

Teachers

Remembered in McMurdo, Antarctica

by

Matthew A. Nelson

March 28, 1996

As I start this version of my Antarctic Journal, the time is 2:30 AM. What am I doing up at 2:30 AM, listening to the music of Simon and Garfunkel on my CD headset, typing on my computer? You guessed it - I can't sleep.

They are now singing "So Long, Frank Lloyd Wright". This song came out about 1970, when I was repeating my Freshman year at Casper College in Casper, Wyoming. My first attempt at college was in 1964, but then, it was more important to goof off than to study. Four years of Army life convinced me that there are finer things in life. I spent those years complaining about the Army while serving in Turkey and Japan, as other men my age were dying in Viet Nam.

A grade point average of 0.323 may indicate to some that I flunked my Freshman year of college. Semantics! I like to say that I liked Mrs. Margaret Demorest's Humanities class, and Mrs. Jane Katherman's History of Western Civilization class, so well that they were worth repeating.

The Humanities class was disguised as Advanced Freshman Composition. Students were taught how to fine-tune their writing, but more importantly, were given an introduction to the arts and writings of the Twentieth Century. For thirty-one years, I have had with me "The Humanities In Contemporary Life", the textbook. It is well worn, and every now-and-then, the passages I underlined way back then still jump out at me. Mrs. Demorest taught how love and the arts can impact our everyday lives. I could, and perhaps will sometime, write an entire paper on Mrs. Demorest's Humanities class. Man, do I ever love that teacher and the gift of Humanities she introduced me to.

Sinop, Turkey 1965 - 1966. Hittites, Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Turks. Alexander the Great. Macedonians. Diogenes Station. I had to have my parents send me the textbook from Mrs. Katherman's class. Quite a lady! Hair always in a bun. Tough. Regal. What a gift I had, to repeat her class after I came back from Turkey. I didn't flunk the first time - the foundations of Western Civilization only required extra reinforcement for me to remember them.

Other people may have made better grades their first and only time as students of Mrs. Demorest and Mrs. Katherman. I received the better education. Through those two ladies, I learned about the joys and sorrows of Kings, poets, architects, writers, painters, musicians, the everyday farmer, the common soldier (is there such a thing?). They gave me their friendship, insights to man's eternal struggle, and taught me how beautiful and precious life is. I will forever be grateful.

What simply started as an update to my Antarctica journal has completely changed direction, just by hearing the words to "So Long, Frank Lloyd Wright". One of the term papers I wrote for Mrs. Demorest in 1970 was on Frank Lloyd Wright, with emphasis on the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo. He designed this hotel in 1923, blending modern construction methods of the era with the philosophy of Japanese culture. A few months after completion, the hotel survived a major earthquake.

One night while walking in Tokyo, I came across the Imperial Hotel. Thought I was cultured, because through the cobwebs I could remember having studied about the Imperial

Hotel in Mrs. Demorest's class. In 1968 the lobby of the Imperial Hotel looked like any other hotel. The lights (and probably) bars of the Ginza had more appeal, so I walked out, without investigating any further. Had I not been in such a hurry for whatever I did that night, my culture could have been enriched by what is no longer. Frank Lloyd Wright's design was in an older part of the hotel, which was torn down in 1969. I was there, could have seen it had I spent an additional ten minutes searching for it. Now, it is lost forever. Oh, there may be a small section left, but not what I threw away by a causal dismissal.

Back in the States, different semester, different term paper. At Mrs. Demorest's suggestion, I wrote it on Vincent Van Gogh. In one of my previous writings I mentioned that he had studied the art of woodblock printmaking in Japan. He wrote that the difference between the Japanese artists and Western artists was that a Western artist painted fields of grass, while the Japanese artist painted only a single blade of grass. Simple. Elegant. Mrs. Demorest said once familiar with Vincent Van Gogh's style, I would always recognize one of his paintings.

Tonight, twenty-six years later, I just touched a Vincent Van Gogh calendar that I have hanging in my room, just to the left of my desk. The March painting is "Bedroom At Arles". His room. Blue walls. Was his mood blue that day? Blue is my favorite color. Looking out my window here in McMurdo, Antarctica, I haven't been able to count the shades of blues of the ice, sky, and mountains. I find that blues are colors that lift my spirits. Above his single bed is a self-portrait. Above my single bed here in Antarctica is a photo of me at the South Pole in 1991, holding a book written by another Casper College instructor, Harry Dinges, titled "Foolish Pursuits". Behind the book is a hand drawing of a deer that Mr. Demorest gave me a few weeks before I left the States.

