

SCHOOL YEARS—1921-1933

All of my schooling took place in Mount Vernon, New York, and all of the schools were within walking distance from our house: Robert Fulton, Sophie J. Mee, Washington Junior High School, and A. B. Davis High School, in sequence. These schools, or the buildings that still exist, now have different names and functions. The teachers were a dedicated lot. The students represented a good mix of the population of the city in those years. In elementary school, I skipped the second halves of the second and fourth grades and, in general, found the lower grades rather slow-paced. As a result, I often indulged in mischief and spent some time standing with my face to the corner of the classroom, which was the punishment for minor infractions. If I walked alone to Fulton School, I was sometimes late. The final short cut of my walk was a path through a wooded area, and in the spring there were abundant diversions due to the emerging flowers and small creatures. When it was raining, there was the invented diversion of racing matchsticks down the tracks of the Fulton Avenue trolley. I was frequently discouraged from this pastime by passing motorists because the tracks were in the middle of the road! By fifth grade, I was more attentive; in sixth grade, I became steeped in books; and by seventh grade, I was intrigued by mathematics and general sciences, and was inspired by an English teacher, a Miss Redington. I found later, in high school, that many other students had been influenced positively by her. Junior high school provided a year of Latin, a taste of French, and general music education in addition to the usual subjects.

What did we do in our spare time as boys growing up in Mount Vernon? There were, of course, chores to be done depending on the season: weeding the garden, mowing the lawn, raking leaves, and shoveling snow. The seasonal sports included touch football in the street (discouraged by the police) or on the church grounds (discouraged by the custodian), ice skating alongside Eastchester Parkway or at Playland, Rye, New York, sledding (with luck, up to a mile downhill from the front of our house when the snow on the road was well packed), basketball (at two houses on the street), roller skating and biking, and baseball (on a vacant lot). We learned how to walk the picket fences that separated the back yards and

how to run up and down garage roofs, jumping from one to the adjacent one. We pestered neighbors by pea-shooter attacks on their windows (at Halloween). We found tennis courts where we were allowed to play as long as we scraped and rolled the court afterwards. Two of our number became excellent tennis players and competed in city tournaments in their age group. We went swimming off Glen Island or in Wilson's Woods Pool. The "we" consisted of boys with the family names Minkowsky, Palestine, Fisher, Van Cott, Meury, and Leonard. I still keep in touch with Allan Van Cott and with the widow of Ed Meury. I last saw the Minkowsky twins, a great touch football combination, at our fiftieth high school class reunion (1983). They recalled, for the unwelcome edification of Nell, that I could burp louder than anyone else on the block and that I could climb up to and jump out of selected second story windows in our house.

We boys scrambled to make a little money by payment for chores, delivery of groceries, selling magazines. I wasn't very good at marbles, so I invented a game that involved a friend rolling marbles at a cardboard cut-out which I made and held in place. It had gates designated 1, 5, 10, 5, 1—the number of marbles he would win if a marble went through one of the gates. The "house" invariably won since it kept all stray marbles. When the friend's marble supply was exhausted, I would sell him back his marbles so that he could continue the play. Needless to say, I did not retain the monopoly on this game very long. Other boards appeared even on the second day, and the process was neutralized. I had a similar gimmick based on stamps, for we were all stamp collectors. I bought from Scott Stamp and Coin Company special issues of beautiful stamps that I knew my friends did not have and could not resist buying from me (at a higher price than I paid for them). Some British Honduras issues come to mind, also some of the French colonies. Of course, that process was soon neutralized as Scott gained new Mount Vernon customers. A miniature golf course, actually three holes, served me better. In the alley next to our house, I constructed these skill-testing holes from pipes and turf on several levels. My imagination exceeded my ability to construct professional-looking, complicated challenges, but my friends would shell out five cents a try until they shot par, when it became free. Even adults, e.g., my parents, became players. At least, my construction remained the only miniature golf course on the block. When I became a choir boy, I earned "real" money, but that is covered in the chapter on my musical experiences.

Regular meetings of our Boy Scout Troop #5 at Trinity Church kept me interested, but it was the summer camping that I lived for. The first summer experience was discouraging, however. The Scout camp I attended when I was 11 years old was a collection of tents at an attractive

spot on the Hudson River, about 40 miles north of New York City. I was scheduled to be there for two weeks, but I only lasted one. I developed a systemic *Staphylococcus* infection (“boils”) probably from scratching mosquito bites and abetted by the contents of the river at that point. With no sulfa drugs or antibiotics available yet in 1927, the treatment was only palliative, but my system managed to rid itself slowly of the infection, aided by the regular house calls and ministrations of our family physician, Dr. John Tallman. At the end of the summer, I spent a compensating week at a choir camp that was laid out on the grounds of a wealthy church member, a surgeon, near South Norwalk on the Long Island Sound. The contrasting experience restored my excitement about camping, swimming, and athletic contests as a summer diversion, but not enough to return to the Scout camp while it was still located on the Hudson. Two years later, it was relocated as Camp Waubeeka on a small lake near Copake, New York, and I went as a somewhat more mature camper, attending regularly into the high school years, participating in the horseback riding, swimming, canoeing, athletics, backpacking, and finally serving as a junior counselor. Those summers made it possible to rise through the ranks of scouting, by taking the necessary tests and adding merit badges as required, to Eagle Scout and beyond, including the Order of the Arrow. In my final summer, I spent eight weeks at Camp Waubeeka as a totally enjoyable experience. Imagine my surprise when, 50 years later, I was driving east from Albany, New York, to a summer chemistry meeting in New Hampshire and suddenly realized that the NY Route 22 south exit would take me to Copake. The sleepy town had not changed very much, but it did look the worse for wear. I followed my instinct to take the dirt road out of town that should lead to a small side road bearing left after about one-half mile. Sure enough, there was the small diversion indicated by the sign “Camp Waubeeka.” I drove in and found a trailer camp! The grounds were smaller than I remembered and the lake appeared minuscule in size. None of the Scout cabins, of course, remained, only an office and rows of electric hook-ups for trailers. I hoped that the present occupants of the terrain were appreciating the simple, natural surroundings as much as I had in years long past. I squeezed my eyes tightly shut to imagine the log cabins of the Mohawks, the Gramatans, and the Algonquins, the administration building, the mess hall, the horse ring, the baseball diamond, the water slide and high dive, and the canoes in water fights and tipping contests. Then I drove on, quietly fulfilled.

