

HOW IT WAS . . .

The War Years

by Roslyn Sternberg Willett '44

The 68 Street building opened with great ceremony in September 1940, but most of the September 1940 freshmen were in the Bronx and not really present. The building, called a "factory" by the irreverent, had a number of novel features: its most significant, for a building completed more than a year before Pearl Harbor, was the fact that the sub-basement was considered the best bomb shelter in New York. It was subsequently put to use as the city's volunteer-manned control center for air raid warnings in those grim, sad, browned-out years.

The Bronx was much more fun: a real campus, especially to those of us coming from Hunter High's old establishment, a previously condemned and mouse-ridden old public school building on East 96 Street. The campus had sun, trees, space, separate buildings, everything we thought of as properly collegiate. Of course, there was a hole in the ground (where the library now is), dug in the WPA days as the earliest phase of construction for an abortive building. But we could sun and swap dirty jokes in the outdoor theater (I don't recall that it had any other use in the two years I was there); also sun on top of the student building, and occasionally of the other buildings; sniff freshly cut grass in summer and have occasional outdoor classes when the weather was especially tempting to instructors and students alike. (If the classes were to come outdoors to a building roof, scouts were sent ahead if the instructor were a man: sunbathers with foil reflectors stripped to their underwear on building roofs where they anticipated no men.)

Politics

The major preoccupation of a sizeable group of very energetic girls in the Bronx was politics, mostly Marxist socialist. American Students' Union was the largest and most active group; another socialist-led group—American Youth for Democracy—was rallying college groups for national conventions whose point I have forgotten, if I ever knew it. ASU was distinctly Marxist, had huge

meetings on campus in which dicta came down from on high without even a parody of "democratic" discussion. It also had a crew of muscular lady radicals whose threats in one of the Bronx tunnels to blacklist me with every organization on the campus if I didn't join ASU and pay my dues (I had attended one or two open meetings as a guest), came as confirmation of their authoritarian orientation. ASU stuffed locker boxes with more mimeographed statements, notices, and other material than any other organization on campus. A well-organized bunch they were, and they continued their rallies, meetings, statements and other mass communications in the years I was downtown. As a matter of fact, it was clear later that their enthusiasm and organization had put them in complete control of the Student Self-Government Organization in the Bronx. The rest of us were not so political—and certainly not organized. The question in my mind now is, "What did they accomplish?"

Tea Dances

But there were better things happening on the campus. Tea dances for one. Early in the war years, there were still boys uptown at Fordham and NYU who responded nobly to invitations from Hunter and braved the campus guards to appear in clots at our late afternoon tea dances. They often remained in clots, inspecting the girls present without ever making up their minds to do anything aggressive like asking someone to dance. Standard clothing for ladylike girls at these affairs was a black dress (also suitable for selling at Macy's) and pearls. It took a more discerning eye than most boys had to separate the possibilities of one black dress from another during those nervous afternoons. A few confident, experienced girls *never* appeared in black dresses with pearls. They wore things like tailored gabardine suits, with sweaters, pearls and "spectators," and no matter how undistinguished physically, were instantly attractive in their oddity. I made this enlightening discovery one day when someone gave me a tea dance ticket at the last minute, some months after I had given up hope (in

my black dress and pearls) of ever being asked for a dance. I had worn a red sweater (sloppy joe style) and plaid skirt to school that day. I was mobbed—by *nice* boys. (Boys were of two kinds then.)

House Plan

House Plan was the poor girl's sorority: a way of organizing to recruit dates, and it worked fine until all that was left was 4F's. Ours was called Graff '44 (the names were stable; you adopted the name and simply put your own year on it). We ran parties organized on the simple level of sending a letter to CCNY House Plan, saying we were having a party on some specific date, and would CCNY House Plan send a specific number of boys. They always did, and we always had great parties, whose success was gauged by the fact that we had dates with those boys afterward.

Some of our House Plan members had another loyalty: they belonged to another organized minority: the 68 Club, for girls over 5'8". Its main point was to organize big girls for propagandizing retailers (whose things were always too short or too small), but it also tried to recruit tall boys to its events. The 68'ers currently most famous member was Bess Myerson, '45. Oddly enough at a Miss Hunter Contest in a local movie theater she came in *second*. A pretty little girl named Cordia Milosovich came in first.

Dr. Kinsey

The Bronx years were marked with other amusing things, among them Dr. Kinsey's visit to campus and interviews in the student building. Most of us didn't feel we had much to tell him, but he did spend some days there. An informal poll of students at Hunter, inspired by Dr. Kinsey's interests, became the subject of much cafeteria gossip. One-third of the students, the poll was said to have reported, were no longer virgins. Considering that the usual entering age of freshmen was a little over 16, this implied a rather avant-garde outlook.

Working Hard

Homework and classwork rated relatively low in our major preoccupations. We were brought up to take care of our responsibilities in these departments without fuss, and did so, rallied to extra effort once in a while by flattery from a teacher. End-of-the-term was no different then than now: sitting up all night to finish term papers and perhaps do a little high-

speed cramming. But we drank coffee to keep awake.

Other kinds of work were more discussable. Most of us were very poor. My father died in my first semester at Hunter (I turned 16 that semester, at about the same time, so that what was supposed to be a "sweet 16" party was just a few girls over for cake and milk. Not that it mattered. I didn't know any boys to invite). Dean Anthony called me into her office to congratulate me on making the Dean's List in view of my father's death. I didn't think that had anything to do with it.

