

1-1-1993

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Recommended Citation

Batchelder, John (1993) "Forty Years of Then and Now," *Grand Valley Review*: Vol. 9: Iss. 1, Article 22.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr/vol9/iss1/22>

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FORTY YEARS OF THEN AND NOW

John Batchelder

This summer has been a period of nostalgia for me. "Nostalgia" comes from a Greek word that means "returning home."

I began these "what about the past" reflections during the early morning of July 4th. I got up at about 5:30 to let the cat in and put the flag out. The flag had been given to Shirley many years ago in recognition of her service to America as a Cub Scout den mother when our son was in the fourth grade.

I fly Shirley's flag on days like the 4th of July mainly to fool my neighbors into thinking that I am a patriot and also to cover for her cat. Shirley's cat and I share a secret. We are both closet Tories.

Pussy cat, pussy cat, where have you been?
I have been to London to see the Queen.
Pussy cat, pussy cat, what did you there?
I chased a mousey under a chair.

So far, this ritual of flying Shirley's flag has worked. Up to now, neither her cat nor I have been tarred and feathered and run out of town swinging from a rail.

I

The 4th of July, we are told, is a day for celebration and "thoughtful" reflection. Is there any other kind of reflection? Among many things, patriotism debases language. I happily served five years in the U.S. Navy, but I was young back then and still under the influence of the standard self-congratulatory interpretation of American history. Over the years I have become skeptical. Our wars, I now believe, are mostly aggression for possession. The War for Independence, the War with Mexico, the Indian Wars clearly were about what in German would be called "lebensraum": "You get out of this place. We want it."

Our latest war, which was about the marginal cent price of oil, has been given the mind-numbing name "Desert Storm." In my opinion, this hollow media extravaganza was George Bush chasing a mousey under a chair.

I wish our historians would classify our numerous wars with less hyperbole. They might adopt the strategy of meteorologists in the way that they catalog tempests. As we had "Hurricane Alice," "Desert Storm" could be debloated to "War George."

II

In addition to thoughtfully rethinking American history and conscientiously objecting to most of our wars, my summer of nostalgia took me back to when I was 14-17. Thomas Wolfe said "You Can't Go Home Again." Well, during the weekend of 14-16 June, I tried. I went back to Kimball Union Academy for my 40th high school reunion.

Kimball Union Academy (KUA) is located in the central highlands of New Hampshire on the single road of the village of Meriden that runs west-east and down-up. All of New Hampshire runs down-up and up-down. As the old saying goes, "If New Hampshire were flattened out it would be as large as Texas."

KUA was established in 1823 by a Congregational Minister named Ebenezer Adams. Its motto is "Religione et Sciente." When I was 14-17 I lived, studied, and played on and around the Meriden hilltop. My schoolmates and I ranged from the covered bridge over Skinny-dip Gorge to the low land athletic fields of Francis Hall Farm.

This was the first time I had been back to KUA since my graduation forty years ago in June, 1951. The most dramatic physical change I noticed is that the wild meadow above the football field is now a spruce forest. During the last forty years, Mother Nature has been busy generating and degenerating.

I had no difficulty recognizing my classmates. We had shed hair and inched on pounds but our personalities were the same. Even my former teachers and coaches didn't seem that different to me. It dawned on me that these men must have been young forty years ago. When you are 14-17 you don't realize that there are age gradations among adults. You think all of them are as elderly as your parents.

One of my former teachers that I enjoyed talking with is Fredereck B. Rawson, Harvard AB '31. Among ourselves, we students called him "Batman" because he sometimes wore a cape. Mr. Rawson tried to teach me Greek, Latin, and German in the round room under the tower of Baxter Hall, built in 1895. What I learned from Mr. Rawson in that round room is that you can't begin to understand the English language until you have looked at its roots.

III

Saturday night there was a cocktail party and dinner dance that started in the new art building. As we were arriving, the weather turned angry. There was thunder and lightning, and sheets of rain swept in from Mt. Ascutney. I am convinced that this wrath was visited upon us by our former (now dead) headmaster, William Brewster. This was his way of saying "Even if this is your 40th reunion, it is not nice to carouse on the hilltop." The message of the Brewster years was clear and simple: "Only a toned body can maintain a tuned mind." Because of this scripture, we were in class six mornings a week and on the playing fields six afternoons a week. In the A.M. we were Athenians. In the P.M. we were Spartans. On the seventh day we went to the Congregational Church that dates from Ebenezer Adams.

But there have been some changes at KUA over the last forty years. Saturday afternoon Shirley and I signed up for the visit to the restored Shaker village south of Meriden on the road to Claremont. This road is a typical New England, curving and up and down, two-lane highway. Half way there, one back brake on the unstable twelve passenger van froze. We swerved all over the road for half a mile. Behind and in front of us were New Hampshire drivers who take seriously the motto on their license plates: "Live Free or Die." Our van driver handled this emergency like a Daytona pro and saved us from becoming alumni stew.

There are two points to the above story. The first is obvious. How many times in our lives have we just missed death? If cats have nine lives, then humans must have ninety. The second point is more important. The super-competent driver of the van was Stephanie.

Stephanie represents the most significant change that has happened to KUA since 1951. Stephanie is a 23-year-old biology teacher who teaches classes that are boy-girl mixed. KUA now recruits members from the other half of the human race, females. Forty years ago all students and all faculty were males. During the 14-17 years when our voices were descending, I think my male classmates and I would have gotten a clearer understanding of biology if we had been gender-integrated and Stephanie had been our teacher.

Ebenezer Adams was no dummy. He established KUA in 1823 as coeducational. But some time around the turn of the century some jerkass educator convinced much of the American educational establishment that, for proper direction and tuition, the sexes should be separated.

IV

I have fond memories of Kimball Union Academy which have been refreshed by my return. It was my Brigadoon, the never-never place where once I was. I can still see petite but imperial Mrs. Duncan riding up to the Congregational Church of Ebenezer Adams in her one-horse carriage to command her aisle seat half way to the pulpit.

But Thomas Wolfe is right. You can't go home again. The Kimball Union of forty years ago is a dated Norman Rockwell or Paul Sample painting. Mrs. Duncan is dead, as is probably her horse. Required Sunday church service is dead. The simple, rigorous, structured conformity of the 1950's is dead.

Another meaning of the word "nostalgia" is "a morbid longing to repeat the past."