

Polytechnic Bids Farewell To Elmer Harn

By ELLIS T. BAKER JR.

IF it hadn't been for the stubbornness of the young lady who later became his wife, Elmer Harn, who retired two weeks ago after thirty-seven years as a teacher at Polytechnic Institute, might have spent his life in a newspaper city room instead of behind a professor's flannel shirt.

For so long as he worked at being a newspaperman, the future Mrs. Harn wouldn't have him. "I followed after that girl for nine years," he explains, as if recalling a losing battle, "but she said she would never marry a newspaperman, who changed night into day."

So, as any good Irishman would, Mr. Harn "chased the job for the girl" and turned to teaching. And he has never regretted the choice. He considers it the wisest thing he ever did.

In that, more of the thousands of students he taught at Polytechnic in the past three-and-a-half decades will agree, regardless of the merits of the musical and literary criticisms which made up most of his newspaper writings.

An Unpredictable Manner

They remember him, more and more fondly as the years within the focus of a more mature perspective, as a wild-eyed, emotional and highly eccentric Irishman, who was just as often in trouble with the school administration as they were themselves.

His manner of teaching was informal and unpredictable. He would sit upon his desk, or in a window, or stand with one foot on a chair. In short, his manners were largely those of the newsroom, for whose sloppy freedom he has always borne a great fondness.

He never placed much stock in textbooks, or the teacher who instructed by them. And, happily for his pupils, he never felt unduly constrained to follow even his own assignment sheet. Instead of the lectures of Harn, as announced, his students might receive a dissertation upon the mating habits of penguins (come, having coincidentally appeared in the classroom window) with only the very pick and snore of the Hamlet problem retouched into the period's final two minutes.

Widely Informal

He impressed his students, and does even yet, as being one of those rare persons whose talk deserves the adjective "brilliant," even as the most banal of subjects. In his mouth, the art of fishing and the choice and construction of fish, for example (which he for one would never expect to hear of again), become almost an epic.

As a teacher, he had a keen quiet sense of humor and an immense and sudden Irish temper. "Be quiet," he'd address his class preparatory to a lecture. "I have a few points to call."

He lost his temper when he lost it, in a most wonderful fashion. He rarely, if ever, allowed himself the luxury of profanity and he even more rarely the refuge of hurling blackboard erasers. But in his students it sometimes seemed as if he were capable of hitting and throwing his whole desk, he alone in exact.

Even before John Keegan became a sort of human semi-automatic device by which to measure prodigy of whatever age, Mr. Harn im-

pressed his students as enormously and disarmingly informed on all manner of things. His memory, especially for poetry, was and is prodigious. Not only can he quote some after some from Shakespeare, for example, but he can quote the changes in the names from edition to edition.

He had a preference for red ties, which time has colored to black, and like every good Irishman, loved a fight.

Nothing Like A Fight

He got into the thick of one at the first City-Poly game after he joined the Polytechnic faculty in 1904. Obviously, he, an instructor, was supposed to separate the struggling students. Instead, he encouraged the Poly youth himself, and capitalized upon the confusion to knock off with his cane the hat from the head of the Polytechnic vice-principal, for whom he had small one, then or now.

Later that afternoon, he was called before the principal, who was then William R. King. "Mr. Harn," said the principal, "your action this afternoon was highly reprehensible, simply reprehensible—but it was the best thing you've ever done."

"Yes, I always enjoyed those City-Poly fights," Mr. Harn smiles in retrospect, "and would yet, if they hadn't moved them out to the Stadium, where I can't get to 'em."

As a matter of fact, Mr. Harn has had to fight for much of the success which has been his in life. He was born, the son of a cotton-mill worker, in Allertown, in Howard county, on April 7, 1870. April 7 that year happened to fall on Good Friday and he had to wait sixty-nine years before his birthday fell on Good Friday again.

As a youth Mr. Harn did mill work, while waiting and other odd jobs to work his way toward college.

His mother, who was an Evans, traced her ancestry back to William Bradford, the second Governor of Plymouth colony, and of this genealogical blue ribbon Mr. Harn has always been very proud.

Got Book About Protestants

He entered Rose Hill College, a parochial school at Ellicott City, in 1889. Although he had no high school education, having studied independently with preachers, and knew no foreign languages, he graduated in three years, with French, Latin and Greek. He was awarded a book, "The History of the Protestant Revolution," for his proficiency in Latin, and the faculty medal for "mental philosophy." This alone of all the medals and charms a scholar collects over a lifetime he still wears. The others, he says laughingly, he pawned.

His first teaching position was at a little elementary school at Reisterstown Hills, where he was a pedagogical lack-of-all-trades. Former Governor Warfield was the first man to teach at Reisterstown Mills and Mr. Harn the last. Mr. Harn says Warfield jokingly accused him of derailing the school.

