In a 1972 article entitled "Harvard Grads Go Blue Collar," Life
made a shocking discovery: not everyone who crisscrosses the
Yard for four years strolls straight into the corridors of power, or
even wants to. The magazine tracked down a handful of
young Harvard alumni catching dogs, pounding nails, and
driving trucks. As I leafed through the photos of Judy Norsigian ’70
changing an oil filter and Jamie Maslach ’69 jogging through the tall grass of California, I wondered, What are they
up to now? By all media accounts, they should be driving
BMW's and advertising Nikes to the tune of “Revolution.”
Yet as an alumna from the Class of '83 who has emptied
ashtrays and licked stamps to keep hamburger in my refrigera-
tor and rejection letters in my mailbox, I suspected that those
effortless hippie-to-Yuppie sagas did not tell the whole story—
for Life's cast of characters or for others. To Time Inc., “going
blue collar” was a giddy frolic or a sinister defection from
social mores; with such an expensive education lectured into
our heads, we should be using them to make megabucks, or at
least policy. Seriously, why would anyone choose to do any-
thing else?

TO CONSERVE CREATIVE ENERGY

Aspiring potters, painters, and playwrights, of course, have a
great tradition of unconventional employment. After deciding
during freshman year to win the Nobel Prize for literature,
Michael Hilton '68 avoided jobs that would generate any dis-
traction other than income. “I was well into my second mis-
tress when I realized that this was not an entirely honorable
way to go about writing,” he says. After trying on gas-station
attendant, clothes-store clerk, and cowboy, he pinned his hopes on postman—only to find a line of qualified women, veterans, and handicapped applicants in front of him. Steeplejacking paid well, but the glamour tempted him too much. “The trouble is that every employer expects you to show up on time, and I mostly write by inspiration,” Hilton says. “I finally realized that I’d have to start my own operation.” Commercial roofing in Decatur, Texas, he found, keeps his wife and three kids in “the pretty good style” to which they’re accustomed.

Revere “Reve” Little ’67 jobbed around New England in order to play guitar. When not singing with his friend Bonnie Raitt ’72 or opening for Hall and Oates at the Music Hall, he poured lots of Scotch and water. “It was both necessity and choice,” he says. “I hate working for other people. At least waiting, bartending, you’re with customers. I sort of like doing physical things, too. Piano moving was great exercise.”

The promise of a paycheck without headaches lures anyone with outside responsibilities. Wife, mother, and volunteer (“my higher quality work is not for pay”), Jennifer Goetz ’51 of Philadelphia cooked goodies and bagged beans at a coffee store a couple of days a week. “I like baking, and this was a wonderful taste of that life,” she says. This job ranked up with filling orders in a feminist warehouse and above selling china in a department store. “Not too strenuous, and the park-
The trouble is that every employer expects you to show up on time, and I mostly write by inspiration.”

—Michael Hilton '68, self-employed roofer

ing was convenient. It’s good to earn money,” she says. “Unfortunately, it’s the only job I ever got fired from. The owner felt uncomfortable with an older person around.” Recent graduates often regroup off the fast track. Longtime friends Frederic Martucci, John Cosentino, Bradley Cutler, and Timothy Lee, all from the Class of ’71, spent a couple of years behind the counter at Jack’s, a Cambridge tavern, before heading off to ed, med, business, and architecture schools. “Maybe we were all Peter Pan and needed to grow up,” says Lee, who now lives in Salisbury, Massachusetts. He had declared himself “pre-restaurant” but wended his way into private education. “I don’t think my parents invested time and money in Noble and Greenough and Harvard to have me become a bartender,” Lee explains. “And I knew I could offer the world more than being a mixologist. I liked working with people, but the conversations tended to be superficial, like at a barbershop. Sure, on slow afternoons we’d play Scrabble, but I...
didn’t feel I was engaging people in a deep way. Which is not to say that the customers did not have depth and meaning, but I was not helping them out—except perhaps to make them alcoholics.”

Lisa Blackwell ’88 of Belmont, Massachusetts, wanted to sort out her thoughts in the Peace Corps, but when she learned there was no indoor plumbing, she signed on as a nanny instead. “If I took a regular job, I could get stuck for five or ten years,” she says. “This has a built-in limit—and your mind is free.” While reading stories, making sandwiches, and chasing after a toddler, she has reconsidered not only career (law school, then maybe the FBI) but motherhood. “I used to think that I wanted four kids by the age of thirty. Well, I still want to have a child—not children. Being a mom seems so easy. But you can’t ever take a vacation.”

