

THE MYSTIQUE OF PENN STATE

Tested and Triumphant In the Crucible of the Forties

By Lawrence G. Foster
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There is an enchantment bordering on mystique that hovers over Penn State and its picturesque campus nestled in the lush valley at the foot of Mount Nittany. The years roll by but no one has ever been able to explain precisely why this patchwork of nirvana has such special appeal to those who have been stranded there during their college years. And maybe it is just as well that we let bliss triumph over reason.

It is easier to cite ways in which this magnetism is manifested. The comforting feeling that comes on returning after long absences. The immediate rekindling. The stirring of memories born and nurtured here. The unseen door to the harsh outside world that seems to quietly close. The freedom of once again being caught in the web. Succumbing to the beauty of the landscape and the company of some very nice people.

The location of State College offers another clue. After spending frustrating hours wending their way over hill and dale, metropolitan sports writers, in exasperated prose, would describe their delayed arrival with words like these: "It is an isolated campus miles from nowhere." Of little help to unfamiliar travelers is the landmark on the front lawn of Old Main -- a boulder with a brass plaque marking the exact geographic center of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. But before the inter-state highway system the secret to getting to Penn State on country roads was perseverance. And somehow that seemed to add to the charm of the place once you finally got there.

Despite its remoteness, Penn State was becoming known to the outside world, in part due to Fred Waring, who was director of America's favorite choral group, The Pennsylvanians. On their weekly national radio broadcasts in the 1930s Waring never missed an opportunity to mention "the little school up in the hills of Pennsylvania," where he attended college. As a young kid from Tyrone, Waring enrolled at Penn State in 1918 in Architectural Engineering, but his first love was music, especially choral singing. Waring played banjo in a local band and then took a year off to earn enough money to continue his education. He returned to Penn State in 1922 but left before graduating. Later, "Fred Waring's Pennsylvanians" captured the heart of America as a 55-piece jazz orchestra and choral group that sang spirited and uplifting music, much of

it composed and arranged by Waring. He became known as the "Man Who Taught America To Sing."

Soon the Pennsylvanians were making films and their fame spread. Waring often brought the group back to the campus to perform and never missed an opportunity to gently chide the Penn State Glee Club for turning him down "three times" when he auditioned as a student. Frequently in his radio broadcasts he would include college songs, and always "The Hills of Old Penn State," a lovely hymn that he had composed. Waring had been caught in the web and was enticing others into it.

Penn State was still a small college in 1940, with an enrollment of 6,700 on the main campus. Families were still feeling the lingering effects of the Great Depression and money for college tuition was hard to come by. Still, many parents made further sacrifices at home and were able to provide some help. Part-time jobs -- often more than one job -- were needed by a new generation of students, many of them the first in their family to attend college. Pride in being the first was a great motivation. And since most Penn State students came from working class families, holding one or two jobs to stay in school was quite common.

The war that had erupted in Europe sent shock waves throughout the nation, and the thought of sending America's youth to fight a distant war was revolting to many. But the thought of losing America's hard won freedoms was deeply troubling. The attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 made war the only choice, and no college felt the impact more than Penn State did. Enrollment on the main campus had dropped to just over 3,000 by 1944. Military units in training were so prevalent the campus resembled a military base. Behind the scenes, the faculty and staff pursued an important array of research and ordnance projects that made significant contributions to the war effort.

Even before Pearl Harbor all eligible males were enrolled in R.O.T.C., and seeing them marching across campus in their uniforms was an ominous sign. Then swarms of persuasive recruitment officers from all of the services descended on the campus. The dilemma: Join now and get a choice of service and assignments, or wait for the draft and take what you get. For some, the choice was preordained. John Neel was one of them.

In the Spring of 1941, Neel, a scrawny eighteen-year-old from McKeesport, began his freshman year. When the threat of war grew, he enlisted in the Army Air Corps. Airplanes were in his blood. His childhood was spent at Pittsburgh-McKeesport Airport, known as "Bettis Field." It was Pittsburgh's first commercial airport and his father, Harry, was president of the company that ran the field. Following his historic

trans-Atlantic flight in 1927, Charles Lindberg flew the "Spirit of St. Louis" on a good will tour of the country and one of his first stops was Bettis Field. As the crowd pressed forward to greet him, Lindberg reached down and picked up a four-year-old boy (John Neel) from the front row and asked him: "And what do you want to be when you grow up?" "A pilot," the boy replied. And so it would be -- fifty missions as co-pilot and then pilot of a B-25 bomber in Europe.

