

In search of Bonnie and Mitch

by MIKE GERSHOWITZ

It was July 27, a lazy midsummer day. Bonnie Bickwit and Mitch Weiser were hitch-hiking to the Watkins Glen rock concert — they and 600,000 other young people. It seemed perfectly normal, perfectly innocent, but neither Bonnie nor Mitch has been seen or heard from since.

Did they decide to run away? Possibly. Did they meet some horrible fate? Maybe. No one knows. Not their anxious parents. Not their friends at John Dewey High School in Coney Island. Not police, in the city or upstate, who have made futile searches.

Now, seven months after their disappearance, students at Dewey are raising \$1,000 to fund a professional search by a detective agency called Tracers Inc., which specializes in missing persons cases.

Edward Goldfader, president of the Manhattan-based firm, says Tracers has a record of finding more than 60 per cent of teenage runaways it looks for. He sees this case as no different from others.

BONNIE, JUST TURNED 16, and Mitch, 17, are good persons, according to those who know them. They had summer jobs, lots of friends, were doing advanced work in high school, and looked forward to college and careers. Why should they want to run off?

At first, there seemed to be no reasons. But as their parents and friends talked, clues emerged—real or imagined clues that have led their families down a series of dead-end streets.

Take Bonnie. Her family isn't religious, and neither was she. But her mother, Raye, recalled, "Mitch gave her a Bible—an Old Testament in English. Many times I saw her reading it at night. She said it was for school, so I dismissed it. But now I wonder."

Then Mrs. Bickwit was a TV documentary about religious cults that brainwash and imprison children. She began to fear that Bonnie had become a "Jesus Freak." But inquiries to such cults had no results.

Mitch had wanted to go to an out-of-town college upon graduation which would have taken place last month. But his parents convinced him they couldn't afford it, and he reluctantly agreed to settle for Brooklyn College. Now, his mother Shirley believes he never did accept that decision. But how can he think about college when he has dropped out of high school?

ONE MONTH, the Bickwits' telephone bill showed a person-to-person call from Manhattan to Rockville, Ind. Hopes soared, but police determined the bill was in error.

The parents have circulated letters and posters to more than 500 American Indian missions, 300 youth hostels, hundreds of radio stations, and various runaway centers such as the East Village's "Contact," operated by the Educational Alliance. They have combed the East Village personally. They asked the Social Security Administration whether either child has earned any wages since summer.

Once, in desperation, the parents called on a man who says he is psychic, Bennett Bayrick of Glen Head. He told them he "felt" the children were "in a cold area—maybe Vermont or New Hampshire."

That made Bonnie's father recall that when he went to Watkins Glen in August, he had heard of loudspeaker announcements inviting anyone needing food and lodging to go to "Earth People's Park," a Vermont Commune. Inquiries there also were futile, however.

GOLDFADER SID Tracers had a network of incognito "stringers," or paid informers, throughout the world. Pictures are circulated to them, and if they see a wanted individual, they let him know, without telling the wanted person.

He said runaway teens were relatively easy to find because they tended to congregate in a limited number of well-known spots. At the moment, he said, San Francisco and the East Village were out of vogue, but Providence and Denver were in.

If his search were to be fruitless, Goldfader said the parents could still expect to hear from their children on Jan. 28, 1976—Bonnie's 18th birthday. Before then, they are minors and the parents have a legal right to force them home.

He doubts any harm has befallen them because when it does, "the feedback is almost immediate."

AT DEWEY, BONNIE and Mitch's friends, supported by the school administration, opened a "Have a Heart" shop around Valentine's Day to raise \$1,000 to pay for the search. They have sold jewelry donated by a teacher, dyed and sparkled T-shirts and various snack foods, most popular of which is jelly apples from a Boardwalk stand. About 20 dozen of those are gulped down each school



In Bonnie's room, the parents ponder their children's fate. From left, Sidney and Shirley Weiser, Raye and Ted Bickwit.

day, and the \$1,000 target is close at hand.

Meanwhile, the Bickwits and the Weisers try to lead normal lives, while thinking and rethinking their personal tragedies.

"What's the alternative," asked Mrs. Bickwit, "death for myself? You have to go on living and have hope." Her hus-

band Ted added, "You have to put up a very brave front. The world smiles while you cry so you have to cry alone."

One of the things the parents have given much thought to is what to say when their children return. Ted Bickwit has memorized his entire speech: "Thank God you're home." That's all. Just "Thank God you're home."

2 Teens Missing Since Watkins Glen

By JACK COWLEY

Two Brooklyn teenagers, with backpacks and sleeping bags, left to join the throng at the Watkins Glen music festival last July 27 — and haven't been heard from since.

Their worried parents say Mitchell Weiser, 16 and Bonnie Bickwit, 15, classmates at John Dewey HS, both had left behind recent paychecks from their summer jobs.

"They weren't prepared to go up for more than just the weekend," said Mrs. Shirley Weiser of 1146 E. Eighth St. "This is so unlike our son. He's done some hitchhiking around the city but always calls if he should stay over

night away from home."

According to the parents, Weiser picked up Bonnie at a camp in upstate Narrowsburg, where she had been working this summer. The town is within 75 miles of Watkins Glen, site of the one-day rock concert that drew a crowd estimated at 600,000.

Weiser had departed for the festival from his Brooklyn home, telling his parents he was going to take a bus friend.

The Schuylar county sheriff's office reports that hundreds of youths are camped out at the site this week, still cleaning up.

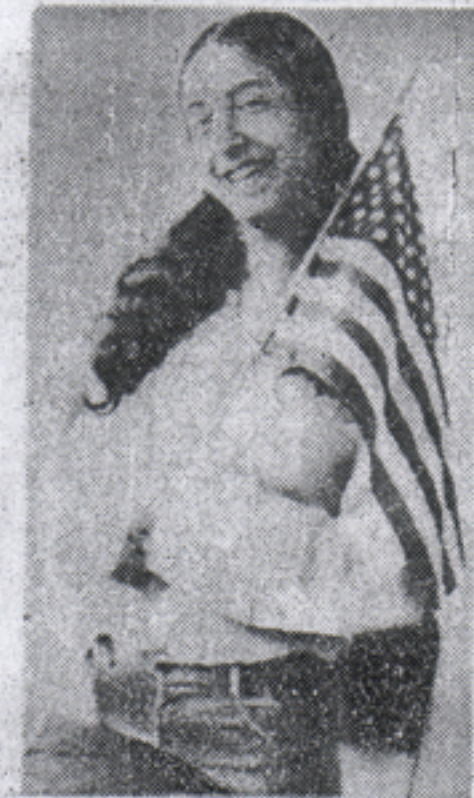
But Mrs. Weiser said her husband drove to Watkins

Glen on the Friday following the festival, and could not find their son or his girlfriend.

"It's almost four weeks now and I'm very disturbed," said Ted Bickwit of 1324 49th St. "My daughter has never been away from home like this even for a few days."

Weiser is described as 5-foot-7, 145 lbs, has shoulder length brown hair worn parted in the middle and tied back, and brown eyes. When last seen he was wearing blue jeans, a T-shirt and boots.

Miss Bickwit 4-foot-11, 90-95 lbs, has dark brown wavy hair and brown eyes. When last seen was wearing jeans and a T-shirt.



BONNIE BICKWIT



MITCH WEISER



MITCHELL and BONNIE
The missing teenagers.