

CHAPTER ONE

The Iron Fist, the Velvet Glove

AUGUST 7, 1911

Nicholas Ray was a kind of human jigsaw puzzle, the pieces of his mystery scattered and lost over time.

Many of his films were haunted by bruised young people, threatened, damaged, or twisted by events beyond their control. Their suffering often begins in youth, its source a secret buried there.

Mementos of childhood crop up in Ray's films like missing pieces of the puzzle. Sports trophies line the top of a dresser in the room of an embittered detective in *On Dangerous Ground*. A broken-down rodeo champion finds a rodeo handbill, cap pistol, and tobacco-can bank squirreled away in a crawl space under his old homestead in *The Lusty Men*. ("I was looking for something I thought I lost," he tells an old-timer carrying a shotgun who interrupts his search.) Sprawled drunkenly on the ground, James Dean pulls a scrap-paper blankie over a cymbal-banging monkey toy during the opening credits of *Rebel Without a Cause*. ("Can I keep it?" he pleads when arrested.)

Even so, the source of hurt is private and vague and remote—not, as in the case of another Wisconsin filmmaker, as knowable as a certain Rosebud sled.

In his films, Ray tended to load the blame on mother and father fig-

ures. The parents in *Rebel Without a Cause* are fundamentally clueless. The drug-addicted father in *Bigger Than Life* tries to use a scissors to sacrifice his young son to God. Fathers are faulted the most in Ray's films, while mothers linger in the shadows, blurry and complicit.

His unorthodox "heroes" (the drug-addicted father is one) are destined to fail. The obstacles they face are nothing compared to their own neuroses. They are burdened above all by their integrity.

Ray's intense, searching visual style mirrored his personal struggles. His best films—a list that would arguably include *They Live by Night*, *In a Lonely Place*, *On Dangerous Ground*, *The Lusty Men*, *Johnny Guitar*, *Rebel Without a Cause*, *Bigger Than Life*, *Bitter Victory*, and *Party Girl*—can't easily be categorized. They owe something to Hollywood, where he never quite fit in, and everything else to his iconoclastic sensibility. First to the influential French critics of *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Positif* in the 1950s, and to every succeeding generation of film fans since, Ray has become a symbol of artistic purity and tragic flaws: a test case of auteurist worship.

In his life, as in his films, everything began at home—hope and trouble, strength and fissures.



Home sweet home for Nicholas Ray was an all-American city that was rugged and beautiful, as ideal on the surface as an airbrushed portrait of the director at the peak of his fame.

Christened as a fur-trading post in 1841, La Crosse was settled on the eastern banks of the Mississippi River, at the confluence of the Black and La Crosse Rivers along what would become the border of Wisconsin (which became a state in 1848) and Minnesota (which followed in 1858). From a handful of houses, the town swiftly multiplied into a booming gateway to the West for merchants and adventurers. Germans and Norwegians swarmed in on packed trains and cattle cars from Milwaukee. By 1880, La Crosse had grown into the fourth-largest community in Wisconsin.

"Here is a town," declared the former steamboat pilot Samuel Clemens, a.k.a. Mark Twain, in his 1883 tall-tale memoir and travelogue *Life on the Mississippi*, "with electric lighted streets, and blocks of buildings, which are stately enough and also architecturally fine enough to command respect in any city. It is a choice town." And a choice setting: With its lush

greenery and majestic bluffs spared by the Ice Age, surrounding fertile farmlands, crystalline rivers and lakes, dense forests, and plentiful hunting and fishing, the area was hailed locally as “God’s Country.”

By the early 1880s, members of a German clan named Kienzle had reached God’s Country. Nicholas Ray’s German-born grandparents stopped briefly in the Teutonic stronghold of Milwaukee before heading to La Crosse, where they would eventually raise a brood of three sons and five daughters. Their oldest son, Raymond Nicholas Kienzle, was born in Milwaukee in 1863; he would wed twice, the first time at a tender age in Milwaukee, before meeting Nicholas Ray’s mother. Kienzle’s second marriage, in La Crosse in 1888, didn’t last much longer than the first, though it produced two daughters, who continued to live near their father after their parents divorced.

An enigmatic, forbidding figure Raymond N. Kienzle was, as Ray himself recalled him. In his earliest photographs he wears an ironic smile, but later in life a walrus mustache and the *El Producto* cigar invariably lodged in his mouth gave him the gravitas of a successful tradesman. The Kienzles were building contractors, specializing in masonry, brick, and stonework for public edifices and luxurious homes for rich clientele, and in the 1890s Raymond, the oldest son, took over the family business.

Late in that decade, Kienzle got a big job renovating Gale College, a Presbyterian institution recently absorbed by the Lutheran ministry, in the town of Galesville, about twenty-five miles north of La Crosse. While there he met a quiet and kindhearted woman eleven years his junior. Slender and bespectacled Olene Toppen, known as Lena, had been raised on a nearby farm, one of nine children born to parents who were natives of Norway.

