

THE GOLDEN AGE OF GILMAN

1913-1917

HERBERT E. PICKETT

When he left in 1940 to become Headmaster of Coopers-town Academy, Herbert Pickett was already a legendary figure at Gilman, where he had taught history and Bible for about twenty-five years. He was faculty adviser to the News, director of the school play, mentor of debating, and coach of the J. V. football team. These outlets proving insufficient for his talents, he was for many years a leading actor with Baltimore's theatrical group, the "Vagabonds."

Always in great demand as a public speaker, he addressed a large group of alumni at the Annual Banquet this October and with mountainous and stony-faced solemnity reduced his audience to helpless mirth. In the following article, Mr. Pickett reminisces about what he terms the "Golden Age" of Gilman.



The perpendicular pronoun is the shortest word-symbol in our language. For brevity I shall use it, let the chips from my modesty fall where they will. This is the portrait of an era, not a photograph. It is inaccurate. In my heavy-handed blue-pencil days I would have marked it 48% and hailed the author back on Saturday. It is purely recollection unsullied by research.

The golden age of Gilman began with my arrival on the faculty in the fall of 1913, a mere coincidence. It was started by the flight of the Gilman Country School from the encircling city at Homewood to settle in the rural environment of Roland Park. The school was a noble experiment originated and fostered by a group of young Baltimore parents seeking something new and better for their children. The world was basking in the false sun of universal peace. I was young. The school was young. My colleagues were either young or had been rejuvenated by the boyish spirit of their younger associates. There were less than a hundred and fifty students. It is hard to grasp such a picture a full forty years from the golden age.

The school and its surroundings were as lovely as they were inadequate. The only level spaces were the lawn in front of the one and only building and the terrace and playing field in the rear. A genuine forest covered the whole southern sector down to Deepdene. Sloping meadows and rolling hills with here and there a tree were marred only by four clay tennis courts up by Belvedere. The area across the tracks of the then still active Ma and Pa was pure jungle. It certainly was a "Country School".

The interior of the school was as new and charming as the house of a bride. At either side of the broad entrance was a lovely room. At the right, finished in brown and tastefully furnished, was the Faculty Room. Here mothers perched nervously, waiting to do battle with the Headmaster, or masters clustered briefly between mealtime bells. To the left was a luxurious sort of parlor. Like its prototype in ancient houses it was almost never used. Its magnificence did prepare the visitor for his first glimpse of the Common Room.

The floor of this broad hall was covered with oriental rugs. The dark oak and brown leather easy chairs and couches were invitingly arranged. Broad tables were piled with magazines. Fires were always laid and frequently burn-

ing in the transept fireplaces. Classical pictures and the portrait of a former headmaster above the grand piano completed the scene.

If the door was open, as it mostly was, one had a glimpse of the Gilman library. With fewer books and less functional furniture and more new chairs and couches, this was the social center of the school. It was seldom if ever used purely as a library. Here coffee was celebrated with great protocol and ceremony after each midday meal. Mrs. Pine poured and the ladies were always present. All but one of the masters carried on polite conversations for a half hour. That unfortunate, chosen in rigid rotation, dashed about the corridor and grounds to guard all property till the boys were safely herded into their study halls.

Mr. Pine and his family occupied the entire three floors south of the library in a somewhat dubious privacy. The rest of the building presented no startling contrasts to its present status although it has had many and curious changes. The same Via Dolorosa of class rooms lead to the gracious rooms at either end. The laboratory and its odors were then on this floor.

At the third level the north corridor was populated by the ladies of the faculty and the numerous white maids. The echoing cavernous loft thinly divided into cubicles, known as "The Cubes," was the south wing. A disciplinary monstrosity inherited from England via Groton, it functioned for many years. Fortunately the small boys residing here in the Golden Age were few and easily reduced to silence and sleep with the back of a hairbrush.

The basement featured a vast unfinished room called correctly the Omnibus Room, the kitchens, a low vaulted gymnasium where study and class rooms now prevail, and all the showers and locker rooms whose aroma blended stimulatingly with those of the lab.

Of course the infirmary was on the third floor too. How well I recall my first serious professional contact with that institution. It was sometime in my first year. I shared a study over the front door but slept in a corridor room and bathed in the communal bath at the end, mingling with my juvenile charges. This morning as I was shaving I was startled to see my chest all covered with pink blotches. I hastily sought the infirmary and thus embarked on a weird three weeks.

Nurse Lamb looked me over and called the school doctor. He went over the same ground and called a Trustee who was a distinguished medical authority. He also rubbed my spots. After a terrifying exchange of Latin phrases at my bedside and a prolonged murmur of voices beyond the door I was adjudged guilty of scarlet fever and sentenced to Sydenham. And there I was taken with ambulance, nurse, and interne. I did carry down my own bag and refused to lie in the stretcher, but I was carried off. A cordon of masters had guarded every approach to the hall. I know not what fumigation rites were then performed.

