



1943 and 14 Miles From School

1943

And now in September of 1943, I was off to high school, 9th grade in Manchester. Manchester was about 14 miles by bus after a three mile walk to and on Route 44. I had turned thirteen that August and was small and very immature. I even wore pigtails. Some of the Korner boys and I walked to the corner where the Agricultural Experimental Station was located. On the other side of Route 44 lived Gwendolyn. On real cold days, we used to wait in her house for the bus.

I signed on for Algebra, English, French and Civics. I was going to college! It was an amazing year. My civics teacher, Mrs. McAdam let me learn for awhile and then after a month or six weeks, she called me aside and asked if my mother would let me have a permanent like all the other girls. I had the only pigtails and she was so thoughtful. She could tell that I was very shy and being a year younger didn't help. So, I asked my mother and she said, "Why not?" and the next thing I knew I was sitting wired up to some kind of helmet with heat in it. When we arrived home again, Dad never said a word. My brothers and sisters liked it and I arrived next day in school all permed up.

To learn French we had Mademoiselle Jeanne Low straight from Paris and we were to learn Parisian French. My parents had never taught us French because they spoke Canuck and though they were fluent, we were not encouraged. I don't even know how they knew the difference.

Fermez la porte et ouvrez la fenetre. We learned that right off. And we learned that there was to be no English in the classroom unless there was an emergency. I thought it was all just great. I studied everything real hard because I knew that, like those kids in eighth grade, I was able to get good grades. Not a one of the 11 were in any of my classes and as a matter of fact we had very few overlaps of Coventry kids. Manchester had maybe 400 students then. Bolton also attended Manchester. And they sorted us out without computers!

Our parents had a choice in whereto send us: either Manchester or Willimantic, equally far. Except for a few, all chose Manchester. We were unique because the kids who chose Willimantic were considered inferior somehow. Why, I don't know and am quite sure there wasn't a whole lot of truth in that. But, by then many of our relatives lived in Willimantic and my parents considered it a "fast" place. Manchester on the other hand was conservative and stodgy and not likely to put "ideas" in our heads.

As for Algebra, I mastered that because it was far less complex than it is today. Our Algebra teacher was Mr. Dwight Perry and I remember that only because shortly after in 1952, our president was named Dwight. I had never heard that name until Algebra. Mr. Perry made it really interesting and was a very personable teacher.

I really liked all my teachers although the English teacher insisted on Shakespeare and I really didn't like it. Later, in life, I recognized the value and taught lots of it to my students although it was not required. I must admit, though, that I made it a whole lot more exciting and interesting. Our teacher was lame and old and quite severe. She was too serious for me. Still, I learned.

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Birthplace of Nathan Hale

And Civics was great. Without my ever knowing it, government was to become a lifelong interest and to this day, I believe that our country is the greatest, no matter that the chads drove us all crazy for awhile. All of this interest had to do with my parents who never taught us but always read newspapers and had the radio on morning, noon, and night. Also, the war flavored everything.

All of our teachers emphasized the war effort and patriotism and saving and making do.

And lest I forget, there was an indoor swimming pool. Wow, I just couldn't wait for that class. We had scratchy, itchy wool suits that covered everything quite nicely, thank you, We formed a club. We did not do competitions except for intramurals because of transportation and gas shortages. The shock was that on the first day after school, when we started practice for our competitions, there were no swimsuits to be worn. There was a war on after all!

Wow! I had never seen another girl and never did see a naked boy. They had breasts of all sizes and shapes! So, where were mine? And some were dark and some pinkier. We were all white girls so you can understand what I'm talking about.

I wanted to quit on the spot but I couldn't. The bus had left and I had to wait until my father came in from Pratt and Whitney in Hartford around 5-5:30 pm. In this job, he worked on aircraft parts and that's why he always had gas. And he could arrange his hours as a 12-hour workday was the rule.

Well, there is nothing like swimming and diving stark-naked. Try it sometime! For competitions, we were allowed to wear the suits with our school colors. And for several years, I had the best time ever.

Respectfully submitted, Jean Thibault Castagno

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