

In 1946, Paul and I left Washington and returned to Dallas, directing our thoughts toward education. Paul already had an appointment as Instructor in the Department of Mathematics at Southern Methodist University, to teach full time and to work on his Masters degree.

All through undergraduate school I had thought that the last thing I ever wanted to do was teach, but several years away from school had changed my mind. Because I had majored in Spanish as an undergraduate, I approached Dr. John Cooke, chairman of the Spanish Department, but he assured me that there was no opening in Spanish at SMU. Since he had been my least favorite teacher, having given me my only B in my major, I was not too disappointed. Also, several people told me that the English Department was eagerly searching for instructors.

I could see a problem with my teaching English: the only college course I had had in English was freshman English. Dr. John Bowyer, chairman of English, assured me that my double major in Spanish and Comparative Literature would serve well, provided I took an advanced course and began studying toward a Masters in English. I could teach half time and study half time. I was delighted and, at the same time, frightened at the idea of standing before a class.

1946 represented the beginning of several years of explosive growth in universities all over the country because former servicemen in great numbers were taking advantage of the G.I. Bill to attend college. When Paul and I had graduated from SMU just before the war, SMU had a total enrollment of about two thousand students, including the Law, Engineering, and Theology Schools. When we began to teach after the war, SMU's facilities and faculty were stretched to the limit to admit over ten thousand students, mostly G.I.'s. The campus was crowded with temporary pre-fabricated classrooms and living quarters for students and their families, and most academic departments had doubled and tripled their faculties. But because English and mathematics were basic to every degree, they bore the burden of the greatest influx of students. That, of course, accounted for these departments' acceptance of us as beginning instructors; we were live bodies willing to enter the instructional staff.

I met with Dr. Bowyer, who outlined the rules of the department pertaining to new staff and helped me decide on the make-up courses I would take as well as my schedule of classes to instruct. The senior staff, most of whom I had known on the small campus before the war, was available as mentors and as help for any problems the new instructors might have. There were some twenty new instructors and two or three second-year people, and we all taught the beginning composition course, English 1 (later 101). Our textbook was *Form and Style*, designed to reinforce the lessons students had supposedly learned in elementary and high schools and to work through problems of rhetoric and organization. Because my favorite classes during my early education had been grammar, particularly the diagramming of sentences, I felt relatively sure of myself in that area. For the entire year, my main concern was that my students would discover that I was supposedly teaching them the only course I had ever had in the English Department.



English Department

(Standing) left to right: Dr. John W. Bowyer, Betty Ann Hicks, Mrs. Lee Schremmer. (Front row): Rene P. Manes, Laurence Perrine, Tom Gossett, Katherine Knight. (Second row): Mrs. Elizabeth Knight, Dr. Vincent E. Walsh, Mrs. Helen Claude Cooke, Mrs. Mary Frances Minton, Hortense Watkins. (Third row): Virginia Zelfel, Mrs. Ora Mae Wrigley, Dr. John Lee Brooks, Mrs. Barbara Lindsay, Eunice Kilpatrick.

(Front row) left to right: Jane Etheridge, Ann Harrison, Walter Rhea Smith, Morris Rodgers, Elmer Crittenden. (Second row): Hortense Watkins, Margaret Wasson, Nannie Fitzhugh, Mrs. Virginia Tillman, Mrs. Maysel Moore Jackson. (Third row): Mrs. Barbara Lindsay, Eunice Kilpatrick, Hazel Grace Boger, Anna Buchanan, Myra L. Brown, Dr. Ernest E. Leisy.

From the 1947 Yearbook

Despite intensive preparation and the encouraging words of Dr. Bowyer and other faculty, I faced my first day of classes with a great deal of trepidation. My only role models for teaching were the teachers I had had several years. Every one of them taught largely by lecture with little or no class interaction. It was several years before I learned that my best teaching style was with interaction with my students, leaving plain lecture as far out of the formula as possible. Fortunately, most of my students knew no other kind of instruction, so we all suffered through my necessarily boring presentations with a kind of grim acceptance. They did, however, make clear their negative reaction to any attempt I made to teach them diagramming. I did start loosening up a bit as I persuaded the students to share their doubts about grammar and basic style. I've never learned to be absolutely relaxed during my first class in any subject, but at least now I know that the tension will quickly diminish as the students and I get on with our jobs.

