

# Debbie Todhunter: plucky and passionate

Editor's note: following is the third in a series of weekly articles profiling University students selected at random.

By RICHARD DYMOND  
Collegian Staff Writer

Raggedy Ann Todhunter spends the morning arranged on the divan facing the door in her mommy's ninth-floor one-bedroom apartment in Penn Towers. Just above the doll's head, in a fish-bowl, live Golda Meir, a yellow and black fantail, and Edward G. Robinson, a silvery-black fellow who has googly eyes and roomy cheeks. He and Miss Meir, who is a bit ostentatious, seem to have an understanding. Further along the wall on the window sill, the lid and bottom of an empty egg carton are filled with soil and seeds. A tiny, tiny philadendron has emerged from the first dip. A breeze high above East Beaver Ave. ruffles a white sheepskin on the divan opposite Raggedy Ann.

At noon, Debbie Todhunter (11th-biology) unlocks her door and places her G. Sci. 20 notebook (undoodled) on a coffee table. She begins to straighten the small apartment, still a bit messy from weekend guests. Raggedy Ann, who has been Debbie's for three years and sometimes sleeps with her also gets a straightening. Soon Debbie becomes tired and sits down to proofread a Nutrition 351 paper that kept her up late the previous night.

She goes to class, hands in her paper and comes back late in the afternoon. After a nap, some television and something to eat, she gathers up her laundry, puts it in a plastic basket and hauls it down to Armenara Plaza, where the machines are cheaper. After putting the clothes in the washer, she sits down in one of those plastic chairs to read the laundromat's copy of "Newsweek" and enjoy a Virginia Slim. That's where I met her.

Debbie Todhunter, whose name is English and means fox hunter, let me carry her laundry basket home. I couldn't wait to talk to her because she lived on a farm in a place near Ebensburg called Nicktown, a community outside Johnstown

with a small population. The first thing I noticed about Debbie was her hair and how unflappable it was, the way it always fell so perfectly into fine, seamless ends. It's the kind of hair that is naturally buoyant, like a young child's.

At home, she lit a cigarette and kicked off her boat sneakers.

She began living on the farm when she started high school, but about a year ago her father gave up most of their livestock, which included horses and cows, to work as a mine

"It's so soft."

"I got that in England last summer. My friend Marcia and I spent three months working for a friend of my father's. We worked on his farm in the center of England called the Midlands and lived in a hotel within distance. He gave us a little car to use, a Hillman Minx."

I asked for more information.

"My father's friend was Captain Ayer, an ex-RAF soldier. He was very, very English. They have a subtle sense of

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engineer. He graduated from Penn State in 1952 with a degree in geology and mine engineering. Twelve cats and a few dogs remain at the farm. Debbie went to Northern Cambria High School, a rural school with a tiny graduating class.

"In high school I was a wallflower. I never got close to those people. Everyone knew everybody."

"My father was great then. He's a tall man with gray hair and he's letting it grow (she laughs). I could always talk to my father. He seems to give me the confidence I lack."

"I always liked biology. When I came up here I majored in chemistry for one term. (She laughs that sweet laugh.) Big mistake. Chem. 12 finished that. A friend suggested Biology 11. I took it and I loved it. Up here you can take high-powered biology courses where you have the pre-med majors and those looking to get good grades. I'd rather the more comfortable courses."

I noticed the sheepskin on the sofa.

humor. He had about 300 sheep and 400 pigs and one cow and some chickens. The houses there were very old, made out of stone from the mountains. All the barns are real old, and they have slate roofs and the houses are covered with moss. You can look down from the top of the valley into the village. It rained a lot.

"We did everything and got paid 12 pounds a week (about \$28) and we earned it. When we first got there they were pretty easy on us. We would repair fences or paint them with creosote. But later on we had to do stuff like cleaning out the pig pens, which I hated."

"Do you know anything about pigs? I'd never been near a pig until I got over there. They're very smart animals. I remember we were standing near the pig pen and I asked, 'Where do you get the mud for them?' These porkers were standing in mud up to their belly. I thought they must bring it in from somewhere, you know. The hired hand looks at me and says, 'That isn't mud.' I said, 'Ugh...don't tell me.' Every week, twice a week, we had to clean those things out. We'd have to shovel it all into one of those tractors with the scoop on the end. We'd come back after work and it would stick to our clothing and smell in our hair. I hated pigs. If you'd climb in to clean them, they'd bite at your legs. After a while I started jabbing them with my pitchfork."

