

Once It Was Normal

In the beginning was the word, and the word was "Normal," the name of a college which later became Hunter. My mother was Normal, 1901, a class called "Naughty One," whose cheer was "Are we in it? Are we in it? Well, I guess. Normal College, Normal College. Yes, Yes, Yes!"

Later Hunter was housed in two buildings: one on Park Avenue (the "old" building) and the other on Lexington (the "new" building). Both had a full quota of mice but no men except the male faculty members. There was no cafeteria. You brought your lunch in a brown paper bag; or if you were better heeled, you ate in the only restaurant in the neighborhood, a tea room nicknamed "The Greasy Vest," on Lexington Avenue and 65th Street.

Another grievous lack was a central library. There were departmental libraries, each housed in a converted classroom, presided over by ancient crones who, we suspected, were relatives of some faculty member or of Tammany politicians. My department, Classics, had a creditable col-

lection of tomes, which treated us young classicists to a course in sex education. We eagerly read Juvenal, Martial, and Suetonius, authors who served us in good stead when Kraft-Ebbing and Masters and Johnson were widely discussed.

In your freshman year you chose your major and minor. Most were prescribed; if you had a Latin major, you had to suffer a Greek minor. If you elected French, it was paired with a German minor, and so forth. An English major was a privilege, to be conferred in your second year. The criterion was probably how well you did in your freshman course, which required a theme a day. The English major was no cinch; Shakespeare and Chaucer were compulsory. The Shakespeare class was taught by Helen Gray Cone, who brooked no class discussions. She started the course by writing her name on the board and called attention to the way her surname was spelled, lest any poor sophomore confuse it with "Cohn." The no-discussion policy caused many of the students to drop the course, and often the English major or minor.

be a guest of a club member. My hostess was Jeanette Eilenberg Klinger of the Class of '25.

The Classical Club was geared to the drama, not to edibles. It was ambitious but not well-attended. In 1921, our production of Sophocles' *Antigone* was to be presented in the Lewisohn Stadium. As club president, I was delegated to scout around for the necessary bier. I dutifully went to Campbell's Funeral Home and asked to rent a coffin. The receptionist on the ground floor seemed startled, but summoned some important-looking men from the second floor who appeared, followed in a couple of minutes by another contingent of VIPs from the third floor. One was introduced as Mr. Campbell, who asked me to repeat my request. It finally dawned on me that the Campbells were coming to confront a nut. So I explained I was from Hunter College, and about the *Antigone*. Visibly relieved, they not only lent the coffin but transported it both ways for free in return for a notice in the Stadium's program that the Campbells were always near when needed.

Sororities also thrived in those antediluvian days. All were religiously oriented—except one which specialized in athletics. The sorority girls were termed "Greeks"; the outsiders "Barbs" for barbarians.

There were three periodicals available, the "Wistarion," a yearbook; the "Echo," a literary magazine, and the "Bulletin," a news weekly which also printed humor. The "Echo"'s staff was

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Departmental clubs were in vogue. The German Club was very popular because its faculty advisor was Dr. Kaiser, a charming gentleman with a rich sense of humor who would lead the assemblage in singing "Doctor Kaiser Soll Leben—Hurrah Hoch!" The club also featured yummy refreshments. If you weren't a German student, you might be lucky enough to

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chosen by competition; the other staffs by invitation of the current editors. A great scandal erupted when a story submitted by a hopeful was accepted by the contest judges, but Professor Hesse of the English Department unmasked it as a tale by Lafcadio Hearn. The winner left Hunter in disgrace.

We had Chapel once a week. The President or some other speaker might address us, a passage from the Bible might be read, a silent prayer was allowed, and a hymn like "Abide With Me" might be sung. The religious emphasis did us no harm; in fact, because it often exercised our ears to the cadences of the King James version, it did us positive good. I'm glad the ACLU was still far in the future.

A special assembly was a rare occasion. One Wednesday, the entire student body was summoned to Chapel. What momentous information was about to be revealed? Lo and behold, the Dean announced, "On the subway this morning, I heard one Hunter girl say to another, 'I thought I was late already.' Can you imagine what other passengers thought of such grammar?"

We students lived by the rules of Emily Post. Our rights were to be civil and polite. Nobody heckled or booed a speaker. Had we ever been unruly and boisterous, we would have been immediately expelled as our teachers were not easily intimidated.

The annual rite of spring was the preparation of the College lawn for later blossoming. For about three days the windows were kept tightly shut to

keep out the aroma of the organic fertilizer liberally sprinkled on the grass. Cooperation between the city police force and Hunter was beautiful to see—if not smell. The mounties' horses supplied the fertilizer and the College solved a disposal problem. Unfortunately, no one thought to greet the supply truck with "Dung Ho"!

In our senior year, one classics professor, while expounding on Roman religion, said that each person was thought to have a guiding spirit, or a conscience, "Each man had his Jupiter, and each woman her Juno." But with his strong German accent he pronounced it "You know." It brought down the house. "What's so funny, young ladies?" he asked. We were young, but we were also ladies, and we were too shy to explain.

Now for the backbone of any college—the faculty. I remember some with respect and affection: a Greek professor, Jane Grey Carter, who read *The Odyssey* in the original with such skill that it sounded like poetry set to music. When she looked up from the reading, she gazed at us with a mother's fondness. A Latin teacher, the recognized poet George Mason Whicher, knitted in class while he taught. Professor Sanford Burgess allowed me to take a graduate course in anthropology when I was only a junior; he made his subject so enthralling that I was forever torn between anthropology and archaeology.

There were other good souls who left lasting impressions on those of us

who came in contact with them, but even in Eden there was a snake. Ours was a Margaret Barclay Wilson, who had once tutored Andrew Carnegie's children and considered this service her badge of omnipotence. Her subject was home economics, an elective, and—such was her charm—her classes had to be filled with girls shanghaied by their major professors. No economics were mentioned; the subject of her lectures—her tirades—was unworthy ethnic foods, with emphasis on bagels. I finally became fed up (not with bagels) but with her blatant anti-Semitism and I blurted out, "Bagels instead of Wheaties are no worse than the Scotch eating kippers to greet the day!" This so infuriated the Presence that she sent me to the dean. "Report yourself for insolence," she screamed. I gladly did. The Dean heard me out and said, "Go back to class and tell Miss Wilson I'll speak to her later." I followed the order and maybe I imagined the Horror turned pale? Now Miss Wilson has gone down to her just reward. I know "De mortuis nihil nisi bonum," but even today I see no reason to follow it in Miss Wilson's case.

There was a song in those days "Hunter Students, Glorify Hunter." As a student, I didn't glorify Hunter, but later I realized Hunter had glorified *me*. I was admitted to three excellent graduate schools in pursuit of a doctorate, but my basic education came from Hunter, to which I am greatly indebted and deeply grateful.