The Sydenham of that day was a low wooden shack behind Bayview. One wing housed diphtheria cases while the other took in the scarlet fever patients. All were children. There were two "private" rooms with a bath each. Here they put those children who came down with any other contagious disease. A mumps case was hurriedly removed from one room and I was inserted. My clothes were removed to be baked. I was given an abbreviated gown called a "Nightingale" designed for a child and not for one six feet and four inches. It hung about my neck like a bib and concealed nothing but my unexciting manly breast. And there I stayed for eighteen days.

I shall spare you my first embarrassing encounter with a type of thermometer commonly used for children but never seen before by me. Nor shall I mention the sensation at Smith when my wife-to-be received badly scorched envelopes addressed to her in a masculine hand. They baked all my outgoing mail. I never have felt better in my life but the law had to take its allotted course. At the end with my bag and clothes, feeling like one dismissed from the pen with no ten dollar bill, I boarded the Highlandtown trolley, stopped at Caye's for a haircut, and got back on my job. Some of the timid avoided me for a few weeks but all was soon forgotten.

Boys came to the school mostly by trolley or on foot. Autos were very few. No member of the faculty owned one till 1916. Then two combined resources to buy a used or more correctly abused one. The last lap of the street-car contingent was by Lakeside. These diminutive cars ran from the drug store and carbarns in the Park to a circle in the woods out beyond Belvedere, and so back to their starting place. For some reason no fare was ever charged, another unique facet of the Golden Age.

Each Lakeside was operated by two men chosen for their ability to control Gilman boys. They knew every one, they would carry packages and run errands, and they kept us abreast of the news of the day. The morning rush severely taxed them but the Lakeside always screeched, and bobbed, and ground to a successful stop before the school. To soap their tracks on Hallowe'en was the never omitted duty of some Gilman boy.

Pupils from the hinterland came to Mount Washington by train where they were met by a hired truck. It was my sad duty to supervise this trip. As the truck originated in Mount Washington I had to arise earlier than my colleagues, eat a lonely breakfast in an empty and frequently chilly dining room, and walk in all weathers down Belvedere, along Falls Road and so up to the station. The truck was provided with the sort of wooden benches found on the sidelines at football games. One could always tell what the truck had done the day before. We were lucky if it had lugged coal.

Football was our most important sport. Soccer pressed it hard but only in the winter when under the relentless rule of E. Boyd Morrow the soccer players churned the athletic field to hopeless mud every day of the week no matter what the weather. Baseball dominated the spring term with Tennis, a varsity sport also. I had come primarily as a track coach, as I saw it. I had prepared for many years for this profession and had come well fortified with notes and plans and diagrams. I had written my own letter of recommendation as track coach and Johnny Mack of Yale had signed it. Teaching history and English was merely an avenue to fame as a track coach.

My first and only squad consisted of five boys. One was an able track man whose parents feared and hated football. Another was hopefully trying track as a cure for flat feet. The other three considered track under an unknown as preferable to the perils of football or the tedium of tennis. After a few miserable weeks I was shifted to a more profitable employment, and the world lost a great track coach.

Our rivals were appropriate to our size. Our great enemy was Boys' Latin. The year before my arrival a fearful lacing had thrown us into mourning. The universal panacea for such ills, a new coach and the agility of Charley Slagle brought us sweet revenge in 1913, another nugget of the golden age. Marston, a proprietary school with the formal name of "The University School" was almost as important. We also played Friends and the now defunct Jefferson and Donaldson. Our opener was against a school for poor boys to whom we

annually gave our surplus equipment. These uniforms gave the game a curious intramural effect. We were almost as pleased as they the first year they scored on us. The name as I recall it was McDonogh.

As there were too few athletes to provide a suitable scrub team for practice it was an implied obligation of the younger and more athletic masters to supplement the reserves. Mr. Russell in his first week in 1915 had his tongue nearly cut in two during such an eager-beaver exhibition. What a loss that would have been to Gilman atmosphere!

Once we even had a formal game. We could muster nine players. Alumnus Charlie Latrobe and the superintendent of our grounds, Tom Oldham, were our ringers and played the tackles. Our offense was fullback and Latin teacher Alexander T. Ormond, late of Princeton and a subsequent Hopkins center when they played medical students.

The game ended abruptly with two touchdowns apiece when everything seemed to happen at once. The unfortunate Oldham was borne senseless from the field. The frightened boy drafted as the sole official was fleeing for his life. Assistant coach Bill Sherbourne was being revived after being clipped from behind by a student who claimed with patent insincerity that he had mistaken him for a player. Real bloodshed was averted only by the complete exhaustion of the faculty team. From higher up came the superfluous interdict, "Never again!"

My memories of the Open Air School must bring this virtuous narrative to a close. Medical authorities also had their golden age wherein they were convinced that human ills such as tuberculosis could be cured by exposure to lots of air. Someone made the logical deduction that if such treatment would cure the sick it would also embellish the health of the well. The Gilman Country Day School volunteered to try it. They erected two low brown wooden pavilions hard by the end of the Study Hall. Each had a roof and a floor and precious little in between. In all weather pupils and teachers studied and recited out there. When it was really cold they wore a sort of arctic regalia with parka, hood, and woolen pants. At the feet of each was a heated soapstone. Heavy mittens protected the hands. The only exposed area was the face—and presumably the mind. This system lasted with sundry humane amendments till the new Lower School was erected. I do not know the clinical results.

