

On the Sidewalks of New York

11. Going West!

The Broadway Limited left Penn Station on its westward journey to Pittsburgh and then on to Chicago. Along the way it stopped in Wooster, Ohio, the home of the College of Wooster. The largest city I had been to west of New York City was Newark, New Jersey. In late January 1945, I packed my bags with all my earthly belongings and made the trek down to 34th Street. I made the trip to Penn Station alone.

Leaving New York in the middle of Winter to begin a new venture was a sober undertaking. There was no joy in leave-taking. I felt burdened by my decision to head off to Wooster. The state of the family was obvious: my mother's health was deteriorating and my father had taken on two jobs. I tried to soften my decision by telling my mother that I looked on this venture as exploratory. I needed to know whether I had the ability to take on a full time college education, both intellectually and financially. The next four months would be a trial. In four months I would be back in New York and we could go on from there. I would get a job and give what help I could to the family.

In January 1945 most people's thoughts were on finishing the war in Europe and defeating the Japanese in Asia. I did not have much time to think about what the College of Wooster would be like. I worked at the Waring's Pennsylvanian offices until the time I had to leave. I knew Wooster would not be C.C.N.Y. It would still be a serious business, but I hoped it would be a less pressured experience.

In my family, the experience would be completely new. None of my Poethig cousins had gone on to college. None went to college after the war, even with the possibility of the G.I. Bill. Only my mother's second cousins, Bob Rehling and George West had gone to college. Since my mother identified so strongly with her side of the family she was more sympathetic to my venture.

As I got on the Broadway Limited, I carried with me an image of college which had been implanted in my early teens. In the late Thirties I saw a movie on college life which made a dramatic impression on me. Denny Egan, Billie Howard and I went for one of our Saturday movie ventures to the little Loew's Theatre on 86th Street. The little Loew's was located between Third and Lexington Avenues across the street from the big Loew's Theatre. We saw a movie called "College Days." In a foretelling of my future, the film featured Fred Waring and his Pennsylvanians.

The movie was a musical about college life. It was filmed at Penn State College where Fred Waring was an alumnus. Tyrone, Waring's home town, is near State College. The film was fast moving with upbeat songs and lively dance numbers set within the carefree life on a college campus. The film made a tremendous impact on me. At twelve years of age I never thought that a college education could be such fun. Most of my friends had not given much thought about college. I came away from the theatre with a feeling of great exhilaration.

In junior high school few of us ever talked about going to college. It was enough to get out of high school. After seeing the film, I thought how great it would be to get an education in a setting where there was such a great zest for life. The feeling and the images of "College Days" stayed with me through my teen years. As I got on the Broadway Limited to depart New York to begin college, it seemed ironic that the job I was leaving to begin college was with Fred Waring and his Pennsylvanians.

The trip to Ohio was uneventful. The Broadway Limited left Penn Station in the early evening. It rumbled through Pennsylvania at night. I tried to sleep sitting up in a coach car. All night the temperature in the coach alternated between hot and cold. Sometime in the early hours of the still dark morning we arrived in Pittsburgh. A blanket of snow covered the city. I got off the coach in the Pittsburgh station to test the morning air. On the rafters high above the station platform the snow was melting. The drops of water came down from the rafters splattering black stains on the floor. I kept an eye on the rafters above maneuvering between the descending black drops. By the

time I reached the inner station my tan raincoat was spotted black. The coal dust from the steel mills provided a coat of grime over the city. This was my first experience of industrial America. I would remember this experience when I returned to Pittsburgh to work in U.S. Steel's Braddock works in the summer of 1950.

The Broadway Limited arrived in the Wooster station in the early afternoon. The skies were gray with snowfilled clouds. The station and the town were white. I was the only passenger to get off in Wooster. I caught the attention of the station master as he headed back into his office. "Which direction is the College of Wooster?" He looked down at my large valise and pointed to a street which headed uphill: "Up that street about a mile. You want a taxi?" No, I think I can make it. I've been sitting a long time." I told him.

So I began my journey. The hill was long and my overpacked valise was heavy. The footing was precarious. But I hauled my way up Beall Avenue with more than a few stops along the way. As I reached the top of the hill and University Street, I saw the first signs of the College. An attractive brunette was coming down the street. I put down my now very heavy bag. "Hi! Which way is it to Galpin Hall?"

