

Winter of his discontent

Before *On the Road*, Jack Kerouac drank, wrote, loved and lost in Detroit

BY JOHN COHASSEY



In 1944 "a very strange screw of events began to turn," Jack Kerouac later reflected about the life-changing paths among rebellious writer friends. That year, Kerouac lived briefly with his first wife, Detroit-born Frankie Edie Parker. While in New York, Edie's network of friends helped to form the 1940s beat circle. Like many of Kerouac's friends, Edie figured in his writing, fictionally appearing as the *Town and the City's* Judy Smith, *Vision of Cody's* Elly, and *Vanity of Dulouze's* Edna "Johnnie" Palmer, and under her own name in the recently published *The Original Scroll* version of *On the Road*. Though Kerouac lived only a few months in Grosse Pointe, he made trips back to Detroit in search of Edie, of lost love and a friend's company with whom he could recall days past — events that give us insight into the foibles and vulnerability of the young artist before he found fame as the "King of the Beats."

Born the same year as Kerouac in 1922, Edie grew up in the wealthy Detroit suburb of Grosse Pointe Park. A lover of life more than of books, Edie had long dreamed of following a bohemian artist's route of migration to New York, then Paris. At 17, Edie went to live with her maternal grandparents in New York at an apartment near Columbia University. Edie represented a new generation of independent women, often living alone or with a roommate. In the spirit of newly liberated women, Edie soon dated and made love to Henri Cru, Kerouac's former Horace Mann Prep School friend and the son of a Columbia University French instructor. Cru's mother lived in the same New York apartment building as Edie's grandmother. In fall of 1940, Cru introduced the shy, intelligent and inwardly intense Kerouac to Edie near the Columbia campus, while Kerouac was on crutches as the result of a hairline fracture to his tibia suffered on the football field.

Edie enrolled at Columbia's School of the Fine Arts, studying with the German modernist George Grosz, who taught there from 1941 to 1942. Around this time, Edie met a well-read and art-minded Barnard student, Joan Vollmer Adams, whose husband was away serving in the Army. Known today as two exemplars of the 1940s beat women, Edie and Joan rented a fourth-floor apartment on 119th Street. Edie, neglecting her art studies, frequented the same off-campus dives and Greenwich Village nightspots and restaurants as Kerouac, who, after leaving the Columbia football team and unable to pay for his studies, was struggling to chart his future.

During the 1942 Christmas holiday season, Henri Cru and Edie saw Kerouac at a church concert. Cru suggested they meet him the next day at a nearby deli. When Edie arrived early, she was instantly attracted to the sweater-wearing Kerouac, his shirt opened at the collar. Kerouac sensed a carefree boldness in this Barbara Stanwyck-like woman with an endearing "buck-tooth grin." During this encounter, Edie nervously consumed five sauerkraut-topped hot dogs — a feat that she claims won the writer's heart. While serving in the merchant marine, Henri Cru put Edie in Kerouac's care. Cru soon regretted this decision when he returned to find that Edie had become his friend's new companion and, some considered, his lover.



Rustic Cabins bar in Grosse Pointe Park.

In a confession-like journal entry, Kerouac candidly addressed his expectations about women: He'd either have "a wild Edie who matches my own impatience and madness ... or a simple girl (similar to my mother) who absorbs and understands and accepts all that."

Torn between his mother, his lovers and his wives, Kerouac had little or no interest in marriage, but he sometimes broke from his bachelor status. On New Year's Eve 1942, Kerouac moved into Edie and Joan's 119th Street apartment. Edie's aspiring writer friend, Lucien Carr, frequently visited the apartment. Kerouac and Carr became friends and collaborated in their "New Vision," a symbolist-influenced literary movement. Carr thought Edie "the best woman Jack ever got involved with, bar none." Even the street-hardened denizen of Times Square, Herbert Huncke, who'd later visit Edie in Detroit while living on the city's skid row, considered her a "cute-looking" green-eyed blonde, with a nice figure, who "carried herself well."

To pay the rent, Joan, Edie and Kerouac worked odd jobs. The writer waited dining-hall tables, while Edie worked as a longshoreman, driving a hi-low for the New York Port of Disembarkation.

