

Vintage Brown...

The Early Days of AUC

My former colleagues and students never tire of telling me how much the College has progressed since my retirement. There is, for example, the major increase in enrolment, the new George Leach Athletic centre, and the raised hopes for independence. Indeed, this is such a constant refrain that I am led to suspect that the rate of College advancement would have been all the more remarkable had I retired at an earlier date.

Nevertheless, it remains true that the College regards its superannuated faculty as highly useful adornments, especially since advanced age and inactivity has rendered them both harmless and humble (we are at our most humble on the day we receive our pension cheques.) One policy, evidently, is to anoint anything not breathing or moving with the name of a former professor. For example, there is to be an Ian W. Brown East Lounge and Rest-rooms. And I am given to understand that at some future time there will be a J Kenneth McLarty West Stairwell and a Robert G. Ewing Furnace Room.

Former faculty are also on occasion asked to record their reminiscences of the past for the edification of current students and of alumni. Our current students, and recent graduates, having experienced the luxurious facilities, sophisticated administration, mature student government, and abundant faculty resources of the present may not appreciate the more Spartan conditions of the College's early years. I thought, therefore, that I might use this occasion to say something about College facilities and life in the days before the move to Shingwauk campus.

In 1967 the College began operations on the present Sault College site. (Sault College was then known as Cambrian College.) We were set up in a small complex of "tin" Butler buildings. These buildings were not owned by us: some wooden portables were, and a few of these are still in use on our present campus twenty five years later (although we had been promised that they were for "temporary" use only). It was not long before increasing enrolment and the expanding complexity of programmes made our situation critical. It should be remembered that by some five years or so after its founding AUC had, for a brief moment at least, the highest enrolment of part-time students of any university in Ontario. We couldn't fit all our classes into the Butler buildings and the portables and so had to make extensive use of Cambrian College classrooms. This made scheduling difficult since we had to conform to their needs for their own classrooms. In fact the classroom situation became so critical that we had to take over the old Prince Charles elementary school across the road. This school had been condemned for use by public school students but was evidently suitable for use by our students. We had so many Psychology students at the time that the old Prince Charles school became known as the "Psychology Annex". Because of stringent funding much of the renovation had to be done by our own faculty and administration; in fact the Acting-Principal of the day, who nobody accused of being overly-swift, ended up in the hospital with a nail in his foot.

We might note in passing that the total administration of that era consisted of an Acting-Principal, who thought he ran the place, a Registrar (who doubled as Business Officer) who thought he ran the place, and a Principal's secretary, who actually did run the place.

The Butler buildings certainly did not constitute an ideal teaching and learning centre for us. When it stormed we had to cancel classes because the voices of our faculty could not be heard over the thunder of rain on the metal roofs. After the initial years our growing library collection could not be contained within an area that was equivalent in size to a single classroom. We had no labs of our own so our science labs had to be scheduled around Cambrian College use of its lab facilities. Because of the heavy pressure on existing lab space the materials for our Physics, Chemistry and Biology courses could not be stored in the Cambrian College labs. So every morning our science faculty had to stuff their pockets with chemicals, Physics equipment, and pickled rats, frogs and sundry other creatures, and make their way over to the Cambrian College buildings. These itinerant AUC science faculty were highly toxic, highly flammable, and often foul-smelling.

Our mutterings of discontent fell on deaf ears, at least as far as the governmental authorities were concerned. However, our space needs did receive thoughtful consideration from a group of Lake Superior State College students across the river. In 1968 or 1969, evidently with the connivance of Customs officials on both sides, they transported a one-holer wooden outhouse across the bridge, located it near our front entrance, and identified it as the "New Algoma College Annex". The Lake State students were kind enough to advise the Soo Star of their efforts, and reporters and photographers were on hand to witness AUC's reaction to this international "aid package".

If this might be termed an incident with an international dimension, the College in its early years also witnessed a significant national political incident. This became known as the "Stanfield Affair", and we are confident that it will receive space in our history books appropriate to its magnitude. The local Tory establishment (most of whom sat on our Board of Governors) decided that it would be a "good thing" to have the national leader of the Conservative party visit our campus. Certain fanatically radical members of our student body (most of whom later became steel plant executives, lawyers, and accountants) decided that it would be an equally "good thing" to bar entry to the visiting VIP's by running a padlocked chain through the handles of the main entrance doors. This left a discomfited Chairman of the Board and Principal grinning stupidly through the glass at a tolerantly amused Stanfield and a Tory delegation that was not amused at all.