The couple married in 1898 and soon moved onto four acres near Galesville. Their land included a brickyard factory where Kienzle employed a handful of workers. Kienzle took local commissions, including a cement archway entrance to Galesville’s High Cliff Park, but also jobs that took him away for weeks elsewhere in the Midwest and as far as the Deep South.

All four of the couple’s children were born in the small town of Galesville: three girls—Alice (b. 1900), Ruth (b. 1903), Helen (b. 1905)—and, at last, a son. Raymond Nicholas Kienzle Jr. came bawling into the world on August 7, 1911. As a boy he would be called “Junior” or “Ray,” and in due

time he would drop the name “Kienzle,” reverse the order of his first and middle names, and adopt “Nicholas Ray” as his identity.

After he turned fifty, Raymond Sr. decided to cut back on his factory work and travel. He put the trappings of his business—the brick machines, molders and sanders, kiln, sheds and tools, and the Galesville land itself—up for sale, and in stages moved his family back to La Crosse, purchasing a series of houses co-owned or shared by Kienzle relatives. By 1920 the Kienzles had landed in a house at 226 West Avenue North, near the corner of Vine, facing west toward downtown and, just about a mile away, the river the Indians called “the Father of Waters.”



Especially after *Rebel Without a Cause*, the mythology surrounding Nicholas Ray tended to highlight stories of a misspent youth, complete with drinking, truancy, car thievery, brushes with the police, and flirtations with his father’s mistresses.

In many ways, however, his boyhood offers a scrapbook of an American idyll.

Galesville wasn’t far from La Crosse, and in the early years the Kienzles made regular trips to the bigger city for shopping, holidays, and visits to relatives. It was the city’s first-rate public schools that eventually lured the family to return there permanently. Although the countryside was still dotted with a few tepees, and scattered steamboats continued to roam the Mississippi, by 1920 Mark Twain’s “choice town” had transformed itself from prairie way station to glittering metropolis. La Crosse’s streets were lit with electricity and paved with stone, whizzing with automobiles and streetcars; most neighborhoods had sidewalks and garbage collection, and thousands of households had telephones.

La Crosse had cause for civic pride, though the lives of its citizens were subject to the whims of extreme weather. The wind whipped across the Mississippi—perhaps not quite “like emery cloth tearing across their faces,” as René Hardy wrote of the searing ghibli in *Bitter Victory*, but turbulently in the summers and frigidly in the winters. Those winters, which brought snow and ice before Thanksgiving most years, were the real endurance test. Yet La Crosseans embraced the season with skiing and skating and an annual winter carnival that featured dozens of floats

and fur-wrapped marching bands and employee clubs representing local businesses. Ray must have remembered the strong wind, for it often blew dramatically through key scenes of his films—sending up a murderous sandstorm in *Bitter Victory*, howling outside as Mercedes McCambridge makes her grand entrance in *Johnny Guitar*, blowing back the hair of the mourning teenage rebels standing cliff-side in *Rebel Without a Cause*.

The Kienzles lived on a street with several other Kienzle aunts and uncles, in a two-story house that was large but not architecturally fine: “a big yellow barn,” remembered Ferdinand Sontag, a neighbor and classmate of Ray’s. The living room featured a parquet floor and an Italian marble fireplace; antlered heads decorated the walls, and the family’s shelves were crammed with books. There was a separate piano room; Lena Kienzle played violin, and all her children learned to play at least one musical instrument. For supper, the dining room was set with linen and lace; for parties and holidays, the house filled with relatives, friends, and flowers.

By 1920, Ray’s father was semiretired, but he still took small jobs as a bricklayer, cement man, and plasterer. He was active in the chamber of commerce, while his wife earned plaques volunteering with the Red Cross and Community Chest. Though raised as a Catholic, Raymond Sr. had been excommunicated after his first divorce; for a time he joined the Congregational Church, but eventually drifted away from organized religion. His wife, brought up as a strict Lutheran, trended toward Methodism and faithfully took her children to services and Sunday school. Ray Jr. had been steeped in the Bible, long before the temerity of his film *King of Kings*.

Ray Jr. was a Boy Scout, a good boy who delivered patriotic speeches in grade school. On Election Day in 1924, as President Calvin Coolidge faced off against Democratic candidate John W. Davis and Wisconsin Progressive Robert M. La Follette Sr., the thirteen-year-old eighth-grader urged his Lincoln Junior High School classmates to remind their parents to vote.

All three of Ray’s sisters doted on their young brother, the only boy in the family. His siblings were all pretty, with wavy hair like their mother’s, good-humored but serious-minded, anxious to leave home and La Crosse.

They also nursed ambitions beyond marriage. The eldest, Alice, had already graduated from nursing school by the time of her young brother’s Election Day speech; after exchanging vows in the Kienzle living room, she moved with her husband to Madison, the college town that was swiftly surpassing La Crosse in size and prospects and glamour. The next-oldest

sister, Ruth, was on the verge of departing for Chicago. One by one the girls left—with Ray Jr.'s favorite, Helen, closest to him in age, the last to go.