Lou Demorest. Honest. Expert skier. Woodsman, artist. My father, John Nelson, is also an honest man. Both of these men contributed to my own work ethic. While my father's contribution was by a life long example, Mr. Demorest taught me something in one five minute lecture that has stuck with me for twenty-five years. I had dropped out of Casper College again, and was working at Hogadon Ski area on Casper Mountain while waiting for a visa to move to New Zealand. I didn't know how to ski, but was running the ski lifts. Mr. Demorest was on ski patrol. One day, the idea of going to work didn't appeal to me, so I failed to go. Nor did I call anybody. The next day, Mr. Demorest took me aside and sternly talked to me. I don't know which is worse - disappointing yourself, or somebody you highly respect.

One of the books that I brought with me to read during the Antarctic Winter is "Canterbury Tales". The Christmas card I sent to the Demorests in 1971 was the printed program from a stage production of "Canterbury Tales" in Auckland, New Zealand. Prior to departing the States for Antarctica, I called Mrs. Demorest. She suggested I bring some Shakespeare with me. I also brought "Lord Jim", "The Return of the Native", "The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam", "The Brothers Karamazov", "The Odyssey of Homer", and novels by John Steinbeck, Jules Verne, Jack London, as well as Indian, Civil War, space, and adventure stories. Perhaps I can enhance my literary knowledge of some of the classics during the long Winter months.

Most adults remember their last day of high school. Most students do not spend their last day furiously typing the overdue term paper. Miss Hill taught the advanced senior English class. I transferred in at the beginning of the Spring Semester, because I didn't feel challenged by the regular "Just get by" class. This wasn't an English class - it was a class on the classic Greek tragedies. As our final paper, Miss Hill assigned us to write on the topic, "Man is the Measure of All Things." For months, I had saved quotations, and I knew this was going to be one of my best works. Deadlines are something reporters must meet. But at 10 AM, on the last day of class, I had to ask Miss Hill for an extension. Gruffly, she said, "Have it in by the end of the day." "The day doesn't end until midnight!" I exclaimed. "Just make sure you hand it in." While everyone else went to the Hat 6 Ranch to party, I typed. At the time, I was working as a janitor at the high school. Finally, I banged on the door outside of the janitor's office, took the keys to the library and her classroom, and time stamped my paper in

the library at 10:30 PM. For the record, I did receive an "A" on the paper, but even now, my study habits haven't changed since my graduation from Natrona County High School in 1964.

Dale Burgess taught Chemistry as Casper College in 1964. I did better in his class - I walked away with a "D"! But that's OK, because in one of the labs, I had much more fun than the other students. One morning, strips of Magnesium were lying next to the trusty Bunsen burners. Mr. Burgess hadn't arrived yet. High school chemistry had taught me the beauty of burning Magnesium. Guess who walks in just as Matt Nelson finishes displaying his knowledge of how brightly Magnesium burns. I was eighteen, and certainly had to give Mr. Burgess a good answer when he asked me what I was doing. "Just demonstrating the effect of the oxidation of Magnesium". "Fine. Everybody else will perform the regular lab experiment, but your assignment for today, Mr. Nelson, is to tell me the percentage of oxidation. If you don't, you will fail today's lab."

The race was on. The only way I could think how to exit this mess gracefully was to burn more Magnesium, and weigh it. I think in some ways the rest of the students envied me, because they had to perform some boring experiment with water, and didn't have the chance to determine the oxidation characteristics of Magnesium. I pulled it off, and made an "A" for that lab. Seven years later, I stayed overnight at Mr. Burgess's house in Hamilton, New Zealand. He was teaching science at a Mormon high school. As I helped him tie wires on the Ferro-concrete sailboat he was building, he told me that he knew I had given him a smart aleck answer, but was trying to teach me a lesson. I learned the lesson well. It is more fun to burn Magnesium then to dunk it in water, and not have the chance to see it burn. It is more fun sometimes to go off on your own tangent. A year or so later, I received a postcard from Mr. Burgess that he was ready to start sailing around the world; that was the last time I ever heard from him.

