

The Marion Military Institute

1952-1967

My first introduction to “MI,” as everybody called it during my tenure, was shortly after I had returned from The War and was asked if I wanted to ride along to take a student back to school. We hit Marion pretty late at night and stopped by the guard house to sign him in, and then I helped him carry his stuff up to the second floor of South. I didn’t see much—it was dark, and we didn’t stay. I assumed that I would never even hear of the place again.

Hence, I was surprised when, three or four years later, I received a call while finishing my studies at Vanderbilt (undergrad at Auburn, of course!) from Colonel J.T. Murfee II, offering me a job immediately at the fine salary of \$1,700 per year. So, leaving my young bride, Suzanne, to finish her stint teaching dietetic interns at VU hospital, I arrived at MI to start the fall term of 1952, only to be informed by the academic Dean, Colonel Baer, that I was to teach mainly mathematics (I was an English major, minor in math), and by the business manager, Colonel Rodimon, that I was now the varsity tennis coach. In leisure time that afternoon after arriving in town I had hit a few balls on the MI courts, and they had lost their coach.

That was the start of fifteen years of pleasant camaraderie with both students and faculty (and also with Judson students and faculty as I acted in their drama productions—and eventually directed plays at MI).

Most of my memories are non-academic. The cadets were not above mischief. I recall that an elderly math professor was employed one year that was mistreated in a way that the students thought very clever. We had a high school department then, and their classes were shorter than the college ones. The cadets convinced the poor fellow that bugle calls started college classes and the high school bell ended them. After a couple of morning classes that became about a twenty-minute class instead of the required hour. Also, he would ask the class where they were in the textbook, and they consistently replied, “I think we’re on page 30, Colonel.” Not too much progress was made that year! On the bright side, they could handle any problem on page 60.

They got me once. Since at that time the only females on campus were the president’s secretary and the librarian, Colonel Baer’s daughter Sarah, the cadets could be a bit more free with their amusements. My habit was to answer all questions about the homework before presenting new material. One morning, I

was asked to explain a troublesome problem. Happily, I knew how to work it, so I took chalk in hand and went to the board. The pull-down graph was down from the previous day's trigonometry work, so I rolled it up like a window shade. There, before my eyes, was a beautifully executed recumbent nude drawn on the board. As I stood there, chalk raised in hand, I distinctly heard the click of a camera! Of course, it looked as though I had just finished drawing the picture! I believe the picture appeared among some random photographs in a later MI publication. Mark one up for the students!

This will be the longest story, but it is the most memorable for me. One day as the Thanksgiving holiday approached, I was strolling up and down the rows of desks in my classroom, no doubt passing on some mathematical gem from Pythagoras, Euclid or Carl Friedrich Gauss, and managed to heist a textbook from a student's desk without his knowledge. Returning to the front of the class, I offered to auction it to the highest bidder. Having fun with their classmate, they began to make offers. Real money came out of their pockets. After a bit, I returned the book to its owner and asked the class if they might be interested in collecting the money now lying on their desks to help a poor family at Thanksgiving. They readily agreed, and I passed my hat around, and they put what they wished in it. One the way home shortly thereafter, I had to stop at an office in the Chapel building. I left my hat in the seat of my VW. Returning from the office I saw a cadet, back turned, slam my car door and dash around the corner of the building. I rushed to my car, sure that I had lost everything—and found that my hat contained twenty dollars more than when I had left. Twenty dollars was a lot of money back then. I never found out who the student was, but you just have to love a cadet corps like that. My wife, now the head dietitian at the Perry County Hospital, went with a couple of cadets from the class and helped them pick out not only a great traditional Thanksgiving dinner but also a collection of canned foods that would serve them well for a time afterwards. The local social services provided us with the name and address of a very needy family, and a couple of local cadets delivered the food on Thanksgiving Day. They later reported to the class that when they got there, the family was just sitting down to their Thanksgiving meal—a small bowl of oatmeal in front of each family member. The two cadets said they would remember that for the rest of their lives, and I'll bet they have. You will never convince me that the cadets on the MI campus in the fifties and sixties were not a most fine group of young men. I am pleased to have written the Marion Institute alma mater that they sang.