Most of us had slews of part-time jobs, and looked for full-time jobs during every two-week recess and summer vacation. We worked on NYA (National Youth Administration) funds in college. NYA was the best-paying employer in town—50c an hour. In the Bronx I was the Physiology Department lab assistant, washing lab glassware (inefficiently) taking care of the lab's frogs, catching and pithing them for dissection. I was devastated when the custodian turned the water off in the frog tank one Easter vacation and I returned to find most of them dead, their corpses white and blistered. Also used to go to a meat market on Fordham Road quite regularly for the week's experimental lungs, sheep's eyes, and assorted offal for dissection.

Other jobs: working in a Spotless store, unionized, at \$13 for a 40-hour week, during the summer. I was fired. Sold Thursday nights and all day Saturday in Macy's Parkchester. Wore the same black dress every Thursday and Saturday. Didn't have working papers and was under 18, having lied about my age to get the job. Also lied about my age to get a job as Arts and Crafts and Puppetry Counselor in camp. The truth came out when they asked for my ration coupons. Other girls' summer jobs included nursemaid, cook, etc. A friend who is now chief psychologist of a major government agency worked one summer as a cook in Princeton.

I was hired to work on a New York area rent survey one summer by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, ringing every third doorbell in a neighborhood in the Bronx. The result was rent control a few months later.

Other summer jobs: assistant bookkeeper in a power laundry: \$20 a week for a 44 hour week (offered the job of head bookkeeper at the end of the summer—in part because I was working too hard ever to have

found out where the john was). Going back to school was a lot easier.

The reason for the prevalence of interest in jobs and money was, of course, the dearth of assistance, loans, scholarship and other aids. We had to make it ourselves. The New York State Regents' scholarships (many fewer than now, and earned with high averages on statewide exams) paid only \$50 per semester. Even then, about the best you could do with \$50 was what I did in December 1940: bought myself a Remington #5 portable typewriter with \$41 of it. It was one of the last such things made.

War Full Blast

The draft had started before Pearl Harbor, and after that the accelerated move of young men into the armed forces meant an abnormal kind of late teenhood for most of us. Most of us joined USO's as hostesses, took on volunteer work of other kinds. I was a club leader in an East Bronx settlement house, in addition to carrying three part-time paying jobs, a full program, and doing most of the cooking and cleaning at home. A very kind doctor at Hunter downtown recommended that I cut classes and substitute naps in the infirmary.

This kind of schedule meant very little time for play during the day. But playtime was made, by cutting classes. Hunter's then very liberal policy of unlimited cuts if you thought you'd get an A or a B in a course made it possible. It also made it possible to swarm into the movie houses on Broadway on school days for sexy movies like *Lifeboat* (in which one kiss evoked a collective Hunter gasp heard all over the balcony of the Astor).

Other unladylike activities included concentrated reading of the last chapter of *Ulysses* in the cafeteria and buying cigarettes at 1 cent each in the college shop (they used to break open packs for us so we could buy them one at a time).

Roosevelt House

Hunter received the gift of two town houses on 65 Street, the Roosevelt Houses, during this period, and spent time and money remodeling them as a center for clubs, and focal point for extra-curricular activities. We were very proud to have them—and delighted at the uses to which they were put.

I do not know if it is still policy, but in the 40's a student or alumna could get married at Roosevelt House, just about the nicest place in

the city, it seemed to me, for the cost of the catering job. Catering was handled by someone at the House (no hard liquor permitted), and I remember my own wedding there in June 1949, with immense pleasure. It cost \$300 for what I am still being told was the nicest wedding some of my guests had ever attended: roomy, cozy, informal and with a buffet supper and wine punch. The actual ceremony was in the large room at the rear of the second floor, with the reception downstairs. One of my friends played the Gershwin piano for the wedding march. Lovely, as was the whole house.

How We Felt About Hunter

Most of us took Hunter for granted—we couldn't have gone anywhere else, we thought. (Virtually no guidance or other services in those days.) A very small number of students monopolized the college's bureaucratic attentions. I realized this in one of my NYA jobs, as student assistant in the Office of the Dean of Faculty where I worked seven hours a week for two years. It was my job to record the names of all the full-time students in the college on cards. Then, as weekly lists came in from the Guidance Bureau, the Medical Office and the Deans' Offices, of whom they'd seen that week, I recorded the dates and offices on the students' cards. Of the seven thousand or so students in the college then, the names of about 100 were recurrent on all lists. The rest of us were not seen by anyone. And we were quite content to mind our business and let the college officials mind theirs.

As Commencement approached we had many cafeteria sessions (cutting classes) and wondered when we'd manage to have such intimate long talks after graduation. Quite so. That was the best of Hunter—the people we knew and loved who were our friends. Sadly, the war and its aftermath of social mobility have made it very difficult even for people who might have continued to see each other to do so. Best friends scattered all over the country to swap nostalgic letters now once a year, and an occasional phone call on a business trip.

But a lot of the ladies of the 40's are now women of distinction and accomplishment. Considering how few of us were anything but grubby in the beginning, it must be guessed that Hunter did something of a polishing job, although that was not what it and we thought we were there for.