For four years he was principal of the graded schools at Ellicott City and then he went back

to Rock Hill College as an instructor for a year. Then he taught Greek and mathematics. Then came the nightmare that was five years of newspaper vagabondage. "I hit the high spots of life," Mr. Harn says of those turbulent years in what is probably a masterpiece of understatement. His marriage to Miss Pauline Mayfield—for that was the stubborn young lady's name—was a turning point in his life.

He started teaching again at Calvert Hall, where once again he instructed in Greek and mathematics . . . and Latin, which, he says, he always hated.

After two years, he went to Pittsburgh to work in the office of a telephone company, was taken ill and returned to Baltimore to become a member of the secret service of the United Railway. The purpose of this job, Mr. Harn explains, "was to stop leakage on the line; the good men were rewarded, the bad one fired."

"But I didn't like the work," he says, "I had to work every other Sunday."

Finally, in 1904 he landed in Polytechnic to start. He—upon the secret can be told—he first applied for a position at City and got one at Poly only because there were no vacancies at City.

At Poly he taught English from the very beginning. He had started to teach English at Calvert Hall when the regular English teacher died. Because he had done newspaper work the good fathers thought he should know something about English, and, by almost unperceived coincidences, he did.

Mr. Harn died fourteen years ago, having an end to a marriage of high and rare devotions. At about the same time, Mr. Harn finally gave up contributing to newspapers, which he had done, at sparse rates, sporadically ever since the great vacation.

Now Lives Alone

Now he lives alone in a converted apartment at Forest Park. The front room is bath his living room and his office. There are bookcases on either side of the folding doors at its rear and old poems and words hang from its walls.

He is not to greet a caller in smoking jacket and a high, stiff collar, a label of his generation he has never seen fit to discard. The first thing he normally does is proffer a drink. Rye, Scotch, Bourbon—anything you desire, he explains, except rum and gin. Then he excuses himself from joining you because he is to have wine with his dinner instead.

He hasn't changed much in appearance through the years. He is tall, spare and modestly erect. His hair, now white, is a contemporary straight back from his forehead. His mind is still lightning quick.

And he is still unreservedly outspoken and quick to flare at the mention of persons or things for which he has no respect.

Ask him if he knows professor Such-and-such, a contemporary of whom you are fond and whom you therefore think will make a nice conversational bond, and, likely as not, he'll answer, "Certainly I know him; he's a damn fool."

But unless you know Mr. Harn, you can never be sure whether he intends such a pronouncement as a term of opprobrium or endearment. Such emphatic exaggerations are all a part of the ornate, climactic language with which he clothes his simplest thoughts.

Last To See Billy Alive

For example, it was typical that he should battle through the years with his first principal at Polytechnic, King, and yet at the end value him as one of his dearest friends. And it was equally typical that he should describe their last moment together, just before King's death, as he did.

"I was the last to see Billy King alive," he recalled, "I took him a bottle of whiskey, and he kissed me on the cheek."

For companions, Mr. Harn has a housekeeper and a tuxedo named Kingfish. The first time you visit him, he poses Kingfish on his hand legs on a dining room chair and, manipulating the cat's forelegs in forensic gestures, requests that he give his speech for the guest. The speech, actually delivered by Mr. Harn after the manner of a poor amateur ventriloquist, turns out invariably to be some manner of diatribe against the President. Too much spending, says Mr. Harn, returning to his natural voice, too much spending.

He thinks there are a lot of things wrong with public schools, but that is another story. He is writing what he calls a report on his "viewship" in the schools for Dr. Virginia's eyes alone.

Great Stakes With Fishing

If the doctor sees fit to discuss its contents, well and good; if not, Mr. Harn will keep his piece as best he can.

Fishing is his consuming hobby and greatest pride. Twenty rods, all made by himself, hang on his dining-room wall; 600 flies, all tied by his hands, are filed in his desk drawers.

He's very proud of his flies, which he gives to other fishermen. "Aren't they pretty?" He asks, fingering the colorful strands. "They've all got names, too; there's a Mickey Finn, there's a Tiger; there's Black Ghost. Yeah, I've made a lot of friends with these flies."

Follows The Fish

Mr. Harn says he fishes wherever there are fish to be had. During the summer months he fishes mostly near Syracuse, where both his son and daughter have homes and where he knows twenty-six good fishing streams.

He maintains a room in both his son's house and his daughter's house in Syracuse. "Then when one of them does something I don't like," he laughs, "I can go over and stay with the other until I cool off."

He has two lesser hobbies. Poetry is one and being a "jester" is the other.

Now, for the first time in a busy life, he has more time than he knows what to do with. But he has a tentative schedule mapped out.

"I'll last six months," he says, "then I'll review my Greek and mathematics, and then I'll write my obituary and go to sleep."

But everyone knows Elmer Harn will find a great deal more time to fish than that.



Elmer Harn with Kingfish

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Mon, Mar 30, 2020