Ray felt particularly close to Helen—close enough that, in one of his autobiographical jottings, he confessed that his first crush was on her. “Ever since I was four and she was nine I’ve wanted to make it with my sister Helen,” he noted wryly, “because she was my sister.” Years later, reflecting on some of his adult relationships, he would joke about a history of similar improprieties and feeling “bent towards incest with other people’s children and wives, ex-wives, and daughters and such.”

By the time Ray was a freshman at La Crosse Central High School, Helen too had graduated and was planning her escape. The table settings dwindled at home. Ray felt abandoned and lonesome, and this loneliness, which was with him from earliest memory, never abated. It was fundamental to his character and the themes of his films—which were often preoccupied with “the loneliness of man,” he noted, peopled by characters who suffer “much agony and much searching,” culminating in a private despair.

In youth and manhood alike, Ray too was a soul-searcher in tortured colloquy with himself.



His mother lavished attention on the girls, but when it came to Ray Jr. she deferred to her husband.

Raymond N. Kienzle Sr. was tall, his size and erect carriage lending him a larger-than-life air. The filmmaker romanticized his father later in life, once boasting that Raymond Sr. had “built levees, docking areas for steamboats and dykes against floods,” as well as “colleges, creameries, warehouses, cathedrals, and breweries.” Beyond his success as a contractor, his father had other positive qualities: Raymond Sr. loved music and literature, politically a Republican, he was known to speak out against racial prejudice at the dinner table. In 1924 he may even have voted for the spoiler La Follette, who carried only one state—Wisconsin.

But Raymond Sr. cast a formidable shadow. His son’s delinquency started as early as his Boy Scout years, by which time he was already smoking and drinking and playing hooky. A stern disciplinarian, the father had an iron fist, punishing his son physically for his indiscretions. And there was something else: As the director put it once, he was raised under “the

lash of alcoholism.” Though Lena Kienzle was a teetotaler, her husband was a dedicated alcoholic. Drinking was one way to imitate his father. “All during childhood and Prohibition,” the filmmaker recalled years later, “there was booze in the house, and on the street. At home it was for stealing: I stole my first pint at ten. On the street it was for buying—grain alcohol mixed with sugar and hot water—with money stolen from home. . . .

“I learned about Aqua Velva long before I started shaving. No, I didn’t drink it. I poured it over the sheets or into the bathtub to clear the smell of my puke.”

The household was filled with tension. Ray’s parents slept in separate bedrooms, and after dinner Raymond Sr. often disappeared, prowling a city that despite Prohibition was flush with speakeasies and saloons. Sometimes he didn’t come home until the next day.

“If he had the guts to knock Mom cold once,” Jim Stark (James Dean) muses harshly in *Rebel Without a Cause*, “then maybe she’d be happy and stop picking on him.”

Raymond Sr. had a series of mistresses, one of whom his son learned about around age fourteen. “At fifteen, I made an unsuccessful pass at her,” he recalled ruefully. Womanizing, a lifelong habit embedded in his youth, was another way for the son to emulate his father.

Raymond Sr. loved flashy cars—his name often appeared in the local paper as one of the first owners when a shipment of new models landed in town—and he had ulterior motives for teaching his young son to drive. “I learned to drive when I was thirteen,” Ray recalled, “so I could get my father home safe from his nightly rounds of speakeasies and bootleggers. Sometimes I’d wait for him in the car and masturbate.” This peculiar father-son bond—this sharing of drink and women and cars, often with punishment lurking—became a blueprint for what filmmaker Mark Rapaport described as the “Gordian knot of unbelievably complicated father-son, older man–young man relationships” in Ray’s life and films.

In 1927, the Kienzle family changed forever. One night in the fall, Raymond Sr. went missing. Searching for him, Ray tracked down his father’s current mistress in “a speakeasy across from a brewery my father had built. She led me to a hotel room. He was lying in sweat and puke, with puke pans on the floor at the side of the bed. I took him home and nursed him through the night.” Twenty years later, that memory was echoed by dialogue he wrote for Farley Granger’s character, recalling his own youth-

ful trauma, for a scene in *They Live by Night*: “Pa turned to me like he was trying to say something. I saw his face . . . white. Like he was gonna cry.”

Ray dragged his father home to recover. The next day he skipped his Latin class, as usual, decamping to a pool hall to practice three-cushion billiards with pals. His mother had to track him down by phone to tell him his father had passed away.

Convinced that the doctor who had treated his father was a dope addict (“before I left for school I watched him heat a substance in a spoon and draw it into a hypodermic”), Ray persuaded his mother to file a lawsuit against the physician. When the court date came, however, Ray was “so pissed on home brew” that he “couldn’t testify,” so his family lost.

“The next day I saw the doctor walking on Main Street,” Ray said. “I was driving a new Oakland Cabriolet. I was drunk. I ran the car at him across from the cathedral my father had built. A fire hydrant got in the way.”

