

Memories of Oberlin College in the 1940s

by James K. Sunshine '49

Whenever I go back to Oberlin, which is every few years, I am astounded at the changes I see on every side. The new science center is the latest and probably the grandest evidence that I am not where I once was. The streets are the same, an occasional building looks as it always did, and the downtown seems, if anything, more down at the heels. Of course the Apollo is still there, but on the whole, the College seems vastly different from what it was 60 years ago in manners, morals, and physical appearance.

October 3, 1942, the beginning of Freshman Week, was an unusually bright fall day in Oberlin. In Elmwood, an old yellow house on Elm Street, it was lunchtime. Twenty young women who were to live there in what was then a typical Oberlin dormitory, and as many young men, gathered in a comfortable, somewhat shabby living room waiting to be called in to lunch. Since they were meeting each other for the first time they were self-consciously doing their best to seem bright and unconcerned. On most days, lunch was served at exactly 12:30 p.m., 10 minutes after the end of the 20-minute noon chapel, which before World War II every student would have attended because “regular attendance” was required and seats were assigned.

But this was a Saturday and the first day freshmen were on campus. They trooped into the dining room, taking seats at round tables for eight covered in white linen with a napkin and silverware beside each place. A small birdlike woman in her sixties presided over the room. Young men in white jackets, a year or so older than the freshmen and working for their part of their board bill, carried trays laden with family-style bowls of chicken, mashed potato, and green beans through the room and placed them on the tables. The birdlike woman, whose name was Mrs. Hayward, and who, as housemother, was in total charge of the manners, habits, and morals of the young women in her house, unmistakably *in loco parentis*, explained that when she touched her fork, it was a signal that we could begin eating, but that, of course, someone would say grace first. Someone did, and we ate.

As the meal progressed, Mrs. Hayward instructed us on acceptable manners, ignoring the possibility that we might have first been so instructed by our parents. Coming into the dining room to our assigned tables, we were to pull out the chair for the young woman on our right. We were not to eat until Mrs. Hayward signaled. We could pick up chicken and rolls with our fingers, but nothing else, and so on.

Such was my first day and my first meal on the Oberlin campus. Today, Elmwood is gone, as are my other dining halls, Grey Gables and Pyle Inn, where I ate after the war. Housemothers are gone, even the terrifying Mrs. Locke at May Cottage who used to patrol her parlors to catch snuggling couples. But a number of the people I met at Elmwood, and the young men who lived with me in the Third East section of the Men’s Building, dubbed the “MB” and now called by its donor’s name, Wilder, have been my closest friends for the past 62 years.

It is not unheard of for Oberlin graduates to persist in friendship for a long time although perhaps 62 years is something of a record. To recall something of the lives of those I knew and the College as we knew it may be of interest to more recent generations, or it should be, because the College as we knew it is long gone. And to trace even briefly the trajectory of these lives may be reassuring to those generations who fear there may not be life after Oberlin. To still others of a historical bent, it will be interesting to read of what it was like to live in a simpler college in a simpler time.

You have to remember that my class bridged World War II. We came in 1942, when the war was young, the men going off to the service a semester or a year later, not to return until 1946. But most of us who had started together did return. Those who did not are now remembered in bronze in the little garden beside Finney Chapel. Occasionally, when I return to the campus, I see students sitting there studying in the sun, and I wonder what they think of the names on the wall. I wonder if they even see them.

A group of us came together that spring of 1946 to eat at a corner table at Grey Gables on West College Street, another old residence converted into a women's dormitory. There were several men back from three years in the service (I was one) and a number of women we had known as freshmen in 1942, who were now seniors a semester short of graduation. With me at that table were Caroline Morris, Jean Garcide, Frances Skinner, Midge Garrett, Bob Avery, and Dave Fowler. One other was Jean Reitsman, but she sat at the head table by virtue of her position as dining hall chaplain. It was her task to pray for us before we ate.

By 1949, however, as graduations and marriages in Fairchild Chapel occurred, we had separated, frequently calling on each other in different parts of the country where first jobs took us, but not to come together again as a group until 1982. From then on we have gathered every summer at someone's home or summer cottage, although each year now it seems we lose someone.

Recently I attended an eightieth birthday party in Vermont for my freshman year roommate, and there met someone of that age who had gone to the University of Michigan, which in his day had some 10,000 students and today has 30,000 or more. He was astonished that many of those in the room had been close friends for six decades, having met first in an Oberlin dining hall. He had not, he told me, heard from a single classmate since his graduation.

