THE CLASS OF '51: CREIGHTON'S BAND OF BROTHERS

They are known, and not just among themselves, as the "famous class." A class that has produced judges, a supreme court justice, government officials, members of the FBI, the Army Corps of Engineers. They have excelled in the corporate arena and as acclaimed trial lawyers. They are loyal supporters of their churches and synagogues. They are civic leaders who have led major fund drives and seen cherished projects in the public and private sectors come to fruition. They have assumed leadership roles in the legal profession. They are honored practitioners of every variety who have left, and continue to leave, their particular stamp on their communities and their alma mater. They have been remarkable for their achievements and for their genuine love for each other and the institution which nurtured them.

When they convened in September of 1948 at some one hundred strong, they were the largest class admitted to Creighton Law School in its 40-year history. Except for a few "youngsters," like Frank Duffy, they were veterans of what would be called "the last good war." Some like Francis "Frip" McLane wore the bomber jacket that marked members of the elite Army Air Corps; others had served in the navy, the army, the marines. They had been in Europe and the Pacific. Their backgrounds had not bred arrogance, however. Frank Duffy testifies that "the nonvets were recognized as equals—even the ribbing we took while wearing the ROTC uniforms was in good humor." None of the veterans talked about their experiences. It was time to get on with their lives. They had taken advantage of the GI bill, had finished their required 64 hours of undergraduate credits and were ready to bring their discipline, courage, and hard-won maturity to the study of law.
For most, the law and lawyers were not familiar territory. On their side, the law faculty was used to 20 or 30 young men (with perhaps a smattering of women) who were generally fresh from undergraduate studies and used to vagaries of academia. The class of '51 did not fit the profile. There could have been a culture clash. But, as former FBI Agent Neil Welch puts it, they were prepared to meet the challenge:

We had already accumulated many real world experiences, beyond the academic, which provided us with the courage, vision, and fortitude to see our renewed academic undertaking in the longer view of one's real purpose in life. We veterans had been well trained by our recent military and naval duties, and we could see at Creighton's Law School the same type of rigorous training and study for success in our chosen life's mission, we came to realize this was the product of the Jesuit military style discipline.

They were pragmatists. They had great respect, even reverence, for this Jesuit institution, but they had learned to establish priorities and to take charge. They were respectful and willing to work, but they were not cowed or impressed by nonessentials. They went after what they set as goals and were not easily deterred in their quest for the best legal education available.

Not that they were immune from intimidation. Longtime Douglas County Attorney Donald "Pinky" Knowles speaks for the class in describing Father Paul Gregg, the only Jesuit regent of the law school, who could paralyze them with his "strong, penetrating, almost terrifying, look through those grey-blue steel eyes."

Perhaps their military background helped them appreciate Father Gregg who figures prominently in their fondest memories as a "strict, tough, but fine man" in the words of retired judge Paul Hickman.

Dean James A. Doyle who taught administrative law announced that they were the worst class he had ever had the misfortune to come across at Creighton or the University of Nebraska and would never amount to much, a remark which reassured Truman Clare that "this was the class for me" and which is repeated with great glee at every reunion.

In addition to meeting the rigorous standard of the classroom, the reading requirements were overwhelming from the start, and the spartan GI stipends meant most had to work at whatever they could find. Those who had families struggled to provide for them with the help of working wives, of course.

But they were in this together. They might not talk about their service days, but there was an indelible mark: a camaraderie which included all members of the class. They were in this together. So they formed study groups. They divided up cases. They sweated out the one-exam-a-semester for each course—and inaugurated the tradition of "the first beer before noon" on 'the last day of exams.

They were in this together, but they were not all about work. They persuaded the administration to let them have a lounge and laid the asphalt tile and found the furniture for it themselves. Their picnics, Christmas parties, St. Patrick's day parties were legendary. Under the leadership of Tom Burke and John Burke, they revitalized the law fraternities of Delta Theta Phi and Phi Alpha Delta and made them the premier organizations on campus. The unmarried members wrangled introductions to the few young women "on the hill." The married members often fed the bachelors who in at least one instance, according to Connie Peetz Mangold, showed up with a jar of olives by way of contribution to the meal.

When they graduated, a newly inaugurated Father Carl Reinert, S.J. cautioned them not to take any wooden nickels. There were few nickels of any kind. But they had made it; they were ready to begin. The hundred had dwindled to 84 even with the addition of the 20 who had come up from Lincoln to join the class. They were ready

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for the next challenge. They scattered from Pat Fitzgerald’s Minnesota to Ed Redle’s Wyoming to John Harrington’s California and struggled to find jobs or establish practices. John Rice and Dixon Adams worked nights as janitors as they established their practice in Bellevue. John Peetz and Frank Svoboda set up shop in Sidney, Nebraska. Their starting salaries ranged from Dixon Adams’ “gross of $600 for the first six months” to Tom Burke’s being hired as an associate for $375 a month with the admonition “don’t be looking for any increases.” They were undaunted: the same drive which had led them to pursue an education in the law gave them the determination to keep at it and to succeed.

In June 2001, the class held its 50th reunion. It was a grand two-day celebration as had been all those before. Their reunions have always been their own, not part of the general alumni reunion. Every five years they come together genuinely delighted to be in each others’ company. This year was no exception, but it was an exceptional anniversary. Of the 50 surviving members, 28 were in attendance, a good number with the wives who had been there from the beginning. They presented a portrait of their beloved nemesis Father Gregg to the law school. As Tom Burke, the evening’s emcee, put it, “It was memorable that our class elected to present a portrait of Father Paul Gregg, S.J. to the law school. As far as we know, Father Gregg was the only Jesuit lawyer who ever taught there—and he taught us. Our own artist laureate, Dick O’Toole did the painting. Both Father Gregg and the class of 1951 will now be enshrined in the law school.”

At the closing banquet they entertained CU’s new president, Father John Schlegel, S.J., initiating him as they had his predecessors. They called the role of missing members and drank a toast to them: both the living and dead. And then it was time for those in attendance to address the group. The words were not about honors or awards. They were words of gratitude for the opportunities they had been given, for the education they had been willing to sacrifice for, for the institution that had nourished them. Perhaps Emil Sodoro best summarized their feelings: “Creighton accepted me; they taught me, and for fifty years I’ve practiced law. I am humbled by the experience. I am honored to be part of this class.”

They have been called the greatest generation—though they take that lightly. “If we had known that,” retired judge Patrick Fitzgerald quipped, “We wouldn’t have been so terrified of flunking.” But to themselves they are the sons of Creighton, hoping to keep alive and pass on what they have been given—and to reconvene in five years.

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