She observed me with a funny smile. "You coming to Wooster? You're from New York, right?" "Yeah, I'm coming to Wooster. How'd you know I was from New York?" "By your accent." she grinned. My first introduction to the College of Wooster - already I was labeled.

She asked my name. She told me her name was Anne Landes. She was from Larchmont, New York. She knew New York accents, especially distinct ones. She offered to walk me over to Galpin, to make sure that I got there. I accepted her offer.

The campus, with its cover of snow, had a good feeling. There was quietness and open space. My guide left me at the steps of Galpin. I found the Registrar's office. I announced my arrival. The Dean of Men, Racky Young, was summoned. He welcomed me warmly. He seemed like an amiable person.

But then any male recruit to Wooster in January, 1945, was a welcome sight to the Dean of Men.

Racky, Ralph was his given name, was a minister. He also taught in the Religion Department. I learned later that his nickname came from an overlarge raccoon coat he wore to football games during his time at Wooster. Racky led me through the course offerings for the second semester and told me about the procedures for signing up for classes. He laid out the possibilities for work that would cover my room and board expenses. The shortage of male students meant there were jobs available, particularly in the dormitory kitchens and dining halls.

The men's dormitories were filled. The college had a contingent of U.S. Navy personnel on campus taking officer's training. I had been assigned to an off campus private home. The owner was an elderly widow. I would get my room for work around the house. It was my first time to live in a private house with my own room.

There was little time for orientation. Classes were off to a quick start at mid-year. My work schedule got me up early. I was on the breakfast shift in the kitchen at Holden Hall, the Sophomore women's dorm. The dorm was almost a half mile from where I was living so I had to hustle. The kitchen crew at Holden had to be finished washing dishes to make 8:00 o'clock classes.

The first weeks at Wooster were intense. After three years away from school, it took resolve to get back in the study mode. It was difficult to gauge how well I was faring in my classes. I had no way to compare. Most of the students were from Ohio towns and from suburban areas. The women students were bright. I had not been in class with the opposite sex since junior high. It was a different milieu than I had ever experienced.

When the grades came out at mid-semester, Racky Young caught me just before the 9:00 A.M. chapel hour. He was delivering grade cards. "Didn't think you were going to make it." he stated matter-of-factly. He handed me my grade card. I sank down in the pew and anxiously opened the envelop. I scanned the grades. A "B" average. Not bad, not a bad beginning at all. I

looked up. He stood there grinning: "We'll keep you around another semester."

By mid-semester I had learned to pace myself. Life was not as hustled. The Student Union was my haunt between classes. The Union was an oval shaped building with blond wood furnishings. Each booth had its own record selector for the main juke box. The booths were set in the wall in a semi-circular fashion on both sides of the room. At one end of the Union were two doors for coming and going and at the other end was the kitchen and counter for ordering food and drink. The center space was for dancing. In the mid-40's there were many patriotic songs mixed in with swing numbers. The refrains of the Andrews' Sisters song hit of 1945 "Drinking Rum and Coca-Cola.....working for the Yankee Dolla....." rang in my ears every time I stepped into the Union.

Getting acquainted was no problem at Wooster. Everyone who passed you on campus greeted you. There was a genuine interest in me as a newcomer. The upper-class women were particularly friendly. The word was out that I was from New York. Whenever I came to the Student Union, there was always a place for me in one of the booths. I was a different addition to Wooster. They wanted to hear my tales of New York, spoken with an authentic accent. Even more fascinating was the fact that I had been working for Fred Waring.

The second semester in 1945 was a unique time historically. In February Franklin Delano Roosevelt died suddenly and Harry Truman succeeded him to the Presidency. I listened to the ceremonies of the Roosevelt funeral with Bob Agnew, an upper class ministerial student. Bob Agnew, who shared my Democratic leanings, was one of my first friends at Wooster. He had been deferred from military service because of a heart problem. He would later die in the ministry at a young age from this heart condition.

