

Reminiscences of St. Bernard's

Ogden Williams, Class of '33

I have attended four major schools in my life, St. Bernard's, St. Paul's, Princeton and Harvard Law School, and of these my favorite was St. Bernard's. There I learned both more and more happily than at any of the others. I still remember and revere the names of my teachers - Headmaster John C. Jenkins, Edwards, Halliday, Cox, Ashton, Captain Fry, Platt, McCagg, Bert Manders, Don Phelan and the others.

Let me begin at the beginning. I made an initial abortive attempt to start in at STB in, probably, 1925 when I was only five. I remember being terrified, particularly by my so large teacher who was Mr. Platt, perhaps the gentlest man one could imagine. After only one or two days it was realized I was too young, so I was withdrawn to wait until the next year. Accordingly in 1926 I remember my first class (perhaps 4B) and first teacher. He was Mario Caturani, of the family that sent many kids to STB, perhaps a temporary or part-time teacher. I remember a short, slim, very handsome man. Our first lesson I also remember: Latin. It was either "mensa, mensa, mensam," (STB had its own order for declining) or "amo, amas, amat". We also had French from the start, and arithmetic.

A word about instruction at STB. There was no nonsense about the authority of the teacher, which was absolute. There was also no nonsense about learning things by memory and by rote which were deemed necessary or useful. As a result I learned spelling so well by age 11 or so that I do not recall making a spelling error since in my life. Of less import, I still remember the jingle for all the Latin prepositions governing the accusative (ante, apud, ad, adversus, ~~super~~^{superius}, supra, citra, cis, contra, inter, erga, extra, infra, intra, juxta, ob, penes, pone, post, praeter, prope, propter, per, secundum, supra, versus, ultra, trans). If I have made some slight mistake in the above, and Papa Jenks is out there somewhere and notices the error, I will plead that it has been 60 years since he taught us that, and he will forgive! In French, he also taught us to remember "D Different Dative" which is the rule that explains "Je vous le donne", but "Je le lui donne." And of course we won apples, pears and bananas for reciting Horatius at the Bridge and The Lay of the Last Minstrel. I can still start off boldly on those, but soon run out.

Quite apart from the marvelous drilling in the basics of English, French, Latin, Math, Geography etc., STB also imparted excitement, fun and thrills to the process of learning. I recall how in the later classes, 1A and 1B, Captain Fry would read us English poetry and prose in his sonorous, husky voice and impart to us his evident love of the mother tongue. For Mr. Edwards we wrote compositions of great imagination. Mine were often quite bloodthirsty. I remember one in which my Spanish hero strikes a blow and cries, "Take that, bastardly Moors" Edwards changed the

"b" to a "d" and wrote "please !" in the margin. He had a choleric temper. Once, in a minor rage, he spied an offending piece of chalk in the center of the classroom floor and gave it an enormous kick, only to have it hit the wall and roll back to precisely where it had started. We couldn't help roaring with laughter.

At St. Bernard's in those days rules and values were not in doubt. There was at least as much emphasis on decorum, honor, character and discipline as there was on academics. I remember when after a serious infraction on my part, my father took me up to the school for a meeting with Mr. Jenkins. The two of them went into his study, leaving me shaking out in the ante-room. Eventually I was called in to make a tearful apology and was told to come back to see the Headmaster in two days, during which I should memorize and be prepared to recite Shakespeare's soliloquy "The quality of mercy is not strained," etc. I did so and was gently forgiven, and the slate was clean - and the lesson never since forgotten.

For lesser infractions, writing out a sentence a hundred times was not unknown. And for real obstreperousness we might even have to go to the gym, put on enormous boxing gloves, and put in a few rounds with a senior boy considered to be the best boxer in the school. In my time it was Jimmy Rousmaniere. I remember when a small but very feisty classmate, Jimmy Barstow, had to go in against Rousmaniere. Barstow was half the latter's size and learned his lesson, but put up such a gallant fight that he became a hero for us ! On some afternoons, to work off youthful steam, we would all be turned out in the gym to play "bombardment," in which we divided up on either side of a center line and proceeded to hurl soccer balls at each other. A hit would eliminate the victim until finally there would only be one on each side. We also had Pierrot shows and other entertainments in the gym. I particularly remember a lecture by a Major Packenham who had been in the Boxer Rebellion in the British army. He had colored magic lantern slides, and I recall one which showed Boxers hanging by their pigtails from lamp posts along a street in Peking. We were not horrified, as we were all very pro-British, and assumed the Boxers had it coming.

