

A TOUGH CENTURY FOR OHIO'S FLAG

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I LOVE Ohio. If you want to see proof, step into my bedroom.

Don't worry, it's nothing kinky. It has nothing to do with the Scooby Doo sheets on my bed. No, those were a well-intentioned, though confusing, gift from two loving parents to their 25-year-old son.

Instead, look at the wall next to the bed. There, hanging like a royal banner, is Ohio's Old Glory, the state flag. It has hung there for the last eight years, keeping watch over me ever since I went to college out East and my father offered it as a symbol of home.

In those days, my roommates showed it no respect. They confused it with the Texas flag or the Puerto Rican flag, and they mocked the swallow-tailed design that distinguishes it from every other state banner. All this the pennant absorbed with a quiet nobility.

I loved that flag. Its giant "O" and 17 stars were red, white, and blue reminders that I came from the heart of it all.

These days, I wake up and look upon the flag with even more reverence. This month, it turned 100.

It hasn't been an easy century for Ohio's burgee (as it is properly called because of its shape). It's one thing to find out that your conception was an accident, quite another to realize that you were a 100-year afterthought.

Ohio entered the union in 1803 as the 17th state (hence the number of stars on the flag). Its pennant, with red and white stripes representing Ohio's waterways and roads and a blue triangle evoking its hills and valleys, wasn't adopted by the General Assembly until May 9, 1902.

The symbol designed by Cleveland architect John Eisenmann actually debuted at the Pan American Exposition in Buffalo in 1901. President William McKinley, of Canton, saw it there but was assassinated by an anarchist soon after.

Things have improved considerably since.

To those who wonder why I care so much for Ohio and its flag, I must admit that it has something to do with brainwashing.

I grew up attending a school where as first-graders we marched around the room singing "Yankee Doodle" and "America the Beautiful." We could have drowned in the deluge of state symbols that our teachers poured upon us. State bird? Cardinal. State stone? Flint. State beverage? Tomato juice. State rock song? "Hang on Sloopy."

There's also something to be said for loving the place you call home and knowing that you come from a land of giants. The mother of presidents. The birthplace of aviation. The home of Clark Gable and Margaret Hamilton, the Wicked Witch of the West.

I'm not the only one who feels passionately about the Ohio flag. One of my college buddies from Spokane, Wash., got into the only fight of his life over it. His name is Hugh Hunter and he looked a lot like the cartoonish statues outside of Big Boy restaurants, though that probably had nothing to do with the fight.

Everyone in his elementary school class had to do a report on a state flag, and Hugh was given Ohio. One of his peers said that it was ugly, and Hugh responded by kicking him. When the other boy caught Hugh's leg, my friend kicked with his remaining leg, sending himself to the floor with a painful thud. In retrospect, this was a tactical error, but I applaud his spirit.

In fact, Hugh's story inspired me to invent Captain Ohio, a Halloween superhero costume that featured the flag as a cape. My companions - tongues wagging, faces painted to resemble members of the band KISS - were less inspired and suggested that my only power was making the Cuyahoga River catch fire.

That's OK, I can take a joke. But I prefer this one: What's round on the ends and high in the middle? Ohio!

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