The war moved quickly to a close in Europe. In April Wooster celebrated the end of the European conflict. The college administration began preparing for the eventual return of former students who had been drafted into the military. Junior class women looked forward to the beginning of classes in September and the return of their sweethearts. The U.S. Navy program was

scheduled to be phased out. The college was preparing to reopen its dormitories, occupied by the Navy personnel, for the influx of male students and returning war veterans.

My first semester of college ended with assurances from the Dean's Office that there would be work for me in the Fall. My grades had held up. I knew that college would be no problem for me. I had enjoyed life at Wooster. Now I had to turn my attention to the situation back home in New York.

The return home carried with it a great deal of anxiety. While I was gone the family had moved from Yorkville to the South Bronx. They had moved to a first floor apartment in a tenement on 137th Street near the Brook Avenue I.R.T. stop. They made the move to be near my mother's brother Paul Schölzel and his wife May. The South Bronx was new territory for me. I had a deep attachment to my Yorkville neighborhood. I had spent the first nineteen years of my life there.

I knew, however, that this was a good decision for the family. The apartment was on the ground floor. My mother would not have to climb any stairs. Her health was failing. There was a possibility she would have to return to St. Francis Hospital, a facility in the South Bronx which specialized in tuberculosis patients. My father had continued his two jobs. It was obvious that he was tired. My sister Erna, who was now eleven, was entering Junior High.

The weight of the situation bore down on me. The issues had not changed since I left for Wooster in January. Only now it was more obvious how much I was needed. Again I was thrown into a mental struggle. I knew now how much a college education could mean. The war was ending and thousands of men would return to attend college under the GI. Bill of Rights. I knew if I stopped college and went to work, I would never finish college. I saw my options narrowing. I would have to continue my college education.

My first priority for the summer was to find a job to earn enough both to help with expenses at home and to use toward my tuition for 1945-46. We were still at war in Asia, but the U.S. forces were closing in on Japan. I went to see

Phil Jones at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church to report on my first semester. He was pleased that I had done so well. He knew I needed summer work to help meet my college expenses. A member of the church had put in a request for workers at a plant he was managing which was making Navy gunner training units. The plant took up one floor of a loft building on West 57th Street. I went for an interview and got the job. I was assigned to spray painting the training units battleship gray.

I was fortunate to be able to get what was categorized "a war job" even as hostilities were winding down. The pay was not phenomenal, but I could help out at home and save enough toward tuition in the Fall. My work mates were a jovial bunch. There were many women in the work crew. They were particularly interested in the fact that I was studying to become a minister. The war ended in August with much jubilation. Most of the women knew their jobs would soon end and they would be in a scramble to find work as more G.I.s returned from Asia as well as Europe. On the last day of my work in September, we gathered for a special presentation at the coffee break. They called me forward and presented me with a large tube shaped in the form of a pencil with an eraser. When I took off the eraser, inside the tube were fifty silver dollars - a going away present. A heartwarming end to a summer's work.

Returning to Wooster was not easy. I needed my mother's blessing on my going away. She knew her own condition. She knew my father's tiredness. But she wanted me to succeed. She knew I had begun the process and was determined to complete the course. She gave me her assurance in my leaving, even though I sensed a deep inner pain in letting me go.

I left New York in the Fall unsettled in spirit. I felt a sense of foreboding. I had to shut myself off from thinking about the consequences. I had to keep looking forward. The very act of getting on the train and heading West was an act of breaking with the past.

If any uncertainty existed it was soon lost in the excitement of arriving on campus in September. The campus was vibrant with the joy of the sudden end of the war. For four years everyone's attention was on the daily reports

from the theatres of war. Now people could think and plan for the future. It was a unique time to return to a college campus.

There was relief among the incoming men students that the possibility of being drafted into military service was less pressing. Women students could look forward to friendships which were not suddenly broken by the departing of boy friends. The first returning veterans were arriving on campus. They represented the new climate of education in the post-war era. Some had dedicated four years of their lives to fighting a war. Now they looked forward to the job of completing their education and getting on with their lives. Among those returning to campus, especially among the Senior women, there was a heartwarming reuniting of sweethearts who had been separated by the war.

I was quickly caught up in the fervor of campus life. It stood in dramatic contrast to my arrival at Wooster in the mid-Winter. I knew I had to be part of this new generation. It only strengthened my determination to make good on the decision I had made. My life had to count for something in the years that lay ahead.