No documents have survived to verify Ray’s account of the malpractice suit or the reckless driving citation (“my first ticket”) he recalled receiving for the hydrant incident. Yet his father’s death is documented in official records and the city newspaper: Raymond Nicholas Kienzle Sr. died on November 11, 1927, at the age of sixty-four. Ray’s three sisters, now all married, returned to La Crosse to grieve. Though the Kienzles kept in close touch and clung to each other in many ways, they wouldn’t reunite for another twenty years.

Just sixteen, Ray was bereft; he felt more alone and abandoned than ever. “Nick didn’t have a father,” Susan Ray, his fourth wife, insisted in an interview years later. “A drunk is not a father. I think he was looking for that. And when people have a piece missing they *magnetize* it in different ways.”

“I hated my father for dying too soon,” the director himself wrote with curious vehemence, “while in earlier years, when it was normal to want him out of the way—because he was a rival for the warmth of my mother, a witness to my fear, scorner of my pimples, withholder of money, knower of my sexual agonies, punisher of all my indiscretions, and an embarrassment in his work clothes and accent—I hadn’t been strong enough to kill him.”

Hate and love mingled uncomfortably in Ray’s psyche, and he never forgot those feelings of loss and need. “A boy needs a father at certain times in his life so he can kick him in the shins,” Ray reflected one time, “so he

can fight for the love of his mother. The boy misbehaves at one point, runs away at another, while his father remains constant, a gauge against which the boy can measure himself. Take that away and the spine is lost.”



Raymond N. Kienzle Sr. had prospered with the growth of La Crosse, and in death he provided well.

According to probate files, Kienzle owned land parcels worth an estimated \$15,000, and goods and savings worth another \$6,000. His will granted no bequests for his five daughters (including the two daughters from his second marriage), all of whom were married to husbands with jobs and assets; nor did he set aside any sum for his underage son. The estate was consigned entirely to his wife, unless she remarried. Two years later, the Wall Street crash would rattle these holdings, but Lena Kienzle proved capable as a money manager. She never remarried, and she lasted on the inheritance until her death in 1959.

Twenty-one thousand dollars was a considerable sum in 1926, qualifying the Kienzles as solidly middle-class; the family even employed a maid. Still, their affluence didn't hold a candle to the fortunes of the first families of La Crosse, the barons of lumber, railroads, rubber, and beer who lived in mansions in the city's older, grander districts—mansions built by contractors like Kienzle himself.

Among these families were the Loseys, descended from Joseph W. Losey, a lawyer, district attorney, and city councilman who had helped bring the railroad and waterworks to La Crosse in the mid-nineteenth century, and acquired and laid out the spacious grounds of the city cemetery. Losey's grandson and namesake, Joseph Losey, born in 1909, was an older classmate of Ray Kienzle Jr.'s at La Crosse Central High School.

The young son of a prominent family, Joseph Losey could drive his car along the city's bluffs on Losey Boulevard, a scenic roadway named for his grandfather. He vacationed abroad with his family and left La Crosse behind after graduation, heading east to college. Ray Kienzle was fortunate to make the occasional trip to Minneapolis, Madison, Milwaukee, and Chicago; his was more like the family in *Bigger Than Life*, gazing at exotic posters for destinations they couldn't afford to visit. Though the two young men grew up in the same time and place and attended the same

schools—and both went on to become movie directors—the age and class differences between them meant that Ray Kienzle Jr. and Joseph Losey had only a nodding acquaintance in La Crosse. Their hometown connection would bring them closer as adults, in New York and Hollywood and still later in Europe.

Yet Losey recalled things quite differently. “*His* family had much more money than ours,” Losey insisted, though he himself was the true child of privilege. It was a mark of Losey’s character that he always assumed a posture of lowliness, while Ray hid his humbler origins by armor-ing himself with grandiosity. Mutual friends were sometimes fooled. “I knew them both in Hollywood,” recalled actress Betsy Blair. “It’s funny, both came from the same town in Wisconsin. One came, I heard, from a wealthy family, and the other came from the other side of the tracks. I assumed it was Nick who came from the wealthy family. He had a kind of elegance, arrogance, an aura, a princely manner, while Losey was [socially] awkward, often dressed messily, and [was] not so handsome.”



If Ray Kienzle Sr. was the iron fist, his wife Lena was the velvet glove.

If Nicholas Ray felt he was competing with his father, even for his mother’s love—if, like certain characters in his films, he wished he had done more to fight for her affection—perhaps it was because Mrs. Kienzle gave her children that love so freely. Ray’s mother pampered him throughout his childhood, and especially after her husband’s death.

In turn, Ray absorbed his mother’s temperament, developing a personality that couldn’t have been farther from that of a teenage delinquent. Despite his angst and streak of rebellion, he was sweet like his mother, earnest—in a word, *nice*. As an adult he would be the sweetest of all Hollywood directors, a breed more known for the iron-fistedness evinced by his father. “One of the nicest people I’ve met,” recalled Ernest Borgnine, who appeared in Ray’s films *Johnny Guitar* and *Run for Cover*, “as well as a helluva director.”