The service rapidly accelerated the transition from boy to man. Bob Mechling of Mt. Lebanon arrived at Penn State for the 1942 Summer semester before he had graduated from high school. "Three of us later hitch-hiked home for our graduation ceremony dressed in our R.O.T.C. uniforms, which made getting a ride easier. We arrived just in time to put gowns over our uniforms, and when the ceremony was over we started thumbing our way back. After a semester I enlisted in the Army Air Corps." He entered the Air Corps in 1943 and flew 27 missions in Europe with the 8th Air Force. He attained the rank of captain, flew as lead bombardier in his squadron, and returned to Penn State in the Fall of 1945. Within a span of some 30 months he had gone from a kid to Air Force Captain. "We matured faster then," he added.

By the mid-1940s thousands of Penn State men and women were serving around the world and they would meet in strange ways, some tragic, some joyful. Dave Lundy was flying aboard a B-24 Liberator bomber with the 8th Air Force and remembered one of the joyful encounters: "On one of my 30 missions Tony DeCillis, a fellow Penn Stater, was in the formation and I knew his plane's position. Tony's plane was badly damaged and on the way home over northern Holland four chutes came out and the ship fell back and went down, apparently with six still aboard. We never knew what happened or who, if anyone, survived.

"Many months later I was playing softball at our base in England. I had gotten on base and was running toward third when I spotted two Air Force officers who had come to watch the game. One was Tony DeCillis. I ran right over third base and jumped on him. Tony was one of the four who had parachuted. He was in a German prison camp but escaped and made his way back to the Allied lines. (Tony DeCillis also made his way back to Penn State and graduated in the Class of 1948.)

Ross Lehman was less fortunate. His right leg was amputated at a prisoner of war hospital after his bomber was shot down over Austria. He was imprisoned for nine months and came home with the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Air Medal and his spirit intact. A member of the class of 1942, the irrepressible Irishman pursued his career as a journalist before returning to Penn State and later becoming executive director of the Alumni Association. He and his wife, Katey, both of them accomplished writers, wrote the "Open House" column in the Centre Daily Times for 26 years.

Many of the bitter memories of the war years were partially erased when veterans returned to the solitude of the Nittany Valley. "I spent the harsh winter of 1944-45 in holes in the ground in France, Belgium and Germany as a 60 mm mortar gunner in the 94th Infantry Division," recalls John King, "but once back in State College the happy memories began and they are almost endless. My fraternity brothers (TKE) were a fantastic bunch of guys and the house was a palace and life was beyond great. The friendships I made have lasted to this day -- and eleven of us have kept a chain letter going since 1951."

The return to college life gave veterans an overwhelming sense of relief that they could now get on with their lives. "We were very warmly welcomed by students, faculty and townspeople," recalls Howie Rogers, who was an Army Air Corps pilot. "I loved the campus with its majestic trees, old buildings and expansive lawn stretching from Old Main to College Avenue." Jim Carey, like many others, found more than a warm welcome on the campus. "I met the cute little blonde who lived on the next block and we have been married 52 years."

It is not known how many couples met at Penn State, got married and are at the heart of the loyal band of alumni who come back to the campus frequently. Or, who became part of the growing trend to retire and make their home close to their Alma Mater to take advantage of the multitude of activities available in a college town. Based on anecdotal reports, the numbers are soaring at Penn State. A remarkable number of children and grandchildren of Penn Staters elected to attend there even though some were surely "brain washed" after taking so many compulsory trips back to the Nittany Valley with their parents. But many rebelled and headed elsewhere for their education, having heard enough of "Fight on State!"

"I didn't get back until the Spring of 1947 because I was in the Pacific Theater (as an Air Force pilot)," recalled Wib (Wilbur) Creelman. "I found the same beautiful campus I had left. It was truly a homecoming. But we had already lost a lot of time and when graduation came it was bittersweet. But, it was time to move on."