In March 1943, while Kerouac trained at a Navy boot camp, Edie and Joan found another apartment at 421 W. 118th St. For more than a year, this four-bedroom, six-floor walk-up served as the main meeting place of the original beat circle. Littered with bottles, books, and manuscripts, this communal bohemian hangout had none of the sophistication of a salon as people came and went. Honorably discharged with the diagnosis of "indifferent character" from the Navy in June 1943, Kerouac eventually stayed with Edie and Joan, spending his time between weekdays at his parents' home in Ozone Park, Queens, and the 118th Street apartment on the weekends. News of Kerouac's living with Edie eventually got back to his mother, Gabrielle, who called upon his sister, Caroline, to intervene.

While serving in the Women's Army Corps, Caroline expressed in a letter her disappointment regarding her brother's living arrangement. "That kind of living is for other people," she wrote, "but not for us. We may be poor and haven't always had the best but we must always have family values for Gabe [Gabrielle] and Leo [Kerouac's dad Leo-Alcide] ... for the best fortunes come to those who lead a good clean life."

But Kerouac immersed himself in a bohemian underworld that traditionally linked art and criminality. At the 118th Street apartment, Kerouac met William Burroughs in February 1944, and that spring was introduced to Allen Ginsberg, forming the triumvirate of the original beat circle. Kerouac became involved in Carr's stalker stabbing murder of David Kammerer, when on a sweltering New York night on Aug. 14, 1944, he and Edie were awakened by Carr, excitedly announcing that he had rid himself "of the old man." Along with Burroughs, Kerouac was arrested as a material witness to the crime and held in the Bronx jail — "The Bronx Opera House" — pending a \$500 bail bond. Because Kerouac's father refused to send money, Edie now had an opportunity to marry Kerouac.

Edie's family sent the money, and she joined Kerouac in what Ginsberg later recalled "as a brief experiment" under the most "bizarre" of "circumstances." Briefly let out of jail for their wedding on Aug. 22, 1944, Kerouac — accompanied by Edie, their friend Celine Young, and a detective — went to Municipal Hall for a civil ceremony. Kerouac wrote Edie's mother, Charlotte Parker, promising to repay the bail money and denying any part in the crime. Kerouac claimed in the letter that he was on board a ship in dry dock at the time and knew nothing of the murder and vowed: "I shall be willing to work at anything in Detroit. I'll try several things I have in mind first — the first day — and without success, I shall settle with other employments. But there is no doubt in my mind that I can get along — and Edith as well."

Edie envisioned their stay in Michigan as a short interlude before going to France and living on the Parisian Left Bank, though she didn't give much thought to the fact the Germans were occupying the city. Kerouac, on the other hand, saw this as a temporary situation and harbored notions of once more going to sea with the merchant marine. The newlyweds visited Kerouac's parents in Ozone Park, Queens, then, after Labor Day 1944, boarded a crowded New York-to-Detroit train, riding in a baggage car containing the flag-draped coffin of a fallen serviceman.

Wartime Detroit, "the arsenal of democracy," teemed with employment opportunities. Edie's father helped Kerouac get a job at the Fruehauf Trailer Company. Kerouac later claimed to have worked from midnight to 8 a.m. at Federal Mogul, which he considered the best job he ever had. At this factory, one of the scores that Federal Mogul operated at the time, he sat at a desk intermittently reading books of literary criticism. Given the availability of jobs and the writer's restless pattern of quitting them, Kerouac could have been employed at both companies, which had been converted to producing military vehicles and parts. He sent part of the money he made to his parents, while the rest went to pay back Edie's mother in \$20-a-week installments.

Kerouac described Edie's Grosse Pointe Park home on Somerset Street as beautiful and quiet. At 7 o'clock each evening Kerouac enjoyed the dinners prepared by Edie, served on china under a chandelier. But Grosse Pointe represented a stratum of society unknown to Kerouac and one to which he never aspired; its country-club airs were antithetical to Kerouac's moral and aesthetic sensibilities. Yet in *Vanity of Dulouz*, the beat writer recalled the "big wild parties of teenage troupes," and their "various houses around Grosse Pointe," where a guy would ring the doorbell and yell, 'Hey, a beer wants to come out of the ice box.' I went to the backyard through the screen door and looked out at the stars and listened to the revelry and shure [sic] did love America AS America in those days."