The early friends continued as such as in high school, and new friendships were forged. John Hess and I played tennis together on a private court across the street from his house. We also worked together on the preparation of Scout merit badges. Johnny’s father taught chemistry in a high school in

the Bronx, so we had access to all kinds of outline material that made our own study of chemistry more efficient. Alex Kaplan was outstanding in English and had cultivated a large vocabulary, so we did some editing together of the high school year book. Bill Weeden, who was not college-bound, became a friend one could rely upon to propose new adventures. At a parents' night at Washington Junior High School, both of our fathers attended and were amazed to see each other again. They had been good friends in a Young Men's Christian Fellowship in New York City about 20 years earlier! Gurney Woodley, an excellent jazz pianist, was my accompanist when I was called upon to sing on high school occasions. Edward Williams was the high school football hero, an unstoppable fullback, who became a teacher and whose son followed him as a teacher. Robert Fulton School was renamed after Eddie, as I learned when I saw him at our fiftieth reunion. At that time, we wrote a note to Catherine Rhodes, over 90 and quite unwell, who had been our inspirational trigonometry teacher.

Another excellent mathematics teacher was Florence E. Brown, who was also my home room teacher for two years. Physics and chemistry were taught enthusiastically by Malcolm MacGregor and Frank P. Bunker, respectively. The chemistry laboratory was a bit haphazard, but I am sure that I contributed to making it so. Emil Nielsen conducted the glee club and coached and directed musicals in a very professional manner, which made participation enjoyable and our performances successful. His daughter Doris and I maintain contact by means of family Christmas cards that are exchanged each year. Elaine Schleicher, who was an attractive (blonde) member of the glee club and appeared in the chorus and dance numbers in the musicals, became a good friend. Together, we went to Radio City Music Hall for occasional Saturday matinees, to parties, and in groups for ice skating and to dances, which we were required by our parents to leave early lest they become rowdy. (They did!). Her mother took kindly to me and occasionally asked me to have dinner with the family. The three sisters, of whom Elaine was the youngest, performed on the radio regularly as a trio, singing close harmony. The older brother was a performing jazz musician.

To finish the roster of teachers, Alice Brower, who taught senior English, really challenged our intellects and inculcated the techniques of writing, whether exposition, book review, short story, or commentary. She incited us, by quoting from the Sunday *New York Times* Book Review Section, to prepare, keep, and modify a book list for intended reading. She was a tough and accurate grammarian. She appreciated her students more than I realized in that final year (1933). When Nell and I were in Bronxville, New York, to be married (1947), Mrs. Brower must have read the notice in the local newspaper. She telephoned my aunt and asked if Nell and I

could stop by her house for a moment, which we did. I thought she wanted to assess Nell, who always “assessed” very well, but she also produced, from a pigeon hole of her desk, the original of an essay I had written 14 years earlier. When Nell and I read it, we couldn’t understand why she had kept it. We didn’t keep it, even though I valued Mrs. Brower’s remembrance.

My activities in high school were limited (e.g., music, French club, student council, hospitality committee, senior (touch) football, secretary-treasurer of the class) because the church choir took a lot of time and because I had to concentrate on getting high grades. Those were necessary if I were to obtain any college scholarships. I also had to do well on the Regents Examinations, required by all New York State institutions and accepted for admission by many out-of-state colleges. My tactics paid off, because I was presented with a record number of prizes at graduation. My friends almost collapsed when, toward the end of the presentations, I also shared in one for perfect attendance. Yet, I was not the valedictorian. That honor went to Grace Kryske, who had excelled in subjects for which not many prizes were offered. I tried to balance the academic concentration during the junior and seniors years by running around the track at the end of the school day whenever I could, usually about two miles. It made me feel good, but my pace was never fast enough to make me a reasonable candidate for the track team. The same was true when I went to college.

Material for the 1933 class yearbook that was gathered at the end of 1932 for each senior included an indication of the college that the senior hoped to attend. In actuality, the hope for attending college became unrealized for many. We were still deep in the Depression that had started when we were freshmen. When the banks were closed in March of 1933, many reopened in a reorganized form that was not favorable to the depositors. When the Mount Vernon Trust Company, where I had deposited my ten or more years of savings, reopened, my balance was half of what it had been before that March. I had enough money for one semester of college, not one year, that is, for living, fees, books, etc! I would still need a renewable scholarship. I retained my optimism about college when Lehigh University offered me a one-year tuition scholarship, largely through the intervention of Morton Sultzter, who was simultaneously a Trustee of Lehigh, Warden of the church where I was a choir boy, a Commissioner of the Boy Scouts in Mount Vernon, and a friend of the family (i.e., my mother was a baby sitter for his young children). He may even have had something to do with the Board of Education in Mount Vernon, so versatile and dedicated was he. Accordingly, I luckily attended the University that was indicated beside my name in our yearbook: Lehigh University, in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, an all-male, largely engineering school with an excellent reputation.