For seven months, I lived and travelled in New Zealand and Australia. (Those months are still waiting to have their stories told - the Matt Nelson School of Antarctic Winters predicts more stories will melt from his frozen brain, sneak to the tips of his fingers, and magically transform themselves into the printed word, or the electronic image thereof.) Time to return to Casper College for the third time. Change majors once more. This time I was going to be an electronics technician. The first time, in 1964, I had planned on a Chemistry degree. I wanted to be a lab technician like in Dick Tracy, and reconstruct crimes based on glass and paint samples. I found there is more to chemistry than outlaw burning of Magnesium. When I was readmitted on probation in 1969, the marvels of the Army Security Agency changed my focus to that of an electronics engineer. Calculus and Thermodynamics started me thinking of New Zealand. Eventually, I made it through calculus, but I still have one "F" on my transcript from Thermodynamics that has never been, nor will ever be, counter-balanced by repeating the class. I stayed up studying for the final until 3:30 AM, and then didn't wake to take the 7:30 AM exam until 9 AM. I am reasonably sure that by the time I leave Antarctica, I will have an in-depth knowledge of thermodynamics.

From Casper airport I went directly to Casper College, without stopping to take a shower. My mother told me later that I stunk. I had showered just a few hours before, but airplanes always have an odoriferous affect on me. Whom do I meet in the hallway? Mrs. Katherman, of course. My beard was jet black, and my hair had been uncut for a few months. I still have my Casper College Spring Semester, 1972 student identification card. I have never used illegal drugs in my life, but I am sure some people didn't think so in those days. Now, looking at the student ID card gives me a wee bit of understanding why Mrs. Katherman didn't stand very close to me.

Harry Dinges and Richard Kingsolver were the two main teachers of electronics then. I admired both men, but came to know Mr. Dinges better on a personal level. My writing was so bad that he started making me turn in single sheets of A's, B's, in one inch high letters, like in first grade. I was infuriated. Most people think I write terrible now. Mr. Dinges forced me into writing block letters so people can at least read my handwriting. Looking back, it's kind of funny having to hand in with my other assignments pages from Red Chief writing tablets when I was a twenty-five year old college student.

As mentioned earlier, Mr. Dinges gave me a copy of his book, "Foolish Pursuits". I read this at the South Pole. He wrote bits and pieces of his life. He left many stories out about being an Infantryman in World War II. Over the years, I sent him some of my writings, and some of the published technical articles on the space shuttle written by others. His letters were full of humor, wisdom, love for his family, respect for his fellowman, and to God. They don't come any better than Harry Dinges.

My ninth grade science teacher, Dana Van Burgh, and I have been friends for thirty-five years. His wife Nora used to work at the Casper College library. A year after she died of cancer, I wrote two pages titled, "Memories of Nora". I am not going to repeat it now. Dana and Nora have been such a major influence of my life. I had to call someone the night my sister Cathy died as a result of a car wreck in 1968. Nora answered the phone. Dana went with me to see the launch of the space shuttle STS-66 mission. I receive e-mail from him here on the ice; he has put me in touch with other teachers. When I was taking his class, I woke the class by tipping over a chair I was leaning against the wall. He had me stay after school and clean the tables. Several years later, I extracted revenge by calling him collect from New Zealand! One paragraph does not cover thirty-five years of friendship.

Writing about former teachers probably isn't typical entries in Antarctic journals. Living in Antarctica is certainly a good place to write about teachers, when one has time to reflect on the good things that has happened in his life. I finally graduated from Casper College in 1973. I had about 95 credited hours, acquired over a period of nine years, seven semesters, and three changes of majors. Eventually, I obtained my Bachelor of Science degree, and now am struggling for a Master's degree between trips to Antarctica. For eighteen years, I have worked on the space shuttle program and other NASA contracts. When I fulfill my dream of flying into space, I will carry with me the memories of these fantastic teachers.

Over the years, I have been so very fortunate to have not one, but several favorite teachers. Through the Casper school system, I have had many good teachers. All of the teachers mentioned in this segment of my journal dedicated their lives to their profession. Each set an example to students with high standards of integrity, and each in his or her own way expected and demanded that I do better when all I wanted was to slide. The quality of formal education that I received in Casper, Wyoming is second to none, and I will match these teachers against any in the country. My thanks to each of you for encouraging me to do better, for accepting me as I am, for being a role model, and for giving of yourselves. Thanks for listening to me, and for caring for me. I hope I can live up to your standards. God Bless you all.