**TO EFFECT SOCIAL CHANGE**

Blue-collar work can be a means to more altruistic ends than time or money. At the communal farm where she first tinkered with auto transmissions in the early seventies, Judy Norsigian of Newton, Massachusetts, also nosed around the kitchen. While teaching women to become more self-sufficient through auto mechanics, she wrote a chapter on nutrition for the Boston Women's Health Collective book, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, which eventually led to her current position as a writer and editor at the collective. She says that she meets her political goals better by discouraging the “indiscriminate worship of science” than by fixing cars or by practicing medicine, as she once intended.

Samantha George ’82 also traces a progression from her experiences as janitor, household cook, and costume maker to community organizer. “Working with the working poor or the unemployed poor, you become aware of people’s struggles,” she says. Now she juggles writing, editing, test scoring, and fundraising for black and Hispanic organizations as she and her partner tend their baby, George, who lives in the Jamaica Plain section of Boston, does not anticipate that she’ll ever “go mainstream.” Perhaps she’d garden self-sufficiently in Vermont. “The system is rotten to the core,” she says. “The only way to fight it is to stay outside and build alternatives.”

In the late sixties Jamie Maslach was crusading against The Establishment, but after running a surplus food store in Roxbury, he lost heart in causes. Marching didn’t seem to help anybody. He felt more at ease cooking, weaving, roofing, blowing glass. While at a workshop in San Francisco, he met his wife, Karen. Moving into that city’s industrial district, they transformed her kitchen-table glass business into an oil-candle manufacturing firm that now employs 45, mostly Mexican-Americans. Ironically, Maslach has probably improved the lot of workers more as an entrepreneur than as an activist.

“We’ve gotten such good people by treating women and minorities like white men,” he says. “Workers say, ‘They’re fair.’ ” He and his wife train unskilled newcomers at five dollars an hour, provide full health-insurance coverage, and don’t expect salaried staff to exceed forty hours per week. While the night manager cannot read or write, “He’s gifted as a leader, and we make sure that talent is recognized and rewarded,” says Maslach. On the rare occasions when someone quits, friends of current employees line up to apply.

Donald Tingle ’59 never expected to benefit the world by repairing exotic Lotus automobiles, but at least he would do no harm. The vortex of the Vietnam War derailed both his marriage and his ride up the administrative track of the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory. He bought a Lotus and turned it into a racecar. Frenchy, his mechanic, wanted to return to Canada and proposed to sell him his shop, “I told him I’d never had a wrench in my hand,” Tingle remembers, “and he said that any idiot can fix cars. I’ve since discovered it’s true. Many do.”

With Frenchy coaching over the phone, Tingle torched and torqued his way to proficiency. At first he worked on any foreign car that could fit through the door, but eventually he limited his Tewksbury, Massachusetts, practice to Lotuses because their owners are “a long-suffering lot who don’t expect much except abuse.” Tingle says he doesn’t really like being a mechanic: “I love to drive, but I hate cars. They’re an abomination on the face of nature. But they’re also the medium through which I can do honest labor and get paid for what I did right. You could say that they keep me physically dirty and morally clean.”

**TO MEET REGULAR FOLKS**

Although not all Harvard graduates “go blue collar” for the love of humanity, most value the broadening of their friendships, the contact with all sorts of people. That’s what Esther Smith ’36 (not her real name) enjoyed for twenty years as a postal clerk. That’s what Timothy Lee and John Cosentino still remember about Jack’s. It impressed Jennifer Goetz for the first time when she switched from a small Friends’ school to a junior high, “which always seemed more real to me.” Appalled by the “pretentiousness and lack of humanness” at Harvard, Jamie Maslach forsook the academic community forever.

“I gravitate toward working class,” he explains. “They come from the heart. With our first employee, a black kid from Oakland, I used to enjoy playing dominos and not taking life so seriously. With the Mexicans, there’s much more of family feeling, a solidness, a sense of being at one with the earth. I have a hard time being with cerebral people.”

"I gravitate toward working class. They come from the heart. I have a hard time being with cerebral people."
"And I know Mexicans because I built this company on Mexican labor—been living, playing, working, and sleeping with them. When this business peaked about five years ago, there were 29 of them, and I was the only gringo. Just think—all this on the Spanish I learned at Harvard."

TO DELIGHT IN A TASK

A philosophy concentrator, Anne Oehlschlaeger '62 moved to New York after graduation. Taking "straight jobs" by day, she worked backstage in early off-off Broadway. She tried acting but realized that poor auditions would always hold her back. For a while she typed and researched for screenwriter Waldo Salt, of Midnight Cowboy, Serpico, and Coming Home fame. Temporary assignments in law firms excited her about legal work. At one point an oil investment company appointed her an assistant landman to track down the title history of oil wells. "I'm always looking for diversity," she says.

