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INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

RJB 15- Rituals



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535 Fifth Ave.  
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Dear Mr. Nolte:

Work at Western Electric, as at most companies, means more than simply doing a routinized, assigned task. For most people it means becoming involved in a constellation of human relations, both sanctioned and unsanctioned, formal and informal. Rituals, in the plant and outside it play an important role in this system. I have selected a going away party, a company picnic, and a vacation trip, as a way to look at non-production associated rituals and their relation to work.

#### Going Away Party

The going away party is the most common ritual to occur on the shop floor. A shift change, movement within the plant, or termination, are all occasions which can call for a going away party. In the five months I worked at Western Electric I had a chance to participate in four of these parties, and to see countless others.

Probably the most representative of the four parties was for Pauline, who was about to leave work because of her pregnancy. About a week before Pauline was to leave, Pam, a girl who worked behind me, came over and said, "Here," giving me an envelope, "It's for Pauline, give what you want, most people are giving a dollar,.." Pam didn't wait while I fumbled in my pocket for money. Instead she told me to pass the envelope on and not to let Pauline see it. I put my dollar in and passed the envelope along to Dottie, repeating what Pam had told me. I watched the envelope as it circulated in the rows in front of me, and at each place the previous person would leave to allow the person to give as he or she saw fit. That was the last I heard of the party till two days before it was to take place.

I overheard Pam explain to Alice that she and Mike had gone shopping with the \$30 that had been collected. Pam described to Alice in great detail all the baby clothes they had bought and told Alice that the cake was decorated with a small stork and a pair of baby shoes.

On the day of the party, a Friday (Fridays were always the day on which these parties were held) a card began to circulate.

I squeezed my name in and passed the card on.<sup>1</sup>

Friday's festivities began when one of the women pinned a corsage on Pauline. Her cheeks fresh with a rich red bouquet,



Pauline went back to work. At ten of nine both Alice and Pam disappeared and brought out paper plates and forks, as well as a huge cake. By 8:55, five minutes before the nine o'clock bell was to ring, signaling our ten minute morning break, all the women in the front area had surrounded Pauline and the cake.

The bell soon rang and a few people, mostly men, went to the back area for their morning smoke, missing the cutting of the cake, but somehow unspokenly assured that pieces of cake would be saved for them. Pauline made the first cut into the cake, and then while another woman took over she turned her attention to the pile of gifts.

1. The occasion was made that much more special because I was allowed to take pictures. Western Electric has a very strict rule not allowing photographs to be taken in the plant. I had asked for special permission, which was granted. However, I hadn't mentioned that to everyone, and when fellow workers saw me take my cameras out they rushed over and told me to hide them quickly before I got into, as one said, 'a hellu'va lot of trouble.' I assured them that I had permission, but the warnings continued to come in.







At 9:10 the buzzer went off again and people returned to their work. Several extra pieces of cake had been cut, some for the men who had been smoking, and others for friends of Pauline's who worked in other parts of the plant. During the day several of Pauline's friends came over to say goodbye, to admire her presents, or to bring one of their own. Then at five of three while tools were put away in anticipation of the 3 o'clock buzzer, people began kissing Pauline goodbye.

The going away party is a highly ritualized event. Unless a person is terribly disliked he or she will be given a party on the Friday of their leaving. Unlike many office parties that consume the better part of an afternoon, or fill up a lunch hour, these parties are squeezed into a ten minute morning break.

Everyone expects a collection to be taken, a card to be signed, and a party including gifts and a cake to be had. The company doesn't sanction these parties, and has a policy against taking collections, yet it accepts the parties as long as they are generally limited to the morning break. Within this framework the group determines the nature of the party.

The party is a good indicator of the cohesiveness of a group. Several people told me that these parties were common in all groups, but that they varied greatly in terms of emotional content.

The party is more than a matter of an important event. It is, in fact, one way in which the workers are able to express their feelings, something which is often absent from the tasks they perform.

All four parties I attended shared common ingredients, and yet each present and card was tailored to the person, and each had its own special emotional content. At only one party, for the three summer students, were there no presents. To me that was a way in which the group symbolically, and perhaps unconsciously showed that these summer students were not considered a real part of the group. It was therefore very important to me that at my going away party, along with everything else, there was a present.

#### The Company Outing

Western Electric used to have a company picnic but stopped the practice when the company grew to a point where it was impractical. Instead of a company picnic there is now an outing day at Canobie Lake Amusement Park, where for \$1 you not only get entrance to the park but entrance to all of the more than twenty major rides.

It struck me as a great opportunity for people in my area to get together with each other's families. Workers are typically introduced to each others' families through stories and photographs. Pictures of husbands, wives, and children, as well as of weddings, vacations, and births, are in almost constant circulation. Over time one inevitably begins to share in the tragedies as well as the joys of fellow workers. The group will often buy a card, occasionally make a collection, when the

tragedy is a serious illness or death. I saw several different instances in which a relative of a worker was sick, and another worker brought in a present or a card for that person whom he or she knew only by story or picture.