As a teenager, Ray had a beautiful smile and a repertoire of grins—sly, shy, amused, mischievous. Beneath them, however, he remained fundamentally restless and lonely. Though sometimes garrulous, Ray was also prone to long, ambiguous silences. Like James Dean in *Rebel Without a*

Cause, who screams at his parents, “You’re not listening to me!” he yearned for someone to talk to—or to listen to him.

In youth and adulthood alike, drinking colored everything. After his father’s death, his delinquent habits worsened. His mother had endless patience but no answers. She appealed to her daughters, his sisters—the first of many women in his life to offer Ray a safety net.

Early in 1928, the sixteen-year-old was sent to live with Ruth and her husband in Chicago (the “Near North Side” of Chicago, where Gloria Grahame’s character in *In a Lonely Place* claims she logged time as a Fuller Brush Girl). It may not have been the first time he was pulled from school in La Crosse. “I got kicked out of high school seventeen times,” the director liked to brag. “I’d been a member of a youth gang,” he boasted on another occasion, “the president of an illegal fraternity in high school.” He was surely exaggerating, but the details in his most personal film, *Rebel Without a Cause*, suggest a familiarity with stolen cars and sympathetic police, and he did vanish to Chicago more than once as a young man.

Ruth Kienzle—“the most sophisticated” of his three sisters, according to Bernard Eisenschitz in his admirable and admiring book *Nicholas Ray: An American Journey*—had fanned her brother’s earliest interest in show business, taking Ray to stage shows and his first motion pictures. The very first was D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*, playing at a Main Street theater in late 1915, when “Junior” was just four years old.

As a teenager Ruth was enamored of show business and thought about becoming an actress until her father tamped down her dreams. Now employed by the society fixture Edith Rockefeller McCormick—daughter of oil tycoon John D. Rockefeller and divorced wife of International Harvester executive Harold F. McCormick—Ruth “released some of her frustrations by continuing to guide me to concerts, theatres, and nightclubs in Chicago during the Capone years,” Ray recalled. The director would revisit this boisterous era in *Party Girl*, the semimusical gangster picture he made for MGM in 1958.

In Chicago, the wayward youth was enrolled at Waller High School,* and under his watchful sister’s care his behavior improved enough that he was allowed to return to La Crosse Central High School halfway through his senior year. His habit of shuttling back and forth between Chicago and

* The school is known today as Lincoln Park High School.

La Crosse was well-known enough that the school paper joked about it on February 5, 1929, reporting that “Ray Kienzle becomes a student again.”

Ray Kienzle’s name came up often in the high school paper and yearbook, often in the context of jokes, but always fond ones. He was well liked, popular with both peers and his teachers, who shook their heads bemusedly over his failings. He was a little like the teacher’s pet in *Bigger Than Life*, who looks stumped when asked to name the Great Lakes but is trusted by James Mason to preside over the class when the teacher steps away.

Kienzle already had the reputation of a pleasure-seeking spendthrift. (Maynard L: “I spent ten dollars on a canary last week.” Ray K: “That’s nothing, I spent fifty dollars on a lark last night.”) He was good-humored and self-deprecating, especially about his grades. (“I got an A—once—in slumber,” he wrote under his class picture in the yearbook.)

Kienzle played some football and basketball as an underclassman, but his athleticism was a bit of a ruse, like James Mason’s in *Bigger Than Life*. (Boasting of his own high-school pigskin triumphs—“third-string sub to hero in twenty seconds!”—Mason’s character puts his young son through intense football drills, until his life spirals out of control and his glory days are revealed as delusions.) For Ray, sports and machismo were more a means to kinship; and by senior year he was a cheerleader on the pep squad.

By then, his real interest had shifted to the debate team. Public Speaking was his new favorite class, and he followed his sister Helen in taking private lessons from local elocutionist Winona Hauser, who also helped direct stage plays at La Crosse Teachers College. Kienzle blossomed under Hauser’s tutelage, his oratory showing flair and promise. Her brother had “a very nice speaking voice,” according to Helen, “well-modulated.”

More important, by senior year Kienzle had gravitated to the Falstaff Club, which mounted the high school plays. Most if not all of his Falstaff tenure was spent backstage; his name appears on none of the published cast lists. Yet Kienzle found allies in fellow students like Mrs. Hauser’s son Alonzo, a budding sculptor, and Russell Huber, an older boy who exhorted Kienzle to try anything. Such kindred spirits must have been all the more welcome to a brooding young man living alone with his mother.



One feature of La Crosse's bustling local arts scene was the Guy and Eloda Beach Stock Company, which usually threw down stakes in the river city during the holiday season, offering a range of familiar plays and variety shows at the Majestic Theater downtown. Eloda, a diminutive, bubbly redhead, and her husband, Guy, an all-purpose lead who also directed the shows, lived part of the year in the city—they were “famous in La Crosse,” as people liked to say—but they toured the Midwest tirelessly for ten years after the First World War.