For athletics, arrayed in our red and white, we went for soccer to Starlight Park and for baseball to Dyckman Oval, as I remember. On the long bus rides, I recall we used to play word games like "geography", in which a boy would say, for example, Afghanistan, which ends in an "n", so the next boy would have to start with an "N", like Nepal, and so forth until someone got stuck. The trick was to know places ending with a hard letter like Iraq or Sfax. Also we would play capitals, like Q: Nevada, A: Carson City, or Q:Germany, A: Berlin etc. These games were fun, and we painlessly learned something at the same time. There was no geographical illiteracy in STB in those days.

Once a year there was, of course, the Shakespeare play. I recall in 1947, just before the spring breakup, being told,

I believe by Captain Fry, that I had been chosen for the part of Henry V in the play of that name, to memorize the lines during the summer and be ready for rehearsals in the fall. Perhaps I was chosen because I had won the Glenn Essay Prize (but on reflection that happened a year later in May, 1933). Anyway, our rehearsals finally included even sessions with professionals from Broadway, and the great evening arrived. The audience of parents was all decked in black ties and evening gowns, each with a red or white carnation, and assembled at the Hecksher Theatre on Fifth Avenue. I think we Thespians became caught up in the magic of Shakespearean English and evidently acquitted ourselves well. In my case, I remember drawing a blank on the last few inconsequential lines of the play, but by that time was confident enough to ad lib some substitute until the curtain mercifully descended. Nobody noticed or cared, and I was told that my name would be added to those of F.B. Adams and John L. Calvocoressi as STB immortals, etc., which I am sure exceeded my deserts. But I was told that when, in my King's suit and on my knees with my sword held up as a Cross, I was intoning the "O God of battles, steel our soldiers' hearts", etc., there wasn't a dry eye in the house. I was more concerned that my purple King's leotard-type hose were several sizes too small, and once down on my knees I couldn't get up again until one of my Nobles lent an arm !

To get to school in the morning, I think I was dropped off in a car and, when young, picked up again in the afternoon. But in the upper classes I recall going home by trolley down Madison Avenue. On the corner of 98th and Madison there was the Lifshitz store for candy. Cantor's was the drug store on 96th and Madison, and a half-block south was a small store with wonderful candied apples, and also marbles - including agates and steelies. I also used to go home by roller skates. Once I recall a few of us wandered over to about 98th and 4th Avenue where we were quickly surrounded by some tough kids who demanded we give up pencils, fountain pens, water pistols or whatever other treasures we had. We were outnumbered and outclassed, but one of us, I think he was named Downer, had the heart of a lion and wanted to fight it out on the basis of not one cent for tribute, etc. but I and the others had no such heart and persuaded Downer to give in along with us. We may have been wiser, but he was the hero.

As a final reminiscence of St. Bernard's days, I must give a word to the BB Club. I don't know if that august institution for upperclassmen still exists. It was very secret. Even the name was unmentionable, and no one knew what it stood for, albeit possibly "Bernard Boys". It met on Friday nights after school at a member's house, the parents being conveniently banned for the evening, whence we would sally forth to a movie. I think that the Club had as its main purpose conning the parents into letting us go to the movies on Friday nights, but its ~~5~~ other, and possibly predominant purpose was initiations. Everyone had to be initiated to get in. I recall some of mine. First, starting out easy, I had to flag down a speeding taxi on Park Avenue and ask the driver if he had the time. Then we proceeded to the drug store on 72nd and Lexington, where they then had a soda fountain, all

sat down, and everyone had a banana split. Then the others all left, leaving me to pay the bill, but having earlier relieved me of any money I had. Well, little did I know that the others had prepaid the bill that afternoon, since the manager threw a terrible fit and put me to work washing dishes, etc. After that, my final ordeal was to stand on Park Avenue, and when the first woman of any size or age came around the corner, I had to fall down on both knees and say "Will you marry me?" My victim turned out to be an Irishwoman with a thick brogue who grinned and said "Sure an' I will!" While my tormentors roared with laughter, I took off down the street like Jessie Owens.

Enough of reminiscences. I suppose most of us kids in those days, going to St. Bernard's, never knew there was a Depression going on. We just had our wonder years, made all the richer by that great school.

Byron Tuller 33