These early years also saw the first horrendous clash between the two Titanic forces developing within the College – Student Government and Administration. In 1969 the Student Council decided to get really tough – they included a clause within the student government constitution authorizing the Council to fine anyone caught “swearing” on campus. The gutsy Principal of the day vetoed this on the spot. Nobody really cared if the students fined themselves into oblivion, but the faculty, who were particularly vulnerable in this area, were reduced to a state of quivering terror.

We don't want to leave the impression that the Student's Council of the day viewed its main function as that of an anti-vice squad. They also worked assiduously at organizing parties. Naturally, the College had no real “party” space so these affairs generally flowed through the minute student lounge, the central foyer, the various classrooms (which, theoretically, were locked), and even the wooden portables “out back”. (It was thought wise to remain in ignorance of any activity in these latter areas.) These parties were used by anti-administration forces as a major device for humiliating the intrepid leaders of the institution. Cambrian College security and cleaning staff refused any responsibility for these affairs. When a party finally subsided participating students and faculty expressed themselves as being marvelously exhausted and went straight home (or so they claimed.) It was not an uncommon sight at 2 or 3 am, therefore, to see the Principal and his indomitable Secretary busy at work with mop and broom and hiding beer bottles. The alternative was to take a tongue-lashing from Cambrian College staff in the morning.

The quest for more appropriate facilities continued. A previous Ministry had advised College authorities, before operations had actually begun, to acquire all the land they could. In the early 1960's, therefore, as a gift by City Council, the College had acquired several hundred acres on the Fourth Line. Now, desperate for space, the College Board bluntly announced that the whole operation would be moved to that site. The government response was swift and to the point-there would be no financial support for operations on the Fourth Line site, and specifically there would be no capital provided for new buildings.

The alternatives then considered by administration and faculty indicate how serious the facilities problem had become by the late 1960's. Teams were sent out to reconnoiter various abandoned stores on Queen Street to see if it was possible to set up a “store-front” campus right in the down-town core. At one point we hinted that it would be a kind gesture to turn the Armouries over to us as a new College home. The local military establishment did not take kindly to this suggestion.

Admittedly, there was always an ulterior motive behind our quest for a physical facility of our own. We felt, and the future was to prove us right, that until we were firmly anchored there would always be forces seeking to amalgamate us with some other institution, or to close us down altogether. We suspected that the move for an “international university” would result in an institution whose physical facilities and programmes were almost entirely on the other side of the river. (Here we were absolutely right, for the royal Commission, in its final report, sought to achieve an “international” institution by closing the College down entirely and shipping its students and its educational assets, including its Library, across the river.) We hoped, therefore, to move in directions that would make the College difficult to be “swallowed up” or obliterated- that is, to achieve a campus and buildings of our own, establish legitimate “associate” institutions (such as a music establish conservatory and a native institute), act as a “broker” for programmes offered by other institutions, and establish academic and recreational programmes that would further integrate us with the local community.

We thought, in 1971, that we had achieved security in safe anchorage on the Shingwauk site but the Royal Commission later proved us to be over-confident. Perhaps now, the capital invested in the Arthur Wishart Library and the George Leach Centre, as well as an effective working relationship with native peoples on a site rich in historical significance, will provide a “presence” that guarantees some security for the future.

The College, for once, was pretty feisty in moving to the Shingwauk site. On a previous occasion we had sought prior government permission for a move to the Fourth Line site, and had been blocked. This time we simply informed the authorities that we were making the move, and never asked for, or received, prior explicit approval. This was a dicey situation because the only secured financing we had to support the move was own surplus operating funds, and such funds were not supposed to be used for capital expenditures. However, we had little choice. Our classes were now dispersed throughout the Butler buildings, Sault College buildings, our portables, the old Price Charles School, and the city school system. Laurentian was about to approve a full three-year programme for us and there was no way that we could offer such an expanded programme out of the Butler buildings and other borrowed space.,

When we moved, the Butler buildings were taken over by the School of Nursing. ironically, the School of Nursing immediately had funds made available for the upgrading of these buildings into a decent teaching and learning environment.

It is with some chagrin, considering the conditions with which our rapidly expanding College had had to put up with, that we recall the head of the Royal Commission criticizing our decision to make this move and remarking upon our obsession for “bricks and mortar”. No doubt, being a representative of the under-privileged and hard-done-by southern Ontario university establishment, he was envious of the “luxurious” accommodations we were enjoying on the Shingwauk site.

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