Soon, Kerouac's defiance showed. Unshaven, wearing near worn-out clothes, he didn't always impress Edie's cliquish friends. At the Parker's home, he passed the time, as he did while living in most places, sitting in the bathroom reading the Bible or Shakespeare. Seeking respite from the family home, Kerouac took a short walk from Somerset Street to a bar called the Rustic Cabins, a Grosse Pointe Park jazz spot and popular college-student hangout on Kercheval Avenue. According to the Rustic's recent owner, the then-unknown writer sat in a corner by the pay phone, brooding, reluctant to part with his money.

There were brighter moments. On Sundays, he and Edie often went to the family farm in Dexter, traveling to the village in what Kerouac described as "the lovely northern October of Michigan." The farm had been established by Edie's grandfather, Dr. Emil Lewis Maire, a well-respected Grosse Pointe Park physician and ophthalmologist. Through the Maire's French Huguenot lineage, Edie shared some of her husband's ancestry. In 1922, the same year of Edie's birth, a book about noted Detroiters included her grandfather's decades of contributions to Grosse Pointe Park's development.

"He is a man of culture and ideals," the book stated, "who found time outside of his professional and public activities to make such

extensive study of the arts that he is considered a connoisseur and he has contributed several scholarly articles on art and general literature."

Edie's parents had divorced when she was 8. The Maire family disliked her New York-born father, Walter Milton Parker, womanizer and lover of the good life; Edie credited his carefree existence as giving rise to her rebellious, tomboy nature. Kerouac enjoyed it when Edie's father took them boating on Lake St. Clair and out into Lake Erie on his 38-foot yacht, "The Cigarette." As recounted by both Kerouac and Edie, they made love below the boat deck on a double bed, covered by red Hudson Bay blankets.

Though employed, well-fed, and having access to elements of high society, Kerouac the lonely artist sought his own kind of folk, informing Edie that there "was no tragedy in Grosse Pointe." Edie's father arranged for a truck to take the writer to New York. Within months, however, Edie followed, and by December 1944, she and Kerouac lived at an apartment that she and Joan rented on West 115th Street. To support the couple, Edie worked as a cigarette girl at the Zanzibar Night Club on Broadway. At this time, hard drugs entered the scene. Kerouac, experiencing the ill-effects of Benzedrine, recalled this troubled period, writing: "I was no use to [Edie] as a husband. I sent her home." Yearning for home and tired of scraping by financially, Edie finally left for the Grosse Pointe comforts. On Sep. 18, 1946, Edie filed for an annulment with the Archdiocese of Detroit that ended the marriage.

Though Kerouac defied the responsibilities of traditional marriage, he often missed Edie and frequently hoped for her return or his return to her. In April 1949, he wrote Allen Ginsberg, "I've been thinking of going back to my 1st wife, Edie." In January 1949, he joined Neal Cassady, *On the Road's* Dean Moriarty, and two other passengers — his ex-wife Luanne and Ed Hinkle — on a cross-country trip in which Cassady's Hudson Hornet sped more than 100 miles an hour over the open road, from North Carolina to New York to Louisiana, then to San Francisco where Cassady drove off, leaving behind Kerouac and Luanne.

Stranded in San Francisco in early February, Kerouac received a check from his mother paying for a bus trip eastward. On his way back from Portland, Ore. — by way of Montana and Minnesota — he was determined to see Edie and took a bus to Toledo. From there, three different rides brought the weary hitchhiker to Detroit, where he phoned Edie. Her mother, having remarried an heir to the Berry Paint Company, lived with Edie in a Grosse Pointe Farms mansion. Edie's mother answered, informing Kerouac that her daughter was in Lansing; she was attending Michigan State University to study horticulture. When Kerouac asked for three dollars, she adamantly refused. With only \$.25 cents left, he angrily sat down on his travel bag in the Greyhound terminal men's room. He was low, and he wrote: "Her relatives were conspiring to keep us separated; not that they were wrong, but they felt I was a bum and would only reopen old wounds in her heart." He spent his last money in a skid-row eatery and took shelter in a local library, reading books about the Old West.

Later, back in New York, Kerouac told Edie via phone that with the royalties from his forthcoming first novel, *The Town and the City*, he wanted them to travel to Trieste in the footsteps of James Joyce.

