — taught his sales scholars to think of each confirmatory answer to a qualifying question as slamming an imaginary door. He calculated that a successful presentation would close thirteen doors, thus trapping the target Mooch, cage-like. Once the final door slammed, Mooches could not escape the situation without a serious case of cognitive dissonance. Most of those carefully qualified would then write checks, sometimes in an altered state of consciousness.

Are you wondering about *the too-good-to-be-true catch*?

After Mom and Dad Mooch had embraced learning and education with their enthusiastic pronouncements, it followed that they must be the kind of parents who would keep a *free* twenty-five-volume set up-to-date. ("Just like regular oil changes for that Chevelle parked on the driveway.") This they could accomplish by ordering annual yearbooks featuring scientific discoveries and major events from the previous year.

The update service was not free, and we asked them to pay upfront for ten consecutive years. Mr. and Mrs. Mooch, being conscientious parents, then agreed to shell out 34 cents every day to save for their annual yearbooks. We demonstrated the math for them by dropping exact change into a plastic coin bank, also included with all the wonderful books.

A profitable number of Mooch couples—Corvairs parked on driveways, swing sets in backyards—could be transitioned in about ninety minutes from disgust over an uninvited doorbell near dinnertime to elation over forthcoming Ivy League education for their munchkins. Some Mooches became virtuous when finally signing a contract for \$1,200 (valued at over \$8,000 today!). They handed over deposit checks for \$200. When we nailed the pitch, they would bid us farewell as a new family friend, delighted to have been selected as their neighborhood’s official sample advertising family.

My hands sometimes trembled when I presented signed contracts and deposit checks to Richard Harris. He was an exuberant man to please, almost worth the psychic cost of many rejections, night after night. His confident hand would reach over and pump mine vigorously. “All right, Brother Brent!” he would proclaim with a wide grin.

The average rep closed a Mooch couple every few nights—sometimes knocking on several hundred doors to land a big score. The best of us, such as hippie Sarah, could sometimes land two sales in a single night. She became legendary for one time closing *three* sales in six hours, and a few dudes cynically attributed her prowess to miniskirts showcasing astonishing legs. Since the commission for each set was a cool \$200, that nubile, nymph-like bohemian lady took in almost two grand some weeks. That wasn’t pocket change in 1969.

But financial glory included risks. The company never purchased sales licenses for 31 clueless college students, and almost every night somebody got busted. Texas enforced the Green River Ordinance with vengeance, a law prohibiting door-to-door sales without local licenses. Buying 31 licenses every night wasn’t practical or affordable. Richard and Bob played the odds; we played their victims.

One time in Austin a balding, bulging Mooch threatened to beat me up after I disqualified his family. He wasn’t agreeing with the required qualifying commitments, so, as instructed, I informed him that he and the missus weren’t educationally minded enough to be selected as a sample advertising family. Bad choice of phrasing.

He called the cops after I departed his living room, which led to a curbside interrogation, a one-way trip to the police station, and the indignities of a criminal booking. Then I spent two anxious hours in the Austin city jail with

hardened convicts checking me out as tie-clad teenage meat. Embellished in his hand-tailored dress shirt and a five-hundred-dollar suit, luminous Richard Harris eventually arrived and bailed me out with a gleaming smile. The cavalcade rolled on to San Antonio the next morning as if nothing weird or worrisome had happened. Just another day in the book biz.

When we weren't selling, we partied into the wee hours at seedy motels. Sexual liaisons happened among the young and impetuous, including all of us. With Texas being the nation's most punitive state concerning possession or use of marijuana, we often became frustratingly "head starved," but we found creative ways to tune in and turn on, sometimes through the resourcefulness of Bud, a worldly Vietnam vet who had army buddies in many Texas towns. We also discovered the potential of over-the-counter Robitussin, a cold medication spiked with dextromethorphan. The surprising psychedelic effects served psychic purposes in addition to coughing cessation.

Being at least fifteen years older than their charges, Bob and Richard didn't know what we were doing, but they distrustfully insisted that we do it in the same motel room and not invade swimming pools or public spaces. They tolerated our budding countercultural ways because we brought them paychecks sufficient to provide a steady flow of designer suits and self-conscious slip-ons.

Free enterprise rocketed with the roll in southern Texas throughout those blistering months defined by Neil Armstrong's first steps on the moon and a legendary rock concert in Upstate New York called Woodstock. Thirty-one hippies and antiwar activists traded psychoactive substances and romantic partners with carefree abandon, and many sold their way to amazing profitability during the summer of '69. My dad was impressed with my sales pluck and ingenuity though nervous about his boy suddenly becoming a more self-assured young man with combative opinions.

Our motley crew knocked on thousands of strangers' doors, started an experimental commune in downtown Houston to explore alternative lifestyle options under the same roof, sampled substances still pharmacologically unclear, made a substantial amount of money, and readied ourselves for cultural and social upheavals that would beset university campuses that coming fall semester.

Thanks to Merit Students Encyclopedia and Collier's, we were primed, pumped and prepared for forthcoming strange changes, mostly as meritorious college students wise to the ways of Mooch manipulation.

*Postscript: I never found out who won a trip to Madrid or a new Mustang, the incentives most alluring to me in that fateful newspaper want-ad. Fictitious come-*

*ons, I now presume. But I did win a Deluxe Edition of The Harvard Classics, today gracing my living room bookshelf—a satisfying symbol and reminder of my slapdash youth. Bob Oliver, an ironic spitting image of actor Dustin Hoffman, offered me a sales territory in San Antonio in lieu of returning to the university. I turned him down. He vigorously shook my hand while escorting me from his office as if disqualifying a reticent Mooch.*