The Beaches' weekend matinees drew farm families from miles around, and they often recruited townies as supernumeraries. Guy Beach had a theatrical personality and served as an example of professionalism and versatility to any number of young actors who got their start with him. Kienzle soon became Guy Beach's number one fan. He hung around behind the curtain and memorized his first lines for crowd scenes in Beach Stock Company plays.

The theater wasn't Kienzle's only interest. By the late 1920s, radio broadcasting was catching fire across America, and La Crosse Central High launched radio classes as part of its speech curriculum. In conjunction with Herbert Hoover's inaugural address in the first week of March 1929, which was aired at the school on specially installed auditorium speakers, the local radio station, WKBH, announced a contest for aspiring radio hosts. The contest was sponsored by Tri-State, an ice cream company servicing Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin.

Members of the school's senior class were invited to compete for the title of best emcee for a musical radio program. In the elimination trials, which went on for months at the station's headquarters in the magnificent Stoddard Hotel downtown, contestants took full charge of the mike. They were judged for their “promptness and snappiness” as well as “inflection, tone, volume and articulation” and “interpretation or description of music and artists.” “The quality of [their] picture words” was essential, according to press accounts, but so was “that indefinite necessity, ‘air personality,’ a quality akin to the well-known ‘it.’” Eventually the field was narrowed to five finalists, all of whom received private coaching from the head of the high school speech department before the last round.

One of those five finalists was Kienzle. By now he was impressively tall like his father, gangly but handsome, with piercing pale blue eyes and wavy dark blond hair like his mother. Thanks to the guidance of his sisters and mother, the camaraderie of the debate team and Falstaff Club, and the guiding influences of Winona Hauser and Guy Beach, in just months he had transformed himself from a drink-addled miscreant to a polished, confident radio host. To his sweet personality the seventeen-year-old had added a distinct theatrical veneer—an “on-air personality,” as it were.

Sure enough, when the results came in that July, Ray Kienzle was the last host standing. Ray often boasted about winning the contest in later interviews, recalling that it garnered him a scholarship to “any university in the world.” The La Crosse newspaper published Kienzle’s yearbook photograph, with the victor sporting a suit and tie and a toothy grin. His radio training would be good practice for his future Hollywood profession, which would demand the same take-charge personality, imagination, and gift for translating words into pictures.



In 1958, in his first interview with the French film journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Ray said he was “absolutely incapable” of recalling exactly why he was drawn so early to a life in the theater. “Did it come from a feeling of revolt, from a particular pressing influence, from a need to attract attention, or from something else? I don’t know . . .”

It certainly wasn’t the lure of college. Regardless of the prize he’d won, Ray’s abysmal high school grades left him with few options for higher education. It wasn’t just the suspensions and absences—it took real lassitude to graduate 152nd out of 153 students in the La Crosse Central class of 1929. Ray did draw good grades in his preferred subjects—English, salesmanship, and public speaking—but he flunked Latin, physics, and geometry. Indeed, the La Crosse newspaper listed him as a “night school graduate.”

Ray found a temporary solution in a public institution just a short bicycle ride away from his home. La Crosse State Teachers College was a onetime “normal school” primarily dedicated to training teachers.* As a teachers college it had a limited curriculum, offered no graduate programs

* The school has since become the University of Wisconsin–La Crosse.

or professional coursework, and had few doctorates among its faculty. Yet the school had a forceful new president, George Snodgrass, and under his leadership it was making strides toward becoming a fully accredited liberal arts college and had just begun issuing four-year degrees.

Despite its fledgling academic standing, there was no social stigma attached to Teachers College. To the contrary, it was customary for La Crosse high school graduates to matriculate there while saving up for—or awaiting admission to—more exclusive colleges, particularly the University of Wisconsin in Madison. The new freshman class of 1929 included Ray Kienzle as well as his friends Robert Fries and Clarence Sezezechowski, both former Central High School debaters and Falstaffians. Indeed, Kienzle's debate and drama clique swept the campus in the fall of 1929; soon he and his friends had taken over the Buskin Club, the elite stage society, and the *Racquet*, the student newspaper.

In those days drama was considered essential to teacher training, and Teachers College had an exceptional speech department, which, besides producing established plays and original works by students, hosted professional touring troupes and noteworthy guest lecturers.

The Buskin Club presented one-acts at each of its meetings, mounted ambitious all-campus shows, and performed playlets in neighboring towns. The Buskineers also spearheaded campus-wide social activities, hosting the semiformal annual Buskin Hop in the ballroom of the Stoddard Hotel. "*The* social event of the year," recalled Ferdinand Sontag, a classmate of Ray's at both La Crosse Central and Teachers College.

New Buskin Club aspirants had to survive an audition. Now growing into a handsome young man with a cultivated voice, Kienzle made an impression at the fall meeting and was quickly voted in. It didn't hurt that other new members included Fries, Sezezechowski, and Sontag, all pals or acquaintances, along with Kathryn Snodgrass, probably Ray's first true girlfriend. Later in life Ray would gravitate toward many smart, beautiful women in the spotlight—Judy Holliday, Shelley Winters, Marilyn Monroe, Joan Crawford, Jayne Mansfield, Zsa Zsa Gabor, and more. The bright, witty, bobbed-haired Kay Snodgrass, the daughter of the Teachers College president and therefore herself "famous in La Crosse," might be considered the first.