When the outing was announced I waited a few days, hoping that several of the people whom I liked would say that they were planning to bring their families. When no one said anything I suggested that a group of us might take our families. The reaction, to my surprise, was basically no interest.

This reaction made me realize that to a great extent there is only a ritual interest in each others' outside lives. I bought five tickets and planned a picnic day with my wife, her sister, and another couple.



Saturday, the day of the outing, was cold and raw. Rain threatened most of the day, yet when we arrived at noon the park was already jammed with families, and there were long lines of children in front of each ride.



I like amusement parks, but I don't particularly like most of the rides. The idea of paying for my own misery is not particularly appealing, so when I have to pay for a ride I have little difficulty saying no. However getting something for nothing made the rides deceptively attractive. After saying no several times I finally agreed to go on the roller coaster. We got into a long line which didn't get any shorter until two men, each with their own children in tow, stopped other kids from cutting into the front of the line.

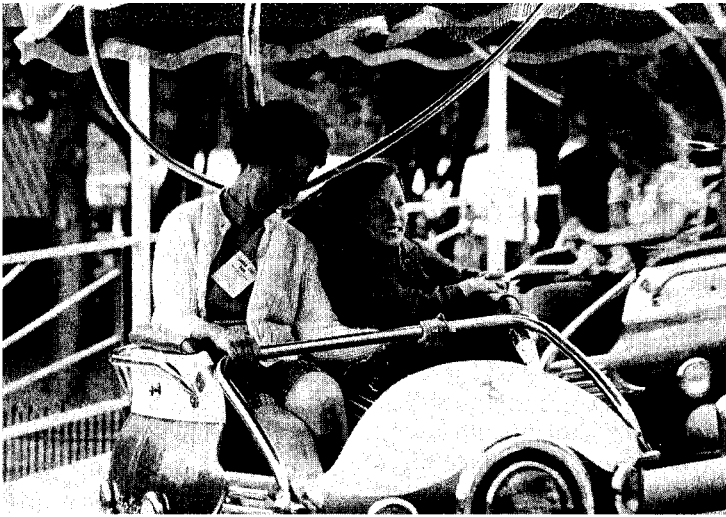
While we waited I thought about the last time I had been on a roller coaster. I was fourteen years old and my brother, who was two years older than me, forced me to go on the Cyclone at Coney Island. He forced me by threatening to beat me up if I didn't go with him. After the first terrifying drop, where I was sure the car would fall off the tracks, I wished I had stayed on the ground and taken a physical beating.

Back in the present my friend Ramsey and I got into one of the cars. My wife and sister-in-law were right behind us in the next car. Compared to the Cyclone this roller coaster was puny, and yet as it made its way slowly up the incline to the first drop, I knew I had made a terrible mistake. The first plunge

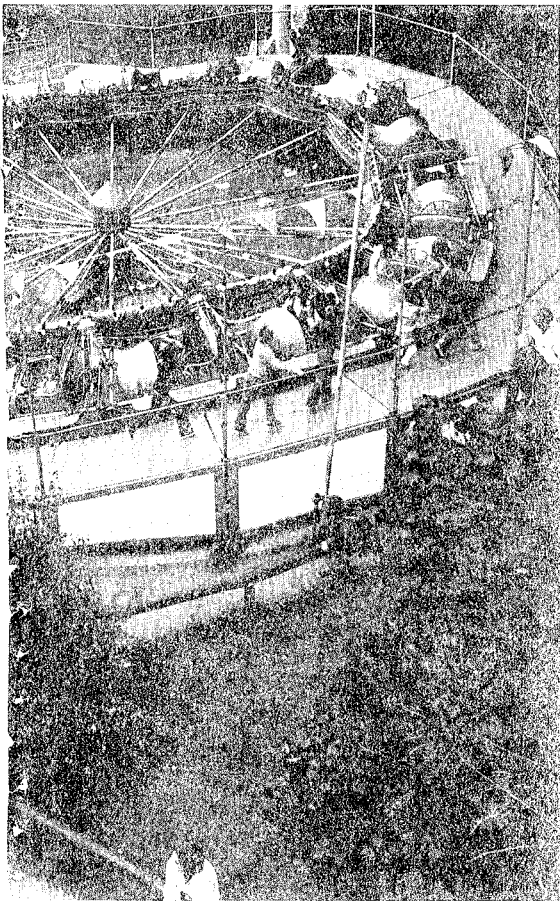


began and Ramsey's mouth opened with a laugh of child-like delight, as my mouth closed, my adam's apple bobbed, and I wished for the end of the ride. After that drop Ramsey shot a glance my way and I tried to look anything but hopelessly ill.