While recovering from a bout of flu at her mother's house in New Hampshire in the early eighties, Oehlschlaeger rode a local excursion railroad, recently revived. Overhearing the conductor (who turned out to be the president) mention an opening for a crew member, she followed him into the engineer's booth and offered her services. That summer she punched tickets, sold soft drinks, switched the lantern—and had a blast. "I remember riding trains in the forties," she says. "To be a conductor stirred up all these emotions. I felt a lot of responsibility. I took pride in calling, 'All aboard!'"

After a winter of temporary work in New York, she returned to the rails in New Hampshire. By passing the rules exam, Oehlschlaeger qualified as the first female freight conductor on the New England Southern Railroad—even though she had never coupled a car or pulled a switch. "I had to learn, so at first I rode as a third person, like a braker," she explains. "Short lines really have to hustle to survive, and usually there are just two on board—the engineer in back and the conductor up front. Conductors are like ship captains. They do all the paperwork and call all the moves."

Once Oehlschlaeger built up her stamina, she mastered the switches; if she had trouble with a misaligned one, the man who came to help usually did too. She loved being outdoors. "When you set the brakes, you have to walk the length of the train twice, and when you pass by the cars, you can tell by the smell what's inside them," she says. "My favorite is cedar. I even liked when they would do track work: I couldn't lay spikes, but I cut brush." Freight trains also whisked at her imagination. "One of my railroad friends used to say, 'If they call me up for one day, I pack for three.' With trains, you're improvising all the time. The theater's like that, too. I like the unexpected."

Maslach wishes that he had more time for that kind of hands-on problem solving. He and his wife may sell their glass-manufacturing plant so that she can return to design and he to research and development. "Working behind a desk gets so stale," he complains. "I wrote the software for this company. I'm good at that. But it's dry—and glass is an incredible substance. About ten years ago, Corning developed this clear glass that when you project an image with ultraviolet light, colors form inside it. Wow! That's what excites me, work with the physical as well as the mental dimension."

Musician Reve Little's "folk-brokerage," Brattle Associates, grew out of his experience renovating houses for Todd Stuart '64, a craftsman with a passion for real estate. Once Little stopped performing, he combined his inside-out view of structures with his knowledge of Cambridge ("from crawling through the back streets at 4:00 A.M.") to launch a personalized real-estate brokerage dealing only in "exceptional or unique" properties. "It blows my mind that I love it," he says.

TO RUN ONE'S OWN WORK LIFE

Little says that he opened his own firm "only because I could do it in the same headstrong way I did music." If Harvard's blue-collar graduates approach a consensus on anything, it's this: working for yourself beats working for someone else. Wed to the bureaucratic post office, Smith nonetheless braved her seniority to claim assignments in one- or two-person branches. "Be your own boss—that's what I liked," she says. Corollary: If someone else must sign the paycheck, try to 1) escape direct supervision, 2) join an enterprise without hierarchy, or 3) be ready to sever ties to safeguard independence. Most would agree with Oehlschlaeger that "you see so many unhappy people. I'll take less money if I can do something I really like."

While self-employment does not guarantee a growing in-
"The system is rotten to the core. The only way to fight it is to stay outside and build alternatives."

—Former janitor, now community organizer, Samantha George '82, shown here with her son Jalil Eagle Eye Ochumar Agharta Nawara.
come, it does allow other activities to share prime-time hours. To finish an article, Hilton may disappear for days at a time. Several afternoons a week, Maslach coaches women runners. Little can pop home to greet his son, Christian, after school or take a long weekend to trade vintage guitars. Perhaps as entrepreneurs they no longer fit a strict definition of blue-collar; but they remain adamantly opposed to nine-to-five or corporate commitments.

With neither cash nor hours to spare from his Lotus Center, Tingle takes his reward in pride and a shower at the end of the day. "It could be lucrative if I didn't insist on working by myself," he says. "I like downhill skiing almost as much as car racing, but I don't have the time or money to do either. If I had megabucks, I'd take someone traveling, own a raccer. I'd hire a chamber orchestra to play me to sleep.

"But this seemed like an opportunity to escape the rat race, to make it absolutely on my own," he continues. "I can deal with my customers any way I like, not have to refer to company policy. I can say it's not some other jerk who's responsible but the jerk you're talking to."

