

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, July 4, 2016

Mercersburg Academy, 1941–1942: I had been graduated from Wilmington Friends School in June 1941 and was accepted as a freshman at M.I.T. However, since I was only 17 and had never lived away from home, my mother thought I needed a year at a preparatory boarding school before entering college. Several of my former classmates at Friends had gone to Mercersburg in the 10th and 11th grades, and I knew others too, including Cliff Diver (who later ran Diver Chevrolet for many years), and Bud Vinton. My father took me to Mercersburg in June to look it over, and we were treated very well by Wilmarth I. Jacobs, the assistant headmaster. We decided I would like Mercersburg Academy, so I was enrolled to start in September.

The school year was delayed by one week because of a quarantine, not unusual in those days. I don't remember which contagious disease it was, but at the end of the month, my parents delivered me with my furnishings in our 1937 Packard Twelve, still in the FAHP collection. I remember well the moment they pulled out to return home and the sinking feeling I had. I was scared!

I had been teamed with a wonderful roommate, John Chapman, who was in his fourth year at Mercersburg. From the small town of Broadalbin, New York, where his father was a family doctor, John was a "big man on campus," being president of the Washington Irving Society and a member of the student senate. All John's friends (and he knew everybody) became my friends because I was his roommate. About two weeks into the school year, there was an election, and I was elected historian of the Upper Middler Class in a three-way contest. The vote was 25-23-22, but I always thought it was rigged in my favor.

There were no girls at Mercersburg, but Wilson College and Penn Hall were girls' schools in Chambersburg, 17 miles away. On several occasions during the year, a dance or similar event would take place on one of the campuses, but I was afraid of girls, so I never met any of the young ladies studying at Chambersburg.

With the exception of Miss Fallon, Mercersburg's librarian, and Mrs. Charlton, receptionist in Traylor Hall, the teaching staff was all male. Some of the teachers were married and had homes or apartments in the small town of Mercersburg, adjacent to the campus, but many were single and lived in a single room in the dormitories and had charge of a floor or floors. These dedicated teachers also had table duty in the mess hall, where they would be in charge of a table of sometimes noisy and always hungry boys. They would also have extra duty as athletic coaches, heads of the Chapel ushers, amateur theater production managers, Academy publications, and special clubs (there was a History club, a Chemistry club, a French club, etc.). I think the breed of single "masters" (teachers) is now extinct, as they were paid very little, had no family life during the school year, but gave so much to future generations. Fortunately, I can remember most of them, and I owe them my sincere gratitude.

Except for English history, the subjects I took were in preparation for Engineering school, namely senior math (which was solid geometry and trigonometry), chemistry, and physics. At Wilmington Friends, I had taken physics and senior math, so these were easy. For homework, I was spending more than half my time on English History, taught by David F. Chapman, head of the history department and uncle of my roommate. After mid-year exams, I tried to switch from English History to Typing, but Headmaster Charles S. Tippetts called me into his office, and convinced me I should stay with history.

I learned a lot about inter-scholastic sports, as Mercersburg prided itself in being very strong in these fields. Swimming, wrestling, and track supplemented the usual football and baseball. Tennis was coming on strong. Mercersburg always fared well at the Penn Relays in Philadelphia each April. There was a reason Mercersburg did not have a basketball team at that time.

On the weekend of December 6 and 7, 1941, about 12 of us boys went to Williamsburg with three teachers in their three cars, respectively, sponsored by the History Department. I was in the car of Frank Currier, a language teacher, who was like a jolly elf, and we had a lot of fun with him. We saw a lot in Washington, Richmond, and

Williamsburg. As we were leaving Sunday afternoon, we heard that the U.S. Naval Base at Pearl Harbor had been attacked. When we passed through Washington, troops were guarding the government buildings. Monday morning, we learned more about what had happened.

John Leonard and I had achieved high marks but were not eligible for diplomas, as we had not taken the required subjects to qualify, in my case Senior English. It was raining outside on June 8, 1942, so the commencement exercises took place in the chapel. John and I were sitting with the Upper Middler Class (11th grade) when Harry F. "Snag" Smith, head of the English Department, tapped us on the shoulder and said to follow him. He led us to seats just behind the senior class, and when Dr. Tippetts awarded the diplomas to the seniors, he singled us out and gave us the same. What a surprise and the culmination of a great year of learning at Mercersburg!

From 1979 until 1989, I served on the Board of Regents of the Academy, and for seven of those years I was chairman of Buildings and Grounds. Again, I enjoyed my time spent at Mercersburg. The school began accepting girls in the 1960s, and now the census is about 50-50. After six headmasters since 1893, for the first time this fall, there will be a woman as head-of-school.