As she sat in the chair, Debbie pulled at the hem of her brown corduroys and lifted her feet from the floor. Her eyes were large and blue, but there was something else about them, something I couldn't decipher just then, as she talked.

"They slaughtered a few sheep while I was there. I always wondered how they got the skins from the animal. They have a thing that looks like a bicycle pump; a slit is made in the animals throat and they just blow it up and the skin separates from the meat and then they cut it off."

"How about the food?" I asked.

"Food was amazing. Even though we were workers, we ate lunch with the family and had tea each day at 5 sharp. Lunch was a sit-down affair with courses. We'd have wine, lamb or mutton, pot pies, plum pudding (which is whole plums in a thick eggy cake) and fresh raspberries or strawberries in heavy whipped cream. Since we had a cow we had real cream, and the English put it on everything."

"What did you do with your free time? Did you go to pubs?"

"We went to some pubs and we found out that nice, polite girls do not go unescorted to the pubs. They tended to dislike Americans anyway. One time, when we went into a pub and talked, everyone got silent and began to look at us, then someone made the remark, 'see you later mac' in an American accent. That really upset me."

I saw Debbie the next day. We met after her Biology 405 class and went over to the HUB for something to eat. She had coffee (she's one of those girls who thinks she needs to diet) and I had a yogurt. She grinned.

"Do you know that you can go blind from eating too much yogurt? I mean the Dannon freaks who subsist on it for years without eating anything else. It involves the body being unable to fully break down that much lactose or something."

"This is my last yogurt, Debbie."

I liked the way she laughed and shook her finger at me as I worked up a yawn. A friend of hers came by, and she gave him her full attention. I watched her as she worked at listening. She leaned toward him and propped herself on her hands. I noticed two little gold rings on her fingers. When the boy had gone, she turned back.

"Did you notice how he spoke so slowly? Both he and his girlfriend speak slow."



... the art of listening ...

We left the HUB together and went to sit on Old Main Lawn. It was a hot, sticky afternoon and we both felt uncomfortable.

"Where would you like to be if you could be anywhere else?"

"Vermont," she said. "I love the mountains."

I noticed her eyes again, and this time I realized a strange wisdom in them that I had not seen in another person my age.

Her eyes said she had forgiven those who had robbed her in one way or another. The wisdom that comes with forgiveness had worn special shadows into her face. Still, her eyes are more hopeful than any I have ever seen.

"I had this one teacher, for speech, and she was a beautiful woman with long, dark hair that she would wear up. I never had a teacher who could get you to talk so openly as she did. I remember she would sometimes interrupt us in the middle of our speeches and say, 'What do you really mean by that?'"

or, "What do you really want to say?" And we would just blurt out what we were thinking.

"Well, the last day of class she said to us, — 'Does anybody want to ask me a question?' This one guy asked, 'Why don't you ever wear your hair down?' She said that if she took it down she would begin to play with it, making her less attentive. Then I asked, 'Weren't you wearing a hairpiece sometimes?' She said it was 'always her' real hair. Then another boy asked if she would let it down right there so we could see how long it was. When she let it down it fell beautifully down to her backside, and she played with it the rest of class. She was right. She wasn't as effective with her hair down."



...that sweet laugh ...

Photos by Ed Golomb

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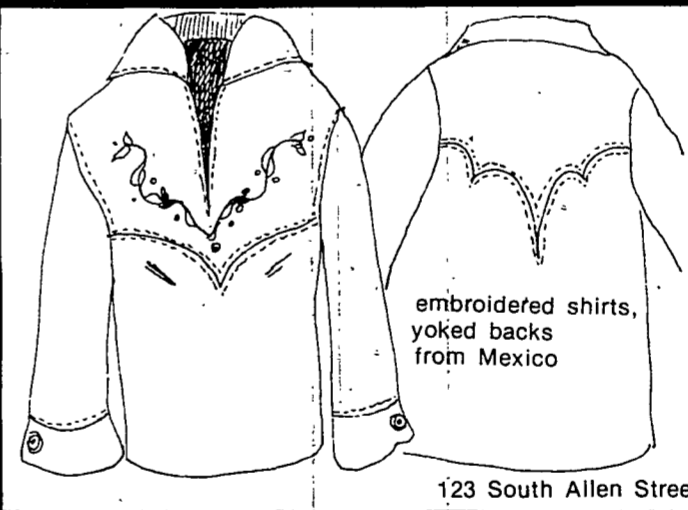


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