

PAST TIMES: STORIES FROM THE SHELDON'S PAST

1919 Yearbook Shows Kids Haven't Changed That Much

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June is high school graduation month, and we will soon be congratulating this year's fresh-faced and slouchy-panted seniors. Wired to their iPods and cell phones, they head off to the future imbued with a sense of their own originality. The feelings that are new to them must surely be unique.

How much have kids really changed? We got some insight into this at the Sheldon Museum recently via an unexpected donation. Ellie Bliss brought in a cream colored volume with the title "Echoes of M.H.S.," left to her by her father, Allen Douglass Bliss, of the Middlebury High School Class of 1919. The book contains four numbers of a monthly school paper published during 1918 and 1919. It was edited by Russell Pratt, Class of '20, and single copies sold for five cents.

The first issue begins with the editor lamenting the lack of school spirit at Middlebury High School. "How can we awaken the school spirit of M.H.S.? Surely, it cannot be entirely dead, though it has not been in evidence for the last three or four years." In his lengthy disquisition on this subject, he never mentions that the country—even Middlebury—might have been a bit preoccupied with the Great War. Instead, he blames the girls, saying that they dampen school spirit through, "the rigid system of "cliques" around here. We cannot work together for a common end if there are one or more persons in every five or six whom we are "down on." Nothing new there, alas.

School spirit was not helped by the generally poor showing of the Middlebury teams. The baseball team did not seem to have much fielding, judging by their 24-8 drubbing by West Rutland High School. The farm boys of Bridport School beat the townies on a regular basis, though Middlebury once managed to wallop the Vergennes Industrial School 14-2.

The paper was also full of coy references to high school romances: "If Taylor broke his nose would Margaret Care-a-gain?" "Jesse Baldwin is fond of music, especially Carrolls." "Haynes was decorated for valor, having withstood the charms of Miss Brown...for a

week, under heavy fire.” Kids could feel they were under surveillance in a small town, the paper issuing a: “WARNING. High school students beware; watch your actions in front of Calvi’s, for a detective agency is installed in the upper part of Battell Block.”

The earnest young writers of M.H.S. included numerous morality tales, in hopes of molding the characters of their classmates. An essay entitled, “Grind,” tries to put some positive spin on that cruel label for hard workers, since they all know that “Too many students, now-a-days, work spasmodically.” An uplifting example follows: “One day, a father brought his son to the principal of a school and inquired, “How soon can you educate my boy? I don’t want him to go through a lot of unnecessary grind.” “That depends,” replied his principal, “on what you want to make of him. God can make a squash in three months but it takes him a hundred years to make an oak.” Gotcha!

The paper quotes quips made by teachers in the course of trying to till the squash fields of their classrooms: “Mr. Harriman to the class, “Isn’t it too bad that Leonard’s head isn’t made of glass so that we can see whether or not the wheels are turning?”” Today’s parents would probably call and complain about that one.

The kids of 1919 were doing homework, playing ball and falling in love pretty much like the kids of 2006, but for one great difference. World War I was just winding down in Europe, and it is constantly pushing its way into their thoughts. The school Victory Drive to raise money for ‘organizations engaged in war work’ sets class against class for fundraising. The juniors won, bringing in \$156.50 of a school total of over \$500.

The Great War was a young man’s war, and the February 1919 issue of the M.H.S. paper contained a “High School Honor List,” showing 76 alums currently serving. Many surnames still familiar in Addison County today: Cole, Shaw, Myrick, Goodroe, Fletcher, Farnham, Calvi, Calhoun...

As their units were disbanded, the paper lists the returning servicemen and tells what they are doing now. Each terse account hints at a greater story.

“Webster Barter has received an honorable discharge from the army, where he held a position in a band, and is now in Middlebury, peddling stockings.”

“Harry Burns has been promoted to the rank of captain as a reward of bravery in the Battle of the Marne.”

“Forest Myrick has been honorably discharged from the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps...and is at his home in Bridport.”

One young woman gets a mention: “Lillian Fletcher, ’18,’ is employed in government work at Washington.”

What can it have been like to grow up isolated in rural Vermont, having seen no

television images of foreign places, only to find yourself under enemy fire in France? Imagine coming back, with a head full of memories of the Marne, to sell socks on Merchants Row. One day you are training to be an officer, and the next you are safely back on the farm in Bridport.

The school paper features a letter from a young local, Dan Yates, writing home to Middlebury to tell about his wartime visit to Paris, three months after the War ended on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918. He writes how he and his buddies got passes to take the train from La Rochelle to the French capital. They chose to stay at the Red Cross rather than the YMCA, because it was cheaper and didn't tell a guy what to do. It was a weekend of wide-eyed sightseeing, beginning with the Place de la Concorde, for "Here is where the captured German Guns are. There are all kinds and sizes. On them are written where taken and by whom and when." After daily rounds of museums and nights in the clubs, the highlight of Paris turned out to be the Red Cross party, where the soldiers got to "dance with real American women once more...we didn't have time to do that while some of us were hunting after subs." (Note to the Class of 2006: he meant submarines, not grinders).

The graduates of 1919, like those of today, were more interested in the future than in the past. One of the best passages in "Echoes of M.H.S." comes in an essay called "Looking Ahead," by someone with the initials P.F. The author comes back to his hometown nearly fifty years in the future, and is shocked by what he finds. "As the train drew near Middlebury, one day in the summer of 1965, I looked in vain for the familiar haunts of my childhood, but none were to be seen. Even the banks of the old swimming hole were lined with factories and tenements." In a Middlebury that sounds much like Chicago, P.F. got out at a large station and "took the elevated up street, and descended at Calvi Avenue, where old Joe used to hold sway. His place was now filled by descendants of his royal line." The story continues, as the author reconnects with many of his high school friends, now old but still very fond of sundaes.

Sometimes history shows us how much people and places have changed, and other times it shows us how much we are the same. P.F. might be relieved to discover that he could still find his way around the heart of Middlebury. And thanks to Ellie Bliss's gift, the graduates of 2006 can know that the kids of 1919 were also having crushes, eating ice cream, teasing their friends and doing their schoolwork while the guns of war boomed far away from their village green.