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primarily, but about those of Morris Markin, an epically industrious Russian Jew, who founded the Checker Cab Manufacturing Company, in Kalamazoo, in 1922; bought the Yellow Cab Company from Hertz and his partners in 1929; and owned one of the biggest taxi fleets in New York. "Markin is my hero," Lowich said. "Let's go with his pluses first, O.K.? He was the first taxicab operator to hire blacks to drive cabs. This took place in Chicago in 1924. He was the first taxicab builder who extended to the black community an opportunity to buy cabs on *carte-blanche* credit. He was the first taxi-fleet operator to give his drivers vacation pay." Lowich slowed down for a red light, and his aging Checker, after making the most of a large pothole, shuddered to a halt. "Now for the negatives," he said. "Markin's banker bribed Mayor Jimmy Walker to take the cab industry out of the hands of the city and turn it into a public utility. It would have been a great concept, and if you have a few minutes I'll tell you why. . . ."

In the movie version of Lowich's life—"The Bobby Lowich Story," say—a chance encounter with the president of Hyperion would lead to a book contract and, a few scenes later, the *Times* best-seller list. In real life, that hasn't happened, but who knows? "If and when my book is published," Lowich said, "I think everybody in the world will love it. I don't want to sound like a hubristic son of a bitch, but there isn't a thing about cabs that I don't know."

—David Owen

THE CHARITY CIRCUIT BARELY SHAVERS



It is probably a good sign for the mustache in America that the biennial World Beard and Moustache Championships, after being held in the Northern European towns of Höfen/Enz, Pforzheim, Trondheim, and Schömberg, came this past November to Carson City, Nevada. Since the early seventies, the mustache, despite some memorable

specimens (Rollie Fingers, Tom Selleck, Ned Flanders) and die-hard constituencies (cops, professional bowlers, *Playgirl* pinups), has failed to match the mainstream popularity of its questionable cousin the goatee. It's hard, certainly, to imagine an American President sporting a soup-strainer like Václav Havel's.

Still, there have been glimmers of a



mustache revival. When a model named Eugene Hutz appeared in a fashion show, in the summer of 1999, wearing the drooping accordion player's mustache of his native Ukraine, he inspired a flurry of mustache coverage. "It's not every day you see Snidely Whiplash on a runway," the *Times* observed.

Which brings us to a windblown stretch of Williamsburg the other night, where the Pirate, an earnest young man with an earnest young mustache, was standing in front of a shuttered bar—the official site of the finals of the Mustaches for Kids mustache-growing contest. "The bar had its liquor license confiscated today, and no one told us," the Pirate, one of the contest's organizers, explained bitterly, shivering in his Hawaiian shirt, jeans, and running shoes. He pointed off into the darkness, in the direction of the Alligator Lounge, where the contest had established provisional quarters.

Mustaches for Kids got its start in Los Angeles in 1999, when two guys named Big Al and Dan Strange decided to bet on who could grow the best mustache in a month. Soon, their wager grew into an organized competition for charity. Contestants line up sponsors, who pledge money to the Make-A-Wish Founda-

tion, the idea being that it is as hard to cultivate a mustache for four weeks as it is to run a marathon, or perhaps a 10K.

Although the official Mustaches for Kids Web site lists a few basic rules (No. 3: "No Hitler mustaches"), the general laxity would probably dismay the judges at the World Beard and Moustache Championships, where there is a range of mustache categories (Wild West, Imperial, Dali), with exacting regulations for each. But the crowd at the Alligator Lounge—girlfriends, clean-shaven hangers-on, perplexed regulars—did not seem to mind that the twenty or so mustaches assembled for the contest were mostly paltry and undistinguished.

The contestants huddled in little pockets around the bar, drinking pints of Pabst Blue Ribbon and exchanging war stories ("My boss has a mustache and he didn't get what was very funny about growing a mustache for charity"), describing ultimatums from girlfriends ("She said it had to go before the meet-the-parents ski weekend in New Jersey"), and agreeing that "moustache" is a pussy spelling and that "Nietzsche's mustache was hot." Soon, everyone gathered in the back-room tiki lounge, where the contestants stood up before the judges and introduced themselves. A man sporting a bell-bottomed navy suit and a comparatively luxuriant mustache invoked his heritage: "When my grandfather came from Russia to Ellis Island, at customs they made him shave his mustache off." He stroked his whiskers melodramatically. "Now I, his grandson, have grown it back." In the end, he was the winner.

Reached on the phone last week, Bruce Roe, of Bremerton, Washington, who has won trophies in the last three World Beard and Moustache Championships, was a little skeptical of the Williamsburg crew. "A month isn't enough to get much going at all," Roe said. He has been growing his mustache for thirty-three years. He competes in the Wild West division, dressed as Wyatt Earp. In answer to the question "If your mustache was an animal, what would it be?"—it had been put to the contestants in Williamsburg—he said, "Tiger." He paused a moment, then added, "Sounds like they're not too serious about their facial hair."

—Field Maloney