Although Kienzle started out backstage (initially as the club's advertising manager), he made a splash in his second semester as coauthor, with

Snodgrass, of an “original musical comedy revue” called *February Flurries*. Interestingly, the revue was a “take-off on all-singing, dancing, talking pictures” following the misadventures of a college student who decides to seek his fortune in Hollywood. *February Flurries* featured skits, songs, dances, even “Eccentric Clogging.” Both writers played leads, with Kienzle also serving as the master of ceremonies—not unlike the job of a radio announcer, or a movie director.

The staging of *February Flurries*, guided by Professor D. O. Coates with the help of Winona Hauser, proved a milestone for Ray, cementing his local profile. The *Racquet*, the school’s student weekly, held nothing back, describing the revue as “one of the greatest achievements” in the college’s history of stage productions. To mark the show’s opening, the paper spread photographs of Ray and Snodgrass across the front page—and later dropped gossip-column-style hints about their love life, noting sightings of “Ray and Kay” cozily driving around town in her Studebaker.

As his high school grades in salesmanship attest, Ray had an early knack for self-promotion, but publicity in the *Racquet* wasn’t hard to generate—especially considering that Kay Snodgrass served as the paper’s features editor. By February, Ray himself had been installed as sports editor, often writing unbylined accounts of diverse athletic events. Soon Robert Fries became the paper’s editor in chief and Clarence Sezezechowski—who changed his unwieldy last name to the better byline of “Hiskey”—joined them as a staff artist and all-purpose reporter.

In April 1930 the *Racquet* carried another front-page photo of Ray Kienzle, this time trumpeting his lead in *The New Poor*, a three-act comedy that was the main Buskin production of the year. Kienzle played the Grand Duke, a role his friend Russell Huber had played in their high school. Huber drove up from Chicago for opening night weekend. While in La Crosse, he talked up the University of Chicago, where he was a theater major. Huber was especially enthusiastic about the English class taught by Thornton Wilder, a Pulitzer Prize winner in 1928 for his novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*.

Wilder had impressed Ray when the author, a native of Madison, Wisconsin, spoke at Teachers College earlier in the semester. Wilder delivered a riveting address to a packed audience, proclaiming that literature should reflect “a true expression of life,” a credo that seemed to capture the spirit of hard times after the Wall Street crash and the onset of the

Great Depression. Wilder's "brilliant and ingenious" language dazzled the college crowd, according to a *Racquet* account, and the La Crosse students realized "they had for a brief time met a person to whom the term materialistic American could not apply." After the lecture, Ray made a point of shaking Wilder's hand.

Wilder wasn't the University of Chicago's only attraction. The school's innovative new president, Robert Maynard Hutchins, had taken office in 1929 as a champion of great books and ideas. Kienzle hadn't read many great books yet, but working for the *Racquet* got him into the lifelong habit of reading newspapers—clipping items of interest—and both the *Racquet* and the *La Crosse Tribune and Leader-Press* covered the educator's every bold move.

Kienzle told Huber he was determined to join him in Chicago.



All of La Crosse rushed outside gratefully to greet the summer, which was inevitably short, hot, muggy, and bug infested, but studded with parades, festivals, traveling circuses, and Wild West shows. A lifelong music lover, Nicholas Ray never forgot the revelation of hearing "The Dardanella Blues" played on a summer night down at the waterfront by a band featuring pianist Lil Hardin and her husband, trumpeter Louis Armstrong.

It must have been during the summer of 1930 that Kienzle made a little pocket money traveling with stunt fliers, according to later movie-studio publicity.

The college itself was quiet and dark in the summer. Summertime was slow and the living was lazy in La Crosse; the river sometimes overflowed its banks, raising a stench in the area. Storms raged and the sun blazed, sometimes in the same day. Kienzle, Kay Snodgrass, and friends haunted the downtown ice cream and sweet shops, making one cherry phosphate last for hours. They cruised the city in Snodgrass's Studebaker, lollygagging in the city's beautiful manicured parks.

Some days the only thing to do was climb "Ole Granddad," a landmark steep cliff rising six hundred feet above the downtown—like the one that gives a scared boy his last refuge in *On Dangerous Ground*, or the "big high bluff" where the chickie run proves fatal in *Rebel Without a Cause*. Climbing Ole Granddad was a cherished pastime in La Crosse; there you could

stare across the Mississippi, following the roads that twisted west, or lie on your back with a girl, trying to pick out the stars and constellations.

“I was just thinking,” James Dean says to Sal Mineo as they stargaze at the planetarium in *Rebel Without a Cause*, “that once you’ve been up there, you’ve been someplace.”



Ray Kienzle was nineteen years old, but he hadn’t been much of anywhere, not yet. He would stay in La Crosse another year, mostly dodging education but staying productive in radio and theater.

