

Horace Mann -- The 1940's

By Daniel Rose, HM '47

Emerson may have overstated the case in describing an institution as "the lengthened shadow of one man," but he would have been on the mark in reference to the Horace Mann School for Boys in the 1940's and its presiding deity, Charles C. Tillinghast.

Tilly, as he was known to everyone (not to his face, of course), was of the "old school" of headmasters whose models were Arnold of Rugby and, in America, Peabody of Groton.

In his always articulate and often eloquent use of the language, in his commanding personal presence, in his own enthusiastic version of "muscular Christianity," above all in his conviction that he was entrusted not only with the formal education of his charges but with the molding of their character and the formation of their values as well—Tilly left a permanent impression on every youngster who came within his orbit.

Weekly assembly sessions called Chapel played an important part in the school routine, and Tilly used them with great effect for what could be described as non-denominational moral pep-talks. Each student felt that he was being addressed personally (Tilly knew and always greeted each student by name). He stressed concepts like "noblesse oblige," fair play, and the satisfactions of a life of service to an ideal. Had he chosen, like Peter the Hermit, to lead a new Children's Crusade, most of the school would have enrolled immediately.

The world Tilly presided over had clear values: solid academic achievement, high verbal facility, "manliness" and rugged determination in sports were assiduously cultivated and highly praised; scientific achievement and musical and dramatic efforts were noted with modest approval but no real enthusiasm; drawing and painting and sculpture for all practical purposes did not exist.

The ability to write and speak clearly and effectively was important—four times a year, every student was required to submit an original written work—essay, story or whatever—called "the quarterly"; and the numerical mark received for it constituted a significant factor in one's English grade. The best of this work was printed in the school literary magazine called, appropriately enough, *The Quarterly*. The ability to speak on one's feet was cultivated not only in a Speakers Club and a Debating Club, but in class recitations and speaking before the school assembly.

The other lesser, but still important deities on duty on "the hill"—Messrs. Blake, Nagle, Williams, Dodge, Moore, Baruth—shared Tilly's view of the school as an institution designed to mold promising youngsters and to send them on to greater things. It was not that the teachers were hostile or indifferent to slow learners, but the impression conveyed was that such students belonged somewhere else, for their own benefit and for the benefit of the rest of the school.

Membership in the Horace Mann community was not a right, but clearly a privilege that one had to keep earning by productive involvement in one's own affairs as well as in the life of the school.

A high degree of mutual respect—of the faculty for the students, the students for the faculty, the students for each other—was an important aspect of life that made for fun at school and strong bonds of friendship among classmates in later years.

The Horace Mann of the forties had its share of colorful characters, or so they appeared to my adolescent eyes. Taciturn John Van Sant presiding over business affairs; genial Bobby Payne teaching physics, guiding the Boy Scout Troop (he eventually received the Silver Beaver Award, one of scouting's highest honors) and serving as Tilly's administrative assistant; picturesque Andy Patzalos and his wizened mother, "Mrs. Andy," living in the candy store under the grandstand; earnest Charlie Avedisian of the New York Giants, who came to coach football and found himself teaching biology as well; sympathetic Mary Webb, who loved books and who made the library the comfortable and inviting place that served as the heart of the school; gently roguish John Oliver, whose French students came away with a masterful command of such useful proverbs as "the pot calls the kettle black" or "a scalded cat is afraid of cold water." ("C'est la pelle qui se moque du fourgon," and "Chat échaudée craint l'eau froide," if memory serves.)

And of course, William Nagle, tap, tap, tapping on his clipboard each

Christmas season, reminding the school of the 100 Neediest Cases and of the obligation to contribute. As a classicist, Bill Nagle would have been the first to point out that our word for charity derives from the Latin "caritas" or "love"; he might have been surprised to realize that his concept of giving impressed the students as reflecting not "love" so much as "duty."

A list of other memorable figures at the school would include

A. Berdena McIntosh, a dignified maiden lady who taught manners and deportment to First Formers as well as Latin; Charles Anderson, whose General Language course was one of the high spots of school life; Ump Tewhill, who so badly wanted the winning teams that home-grown talent couldn't furnish that he went out of state to recruit, coming up with stars like Jack Kerouac; and jovial Bill Blake, energetically leading weekly singing sessions, with songs like *Pack Up Your Troubles In Your Old Kit Bag* and *It's a Long Way to Tipperary* flashed on the assembly screen.

The chief feature of life at Horace Mann was an academic experience that made many students feel that Freshman Year at college was a come-down.

English teachers like Baruth and Blake made literary texts come vibrantly alive—the one with passion, the other with nuance. Both understood and loved the English language, and both conveyed to students a respect approaching awe for what it could achieve in the hands of a master. Though we joked about it at the time, we came away with an appreciation of the musical quality of great

poetry, an ear attuned to the well-turned phrase or an eye trained to seek (and underline, figuratively or literally) the key thought. These men had a great capacity for friendship, keeping up with students and colleagues over the years; and it is a telling comment on Al Baruth that at his hospital death bed, it was his students of forty years before who were the last to see him alive.

Historians like Briggs and Gerow (Harry Martin had just retired and Phil Lewerth was teaching his first classes in my day) inculcated in students not only a desire to know the facts ("the raw material of historical thought," Al Briggs called them), but to see them in context, to interpret them, to understand them in perspective. Students were encouraged to read original texts as well as the usual secondary sources, to become familiar with the art and literature of a period, to visit museums and historical sites when possible, and to think of historical periods as peopled not by store mannequins in costume but by flesh-and-blood types like ourselves.