The ride was soon over, and it took me some time to recover. We spent most of the afternoon roaming around the park, stopping to take this and that ride. That is, I watched most of the rides, content to take pictures and see Eileen and our friends enjoying the rides.









As we left the park I realized that I didn't feel connected in any way with the thousands of people all around me. Once during the afternoon I saw someone I knew from work with her family. We stopped and talked for a few minutes. Aside from that I felt no binding with the group I had shared the day with. It was like being at an amusement park on a normal day.

Some people stopped and talked with friends, yet it seemed that the vast majority of people were isolated in family groupings. That doesn't mean that people didn't have a good time, many did. For the kids it was a day of amusement ride gorging. A day on which a child didn't have to worry about the price of a ride. Nevertheless, as a larger shared experience there was little to be had.

Most Western Electric workers relate to the company through the small work group. At Canobie Lake there was no small definable group to relate to. Being a Western Electric employee wasn't enough to make a meaningful shared experience. In addition, the presence of so many "outsiders" in the form of family and friends worked against any ingroup feeling.

Western Electric has outgrown the 'company picnic'. What remains is a sanctioned, ritualized event called an annual outing. For me, and for the people I talked to, it had less meaning than any other event I've attended through my connection with the company.

The Great Boat Ride

Every so often notices are posted on the bulletin board and forms sent around announcing all sorts of trips, with special prices for Western Electric employees and their families. The trips range from a week or ten days in Acapulco to a Nassau cruise, a visit to Florida's Disney World, or a weekend trip to New York City, Toronto, or Nova Scotia.

I had heard several people at work talk about these trips and how much they had enjoyed them. So Eileen and I along with two other couples from my work area signed up for a weekend trip to Nova Scotia. For \$89/person we were to get bus transportation to and from Portland, Maine, passage from Portland to Nova Scotia and back on the Bay of Fundy, a room going one way, a Smorgesbord dinner, a hotel room in Yarmouth, lunch and dinner on Saturday, and free entrance to the hotel's lounge and show.

We sent in our deposits and waited for our tickets. First we received some receipts, and then a week before the trip we received a packet with tickets for our baggage, a colorful brochure about the beauty of Nova Scotia, and a detailed itinerary about where we would stay and what we would do. It all sounded very exciting.

Several women at work, who had been on other, similar weekend trips, asked me if Eileen was getting a new outfit. They talked about the clothes they had gotten for their trips and the adventure of going to a new place with other people.

By the time we met our friends at gate #3 we were filled with anticipation. The bus, which was scheduled to arrive at 6:00 PM didn't arrive until 6:45. Much to my surprise, almost no one seemed to get mad. Like us, everyone appeared to be with a small group of friends, and the long wait in the cold didn't seem to dampen their good spirits.

When the buses finally arrived in Portland we discovered that the Bay of Fundy was late. Again we had to wait, this time for more than an hour before we could board the ship. Waiting, we were to discover, would be a common thread throughout the weekend.

Our group of 125 was quickly absorbed by the 500 or so other people waiting for the boat, which didn't actually leave until close to 10:30, nearly 7 1/2 hours since I had put my working tools away for the day.

We weren't underway five minutes before the first crisis developed. We had been told that we had a free dinner coming. It wasn't clear whether that free dinner was to be this first night or Sunday. Several of the men scurried around looking for the tour guides, but they weren't much help. This was their first tour. I found that I was beginning to become annoyed with their incompetence, but most of the other people, who had been on other trips with this tour company took it in stride. I heard things like, "Well, they're only young girls," or "We've traveled with this company and it's a good outfit."

Anyway, we found that we couldn't get the smorgesbord that night, so we abandoned eating in the expensive restaurant and

settled for the cafeteria. It was hard for the six of us from my work area to eat together because many of the passengers didn't have rooms and therefore staked out the cafeteria benches for sleeping.

Saturday began early with a knock on the door from our friends, a giggle, and the remark, "that's enough of that, it's time to get up for breakfast." As it turned out, the boat was delayed and we wouldn't be getting into Yarmouth until 10:30 AM, so there was plenty of time after breakfast for picture taking



and relaxing in the stern of the deck. The boat finally docked, and after clearing customs we were taken to our hotel in an old school bus.

I'm not quite sure what I expected Yarmouth to be like, but whatever I had expected it was disappointing. The city was a small old port town, with little apparent rustic charm. Our hotel was more like a motel than the grand old hotel that I had hoped for. Although they were expecting us, the room assignments had been mixed up and we had to go through a complicated procedure to be reassigned rooms. Eileen and I left our suitcases up in our room where we had a window view of an air vent from the adjoining building, and went out for a walk. We came back in time to join our friends for lunch. We discovered on the way into lunch that the tour scheduled to begin at 2:00 had been pushed back to 3:15. The tour finally began at 3:30. The group split up into three buses, our guide was a young eighteen-year-old college student, whose





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Dick and Eileen Balzer (\*\*) and other Western Electric couples on deck

father owned the bus we were riding on. From the beginning the tour was a disaster. The boy repeatedly pointed out such interesting things as, a boat sitting on the side of the road, a house that had just sold for \$25,000, the bowling alley where the best grass in town was sold, and the road to the site where they were going to build Yarmouth before they changed their minds.

