

3-12-97

VCU

Soon after we arrived in Richmond for Paul to begin his duties as Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences, Edwin Whitesell and his wife Virginia invited us for dinner. Other guests included John and Peggy Borgard and Allan Brown, formerly chairman of the Department of English at VCU.

John Borgard was an impressive young man who was serving as an assistant dean in Paul's office. He knew Allan Brown and his stories well and suggested subjects about the years just before and right after Richmond Professional Institute became Virginia Commonwealth University. Under the direction of Henry Hibbs, the former RPI had assembled a number of former residences on West Franklin Street which had become the nucleus of the classrooms and offices of VCU until the Assembly authorized enough money for classroom buildings for the rapidly growing university. It should be noted here that Dean Hibbs had directed the early years of RPI on a shoe string and was something of a genius in accomplishing much with very little. Allan had an almost endless supply of hilarious stories about the way the Dean conducted faculty interviews. He was very hard of hearing. If the interview started going in a direction he did not like, for instance, involving *any* discussion of money, he ostentatiously turned off his hearing aid until the hapless faculty person became discouraged and left, unsatisfied.

Allan had many amusing tales of how the faculty had coped with the cramped, inadequate quarters at first (I'm sure much more amusing after the fact than they had originally been). One story told how Allan had to dodge the furnace in a basement room at 901 West Franklin in order to teach a class in Shakespeare. When the heat was on, literally, Allan had to resurrect all his best anecdotes about the Bard in order to keep the attention of his overheated students.

He had more stories about the early struggles of VCU to take its place, along with Old Dominion and George Mason Universities, as a member of the three universities created in the late sixties to keep up with the rapidly growing population of un-served people in higher education of Virginia, in the "urban corridor" of Fairfax-Richmond-Norfolk.

But Allan's stories about VCU were mostly about a time before we came. I soon began to accumulate my own very different stories. Classroom space was somewhat easier to find then, but the Assembly was still finding it difficult to allot enough money to VCU to catch up in its building needs, because of the capital expenditure formulas the state had adopted when higher education was all located in rural areas. These formulas failed to provide for urban students.

My first story, however, had nothing to do with cramped space. Mary Kapp, a magnificent chemistry professor who had rivaled Dean Hibbs in her ability to get things done in the Department of Chemistry, was retiring. The master of ceremonies, eager to give the new dean a role in the retirement dinner for Mary Kapp, asked Paul to deliver a brief invocation for the evening. Paul had written out his words so that his first public

appearance as the new dean would reflect well on him. Before we were seated, master of ceremonies Jerry Bass announced that the invocation would be delivered by Dean Before Jerry finished or Paul could open his mouth, Dean Hibbs, across the room, began a long and beautiful invocation. No more than five or six people were aware of the unexpected substitution. Dean Hibbs' hearing had once more dictated his response, for *he* knew who the *dean* was and could deliver an invocation on demand. Paul still has an unused invocation he will be glad to provide anyone in need of one.

Several years later, after I had joined the English faculty, I had one class in a ground floor School of Business room which could be made into two classrooms by drawing a heavy plastic floor-to-ceiling divider across the center of the room. If two classes met simultaneously, all went well as long as the instruction on both sides of the barrier was quiet and the students were writing. But this time the other half at that hour was occupied by my office mate, Reyn, who had a sonorous voice and a great deal to say. Unfortunately, our class-written essay assignments did not fall on the same day. My students found it difficult to compose coherent essays while listening to Reyn. I changed the assignment to something requiring oral participation, which I kept as low-key as possible. When Reyn and I returned to our office, we worked out a schedule for in-class writing on the same days so that we would not interfere with each other, although he graciously denied that he'd ever heard my voice through the partition. After that, our classes went more smoothly but were far from ideal. Reyn's voice was almost always clearly audible above mine. (Note: see the memoir "Ren")

I had another class in the Business Building at 8 a.m., not a time cherished by students. One student who lived off campus was habitually late. He had wonderfully creative excuses which went beyond his failed alarm clock or the misbehavior of his dog, but after a while I felt that he was running out of material for reasonable sounding excuses. I suggested, if he *really* couldn't get to class five minutes earlier, that he forget the excuses and concentrate his efforts on well written essays. Surprisingly, he managed to be late only once or twice after that ultimatum.

Still another class which met at ten o'clock underwent an amazing bonding with each other and with me. Most of the students reappeared in the class the second semester. We continued happy with each other and got an extraordinary amount of work done. Just before exams, a small delegation called on me after class and suggested that we all have lunch together before our two o'clock exam. I was a little uneasy about a social gathering just before a final examination but decided to accept their invitation. We had a light-hearted lunch at Stella's just off campus, with not one word mentioned about the pending exam. At one-thirty, we adjourned and went our separate ways; some of the students needing to go to the bookstore for their exam blue books. All appeared with their blue books on time and turned in some splendid work. Some members of that class appeared in subsequent semesters in World Literature courses, and I was able to keep up with most of the students until they graduated. One or two pleased me greatly by checking in with me periodically over the next years as they pursued their graduate work elsewhere or as they worked in their chosen fields. I never had another invitation to have lunch with

students before an exam; indeed, I never had another class from whom I would have accepted such an invitation.

The World Literature course always bothered me because of the great amount of literature for which there was no time in the class. Surveys cannot be thorough. Chaucer, for example, had to be seriously truncated, a necessity that most students applauded because they found his Tales boring. They shouldn't be, but admittedly, the selections in the text were not Chaucer's most exciting tales. When I had an unusually large class of sixty students, making classroom discussion virtually impossible, I had an inspiration to involve the students personally in Chaucer. I divided the class into teams of six or seven students and had each team choose a Canterbury Tale not in the text. Each team was to prepare a ten-minute presentation of their chosen tale for the rest of the class. Most were dramatizations which went rather well; however, one newlywed couple, both artists, prepared a sometimes slightly earthy cartoon sequence telling the Miller's Tale.

The class enjoyed that, but we were all amazed at Maud Craig's presentation. Maud was an unattractive, poorly dressed, slightly older woman whom I knew to be a scholarship/rehabilitation student. She was bright and genuinely thrilled to be in school. With some difficulty she was continuing to manage her single-mother duties with three rambunctious teenaged children, but she was generally shunned by the class. For that day Maud had dressed herself in an even more bizarre fashion than usual, in a short white skirt, a very tight low-cut red knit shirt, and yellow lace knee socks above dirty sneakers. She perched herself on the edge of my desk, smacking a large amount of gum, and crossing her bare knees. Without any prelude, Maud began a monologue, a modern translation, her own, of the Wife of Bath's Tale, using the first person throughout. She *became* Chaucer's character, capturing the essence of the Wife's tale, vigorously chewing her gum as she explained how she ate daintily to avoid getting food on her face and clothes and launching enthusiastically into the bawdier aspects of the Wife's life. It was convincing and hilarious. From that day Maud was no longer ostracized; rather she was sought both before and after class. She began turning in papers even superior to the work she had previously done. Her self esteem had clearly been boosted by the acceptance of her peers. (See the memoir "Chaucer")

I'll probably never be able to get all of my VCU stories on paper, but I want to emphasize that these anecdotes only cover the occasional events that were noteworthy or funny. I am proud that most of my experiences involved serious learning in my classes, enlivened and perhaps enriched by the fact that they frequently were fun for instructor and students.