For some, there was a disturbing sense of urgency to complete college and make up for lost time, which for most veterans was 2-1/2 years. Some had their sights set on graduate school and Ray Shibley and Bill Breece, both in the Class of 1947, wound up at Yale Law School. "Ray and I would go to law school parties and dismay the group by singing the Penn State fight song," Breece recalled.

It has been said repeatedly, so it must be at least partially true, that Penn Staters talk so much about Penn State that the conversation becomes one-sided and often boring to others. If so, there also seems to be a lack of apology for this enthusiasm for a

place with mystical qualities. This is clearest at class reunions and homecoming events when thousands of alumni squeeze into hotels in State College and environs for a few days to relive the past.

Then there are the scores of mini-reunions organized by groups of classmates and friends who have particularly close ties. One has very personal meaning for me, the reunions of The Tekes of the 1940s, held on a weekend every two years at the Nittany Lion Inn. This group had reopened the house, Tau Kappa Epsilon at Prospect and Garner, after reclaiming it from the Navy in 1944. Except for a few of us they were all veterans, some of them older. The Tekes quickly achieved recognition on campus in leadership roles, including All-College President and Inter-Fraternity Council President. They lived in a handsome fraternity house, which they made "dry" to protect it from rowdy drinking parties. The fraters did more than their share of drinking at other parties, sometimes to the ditty . . . "The Tekes Never Drink, In The Teke House, That Is." And, they took a lot of good natured ribbing for being abstinent at their house.

Following graduation some of them stayed in close contact. For the past 25 years a group of about 20 fraters, plus spouses, have been coming back for reunions. As the years go by friendships get closer and the reunions more meaningful. The Tekes of the 1940s are held together by their persevering leader, Bob Mechling, the ex-Air Force Captain mentioned earlier. He learned some of his perseverance and patience when we were roommates at the TKE House. We have been friends for 58 years, a friendship I cherish.

By the end of the war more than 12,000 Penn State alumni and undergraduates had served in the military, and nearly 400 of them were killed. Some, like Bob Davis who graduated in 1949, got called up for the Korean War, where he served in the Pacific as a Lieutenant aboard an LST. But for most veterans, graduation meant a job, family and memories, the good college memories, and the not-so-good wartime memories.

Students in the classes of the 1940s seemed to have set higher goals, perhaps because of the war. Many of them went on to achieve the pinnacle of success in virtually every professional field. The Class of 1948 holds the honors for having eighteen -- the most from any class -- to receive Penn State's highest alumni honor, the Distinguished Alumnus Award. The classes in the decade of the 1940s garnered eighty-three (out of a grand total of 395) Distinguished Alumnus Awards, by far the most in any decade since the awards were first presented in 1951.

It is an amazing but accurate statistic that one out of every 127 college graduates in the United States received their degree from Penn State, whose alumni rolls now number 437,000. And still they come in droves. More high school students seeking

college admission have their SAT scores sent to Penn State than to any other college in the nation. But admission is getting more and more competitive. The average SAT score of freshmen is a respectable 1150.

Another test of loyalty, as well as respect for the University's impressive academic achievements, is the generosity of alumni in support of private funding campaigns. State universities used to lag far behind in private funding, but Penn State's recently completed capital campaign, raised an astonishing \$1.37 billion, an amount once attained only by the Ivy League colleges. While many lament Penn State's rapid growth -- 40,000 students on the main campus -- they take some comfort in the quality of education being offered.

We should let the voice of Penn State summarize the decade of the 1940s:

"I am deeply honored to have provided an education and a home for you while you were here in my care. The turbulent years of the 1940s were especially challenging, but our students, faculty and administration worked together to overcome the obstacles brought on by the World War.

"What pleases me most is that here on my beautiful campus you found lasting friendships. What saddens me most are those of you who died or suffered lasting injuries in defense of your country, and to keep my gates open to future generations of students, many of them your own children.

"Your affection for me moves me deeply. Your return visits constantly buoy my spirit. Your loyalty makes me feel special among my sister institutions.

"Help me to improve the education I offer. I cannot do it alone.

"To each and every one of you, my children, you have my undying gratitude and my deep affection."

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