

1-1-1995

## The Good Old Days at Grand Valley: A Personal View

Howard Stein

*Grand Valley State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr>

---

### Recommended Citation

Stein, Howard (1995) "The Good Old Days at Grand Valley: A Personal View," *Grand Valley Review*: Vol. 13: Iss. 1, Article 8.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr/vol13/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Grand Valley Review by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gvsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gvsu.edu).

# THE GOOD OLD DAYS AT GRAND VALLEY: A PERSONAL VIEW

*Howard Stein*

## **Dramatis Personae**

Carl Bajema	Assistant Professor of Biology
Albert Baker	Associate Professor of History of Science and Chemistry
Frederick Bevis	Assistant Professor of Biology (now Professor Emeritus of Natural Resources Management)
Marcia Boyles	Assistant Professor of Biology (later first Director of the School of Health Sciences)
Philip Buchen	Vice-president for Business Affairs
Robert Chamberlain	Associate Professor of English and Chair of Arts & Humanities Division
Philip Clampett	Assistant Professor of Biology
Arthur DeLong	Professor of Psychology
Greta DeLong	Associate Professor of Psychology & Education
Marvin DeVries	Assistant Professor of Economics (later Director of Seidman School of Business)
Marlys Flanders	Wife of Assistant Professor of Anthropology Richard Flanders
Weldon Frase	Professor of Education
George Potter	Academic Dean
Arthur Hills	Assistant Professor of Music and George Potter's assistant
Shirley Hills	Art's wife
Henry Hanson	Visiting Lecturer in Mathematics
Charles Irwin	Chair of Physical Education and Athletic Director
Harry Jellema	Professor of Philosophy and Chair of Social Science Division
Lorraine Jerkaitis	Wife of Channel 35 Art Director James Jerkaitis
Donald Lautenbach	Director of the Plant Department
Arend D. Lubbers	Second President
Jean MacDonald	Wife of second Athletic Director George MacDonald
Carl Meloy	Professor of Chemistry and Chair of Science & Math Division
Rodney Mulder	Assistant Professor of Sociology
Glenn Niemeyer	Assistant Professor of History
John Payne	State Technical Services Director
Louis Rus	Professor of English and Chair of the Department
John Scherff	Plant Department Supervisor
Mary Seeger	Assistant Professor of German
Wilhelm Seeger	Assistant Professor of German

Jane Sharphorn	Wife of Assistant Professor of Physical Education and first basketball coach David Sharphorn
Roberta Simone	Assistant Professor of English
Rose Stein	Wife of Associate Professor of Biology Howard Stein
Ronald Ward	Assistant Professor of Biology
John Weldon	Assistant Professor of Chemistry
Vernon Wolfe	Admissions Counselor
Theodore Young	Associate Professor of Philosophy
James Zumberge	President

## Prologue

The identifications above are provided for the benefit of newcomers, people whose association with Grand Valley is less than 25 years. Many of the people mentioned below are no longer actively involved with the university; more than a few have died; and others are known today with different titles. My recollections are not organized by any historical timeline, and I certainly made no effort to tell a complete story. What follows is a very personal, probably a biased, view.

• • •

I first saw the campus of Grand Valley State College in February of 1965. The ensuing three decades of sometimes turbulent development has produced a qualitatively changed institution. In no way can we consider the Grand Valley of today to be merely a larger version of the original. In fact, the college changed from year to year in those early days. Faculty size progressed annually from 12 to 30 to 60 to 90 before the first class graduated. Understandings achieved during the earliest years were exposed to challenge by each new and proportionately larger cohort of faculty. Instead of a senate, we had a Faculty Assembly which consisted of the entire faculty, plus the professional staff, and vigorous debate on major issues drew participation from many quarters. Few policies escaped detailed probing.

We were almost all very young and mostly inexperienced. Jim Zumberge had been a professor of geology at the University of Michigan, George Potter had never been a dean, Phil Buchen was a corporate lawyer with no prior college experience, and most of the faculty had never taught full-time elsewhere. Youth and inexperience can lead to error; they also offer a refreshing willingness to take chances and to sidestep tradition.

I came to Grand Valley after five years on the faculty of Kansas State College of Pittsburg (now Pittsburg State University). My four new colleagues in biology in 1965-66 (Carl Bajema, Fred Bevis, Marcia Boyles, and Phil Clampett) had amassed a total of five years of full-time college teaching. Being the old man of the department, at 32, was new for me because I had been the departmental baby at Pittsburg. A 34-year-old physiologist hired at Pittsburg two years before I was had been referred to by the chairman as "the boy." I never knew whether he had a corresponding name for me at 27.