TO BE OR NOT TO BE AN INTELLECTUAL

What does four years at Harvard have to do with blue-collar career decisions? Nothing, for some people. Everything, for others. The son of Berkeley's dean of engineering, Maslach applied only to Harvard, to study math. "I grew up on the West Coast, where sure there was racism, but not like at Harvard," he says. "Nationality, religion, everything made such a difference. I was the House Polack." He distanced himself, switching into folklore and mythology and the Dudley Co-op. [See "Harvard's Dirty Little Secret," Nov.-Dec. 1988, page 92.] "It was like a halfway house, and it's what kept me in school. Harvard never incorporated us. We were always on the outside." At home among ranchers and glassmakers, he plans to stay there.

A government concentrator, Samantha George blasts that department for its conservatism. In scoring law school for community development, she says, "I was reacting against the falsehood and illusion" broadcast by professors. "They don't illuminate oppression. They assume that radical change is not possible." Harvard itself, she says, works toward the destruction of other peoples and cultures: "It still hasn't divested from South Africa. In Cambridge it's knocked down an incredible number of buildings."

Hilton, on the other hand, thinks of Harvard with a fuzzy fondness. "Bemused and amused" by his turn to the Lotusies, Tingle almost silkscreened his diploma onto a sweatshirt to wear while on the dolly. Little concedes that he "had a semi-aversion and a suspicion about The Establishment," but now he's coming to accept its integration with the artistic counterculture. "I get a chuckle out of myself," he says. "I guess I still hate the thought of being a peg in a hole."

At one time or another, most of the Harvard grads who do manual labor confront the pigeonholes; other people's assumptions, or their own. They don't have to be negative—Tingle reports that his classmates "lazoned" him at their 25th reunion—but they often are. Says Blackwell: "My parents are still dying. They don't tell the neighbors I'm a nanny. They say, 'She works for these doctors,' as if I'm a lab assistant. People back in Arkansas kind of shake their heads. 'We took such an interest in you.' I think it offends them. Since I was smart enough to go to Harvard, why aren't I doing something brilliant?"

Jennifer Goetz sometimes asks herself that question. "It's hard to articulate one's limitations, but one has them," she says. She admits that she has ignored an internal push toward professionalism, her own belief that people with an education should maximize it. "I think I've spent my life adjusting my expectations," she says. "In the back of my mind, it would have been nice to earn some money."

The working-class label irks Hilton, among others. "Blue-collar is like being called a nigger," he says. "I see intellectuals in all classes—people who approach things from an ideas point of view." Samantha George agrees: "We're all working-class."

Some alumni predict a blurring of class lines as fields like carpentry and architecture merge. From the beginning, Smith didn't see anything unusual in sorting mail and selling stamps with a degree in psychology: "Whatever you are in the post office, you have to be quick and have a good memory," she says. "Everybody is doing what they can."

For many Harvard grads, though, the gulf between intellectual and everyday life is terribly real. "The split is widening in this country," Maslach says. After trying to stake an employee in his own business, Maslach watched the extraordinary young man pack it in to deal drugs. "He knew he was never going anywhere," Maslach says. "It's worse to be intelligent and bright in the inner city."

For Joel Cobble '70 of Santa Rosa, California, the only solution is to stay involved. A truck driver/mechanic/public defender/full-time father of twins, he says, "There are two worlds: the world of ideas and scholarship, which I delight in, and the world of ordinary people making things, working, doing things—a world I care about. I feel that there are too few bridges between the worlds. I wish truck drivers would get together to argue about philosophy. And I wish sociologists would go work as waitresses. So I try to spend time in both worlds."

How many Harvard grads maintain a dual passport? It's impossible to count. Some use it only in youth, others only in silence. "I'm typical of a lot of people I know, but not the ones in the journals," Goetz says. "You don't hear from us much."

What else don't we hear? I wonder, for instance, how gender factors into this working-class equation. My sample of subjects was completely unscientific; I ferreted names out of Life, friends, and a Radcliffe printout of alumnai in "blue-collar or arts/crafts work." I hesitated to exclude secretaries, but too many of them worked for their M.D. husbands, and the sheer number controverted my premise of an unconventional choice. In the 1950s, Life never questioned the number of Ivy League women going pink collar.

You'd think that by now I could reach some conclusions about Harvard's "renegades." I can, but only the obvious ones. Work means a lot to the alumni who've gone blue-collar, but it means different things. Like chameleons, their occupations change colors frequently. And even in an orderly age of résumés and career planning, serendipity still shapes the future. "I think the diversity is the same coming out of Harvard as going in," observes Timothy Lee. Maybe. But the traffic is still much lighter on roads less traveled by.

Sylvia Whitman '83 is a freelance writer who lives in Orlando, Florida. Among her favorite jobs was a stint writing speeches for the Criminal Sheriff of Orleans Parish, Louisiana.