

Once Over (Not So) Lightly with the Class of '63

"The Era of Well-Being." Those are fittingly the last words in Morris Bishop's A History of Cornell, characterizing the presidency of Deane Malott. They were written as the Class of 1963 was graduating, and could have described America's social history as well as Cornell's. As Bishop mentions, never in the history of Cornell had there been such a period of building; the budget was over a hundred million dollars in 1962-3 (now more than ten times that number), and research came to rival teaching as the "business of the University." Similar statistics could have been applied to the United States in its becoming a world power, and in its then-new commitment to explore outer space.

Just as Bishop's History closed the book on an era, the Class of '63 was instrumental in closing out an era of apathy, and became a class of conscience, a singular mark in Cornell's turning from bricks and mortar to justice and equality: from the builder Malott to the scholar Perkins.

Our four years at Cornell saw the opening of the first retirement community (significantly, by the way, for people fifty-two and older), the first man in space, publication of Rachel Carson's Silent Spring, the first sit-ins and the Freedom Riders in the South; the shooting down of Gary Powers' U2, FDA approval of the Pill, breakoff of diplomatic ties with Cuba, creation of the Peace Corps, Roger Maris's then-still-standing home-run record, the Berlin Wall, introduction of American troops in South Viet-Nam, Marilyn Monroe's death, the end of compulsory ROTC at Cornell, and sophomore Roger Staubach leading Navy to a 41-0 drubbing of Cornell's football team our senior year.

We came in with Eisenhower and went out with Kennedy, in with Mantovani and out with Bob Dylan. Martin Luther King spoke in Sage Chapel our sophomore year, and delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech three months after our graduation. These were presaging events in the history made over the past fifty years, and the sense while we lived them that they were to be so led us to seek a higher purpose on campus. The Class of '63 ushered out HUAC, and ushered in SNCC. In our senior year, our Harold-Nathan-led student government established a policy in conjunction with the faculty to deny recognition for any undergraduate organization that practiced discrimination on the basis of race, religion, or national origin. Pledges were extracted from the IFC, under Jules Kroll's leadership, and from the Panhellenic Council to enforce the policy by disenfranchising any fraternity or sorority whose national charters discriminated in this way. Craig Peterson, our Class president, served on the newly-established Discrimination Committee (note it was not a "nondiscrimination" committee) to oversee the processes necessary to ensure the policy was applied equitably and quickly.

Responding to a growing consciousness of rights for all, three experiments in recognizing coeds' equality were undertaken our senior year. Senior women were relieved of curfews, and sixty-three'sers responded responsibly by getting home even earlier in most cases than they would have during the curfew years. A small group of women set up housekeeping in one of the Wait Avenue houses, and thirty-five senior women were allowed to live in the new Hasbrouck Apartments.

With these innovations, we'd made what we thought were significant changes on campus, with a new-found power and idealism that marked us different from the classes before us. There was no reason to believe we couldn't pick up the gauntlet laid down by the Kings and Kennedys of our world, and change society the same way.

The Class of '63 seemed to turn its back on the past, focusing instead on its future: one of change and innovation, of rights and restructuring; rejecting tradition and the status quo. There was little sense, and little interest, for example, in how Cornell came to be the institution it was. In fact, exactly one hundred years before our graduation, Ezra Cornell and Andrew White were elected to the New York State Senate. Cornell was elected chairman of the Committee on Agriculture; White, of the Committee on Literature. They came together when Cornell's bill to establish a library for the people of Tompkins County, funded with Cornell's hundred-thousand-dollar gift, came to White's committee. That history was of little importance to us. While there was a Centennial Committee formed our senior years to plan a celebration two years hence, there were no representatives from our class serving on it.

This is a Class, then, whose members did not take themselves lightly. The freedom-with-responsibility theme played strongly amongst us, and we felt we were players who had a date with destiny. Just four years after graduation, for example, our first alumni class president, Mark Landis, ran for trustee of the University on a platform of change and representation of youthful thinking on the Board.

Events prior to and coincident with our first reunions seemed to reinforce the reasons for this seriousness. In the five years since most of us had left Cornell, our first voice for change as impressionable teenagers was assassinated in Dallas, we'd participated in or witnessed a one-billion-dollar-a-month commitment to an increasingly unpopular war in southeast Asia, and "race riots" had decimated poor sections of major cities in the country.

Several months before our Fifth Reunion, President Johnson announced he would not run for re-election, Martin Luther King was assassinated, and Annie McGavern Heasley, our much-beloved reunion co-chair, died of brain cancer. We spent much our Friday night during the Fifth at ZBT watching the televised transportation of Robert Kennedy's body from California to New York.

Our Tenth was held just after the signing of the treaty with North Vietnam, and in the midst of the Watergate hearings. Woodstock, the Willard Straight occupation, men on the moon, riots at the Democratic National Convention, granting of voting rights to eighteen-year-olds, and Richard Nixon's landslide victory over George McGovern had occurred in the years since the Fifth. The Class was too disorganized, perhaps too distracted, to elect officers at Reunion, so John Beeman convened a nominating/election meeting in New York City the following fall to do so. Dylan's "Times Are a-Changing" defined those ten years, but their seeds were planted as we left Cornell in 1963. Ours was the transition generation, one of experimentation and new directions: a serious, important-feeling group of well-educated people seeking a purpose.

Fifteen years later those important issues of new interest to us in 1963 were still unresolved, but our class retained a stubborn (and serious) commitment to resolve them. Morris Bishop said then, looking back over Cornell's almost-one-hundred-year-history, the most momentous change was the rise of research as a University purpose: "barely conceived at Cornell's beginning, it has become to be more than secondary to the University's purpose." So the Class of 1963 chose as its Twenty-fifth Reunion gift to Cornell financial support of the Commission on Undergraduate Education.

Similarly, we recognized in 1962 that discrimination on campus must be eliminated, and established a process to "educate" incoming students as to Cornell's expectations for their behavior in this regard. Cornell is still looking for ways to "educate" students as to appropriate behavior in the pluralistic

community that the campus had become." So for our Thirtieth Reunion gift, we funded an award through the Dean of Students for projects that teach understanding and tolerance of different cultures: his office is still, in fact, looking for ways to introduce students to the multicultural experience.

Our experiments in the area of students' rights laid the foundation for greater involvement of students in University governance. Students on the Board of Trustees and student participation in the debate over housing assignments grew basically from the initiatives undertaken by the Class of 1963.

We have continued to improve things at Cornell, and have an unusually large percentage of alumni involved currently or in the recent past in University governance and alumni affairs. At our thirtieth reunion, we counted four 63ers on the Board of Trustees, and more than a dozen past and present presidents of Cornell clubs across the country; we've held the presidencies of the Cornell Alumni Association, the Association of Class Officers, and the Alumni Federation; our members were chairs of two University Council committees; we are or have been directors of every alumni organization, and practically every college advisory council; 63ers served on three of the four administrative boards; and until recently, and for twenty years, we held the record for the most members of the Tower Club (118).

We haven't taken ourselves lightly, and we don't take Cornell lightly. As undergraduates we internalized a seriousness of purposeful change. We were the ones who allayed Morris Bishop's fear of the increase in conformity, or "mass regulation," as a phenomenon taking hold in society and on the Cornell campus. As nonconformists, we've nonetheless been paragons of a blend of idealism and practicality that characterizes the Cornell education, and has for the now-hundred and forty-eight years since Cornell sought out White to build a library for his neighbors.

Dick Lynham

Proud to Be '63 (Slogan courtesy of Russ Stevenson)