At that time, SMU had no admission requirements, a lack which caused no problems so long as the school was small. However, with the meteoric growth as well as the broadening of the base of people who could now afford a university education, some standards needed to be applied early in a student's career, until actual admission rules were established. All of the entering students had to take freshman courses in both English and mathematics. Obviously, those two departments were chosen to establish and enforce academic standards. The nature of the courses in mathematics defined the task of that department. English standards were a different matter, and those requirements became of immediate concern to me. All forty some-odd English 1 classes would have weekly essays assigned, of which one set a month from each class had to be graded by a member of the senior staff in order to ensure equal standards across the department, and to serve as grading models for new instructors. That requirement placed a terrible burden on those professors

who also taught a full complement of advanced literature classes, both undergraduate and graduate. The original intent was good: to provide guidance and uniformity to a large group of inexperienced instructors; however, the sheer amount of extra very demanding work each professor was required to handle diminished much of the available time for guidance of new members of the Department. Moreover, the final examination each semester was a common exam for all English 1 classes, to be graded first by the instructors and again by a member of the senior staff. I realize now that those senior professors must have dreaded their final exam chores every bit as much as the instructors did. All I knew then was that I hated the oversight because of the pet peeves some of the professors had. For instance, Dr. Beatty was sure that a misspelled word was a cardinal sin, and he zealously permitted only four misspellings in a paper before it failed. Dr. Bond despised sentence fragments; he required that each fragment committed should reduce the final grade by a whole letter. And so on. Dr. Herron had a more forgiving approach to evaluations and generally weighed the overall merit of the paper against the mechanical errors, a rational approach, I thought. No matter how the instructor, who of course had known the student throughout the semester, evaluated the exam, the professor's grading was final. And if the grade on the final exam was as bad as a low F, the student failed the entire course.

Parenthetically, I want to add that Professor Ima Honaker Herron (she said she wasn't sensitive about her name) became my special mentor. She singled me out first because Paul had been one of her favorite undergraduate students. I found her support invaluable. She seemed always to be on hand when I needed a word or two of encouragement, including the time she found me moping up the back stairs to my third-floor class. When I complained that my students were saying that I expected too much of them, she simply said, "Good! Keep it up, and they'll remember you as their best teacher." She was also an inspiring teacher of nineteenth century literature and helped me choose William Wordsworth for my thesis subject.



From the 1949 Yearbook

Unfortunately, there were a few students whose educational background was so poor that they became discouraged about improving, and after a few semesters they left school with a bitter feeling of defeat, the dark side of an otherwise very successful GI Bill. I had one strong man who repeatedly returned to my class after failure after failure - eventually garnering six F's in English 1 alone. He replied to my suggestion that another instructor might communicate better by saying that he felt that a known evil was preferable to an unknown one, making me feel really good. He had good enough grades in everything besides English 1 to be allowed to stay in school, and I was much more pessimistic about his chances than he was; he went to summer school at the University of Texas in Arlington, passed the class, returned to SMU, and graduated, feeling that I had been wrong in failing him. He returned to the university as the manager of buildings and grounds as soon as he had his degree. What difference could periods and spelling make there?



From the 1948 Yearbook

As for the new instructors, we were all unhappy about the restrictions on our evaluating our students. I had been assigned a desk in the far reaches of the basement of Dallas Hall, a tiny room with one small window at sidewalk level and just room for five single-pedestal desks with one straight chair separating each two desks. It was 18 Dallas Hall, better known as 18D. There was room for a door and space for a student to walk to the desk of his teacher, provided no instructor had left his or her desk chair out of the knee-hole space. Obviously, occupants of adjoining desks had to be careful of having two students scheduled to occupy the one chair we shared. We almost had to coordinate our breathing if all five desks were occupied at once. Seven instructors were assigned the five desks, making the careful scheduling of office hours a necessity. We were actually able to thrive in our restricted space, sharing our teaching problems, commiserating over fancied injustices in senior professor's marking of our papers, and wondering how we could conquer the system and become our own academic persons as soon as possible. Two of our office mates, Virginia Tillman and Sara Frances Cox, soon established their offices in their carrels in the library, leaving five of us comfortably ensconced one to a desk. Three of my office mates, Morris Rodgers, Jane Etheridge, and Rhea Smith, already had their Masters. Tom Gossett, Virginia, Sara Frances, and I were studying for ours. But we all had the same amount of experience, bolstered by varying amounts of expertise in our fields. As we approached the second semester and English 2

when we began teaching a few essays, stories, poems, and plays, we had wonderful debates about Sherwood Anderson, D. H. Lawrence, and Joseph Conrad, among others. We soon considered ourselves a group united against the established department.



Dallas Hall, built 1912; originally hosted all classes; guest lecturers Carl Sandburg and Robert Frost

Part 2

In Part I, I became a novice member of the English Department at SMU during the great growth of universities because of the popularity of the GI Bill. In lieu of formal training in how to teach, the new instructors had to submit student papers and examinations for re-grading by the senior staff.