"Oberlin is Peculiar in That Which is Good" was one of several aphorisms inscribed on the dining room lampshades of the old Oberlin Inn, the comfortable nineteenth-century predecessor of the unfortunate monstrosity that now occupies the corner of Main and East College streets. The origins of the aphorism are lost, but if most definitions have changed, this one is still essentially true. Nevertheless, if those who were students before World War II were to return today (as some still do), they would be astounded at the changes in the College they knew. What is more, if the students of today could somehow be transported back to that time nearly 70 years ago that I am describing, they would not believe their eyes. Nor, I am afraid, would they stay long.

The College of that time was simple, innocent, self-consciously virtuous, God-fearing, Midwestern, and very hard working. To say students were serious about their studies would be to

understate the case. The level of work demanded by the star professors of the time was extraordinarily high. Men like Frederick B. Artz and Robert Fletcher in history, L. E. Cole in psychology, J. D. Lewis in political science, Warren Taylor and Andrew Bongiorno in English, and Loren Eiseley in sociology were regarded almost with adoration and occasionally with fear. After the war, a charismatic young history professor named Harvey Goldberg arrived and astonished his classes and much of the campus with incandescent lectures on European economic history. With the Cold War and the civil rights movement heating up, political liberalism and race relations began to dominate conversation, and Goldberg became a leading speaker at “Arch 7” mass meetings held after supper on the steps of the Memorial Arch to protest the latest iniquity in Washington, DC.

Before the war the College was quite small. There were scarcely more than 1,800 students in the whole place in 1942. It was customary to say a polite “good morning” to anyone you met walking across Tappan Square, even if you were not otherwise acquainted. A century earlier, President Finney had called it “God’s college,” and there wasn’t much doubt that it was, as was said in the catalog, “an avowedly Christian college.” Many students and faculty went to First Church (“Congregational”) on the corner every Sunday. Sometime in the early weeks of that first semester of 1942, the scholarly President Wilkins offered the noontime Finney Chapel session his own poetry, something about “Oberlin in October,” which included lines recalling “Sunday morning and a white surpliced choir.” Of course, there were students of other Protestant faiths and a few Jews, but no Roman Catholics that I knew of. Even after the war, Sunday noon dinner was always preceded by the singing of the Doxology and by the Lord’s Prayer. It was still, indeed, “God’s college.”

It was the tail end of the Depression, so most of us were not wealthy. The college fees, miniscule by today’s standards, were substantial to us. Tuition was \$150 per term, board \$120, and room \$60. The job as editor of the *Review* paid \$15 a week and was much sought after.

Board jobs, as they were called, were important. Squads of upperclassmen in white jackets were at every meal, carrying trays of food to the tables. There were jobs in the kitchen of every dining hall for dishwashers, pot and pan scrubbers, and waiters. Each women’s dorm employed shifts of young women “on bells,” meaning that they answered the single telephone in the house and signed young women in and out in the evening. The meaning was plain: the College demanded to know where its young women were at all times. The so-called “parietel rules” called for freshman women to be in the dorm by 8:30 p.m. on five nights of the week if they were not at Carnegie Library, with lights out at 10 p.m. At times some continued studying by flashlight in their closets. Saturday nights were the exception. Young women could stay out until midnight. On Saturdays, upperclass women could go with a date to Cleveland, 90 minutes away by bus, but their destinations, and their return, were recorded at the bell desk. A limited number of extensions to 1:40 a.m. were available for out-of-town activities. None of this applied to men, who even as freshmen were allowed to come and go as they pleased. Not that there was very far to go.

It may be useful here to describe college housing of those prewar years. It was, to say the least, minimal. With the exception of Talcott and Baldwin, women’s dormitories were mainly converted houses. Men had the MB and Noah Hall, a “colonial” structure built in the thirties, but Embassy and White House on North Professor Street led a series of college-owned houses that

had once been private homes with rooms for as few as a half dozen men and as many as 20 or so. Just after the war, the College purchased some old temporary army barracks and erected something dubbed “the spider” on the so-called Men’s Campus across from Noah. Women’s houses of some size all came with housemothers, usually widowed ladies of unquestioned virtue and an iron determination to see that their charges behaved according to a lengthy catalog of rules. Essentially, these rules required the absence of men above the first floor at all times, except for the annual “open house,” when every room door had to remain wide open with the occupants required to keep both feet on the floor. One can only wonder what these inflexible ladies would have thought of the famous *Life* magazine cover of the 1960s featuring a “coed dorm” at Oberlin—but that, fortunately for them, lay far into the future.