Grand Valley's basic curriculum, a very rigid Foundation Program, was largely the brainchild of Harry Jellema, one of the few grey-haired presences on campus. All students were required to take the same nine courses, except for the choice of foreign language. The watchword was liberal arts, modified by a term I had never heard applied in this context: pure.

Shortly before departing from Pittsburg, I paid a courtesy call on the Academic Dean, who shook my hand and thanked me for being "a bulwark of the liberal arts" at an institution which was in transition from a teachers college to what they called a "general purpose" college. Within my first month at Grand Valley I was being told that I had no grasp of liberal arts. Pure liberal arts, I heard, eschews any notions of employment, and I had sinned by injecting such practical matters into the discussions of curriculum.

The only applied program was Education, which had been accepted by the faculty because it was expected of a regional state-supported college. Teacher preparation, operating within the Psychology Department, was consistently relegated to second class status in debate within the Faculty Assembly. I suspect that the education faculty felt tolerated at best.

The Biology Department soon proposed the addition of a program in medical technology. The plan required completion all of the general education requirements and fulfillment all of the specific requirements of the biology major, but credit would also be given for internship at an approved hospital lab. The battle royal over medical technology was no less keen within the Science & Mathematics Division than elsewhere at the college. I no longer remember which arguments were the most persuasive, but medical technology was finally adopted at that level and college-wide. Our liberal arts college had become a little less pure.

This was far from the only dispute. The suggestion to overcome perennial shortfalls in enrollment by providing flexibility in the Foundations Program met furious opposition. Dean Potter appointed a committee to make recommendations, including the late John Weldon and Fred Bevis, representing the Science & Math Division. Because the faculty was small, there was ample opportunity for extended debate on the concept as well as the many alternative patterns of requirements. Discussion occurred in faculty offices, over lunch in the small faculty dining room in Seidman House, and at social gatherings on weekends. John and Fred, both disposed toward making changes, frequently consulted others in Loutit Hall on strategy. A sharply divided faculty dumped the Foundations Program in the first of many changes in General Education at Grand Valley.

For the most part, dissent on any issue was open, and few members of the faculty were quiet about their views. An undaunted small group of liberal arts purists found themselves consistently on the losing end of votes in the Faculty Assembly. Most of these people became the founders of Thomas Jefferson College, initiating what became the "Colleges" era of experimentation. Al Baker, who held joint appointment between Chemistry and History of Science, probably deserved the Outstanding Dissenter Award. There were frequent votes in the Faculty Assembly in which he alone or he and a handful of others suffered defeat. We should admire

people who hold to principles, even in the face of nearly 100-1 odds, and Al did have principles.

In contrast, the Physical Education Department was monolithic. At meetings of the Faculty Assembly, P.E. faculty typically sat in a row and virtually always voted as a bloc. Before you assume that Chuck Irwin, their leader, was a despot, you need to understand their unique position. The faculty was divided into the divisions of Social Studies (alias Social Sciences), Arts & Humanities, and Science & Mathematics. Physical Education was independent of all three. According to prevalent rumor, George Potter, hardly the champion of intercollegiate athletics, threatened Chuck Irwin with dire consequences if Physical Education did not do his bidding. I have no direct evidence that this was true, but no hands in that department went up before Chuck's in any votes in the Faculty Assembly.

Physical Education and the Library held remarkable sway in the other major component of the governance system, the Academic Affairs Policy Council (AAPC). Chaired by Dean Potter, it consisted of the three division chairs: Chuck Irwin as chair of Physical Education, Steve Ford as Director of the Library, and three elected faculty members. The reasoning behind this arrangement was that each academic unit (including the Library) got representation, and neither the Library nor Physical Education logically fit into any of the divisions. The small number of librarians and physical education faculty hence had more clout in the AAPC arena than did the larger academic divisions.

On a practical basis, the Dean controlled the AAPC. In those days Steve Ford, Bob Chamberlain, and Harry Jellema were close allies of George Potter. Carl Meloy was never noted as a forceful figure, and Chuck Irwin, as described above, was limited in his opposition. Long meetings were further extended by inclusion of strictly administrative detail into the AAPC agenda, testing the patience of the elected members.

Teaching hours in some cases were personally negotiated by faculty members with Art Hills, who made up the schedules. Advisors in the sciences perceived awkwardness in finding reasonable schedules for our students. The difficulty arose because too many classes were jammed between 10:00 and 3:00, and too few classes met on Fridays. A memo with my signature (though Ron Ward was also involved) informed George Potter, Jim Zumberge, and Phil Buchen of this situation. The body of the memo included a table summarizing the numbers of classes offered by each department, and by each division, at the various days and hours. The courses in one division were especially concentrated. Rather brashly, I ended the note with the question: "Are we running a college or a country club for the faculty?" Potter's response, with my permission, was to circulate the memo among key faculty members. I was too naïve to suspect that the dean would leave my name on the document. We might say that my popularity subsequently suffered in some quarters, but student choices were broadened in later terms.