But the American road beckoned once more. In August 1949, Neal and Jack, returning from a westward 5,000-mile road trip, drove a Travel Bureau car — a 1947 Cadillac limousine — from Denver to Chicago. After a rollicking night in Chicago, Kerouac wanted to see Edie, so the two road-weary travelers took a bus that "roared across Michigan" to Detroit. Cassady fell asleep, giving him relief from his injured blackened thumb, while Kerouac talked to an attractive small-town Michigan girl, admiring her tanned breast-tops exposed by her low-cut cotton blouse. From the Greyhound terminal on Washington Boulevard and Grand River, they checked into a dilapidated hotel run by two tough-looking women, their decrepit room lit by one hanging light bulb.

Kerouac and Cassady ate a "meatloaf meal in a bum cafeteria" and walked five to six miles at dusk, eastward along Jefferson Avenue. At Edie's home they sat waiting on the front lawn, "under summer moonlit trees." Seeing the two vagabond-like characters sitting on the lawn, across-the-street neighbors, thinking these suspicious characters were casing their homes, called the police. About 10 o'clock a patrol car stopped and two police frisked the two. Kerouac explained they had come from California and were waiting to take his former wife back to New York. Satisfied with their explanation, the police ordered them out of the neighborhood.

At a local bar, where the police had earlier stopped to warn the owner about them, the pair waited an hour before Cassady went back to the house to find that Edie's mother had been roused out of bed by the police and that she had told them she wanted nothing to do with her former son-in-law. The next morning, when Kerouac spoke with Edie on the phone, she excitedly told them to meet up with her. He was let down when he saw her. She'd gained weight and acquired the habit of eating candy and drinking beer. For three days, as Kerouac later wrote, he spent his time "trying to understand Edie."

At this time, Kerouac — failed in marriage, beset with personal troubles, and unable to get his writing published — had doubts about his future. This may have had much to do with his bleak descriptions of the "arsenal of democracy" that had given thousands of workers, white and black, jobs — the very working class that Kerouac championed along with America's downtrodden outsiders. In *On the Road* Kerouac wrote, "If you sifted all Detroit through a wire basket the better solid core of dregs couldn't be better gathered." In the book's *Original Scroll* version, he added: "Detroit is actually one of the worst towns possible in America. It's nothing but miles and miles of factories and the downtown section is no bigger than Troy, N.Y., except that the population is way up in the millions." His dismissing Detroit as being money-obsessed was, ironically, a criticism he never leveled at centers of wealth like New York or Los Angeles.

During the next several days, Kerouac made the best of his visit. Edie, now 27, had taken up with a younger crowd she called "The Kids," privileged teenage deviants who Kerouac considered somewhat obnoxious. In the afternoons they rode in "the back of her teenage friends' cars, open rumble seat [sic], looking for Vernors Ginger Ale in the mopy clouds of afternoon among red brick factories." Sharing a passion for jazz, Edie took Kerouac, Cassady and two other friends to Hastings Street, Detroit's legendary thoroughfare of black business and nighttime entertainment. They watched a group perform on a small, elevated stage. "Down on Hastings Street the boys were blowing," wrote Kerouac. The "baritone blew and rocked his big horn on a fast blues." While watching Edie's spirited response to the music Kerouac felt for a brief moment a glimmer of their past days together.

Low on money and banned from Edie's home, Kerouac and Cassady were put up at the Grosse Pointe residence of her friend, Virginia Tyson, whose father was out of town. Virginia's father Edwin "Ty" Tyson was a popular WWJ and WJLB sports announcer who had broadcast the first Tiger baseball game in 1927 — initiating baseball's first full-season radio coverage — and had announced the 1935 and 1936 World Series for NBC. According to Edie, the pair's stay at the Tyson home went on for days, an interval of time that certainly does not fit the three-day visit as described by Kerouac. The two attended a party in the Tyson's basement recreation room, complete with a black music trio and played baseball on the lawn. Through Virginia's connections, they found an affordable room at the Savarine Hotel on East Jefferson and Lenox, a room later paid for by Virginia and Edie. The Savarine afforded Kerouac, an avid baseball fan, a chance to meet the hotel's Detroit Tigers tenants.

According to Kerouac in *The Original Scroll*, it was not long before Edie had had enough of her former husband and his traveling companion. One evening when she was to meet the two, she left them outside a Mack Avenue bar and departed without a word in a car with a male friend. In his journal, Kerouac commented about this incident: "And Edie, not a care, not a straight, long care in the world. She never even looked at me once with anything approaching seriousness. She was tired and wanted to sleep, and drove home and left me to walk 4 miles — not pique so much, just tired."