The women’s houses generally had dining halls serving those who lived in the house and an equal number of men from houses and dormitories that did not offer dining. It is perhaps unbelievable, but in those innocent days we actually sang in the dining halls after dinner, songs like “A Bicycle Built for Two,” “By the Light of the Silvery Moon,” “For Me and My Gal,” and “Moonlight Bay.”

Even after the war, the smaller houses often attracted students with similar interests. Embassy and White House seemed full of large male athletes, while Pyle Out, a small house for women near Pyle Inn, seemed to be a nest of politically aware (that is, left-leaning) young women who played records like *Six Songs for Democracy*, a collection of anthems from the Spanish Civil War. Someone gave me the album and I still have it.

There were, of course, no student cars allowed on campus. Virtually everyone had a bicycle. And there were no alcoholic beverages, since Oberlin was a dry town. It was possible to get 3.2 beer at the pool hall on Main Street and regular beer at Presti’s, a small roadhouse just over the town line, but these were frequented mainly by upperclass sophisticates. After a few beers at Presti’s, the crowd would begin singing a ribald ditty called “The Persian Kitten,” to demonstrate their sophistication.

Much of this began to change in 1946 as those who had left the campus at the beginning of the war as boys returned as young men who had been all over the world and seen and done things that would not have won the approval of Dean of Men Ned Bosworth or Dean of Women Marguerite Woodworth.

Perhaps, to cover the bases for modern readers, we need a word about sex. Essentially, there wasn’t any at all before the war, and none of the unmarried sort after the war ended and the Navy V-12 unit had departed. The scandal story of 1942, as I recall, was that a young woman *Review* columnist had been summarily dismissed from the college for writing a column advocating what was then quaintly called “free love.” After the war, the trailer colony off Lorain Street accommodated newly married veterans, so there was some sex, but for the mass of unmarried students, there was none, at least none to speak of. And no one did speak of it. Before the war, marriage without the rarely granted permission of the Dean was sufficient reason for separation from the College. After the war it was tolerated.

Apart from chaste goodnight kisses on the dorm porch, relations between men and women were largely restricted to dances given by the various dormitories or classes, to “libe dates,”

meaning joint study in the big room of Carnegie Library with an occasional trip to the stacks, and to strolls downtown for coffee at a funky little hangout called the “Vars,” meaning the Varsity Restaurant, or to the Campus Restaurant after an afternoon of study.

The more important campus dances were given in Hales Gymnasium, and these were governed by dance cards in which were inscribed the names of the woman’s partner for each dance. Faculty chaperones were always present and were listed on the back along with the house or class officers. Corsages were usual for the women. Dancing was usually slow and decorous, with an occasional round of jitterbugging, and always ended with the sentimental signature tune, “I’ll Be With You Where You Are.” Less-formal dancing to records was held after supper in Rec Hall, the basement of Wilder. There the formidable Miss Katharine Von Wenck, a kind of social *doyenne*, patrolled the floor cautioning couples who were found too closely entwined.

Dress was casual for both men and women, except for Sundays, when women were expected to appear at noon dinner in nylons and heels and men in coats and ties. There was a limited assortment of other social events, mainly teas, held in the dining halls that were the chief social settings of the College both before and right after the war. These teas also required Sunday dress, and the housemother usually poured.

Of course we went to class, from 8 a.m. until noon, Monday through Saturday. In the afternoon there were two-hour labs, or work in the library or at the *Review*, the *Hi-O-Hi*, or *Picolymp* (a magazine), or any one of numerous other activities. Some people went to the football games on Saturdays, but most simply studied and took a perverse pride in all they had to do.

Compared to the facilities on campus today, the classrooms and labs provided for us were for the most part laughable. Peters Hall was a wonderful but decaying nineteenth-century structure and looked the part. It was the main classroom building. The psych department kept its rats in the attic. Geology classrooms and lab were in an old house near the new physics laboratory. On the corner of West College and South Professor streets, where the Conservatory stands today, were Sturges Hall and Wright Laboratory, where zoology was taught. Sturges was a former church. Many classes were held in Westervelt Hall, an old red-brick schoolhouse downtown that is now an art gallery. Carnegie Library served both town and college. There were immense elm trees all over Tappan Square, and behind the boulders near the southwest corner there was a huge fire pit for the pep rallies held before football games.

Everything began to change after the war, slowly at first, then with greater speed. Six decades of building have remade what was once a modest, almost improvised, campus.