Although his scholarship to “any university in the world” may have expired, the problems keeping him from transferring to the University of Chicago weren’t really financial. Weak grades and his aversion to the classroom prompted Kienzle to skip the fall 1930 semester at Teachers College. Instead he helped out behind the scenes on Buskin Club projects and took the lead in organizing a college hour of playlets performed on Thursday mornings on WKBH.

Then, still not ready for Chicago, he returned to Teachers College for the spring semester of 1931. He came roaring back to the campus, stepping in for Kay Snodgrass (by then the two had broken up, and Kay had transferred to the University of Wisconsin in Madison) as a features editor at the *Racquet*. He also became the unchallenged leading light of the Buskin Club shows, on- and offstage.

By now Ray was a self-styled artiste, affecting a costume of flowing coats—and even a cape—that reflected his expanding horizons. Once a reluctant reader, now he devoured challenging poetry and plowed through political tracts. The college sophomore was undergoing a process of radicalization; living at home, he had no money for luxuries and decided he didn’t need them. Like Thornton Wilder, Kienzle didn’t intend to become a “materialistic American.”

As the unemployment and poverty of the Depression spread, hobos and jobless drifters began popping up all over the country. La Crosse’s homeless population was burgeoning. Troubles abroad made headlines in the city newspapers Ray Kienzle devoured. And although black people were scarce in La Crosse, reports of race crime and injustice were a fixture in the news.

None of this was lost on Ray Kienzle or his peers at the *Racquet*. By

the spring of 1931 Ray was contributing a new column called “The Bull-shevist”—a pun on “The Bolshevik”—under the byline “R.N.K.” His writing style was stream-of-consciousness, with the dashed-off feeling of a diary—an intimate voice that would become a trademark of his writing. “The Bull-shevist” offered gossip, humor, musings, and one-liners about campus events and activities. While much of it was written in a kind of code that would have been clear to students in the know, at times it was rambling, even incomprehensible.

“Thoughts while in Bath,” “R.N.K.” scribbled on one occasion. “Among those present. O salt of the earth. A doll buggy is disturbing. Fights are interesting if only for the melodramatic reconciliations. Would like to see a ten-round Frazee-Sanders go. Cashman has an entirely tough role for tonight.* Confident that this lad won’t hand us so much ad libing [*sic*] we have a pleasant enemy ahead of us. Then the Buskin to-do. Water doesn’t take on silver nitrate. Neither does soap . . .”

For the first time in his published writing, which until now had focused narrowly on campus sports, Ray was giving rein to left-wing sentiments. In one column, he heaped scorn on the “voting intelligence” of the city electorate, deriding “our newly installed mayor [who has] declared himself in favor of beer.” In another, he chided the *Tribune and Leader-Press* for an editorial about student misconduct, declaring that the paper ought to “harp more on the environment,” which he felt was more responsible for encouraging negative behavior and attitudes than harmless student hijinks. “A paper should be more concerned with the welfare of the city and its citizens,” he declared. But at nineteen Ray was hardly an ideologue; he also poked fun at doctrinaire-ism—at all -isms, for that matter. (“The distribution of will-power, and not wealth, should be contested by socialists and communists,” he wrote.)

Politics did not consume his energies. He spent most of his spring term busying himself with his weekly morning radio show and Buskin Club playlets (even, one night, mounting a one-act play in French). He still led school cheers at bonfires and pep rallies and could be spotted at every major college sporting event, often writing up the games afterward. A regular Big Man On Campus was he.

* Frazee and Sanders were popular professors. Cashman was a fellow student and Buskin Club member.

Though Ray was seen with an endless number of girlfriends after Kay Snodgrass's departure, he assured the readers of "The Bull-shevist" that none of them was "special." Then as ever, he tended to turn romances—and even friendships—into endurance tests. He didn't sleep well, and his restlessness came alive especially at night. He hated to be alone; instead he stayed out all night, dancing, drinking, and playing cards, taking pride in stumbling home at dawn.

"You think the end of the world will come at night time?" Sal Mineo asks at the end of *Rebel Without a Cause*, just before he is gunned down.

"Uh-uh," James Dean replies. "At dawn."



The summer of 1931 stretched ahead. This must have been the summer Kienzle traveled to the West Coast—"my first hitch-hike to California"—to visit his oldest sister, Alice, and her husband. Later studio publicity claimed that he tried "his luck as an extra" in Hollywood on this trip; more plausibly, he recalled spotting one of his literary idols on the beach: Robinson Jeffers, a poet whose preference for the divine (over the solipsistic ways of man) appealed to Ray's own idealism.

He had left for California uncertain whether his dreams of transferring to Chicago would ever be realized. His grades were perpetually feeble; he was always retaking French I, for instance, never quite satisfying the requirements. (Though he liked French—even dropping a phrase or two into *Rebel Without a Cause*—years later he cheerfully confessed to a group of Parisian cinephiles that his command of the language was negligible.)

Yet he had worked hard at improving his overall academic performance, and finally it paid off. When he returned from California, an admission letter from the University of Chicago was waiting for him.