Unable to afford a hotel, Kerouac and Cassady stored their belongings in the Greyhound station locker. They took refuge until morning in the balcony of an all-night movie theater among bottle-drinking winos, its floor covered with discarded matchbooks and cigarette butts. A double feature played repeatedly through the night — a Roy Dean cowboy picture and *Background to Danger* (1943) set in neutral Turkey during World II and starring George Raft, Peter Lorre and Sidney Greenstreet. Prominently described in *On The Road*, these films played as the writer drifted in and out of sleep, hearing a singing cowboy's voice intermingled with a sneering Lorre, and the pompous, wily voice of Greenstreet.

The next day at the Travel Bureau, Kerouac and Cassady paid five dollars each for a car ride to New York. They bided their time sitting on the grass in a park, listening to the screeching trolleys. When they learned their ride would not depart until the following day, they contacted Edie. That evening she drove the two back to Hastings Street. She sped through a red light and was pulled over by police. Wearing T-shirts, Kerouac and Cassady appeared at the police station but were released after Edie's threats of involving her well-connected family. The next day, the pair met up with their Travel Bureau ride by hauling their gear several miles to the car-owner's house. When passing Briggs Stadium, the driver, a bespectacled middle-aged man, discussed with his passengers the Tigers' next baseball season.

Whether this Detroit visit lasted three days as Kerouac later claimed, or longer as Edie suggests in her memoir, Kerouac and Cassady never visited again. Within a year, Kerouac's Thomas Wolfe-inspired first novel, *The Town and the City*, met with critical praise but disappointing sales. Meanwhile, Kerouac's experiences in Michigan made their way into his fiction, first in the *Scroll* and later its edited and expurgated sections mentioned in *On the Road*, and the posthumously published *Visions of Cody*. Though Kerouac once admitted to his sister that he should not have married Edie — "but just gone on knowing" her "in a casual sort of way" — he too admitted: "The happiest days of my life, I can tell you, were spent living with her at Columbia when all the kids were around. You'd wake up in the morning and find the house full of people talking or reading books, and you'd go to bed at night with most of them still there and getting ready to curl up on couches and pillows on the floor."

Whether in fiction or in life, Kerouac never forgot close friends. Before his 1969 death, he called Edie, suggesting she visit his Florida home, where he and his third wife, Stella Sampas, were looking after his bed-ridden mother. But the two women of the house forbade the visit, and within months Kerouac died, succeeding in his alcoholic self-destruction. One will never know if the written experiences of youth remain the same in reflection later in life — how the writer longed at times to return to Edie (who died in 1993) and, if just briefly, to her privileged world along Lake St. Clair. Later in life, as in his writing, Kerouac lived in the past — his childhood Lowell, the New York of the war years, the many stops along the road of youth, an America rapidly disappearing — places like Detroit that would never be the same.

Roll call: Excerpts from *On the Road: The Original Scroll*

The February trip — Jack writing about Edie:

"My whole wretched life swam before my weary eyes, and I realized no matter what you do it's bound to be a waste of time in the end so you might as well go mad. All I wanted was to drown my soul in my wife's soul and reach her through the tangle of shrouds which is flesh in bed. At the end of the American road is a man and woman making love in a hotel room." p. 278

The August 1949 trip with Neal:

"It was time for us to move on to Detroit and conclude the final thing in our disordered life together on the road." p. 340

"And Neal and I, ragged and dirty like as if we lived off locust, stumbled out of the bus in Detroit and went across the street and got a cheap hotel with the bulb hanging from the ceiling and raised the brown torn shade and looked out on the brick alley." p. 341

"Summer was over. We stood on the sidewalk in front of the bar — and what the hell were we doing in Detroit? — and it grew cold. It was the first cold dusk since the Spring. We huddled in our T-Shirts." p. 345

"Neal and I struggled five miles in local buses with all of our beat gear and got to the home of the man who was going to charge \$4 apiece for the ride to N.Y. He was a middleaged [cq] blond fellow with glasses, with a wife and a kid and a good home ... The moment we were in the new Chrysler and off to New York the poor man realized he had contracted a ride with two maniacs ... In the misty night we crossed

Toledo and went across old Ohio. I realized I was beginning to cross and re-cross towns in America as though I was a traveling salesman — ragged travellings [cq], bad stock, rotten beans in the bottom of my bag of tricks, nobody buying." p. 348-349.

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