Strangely enough, this seemed to bother everyone very little. In fact, the tour and the guide became a big joke. Whatever the boy said sent everyone into fits of laughter. We began to feel like a group. We made one stop at a lighthouse and everyone hurried off the bus, took their cameras out and started snapping away, here in front of the rock, then in front of the lighthouse, "Would you mind taking a picture of me and my wife?" "No, sure." "Thanks, want us to take a picture of you?"

Our big stop of the day was to be a summer resort, supposedly a big tourist attraction about thirty minutes outside of Yarmouth. On the way out of town the bus passed a factory and the boy said, "That's our biggest factory." He continued, a note of pride in his voice, "It has over 500 workers, and two shifts." That remark sent the bus into gales of laughter. We began whispering to each other about how small the place was when you thought of Western Electric. Finally one man said, "you think that's big, we work in a place where there are 10,000 workers and three shifts." People kept talking about that remark until we arrived at the summer resort.

Our guide kept up his patter, pointing out the house where the owner lived, telling us that the resort, which looked deserted, was quiet. Finally the bus stopped at the resort's general store, a most unimpressive, deteriorating wooden structure. Nevertheless, the bus waited for 45 minutes as people picked out an assortment of knick knacks, memorabilia of our brief Nova Scotia trip.

Secure that they hadn't forgotten to pick up presents for their children or friends, everyone settled into the bus for the ride back to the hotel. In spite of the absence of anything of real interest on this so-called tour everyone seemed to be having a grand time. People began pointing things out on the road, such as a barn, or a wheel, or a shopping center, sending others into more laughter.

Several times someone would point to a store and say something like, "You know, they have five employees, and two shifts." We shared a feeling of superiority in working for a big company.

That night everyone was dressed to the teeth. All the new outfits were worn to dinner in the hotel's dining room. The glow of the afternoon carried into the evening and people said hello to those they had shared the afternoon bus ride with, and settled down to dinner with their friends. After dinner most people took advantage of their tickets for a free entry to the hotel's lounge.

We had been told to be ready to leave the next morning at 8:00AM. It wasn't till we came down to the lobby that we were informed that we wouldn't actually be leaving until 9:30. It was a very windy morning, and our bus drove us right onto the boat.

When the boat first pulled out of Yarmouth harbor many people tried to stand on the stern as they had on the way in, but it was even colder and windier than it had been the day before, and slowly people began moving inside. I stayed out enjoying the idea of having some solitude aboard a very busy and crowded ship. For a long time I sat there, the wind hitting me and the white salt of the ocean spray beginning to stick to my jacket and pants.

Most of the leisurely trip home was filled with wandering around the boat, and the smorgesbord dinner. Soon we were back on the buses heading back to North Andover. I realized during the bus ride home that we had seen almost none of Nova Scotia, or Yarmouth for that matter, and yet it had been one of the nicest trips I had ever taken.

The important element was the trip, and not Nova Scotia. For many people at work, a company-sponsored trip is a long-awaited yearly adventure. There is a ritual to making plans and then for taking a trip, which includes leaving responsibilities for a while, getting new clothes, carrying cameras, buying gifts, and sharing an adventure with other people.


At the beginning of the Nova Scotia weekend people were isolated. That is, although most people were with friends, there really was little relation to the other Western Electric employees. Being on a large boat, with more than 600 people, somehow made people begin to share their common bond of being Western Electric employees.

But it really wasn't until well into the tour on Saturday, till we all went to the same hotel, till we ate lunch in the same dining room, and finally till we took the same disastorous tour, that a real bond was forged. Through the adversity of our trip, our being Western Electric employees brought us closer, to each other and to the company. A rather unexciting, uneventful weekend had been transformed into a very special time. For the first time Eileen felt like part of Western Electric. Non-company spouses fully became part of the company family.

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Many social scientists make a mistake when they look at blue collar work by taking a very narrow view of what happens at the workplace. Often they reduce a person's day to the task he or she performs. Work for most people is much more than the task they perform. It includes the relations they make and their participation in company sponsored events.

A ritualized event by definition is a formalized, repeatable set of events. I have discussed three such rituals which, to varying extents, bind the worker to the company. I will describe in the next few months a variety of other ways that binding takes place, including informal social settings, the breaking of rules, and participation in company-sponsored athletics.





Canobie Lake Amusement Park