Consistent shortfalls in enrollment and some community pressures nudged us toward more dramatic programmatic changes. Dean Potter appointed the Committee on New Academic Programs (CONAP) in 1968-69. Its chair was History professor

Glenn Niemeyer. Other members included Mary Seeger, Marv DeVries, and me. CONAP was charged to investigate possible majors to be added. CONAP thoroughly discussed and even designed programs in communications, nursing, business, and engineering, among others.

Prior to CONAP, the late Dr. Keats Vining, Jr., then chair of the Education Committee of the Kent County Medical Society, had approached the Grand Valley administration with a proposal to start a baccalaureate program in nursing. Marcia Boyles, Carl Meloy, and I met several times with Dr. Vining and the directors of the Schools of Nursing of Butterworth, Blodgett, and St. Mary's Hospitals. After a while, I remained as a committee of one to have monthly meetings with these nurses. They wanted Grand Valley to start with a curriculum which would enable employed nurses with hospital certificates to earn college degrees in nursing. Our School of Health Sciences began operation in 1971, but with a nursing curriculum tailored for students coming directly out of high school.

Grand Valley had offered two courses in accounting through the Economics Department. In the early days of CONAP, economist Marv DeVries opposed any expansion into a business major. Unhappy with that turn, I described the committee's discussion to Ron Ward of the Biology Department. He and I, consulting several college catalogues, formulated a business program which consisted of a core for all business majors, plus additional specialization in accounting, marketing, etc. Did submission of that proposal to CONAP influence the formation of the Seidman School of Business a couple of years later? Someone in the administration can supply that answer.

One feature of the college's plans was the videotaping of lectures. This would free the faculty to spend time with students in small groups (the tutorial system). We used tutorials even before any videotaping. Meeting students in groups of three or four several times each term enabled us to personalize their education. In Biology 101, for example, we required all students to read selections from a book in preparation for the tutorials, and the discussions centered on the philosophy of science. Unfortunately, that system fell of its own weight.

The major miscalculation emanated from the demands and consequences of videotaping. We were using castoff cameras from TV-13, obsolescent technology. Shortcomings of that equipment prevented us from stopping and resuming in the midst of lecturing; one had to deliver 50 minutes as if in a live lecture. The taped lectures were to be typical of our daily lectures, but we quickly realized that a lecture worth capturing for many years of use required many hours of preparation. Marcia Boyles and I agreed that well over 20 hours of preparation were necessary for each hour of product. The Audio-Visual staff kept insisting that blemishes on tape were no worse than the errors that we made daily in live lectures, but the live lecturer does not repeatedly make the same mistake.

I made three tapes for Biology 101 on the chemical background for the course. A demonstration on one tape involved shaking a jar full of wooden balls, and, though the jar broke, I bravely kept going. We used these tapes for several years, until an experiment revealed another fault in the plan. The taped lectures were offered in

room 132 Lake Huron Hall, a large lecture hall with a projection booth in the back. One day, instead of openly attending the lecture, we sneaked into the projection booth after the class had gathered. Ten to fifteen minutes after the videotape started students began to look around the room. Finding no instructor, one by one they left the room before the lecture was over. Using a taped lecture to save faculty time for personal interaction just did not work.

A faculty which had to maintain a 20:1 student faculty ratio and which provided lectures, labs, and discussions could not also be expected to continue with tutorials. That would have left no time for intellectual pursuits, not to mention the tasks of developing a college.

Research briefly surfaced as cause célèbre. Several professors in the Science & Math Division wanted space, time, and funding for research. Jim Zumberge and George Potter met with the division to discuss the issue. Jim had an international reputation in glacial geology, but he brushed us off. When I was a young faculty member at Macalester College, he said, I managed to get research done by personal sacrifice. You can do the same. The priority was clear.

The relative uniformity of age among the faculty, their youth, and their commitment to a common enterprise led the faculty to associate socially. Those living in the Grand Haven and Grand Rapids areas tended, with notable exceptions, to cleave with colleagues in their home communities. Evening parties and picnics were common. The fledgling Faculty Club struggled because of the small population of potential members, but ox roasts and dinners (a number of times at Point West in Holland) became features of the club's program.