With the GI Bill bringing returned veterans to campus, the little “avowedly Christian college” began to grow in numbers and diversity. Many of the veterans had been places and done things not particularly Christian, and they were increasingly outspoken. African Americans, relatively rare before the war (in 1942 there were 11 in the entire College, 24 in the Conservatory, and 11 in the Graduate School of Theology), began to appear in somewhat greater numbers. So did Jews and nonbelievers of all sorts. Slowly, Oberlin was losing its earnest piety, which had won for it a reputation for advanced thought in the nineteenth century, and gaining in its place the beginnings of the more outspoken social and political liberalism evident today.

The many inefficient dining halls serving 50 or at most 100 students were expensive to run and endeavored to make ends meet by offering what students often regarded as barely edible food. Lunch could be canned tomato soup and toasted cheese sandwiches, although served by student waiters on white tablecloths with cloth napkins. On Monday, January 10, 1949, for example, the posted menu for lunch was “corn chowder, crackers, lettuce, bread, donuts, tea and milk.” Supper that night was “bacon, eggs, lima beans, potatoes, bread, peaches, cookies and coffee.”

After a year or so of this, many returning veterans began to rebel. As a consequence the *Review* launched an investigation, comparing Oberlin menus, operations, and costs with those of other colleges, mainly to Oberlin’s disfavor. Oberlin’s semester board bill at the time was \$210, while Harvard and Princeton were at \$200. Yale’s was only \$160, and many colleges cited charged even less. A front-page editorial stated, “We, the students, are paying more and eating less than almost any other college student we have been able to contact.” Largely because of the numerous small dining halls, two-thirds of the board bill was going into overhead and only a third into food, the *Review* said.

The result was the beginning of College efforts to switch away from the small, and as it found out much later, beloved dining halls to a variety of mass feeding alternatives carried on by outside contractors, the first being the infamous Saga. It is worth stating here, I think, that the food provided today at Dascomb and Stevenson is so far above what students were fed in the 1940s that it is inconceivable that students can find fault with it. No doubt it is true that students are impossible to please, but as I said, today’s students wouldn’t last five minutes in the Oberlin of the 1940s.

The many small housing units, most of them made-over private dwellings, were also inefficient and perhaps dangerous. Accordingly, newly-appointed President William E. Stevenson, a Wall Street lawyer who had headed the Red Cross in Europe during the war, began to work for change. Federal money was available to finance college facilities to accommodate millions of returning veterans. The money was not enough to pay for more than minimal facilities and there were restrictions on design and cost, but the college made do. Many of those buildings are standing today, among them new Dascomb, Fairchild, South, and Burton, all distinguished by a 1950s look and the most basic interiors. Still, they were far better than the converted houses they replaced.

Such are the memories that remain after 62 years.

Bill Warren, my roommate at the MB, returned from the Navy and married Caroline Morris, known as Kerrin, who lived at Elmwood that first year and later at Grey Gables. Bill became vice president of Antioch College and later an Oberlin trustee. At Gables in the spring of ’46, Kerrin roomed with Frances Skinner, who later married Jim Dittes, who edited the *Review*. Jim went on to become a noted professor of religion at Yale. The Gables chaplain that spring, Jean Reitsman, had edited the *Review* during the war. She married Bob France, who became an economist and vice president at the University of Rochester, and she taught architectural history there. Bob Avery married Mineko Sasahara, a Japanese American who had been released from a wartime concentration camp in the West to attend Oberlin. Bob became a much-admired professor of sociology at the University of Pittsburgh, and Minnie went on to become a pianist

and a lawyer. Dave Fowler became a professor of history at Carnegie Mellon. In the fall of 1946, Bob Avery and I moved from Gables across the street to Pyle Inn, where we washed pots and pans for our board. There I met Anne Fassett, and after suitable sparring, married her two years later. And I became a newspaper editor. By the 1970s most of these couples had contributed a child or so to Oberlin.

I don't want to make too much of the changes I see in the College, but I don't want to forget them either. Underneath the twenty-first-century skin there are without doubt the bones of the little institution founded in the dismal swampland of northeast Ohio by people who were very advanced for their time and place. One has only to walk across Tappan Square or past the Con to see students who, despite the clothes and the nose studs, seem much the same as those of decades past—earnest, awkward, hard-working, and determined to somehow improve the world. It is not just another small college, it is Oberlin, “peculiar in that which is good,” and known for it by almost every educated person in the land. I have been glad all my life that I went there.