



C '49 TO C/K '09

by Ben Snyder, May, 2009
Remarks at School's Cum Laude Ceremony



Within a matter of weeks a group of distinguished alumni will return to campus. They are the Forty-niners, not the Klondike gold prospectors, but Cranbrook's graduating class of that year returning for their Sixtieth Reunion.

Their numbers have diminished as one might expect, but they come back to mind as my first encounter with the boys of that generation. At the time, they were renowned for their defiance of authority and their mischief-making. Many have remained close to each other ever since.

They are also remembered as a vintage class, meaning exceptional. To celebrate their coming, a replica of their yearbook has been published. As an update, it is a remarkable tribute to Cranbrook and a work of great substance.

It is well worth reading. Their story is not yet complete, but among them one finds nine PhDs, a worthy collection of attorneys and more than a few physicians, all wrapped up around a bouquet of reminiscence. Their years here together apparently were among the best of them all.

My purpose tonight is to compare their world with yours, same campus, similar traditions and then finally draw whatever conclusions are worth sharing.

To begin with, theirs was a Black and White world, the latter dominant, as the Schools were not integrated until almost a decade later. Television had not yet replaced radio as our primary source of news and entertainment. Computers were unknown.

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In those distant days, teachers were called 'Masters', jackets and ties required in class, frequent haircuts mandatory, chapel three times weekly (non-denominational but clearly Christian), family-style dining, student waiters, and Grace sung in Latin on Sundays.

Most importantly even in spite of a limited menu, the Schools were the center of social life, day students returned for plays, Saturday night films and the rare dance, more formal occasions than casual. In such a limited environment, the Forty-niners thrived.

In respect to athletics, Cranbrook competed in the interstate League against similar schools in faraway places, Ohio, Illinois, New York and Pennsylvania. On at least one occasion, teams traveled overnight to Cleveland by lake steamer.

Isolated from local competition, travel was by bus. Early morning departures brought out a crowd, students and faculty, bracing early morning chill to cheer their heroes on their way. And running counter to current practice in pre-feminist times, Kingswood contributed cheerleaders at home games, megaphones in hand.

Cranbrook School then was a traditional place, Kingswood possibly more so. On both sides of the lake, recognition went primarily to athletes and scholars with occasional bravos for those who starred in Gilbert and Sullivan operettas. *West Side Story* and *South Pacific* were yet to arrive on stage.

Except for the typing teacher, the Faculty was all-male, by 1949 many had been in place since the School first opened its doors. Success was largely measured by selective college acceptances. Most of the Forty-niners headed for the Ivy League or Ann Arbor.

When they neared Commencement as many of you are now, Harry Truman was in the White House and the Korean War, often overlooked in military history, was about to begin.

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When they walked down the aisle to the familiar strains of "Jerusalem" on that bright June morning, they were closing out the School's twenty-second year; its eightieth was celebrated not long ago. They then went their separate ways as all of you will. But they had an unusual cohesion, a band of brothers whose schoolboy days remained, as time passed, "still in the distance enchanted."

And now comes the hard part, comparing the then with the now. C-K today is wonderfully diverse, fully integrated with students from across the country and the world. What you take for granted in educational technology could not have been imagined in 1949.

Your world is infinitely smaller, in the sense of access by jet to almost any destination. Today it may be Detroit, but tomorrow Delhi or Dubai.

You also have close at hand such diversions as Black Berrys, I-pods text messages, Face Books and all the rest. Does the accumulation of such devices make it easier for you to deepen relationships or just the opposite? It is a question worth considering.

Granted that the world in which the Forty-Niners grew up was a simpler place and perhaps even more reassuring. Today's agenda includes concerns never dreamed of then -- global warming, gay marriage, the loss of privacy, economic collapse, the threat of pandemic disease, the spread of terrorism and particularly disturbing to most of your elders, the steady erosion of print journalism.

In light of such problems, what might those distinguished gentlemen suggest to those who follow in their path, Forty-Nine to 0-Nine? If they had a collective voice, it might go something like this: slow down, write a long and thoughtful letter to an old friend, make a phone call instead of just sending an E-mail, the former being more personal than the latter. And if you ever have the opportunity, assist one of our seniors cross a crowded street. Who knows? One day that might be you.

And, finally, when you return to this remarkable campus twenty, or thirty or forty or even 60 years on, I hope that your time here will also be 'in the distance enchanted' with old friendships as durable as ever as will the Forty-Niners when they come home again during the first week in June.