English and history were the strong points of a Horace Mann education; foreign language teaching was another story. In retrospect it is probably fair to say that the teaching of modern languages has improved so remarkably in American education generally that in discussing the past we really are speaking of a different world. The rote memorization of conjugations of long lists of irregular verbs, little if any opportunity to converse, no use of current newspapers, magazines or films, and so forth, were weaknesses throughout American education, and therefore shouldn't be held against the school.

Mathematics and the sciences at Horace Mann in those "pre-Sputnik" days

were taught much as they were elsewhere, the dramatic changes since then have made irrelevant what, at the time, were considered first-rate facilities and techniques.

Of all the sciences, chemistry was the most popular. Harry Williams, a low-keyed but effective Ph.D. who obviously knew and respected his subject, presided over a spacious and well-equipped laboratory that was one of the showplaces of the school. Physics was seen as a senior subject of interest primarily to students who might go into engineering, while biology in those days somehow was never accorded the degree of attention and respect due a serious subject.

Mathematics, taught by Messrs. Moore, Kalligan, Gilmour and Crandall, was presented in a straightforward, unexceptional way that was effective but elicited little comment outside of class.

Although not so important as the academic program, a rich offering of extra-curricular activities challenged the energies and imagination of the student body. Highly-regarded, well-financed, with active administrative and faculty support, publications and clubs added resonance to an already heady atmosphere.

For a relatively small group of students (which in the early 1940's numbered fewer than 400 in the seventh through twelfth grades but passed that mark by the end of the decade), the school provided an excellent weekly newspaper (*The Record*); a yearbook comparable in quality to those of major colleges (*The Mannikin*); a glossy, illustrated literary magazine (*The Quarterly*);

a yearly school guide book (*The Manual*); an impressive First Form language magazine (*The Linguist*); a Dramatic Club and Stage Crew that mounted and elaborately staged two short presentations and one full-length production each year; a Glee Club of some 50 members and a 20-member school orchestra; and active and relatively well-supported clubs for Music, Chess, Debating, Speaking, Political Science, Public Events, Science, Photography, Skiing and Scouting. Scouting had its own room, the student printing presses were in space under the grandstand, and the student publications had their own designated room.

The school's athletic program was active, varied and mandatory, with facilities that were well-regarded.

Ump Tewhill and Gordon "Moose" Miller (from Mooselauk, the summer camp he ran) reigned over a domain of basketball courts, indoor and outdoor tracks, a boxing ring, tennis courts and a central football/baseball field, with a large and imposing swimming pool that was another of the school's showplaces. Van Cortlandt Park, a few minutes walk down the hill, provided easy access to additional baseball, football and soccer fields, excellent cross country facilities and even a golf course.

Tilly himself rarely missed a home inter-school football, baseball or basketball game, practiced with the baseball team (playing first base) and generally made clear his commitment to athletics.

The all male makeup of the school community seemed perfectly normal in the 1940's, when most of the nation's leading prep schools and the Ivy League colleges were all male; it never occurred to most of us that the school could ever

be different from what it had always been. Women were seen as social creatures for "fun and games" rather than as "real people"; and the sexist attitudes most of us developed then were slow in dying in later years.

The decade of the 40's was a transition period between the Depression years and the complacent 50's, but the school had an aura of changelessness about it that was reassuring. One reluctant concession to the times (and parental requests) was the inclusion of Spanish as an acceptable modern language; but to make sure that nothing got out of hand, its first classes were taught by Mr. Dodge, the German teacher, a tough-minded fellow with a rigorous attitude toward his classes. No "gut" teacher, he!

World War II left us essentially untouched, other than occasional memorable moments like Bobby Payne's sobbing announcement to a deeply-moved student body of the death in combat of Jack Olstead, our popular varsity pitcher of the year before.

The atmosphere of Horace Mann in our day was warm and friendly, with an air of dignity and restraint that, although out of keeping with today's world, seemed perfectly appropriate then. Students wore jackets and neckties to class; faculty members were addressed as "sir"; the term "elitist" had not yet become a pejorative and all were encouraged to excel. Competition was considered a fact of life; class standings with detailed numerical grades were openly discussed, and the names and subjects of students receiving "honors" (86 and above) and "high honors" (95 and above) were printed each quarter in the *Horace Mann Record*.

That atmosphere reflected what was considered best practice at the time, but it also suited the parents of a student body which, in the teens, 1920's and

even 1930's had been essentially patrician but, by the 1940's, had increasingly become composed of the children of upwardly mobile business and professional parents who wanted their offspring worked hard, trained well, and sent off for polishing to first-rate colleges, Ivy League if possible.

Riverdale was seen as a more social school, Fieldston as more socially conscious (they sang labor songs and once, I believe, had a black president of the student body). Horace Mann prided itself on having brighter students, a heavier workload and what were generally believed (by us, at least) to be higher academic standards.

The outstanding ratings received periodically from the accreditation committee of the Middle States Association reinforced the feelings of the school community that Horace Mann was a special place indeed, as did the impressive college entrance record graduating classes achieved year after year.

Seen from a perspective of forty years, Horace Mann of the 1940's was an institution that justified the admiration and respect it engendered. If the school had shortcomings, they were of omission rather than commission: insufficient emphasis on the creative and artistic side of life and lack of sufficient awareness and compassion for the less fortunate. But the plus side of the ledger was formidable. Bright, literate and highly motivated boys spent happy years in an atmosphere conducive to intellectual and moral growth.

Tilly's Horace Mann was a preparatory school in the best sense of the term. It sent its charges out into the world well prepared to live satisfying and productive lives.

Daniel Rose talks can be found on: www.danielrose.org