The golden age soon began to break up. We built a large wooden shed over a dirt floor and supplemented it by a broad platform in the open. This assembly was called the "Cage" formally and the "Murpheum" normally, after the physical director who promoted it. It blew down shortly after it was built. Another master and I had just left it or I should even now be eying you from a bronze plaque. It was rebuilt and used till the new gym appeared. Mr. Pine and his family escaped in 1916 to the fine headmaster's house now worthily occupied by the Callards.

Finally there was the war year when patriotic people plowed up front lawns to help with the food supply. We prepared a sloping meadow where the gymnasium now stands and I supervised a hundred and twenty boys divided into teams of two who cultivated sixty plots, each 30 by 60 feet. Mr. Este Fisher awarded a prize to Ed Stinson and John Gordon. I know not what share the project had in eventual victory. I only know that a certain archduke was blown to bits and so was the world in which he lived.

After World War I came prosperity and growth. Our Gilman paradise perished like its predecessor on the lower Tigris, a victim to the mad desire to partake of the fruit of the tree of knowledge.



"... human ills . . . could be cured by exposure to lots of air."

5316 Tilbury Way
Baltimore 12, Md.
19 January 1960

Editor, the *Alumni Bulletin*.

Dear Sir:

I have noted with regret that in your otherwise excellent *Bulletin*, you devote most of your space to the very recent past—say the past fifty years—with a consequent sad neglect of the most important period in the history of the Gilman Country School.

Need I add that this most important period was from the founding of the school until 1908?

This was the formative period in the School's history. It was at *this time* that the high standards were set and the traditions established which have been the pride of the school ever since.

In this period future editors (and in fact future School Trustees) like Frank Beirne, were learning to write through the medium of *The Blue and the Gray*. Future judges like Freddy Brune were gaining their first crude ideas of justice; and future Health Commissioners like Huntington Williams were laying the foundations of their own health in a School Track Tournament. Among the very young was little David Bruce, beginning to learn the art of diplomacy in his dealings with his classmates. It was the period of Lewis Robinson and of Clapham Murray, better known as Young Cicero.

Herbert Pickett has written of the "Golden Age of Gilman." Let him keep his title. I do not dispute it. I invite your attention, Sir, to the "*HEROIC Age of Gilman*"!

In this age Men were Men. As evidence I submit for your publication a picture of William Starr Myers (taken in 1906), outstanding for the interest of his history classes.

In that same age Boys were Boys, and had a mighty good time being boys. As evidence see the officials in the 1906 School football game of Subs vs. Scrubs. Left to right are those well known athletes: John Baylor, coach; Billy Howard, umpire; Fred Fulton, time keeper; Frank Beirne, Referee; and Bobby Ober, linesman.

I am, Sir, with great respect, your obedient servant,

WASHINGTON PLATT, ex '08,
formerly Assistant Editor, *The Blue and The Gray*, at present,
Runner-up for Oldest Living Graduate.



Officials: Subs vs Scrubs 1906. John Baylor, Billy Howard, Fred Fulton, Frank Beirne, and Bobby Ober.

William Starr Myers, history teacher at the Country School in 1906; later, professor of politics at Princeton University.



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The following self-explanatory note from General Washington Platt, '08, was sent to us shortly before the death of Mr. Pickett. It presents a recent sally from Mr. Pickett himself, an example of the bantering controversy which he so loved.

Editor, the *Alumni Bulletin*.

Dear Sir:

In the 1960 issue of the *Bulletin* you were kind enough to print a letter from me describing what I termed "The Heroic Age of Gilman," and in which I made an invidious comparison with an article by Herbert Pickett which he had entitled "The Golden Age of Gilman." [1958 *Alumni Bulletin*.]

Pickett makes the following smashing counter-attack. He has given me permission to pass on to you for publication the appropriate parts which are given below.

Sincerely yours,
s/ WASHINGTON PLATT, ex '08

* * * *

Hyde Bay
Camp for Boys
Cooperstown, N. Y.

I should be the last to take from that glorious band, that favored few, the distinction of having created the "Heroic Age" of Gilman. There is a small element of feeling that "The Age of Fable" might be more appropriate. But that is due to the recontour ability of such men as you and the notorious Beirne. I wish I knew how to spell that one word.

You barefoot boys trudging your weary miles through the scrub which surrounded Homewood, alert to Indian attack, crudely dressed in the skins of beasts, (such as mink), subsisting off the country, and yet absorbing knowledge at every step! As you say, at that time men could be properly classified as men. Small wonder you drove the fierce-visaged Myers to exile in Princeton.

We moved in to enjoy the fruit of your labors before Progress came in with its motley host and made the place into a modern school, full of activity, worry, and efficiency. Aye, it was the Golden Age!

Yours,
s/ HERBERT