At one point when we in 18D were in a state of discontent we codified the apparent rules for marking down papers and discovered that the professorial consensus seemed to be that misspelled words were each worth a minus seven points, each sentence fragment a full letter grade deduction, comma splices five negative points, and so on down a long litany of mechanical defects that a careful reader could detect in an unwary student's paper. We tried to show our students the folly of not proofreading their essays carefully for the errors at the same time that we tried to encourage good habits in organization and achieving emphasis in discourse. We were convinced that, as important as it was, mechanical perfection did not make good writing. Mostly, we all greatly enjoyed what we were doing, especially since we had the escape valve of being able to gripe to each other about the injustices visited upon our students by the professors. We also carefully analyzed the final exams of the past and distilled the major composition points that we needed to emphasize if we were to get most of our students successfully through the freshman English year. In the two years that we shared 18D we became well acquainted with the eccentricities as well as the endearing qualities of our office mates and became good friends both in and out of school.

We were an interesting if motley crew. Our probable stabilizing force was Laurence Perrine, the junior member of the senior staff of the Department. Larry spent a good bit of time in 18D, frequently joining in our discussions about the failings of the senior staff but also subtly justifying many of their practices and helping us see them as mostly wise professors. They had their eccentricities, but so did we. Before the year was out Larry had briefly dated a striking blond new instructor, proposed marriage to her, and been turned down. He immediately analyzed what he perceived as his assets and liabilities as a prospective husband, sharing his analysis with us. Among the deficiencies he claimed was his lack of real property, namely, a house. He found a house he liked near the campus, bought it, and invited Tom Gossett, Rhea Smith, and Morris Rodgers, three

of the five 18D denizens, to share it with him. They were generous with their hospitality; we had several 18D+ parties, inviting other instructors we thought worthy of our society!



(From alchetron.com: “Perrine was one of the founders of SMU's Phi Beta Kappa chapter in 1949. In his honor, the chapter awards a Perrine Prize each year to a member of SMU's undergraduate faculty in liberal studies.”)

I well remember the New Year's Eve party at which I noticed, early in the evening, a microphone almost concealed on a table in the living room. A tape recorder was very much a rarity in those days. Because of my reluctance to hear my own voice on tape, I remained mute the rest of the evening until Larry unveiled his taped record of our conversations at midnight. I was in big trouble when several people noticed that my voice was conspicuous by its absence. The tape did commemorate, for the uninitiated, Tom's carelessness in wearing mis-mated socks and, once, mismatched shoes - a black high-topped canvass tennis shoe paired with a scuffed brown penny-loafer. We heard one of Rhea's learned discourses on a symphony concert he had just attended, as well as Morris's worrying over whether he should go to the University of Texas and to study for his doctorate in the History of American Ideas. Later we could look back on that evening as the last time we were to enjoy the company of Virginia Tillman's husband, Watson, for he did not survive the year with a bout with cancer. We heard Larry talk about his playing handball with Paul, who, according to Larry, had a great deal of enthusiasm but little skill at the game, a sentiment Paul had already expressed to me about Larry's handball skill. In other words, except for my silence, the party that last evening of the 1947 year was not unlike almost any day in 18D.

Before the next September we had all dispersed: Virginia Tillman moved to the extension office where she soon had a responsible administrative job; Tom Gossett went to the University of Minnesota, where he lived on a houseboat on the Mississippi River while he worked on his PhD in the History of American Ideas and was probably free to dress as haphazardly as ever (I often wondered if he continued his free-style clothing habits after he married and began teaching at Wake Forest University); Rhea finished his doctorate and taught at Memphis State University, where he served as department chairman and then dean of the college until his death in 1982; Morris Rodgers went to the University of Texas, finally after much agonizing took his doctorate in the History of American Ideas, and began teaching at the University of Texas at Arlington; Jane Etheridge stayed

in the English Department at SMU for several years before serving as head of English at Hockaday School for Girls in Dallas; Sara Frances Cox and I enjoyed our research in Fondren Library at adjacent carrels, she working on a newly published collection of James Boswell's correspondence with Samuel Johnson and I investigating William and Dorothy Wordsworth's letters and diaries as well as those of Samuel Coleridge, William Hazlitt, and Charles Lamb. Larry Perrine remained in the English Department, soon finding a wife and continuing to write successful textbooks, primarily annotated collections of poetry, as well as volumes of limericks. He was by far the most successful financially of that original group. He remained at SMU until his retirement a few years ago, dying last year. Paul and I finished our Masters Degrees at SMU, commuting a great distance daily from the far reaches of Oak Cliff to the Park Cities and SMU. We returned to SMU after Paul finished his doctorate in North Carolina.

SMU certainly wasn't the same as it had been in those halcyon days of 18D. 18D was reconverted to its original function as storage room and I had an office on the second floor when I returned to teaching in the English Department, including that day in November when President Kennedy was assassinated. The temporary buildings were replaced with handsome red brick buildings, the student body settled down into a steady ten thousand, and SMU matured into an excellent university with outstanding theology, law, music and engineering schools, as well as the basic school of arts and sciences.