The David J. Robinson Memorial Stadium! Time passes, and names on buildings and even monuments lose any meaning they might once have had to those passing by. Not the name David Robinson to me. The son of the school president,

David attended all of high school and junior college at MI. He loved tennis, so he was on my tennis team for six years. He became a close and beloved friend, almost, you might say, the son I never had, and he was certainly a big brother to my three daughters. He was very fun-loving, and most of the pranks engineered by the tennis team were at his provocation. In Birmingham to play Samford, I purchased a second-hand office chair that had rollers on the legs. David took it out to the sidewalk, sat down in it and rolled down the sidewalk at attention and stone-faced through the pedestrians in downtown Birmingham to the bottom of the hill. His best idea, I think, occurred on a return trip from a match in Mississippi. It was late at night (or early morning) and pouring rain. We were on a lonely, two-lane rural highway. Of course the motor in the old school van conked out. One team member volunteered to go and try to find a farmhouse and call for help. Just sitting in the dark van in the rain wasn't enough fun for David. He talked us all into getting out and climbing up on the top of the van and stand in a line, and when cars would pass by, we would all snap to attention and salute. I can only imagine what the people in those cars thought when they saw six young men in uniform and a civilian standing on top of a van in the dark in heavy rain and saluting.... After graduating from MI, David went to school in Birmingham. One weekend he and his girlfriend decided to spend that time at home. Turning up a steep hill entering Marion late in the evening, the setting sun hit him right in the eyes. The resulting accident proved fatal to both of them. I remember lying on a bed in the same hospital room with him giving blood in an attempt to help save his life. At one point he regained consciousness and looking up at Dr. Wilkerson said "I'm not going to make it, am I Doctor?" Nearly the whole town was at the funeral because everybody loved David. As he was lowered into his grave, I knew that some of my blood would rest there with him. Please, when you go to a game in the stadium at MI, give David a thought. He deserves it.

And speaking of the stadium, I spent most Saturday afternoons of the fall terms sitting in the press box as the public announcer for the games. I'm afraid that I might have had a little idiosyncrasy during that time that displeased the school president. Once an Auburn man, always an Auburn man, that's all I can say. It was quite unintentional, but now and then I would get over-excited and say on a fumble when Marion recovered the ball, Auburn has it—Auburn has it! First and ten on the twenty-yard line." Colonel Robinson, seated below me in the stands, would turn and glare up at me. I don't think I became his favorite faculty member. I figure he must have had some connection with the University of Alabama—pity!

As I ponder the past vignettes come back to me:

-Poor Captain Malcolm Moore. “Monk” Moore the cadets called him. He was the Assistant Commandant, and they made his life miserable. M O N K was painted on the four chapel columns every year. He owned two black cars exactly alike and drove them on alternate days so the wear and tear would be the same on each car. But he could walk down the aisle of the town movie theater each night and know exactly which cadet was there legally and which belonged back on campus.

- The annual sports banquets where we got to meet famous people invited as speakers: quarterback Bob Wade of the Chicago Bears and Adolph Rupp, legendary basketball coach at Kentucky.

-The speeches I gave in Chapel. As instructor of Public Speaking, I was expected to fill in unassigned dates. One speech I based on a private twenty-minute talk I had with Harry Truman, the circumstances of which make a long story in itself... “Recently I had a chat with someone whose name you would know...”

-Having the second-ranked high school tennis player in the state, Murray Tyson, come to MI and be on my very last tennis team. Murray called me recently, fifty years after I left MI, to see how I was going. That was extremely meaningful to me.

This has been fun, bringing back these memories. Recalling the things I did while there: teaching English, Mathematics, History, Public Speaking and Latin; coaching the tennis team, directing the dramatic productions, doing all the public speaking at athletic events, parades, celebrations and all situations that required public commentary; sporadic chapel speaker; providing the commentary for an MMI promotional film (if it’s still in the archives, that’s me talking); and “any other duties that the president might assign” (read my contract). But there’s no complaint, I enjoyed every single one of them. Perhaps I was younger then!

Fifteen good and pleasant years! Then one day I received a letter from a friend who had moved on from Judson, telling me that should I submit an application for a position at a girl’s college in Virginia where an ex-president at Judson now held the helm, it would be looked upon favorably. I went to Colonel Robinson for advice. He regretfully informed me that at \$4,000 per year, I had reached the top level of my salary potential. The Virginia school offered me twice that to begin. Let me tell you that, after attending an all-male high school in Louisville, spending over two years on isolated islands in the Pacific with no women present, only Marines, then fifteen years at a men’s military school, if you think I wasn’t scared when I walked in that first classroom in 1967 and saw 35 young ladies waiting for the “new teacher” with a defiant gleam in their eyes! Well, that’s another story...