Art DeLong, Wellie Frase, and Jack Payne often convened noon-time meetings of the Faculty Club board at the bowling alley at Lake Michigan Drive and 48th Ave. That was the closest restaurant, if we can glorify it with that title. The thread of conversation at those meetings, over several years, was that a clubhouse would crystallize the organization. Jack in particular worked hard on designing a building which was to be built near the water tower. Could we afford to build it? Would there be sufficient clientele to keep a building financially afloat? Who would be responsible for day-to-day management? Should we raise dues before building or should we wait until after the facility attracted more members? Questions were endless, and answers came slowly.

A parallel organization, Grand Valley Wives (Times have changed, haven't they?), developed a vigorous program of its own. Its leaders included Shirley Hills, Jane Sharporn, Marlys Flanders, and Rose Stein. Jean MacDonald and Lorraine Jerkaitis joined in somewhat later. The Wives subdivided into Northwest Grand Rapids, Jenison, and Grand Haven clusters, in response to difficulties in functioning as one unit. Among their accomplishments was a booklet of advice for wives of newly hired faculty and staff, a welcoming tea, and several interest groups. Each year they produced a group Christmas card which was mailed to faculty. The money people donated to the card fund was used for scholarships. (I'd like to see that practice resurrected.) Eventually the Wives merged with the Faculty Club (now called the University Club), and some of the Wives' activities persisted for many years.

And then there were the faculty/staff teams in the intramural leagues. Though Grand Valley had no gymnasium or well-designed playing fields, an astonishing percentage of its students (about 200 when the total enrollment was perhaps 1,100) participated in basketball and touch football. Naturally the young faculty responded with its own teams, under the leadership of Fred Bevis. Our first touch football game, played on a mowed area immediately south of the present Cedar Studios, showed that students had found an arena in which to flex their muscles—rather literally. Injuries in that game scared off all but a few foolhardy non-student players. Bevis was quarterback, John Scherff was running back, and Vern Wolfe was willing only to punt. We were constantly on the prowl for players.

Basketball games were played at Jenison High School. The "officials" were students, and the calls in games involving the faculty were not always completely unbiased. Faculty members also played each other at times at Allendale High, where Rod Mulder fell on the tiled gym floor and broke his elbow.

Being part of a new and undefined college required a sense of humor at times and generated comical outcomes at others. For example, Science & Math faculty hired in 1965 waited until Loutit Hall was finished in December before they got regular offices. Their temporary offices consisted of a line of open cubicles with six-foot walls on the second floor of Lake Huron Hall. Mathematician Henry Hanson, retiree from another college, was so hard-of-hearing that several of us left our cubicles when he was visited by students; there was no way to concentrate during the shouted conversations.

Yet another awkward situation came from the donation by the Angus family of the first of Grand Valley's teaching vessels. Ron Ward obtained a grant from the National Science Foundation to refit the boat for its new oceanographic function. Don Lautenbach, a retired Navy chief bos'n's mate, suggested that the work could be done more cheaply by Grand Valley's employees under his supervision. A permit was obtained to haul the overweight and oversized vessel from Grand Haven to campus. The ANGUS was placed in a cradle next to an old barn east of Lake Michigan Hall in the fall. When the work had been completed, the college's application to the state highway department for the return trip was denied. The rules, it seems, allowed an oversized load to be moved only once. The Governor's office had to intercede, averting conversion of the boat into a land-locked relic.

Lautenbach also served as the first captain of the R.V. ANGUS. Don once gunned its engine in order to make a quick exit from the Government Pond in Grand Haven and ignominiously missed the opening. A steel hull can have its advantages.

The college had an anti-nepotism policy, but encountering difficulty in attracting some outstanding faculty, the administrators bent the rules. Bob Chamberlain as Arts & Humanities Chair with Bobbie Simone (Chamberlain) in the English Department was rationalized by the intermediate presence of the chair of the English Department, Lou Rus. Art and Greta DeLong were hired as Professor of Psychology and Associate Professor of Psychology and Education, respectively. When Art became chairman of the department, there was some mumbling that Greta was really in education (which was an arm of the Psychology Department). Nevertheless,

a later appointment to the Foreign Languages chair was blocked because Bill and Mary Seeger both taught German. The policy was rescinded.

George Potter appointed me to the chair of the "Tenure, Teaching Load, Etc. Committee," a title which only he could have imagined. One day he requested that the committee propose a sabbatical policy within several weeks. At my complaint about the rush, he stated that we needed the policy because some of the faculty might be eligible to apply for leave. "When might they be eligible?" I asked. We won't know, he responded, until you devise the policy.

Don Lubbers' first autumn picnic for the faculty and staff produced the famous skinny-dipping episode. Guests who accepted Don's invitation to use the swimming pool retired to a bedroom to change. Explanations after the fact varied, but Bob Chamberlain dived or was propelled unclad through a second-story window. The Lubbers have never again invited us to swim.

The Biology Department accepted a donation of two live specimens: a rattlesnake and a copperhead. In the absence of any alternative, the snakes were placed in a terrarium kept at the rear of the biology lab on the top floor of Lake Michigan Hall. The snakes disappeared. One reaction was that custodians refused to clean the building until the snakes were caught; another was that George Potter decreed that the biologists would immediately find and execute these creatures. The snakes had not escaped but had crawled into the warm space above the lights at the top of the terrarium. Fred Bevis, Carl Bajema, and I formed the execution team. Using a crude home-made snake handler's noose, Fred, with Carl's assistance, captured each snake and plunged it headfirst into formaldehyde until all struggle ceased. My self-appointed role was to stand atop a nearby lab table with a stout meter stick in case the serpents got loose. The department still retains these pickled specimens.

Varsity sports came to Grand Valley. Basketball and crew (which ultimately became a club sport) were not controversial. In contrast, football engendered the complaint that it is not a "gentlemanly" sport. Soccer was touted as far superior in that regard. Crew and soccer, of course, were consistent with George Potter's Oxford University origins, but Jim Zumberge was also anti-football. Considering the path of Jim's career after he left Grand Valley, that attitude is deliciously ironic. He served as one of the top administrators at University of Nebraska, Southern Methodist, and University of Southern California, each a monument to King Football in its most highly developed form.

Grand Valley attracted an unusual student body. For the most part, our students had to be adventurous to try out GVSC, their more conventional counterparts sticking with colleges which had existed long enough to build reputations. One indication of student accomplishment is that of the first 25 graduates with Biology majors 16% went on to earn the Ph.D. degree, 12% became physicians, and 24% have been in K-12 teaching. (I have no data on six of the graduates.) They were a joy to teach, and we had the luxury of meeting them in very small advanced classes.

Responding to student objections to being treated as mere numbers, the college anticipated subdividing into units of no more than 1,500 students. One cluster would hold its classes in the Great Lakes buildings, a second cluster would operate from

Manitou and Mackinac Halls, and two more clusters would be added to fulfill an initial goal of 6,000 students. Science, physical education and athletics, and the library were to remain centralized. Placement of the buildings still reveals evidence of those plans. A major question at that point revolved around whether these clusters would have the same curricula.

A split in opinions about curriculum and instruction offered the opportunity to split off a small group of faculty into a unit which came to be called the Thomas Jefferson College of General Studies (TJC). In some ways TJC carried the banner of "pure" liberal arts which had become sullied by the remainder (inappropriately dubbed the College of Arts & Sciences). Though the physical separation imagined for clusters a few years earlier did not come to pass, formation of the Seidman School of Business, William James College, and Kirkhof College (né College IV) ensued. Grand Valley State Colleges had been transformed into an experimental campus, which was hard to explain to outsiders. (I leave it to others to describe the cluster arrangement.)

A negative, even ludicrous, outcome of the cluster arrangement was an entirely unpredictable result of the names. TJC and WJC (William James) were terms introduced into a community which also had its cherished JC (Grand Rapids Junior College, now called Grand Rapids Community College). How many students might have chosen Grand Valley if they had not considered it a junior college?

Change had become the primary descriptor for GVSC. The innovations of its earliest days became pedestrian compared with those of the 1970s. Although that decade may be remembered by some faculty as troublesome, Grand Valley served as a microcosm on one campus for most of the types of experimentation in higher education which were occurring in isolated centers throughout the United States. It may have been hell to live through at times, but, in retrospect, it was an exciting decade for us. Important understandings of Grand Valley's later role were formed in the crucible of debate which characterized the college from its inception. The faculty and the administration learned from its errors and successes. We are probably a better university because of that history.

Ted Young suggested, probably seriously, that when Grand Valley reached 1,500 students, it should cap its enrollment and sell off its excess land. His vision was not illogical, and I agreed then (and still agree) that some consequences of taking that route would be both productive and enjoyable. Small classes, knowing nearly the whole student body, and maintaining a focus on a small range of programs, as we old-timers experienced on this campus, have their rewards. But would that have been a practical road map for a state-supported college to follow? I doubt it.

## **Epilogue**

Some readers might assume that everything seemed to go wrong or that the early faculty were unhappy with their lot at Grand Valley State College. To the contrary, I believe that the education received by our students was very strong, and in many ways I would like to turn the clock back. There was excitement, there was bravado, there was intellectual ferment, and there was a strong sense of purpose. And I was only 32 years old.