

# *Scarlet Letters*

*Number 9 October 2018*



*Three 56ers at their 30<sup>th</sup> reunion in 1986: Carolyn Evans, Sylvia Lucas Miller, and Kate Trynin Kestnbaum. Photo by Toni Holland Liebman.*

## **Calling All “Commuters”!**

Did you live off-campus while at Wellesley?  
We want to hear what your experience was like:  
were you happy? lonely? single? married?  
pregnant?  
Did you feel excluded or just older and more  
worldly?  
Did you feel the school helped you be part of  
things or kept you secluded unfairly?  
Would you do it again?  
We want the “skinny.” Please send to  
claudia.bushman@gmail.com.

Sheila

Barbara Springston Anderson wrote this  
poem after the death of her husband:

## **Art’s Elegy March 1989**

Sorrow sculpts the soul with calm regard—  
Carving deep—  
Determined sweep of pain— —  
Excising— — Precisely— —  
Demanding all that’s petty or of trivial concern—  
Given time—  
Given sight of what continues to exist—  
All that’s left is love— —

Humanity finds its own with the  
hush beyond the tears— —

## Diaries

Spring in Great Lakes country is a reluctant season, and we joyfully greet the cardinal's first whistle and the green hints of daffodils. On an April day fifty years ago I recorded these events in a little notebook, and that was how my diary began.

The urge to write things down is clearly in my genes. Our attic is bursting with the journals and letters of family members and reading them has produced smiles and tears and a few surprises. It's a sharing of lives that began several generations ago with two great-grandfathers. One was a preacher, a teacher, and a public figure whose journals fill volumes. The other was a businessman who kept his record of a family trip in one very small notebook describing a European "grand tour." The writer's delighted observations were squeezed into four or five lines each day, in writing so miniscule that reading it requires a magnifying glass.

My doctor father's World War II journal written in Australia and New Guinea presented a similar challenge but filled many notebooks. Using his ancient Underwood typewriter, I spent a winter transcribing them, puzzling over mysterious medical terms and touched by the writer's joy over the beauty he found in wartime New Guinea, "the palms and tiny huts and white, sandy beaches against a background of dark, grim mountains . . . this lovely land!" His little hospital endured air raids, but his letters home were filled with sunny scenes and did not mention the bombs.

My mother's daily letters from that time are a reassuringly domestic record written when there was no time for diaries. Later she set me a fine example by keeping a journal for nearly forty years, but I discovered an earlier one written during the Depression years, a five-year diary with each day's entries compressed into a few closely spaced lines. It is a somewhat sad little book; my parents were living with my grandparents in those impecunious times, and my grandmother was often ill.

After the war we moved into our own house, but I was always close to my scholarly, dignified grandfather. Imagine my delight upon discovering



*My father at his New Guinea home.*

his younger self in the pages of a journal he kept in 1888-89 while he was in boarding school. He called it "The Uneventful Annals of a Schoolboy's Quiet Life." In its early pages he observed that "sometimes I will flunk, and others I will not. This morning I flunked in Cicero, didn't do much in Algebra, flunked in Greek. Rather a bad day." A later entry was more hopeful: "Today I must begin to study hard, and it has been much easier to do it since I realize that I must." He devoted more attention to sports than to academics, however, noting that "it is hard to do good work before a very important game." And there were other distractions; it was not infrequently recorded that "after lights were out, a whole lot of us had a fine brew."

Perhaps my grandfather, in keeping a journal, was dutifully following maternal instructions. For me, it has simply been the wish to save and remember each day. My first entry fifty years ago noted the appearance of white violets and hyacinths, and the goldfinch's summer yellow. It ended with, "Last night Dr. Martin Luther King was shot in Memphis, Tenn."

Tonight a quiet hunter has perched for an hour in a maple tree; I will need to write about the patience of an owl.

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**Book Review: Lyn Snyder, *Murder in the Choirloft*, 2011.** Order at [lynsnyderbooks.com](http://lynsnyderbooks.com) OR [CreateSpace.com/3601059](http://CreateSpace.com/3601059) OR [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com).

Protagonist Elderberry Himmel got her distinctive name from her New Age parents who now live in a yuppie neighborhood on Coronado Island south of San Diego. As the story begins, Berry, as she likes to be called, has just been fired from her first job, that of deejay at a local radio station, because she added some strong political opinions to her patter. Since she directed a madrigal choir in college and almost majored in music, Berry ventures to apply for the position of choir director at a 1000-member Presbyterian Church in Santa Cora, east of San Diego. Surprisingly, at her first interview, she is offered the job despite her lack of experience. When she expresses astonishment, the pastor, Asa McCallum, replies that bad publicity about the tragic deaths of the last two choir directors has resulted in a lack of applications for the position.

Berry accepts the offer and meets Charlene, or Charlie, the church's virtuoso organist who has Coprolalia, a rare form of Tourette Syndrome. This causes her to suddenly and unintentionally utter obscenities, insults, and racial slurs. (Church members understand this and shrug off her outbursts.) The two are drawn to each other. Berry learns that Charlie also sees words "in two directions" and sometimes pronounces them backwards. For her part, Berry lets Charlie know that she loves to play flag football with a mixed male/female group and is unsure of her sexual preference.

When Berry learns that Charlie suspects the previous choir directors' "accidents" were murders and that the police investigation is lagging, the two women decide to do some detective work on their own. They contact a member of the police department who turns out to be a former college acquaintance of Berry's named Dane Carver. Dane's main job is tracking down "Coyotes," people who smuggle immigrants across the California-Mexico border. Tentatively and then enthusiastically he joins the search—and soon provides romance. Earlier, Berry had visited her parents and acquired a shaggy mop of a dog from their maid, Maria (an illegal immi-

grant?). Amigo becomes an essential player.

And so, the chase begins. Snyder tells a fast tale. Berry wins over the initially hostile choir members and manages to lead them in some glorious performances, all the while following obscure and intriguing clues. These lead in several directions, even at one point, to Pastor McCallum. Visits to Helasco's, an anything-and-everything-goes bar in Tijuana, uncover a dignified church member in drag . . . whiffs of blackmail? A dirty bandana in a rarely-used attic over the choir room . . . was the church being used to smuggle immigrants and drugs? On a walk in the hills Amigo finds a half-dead woman under a clump of pines and the question of how to treat illegal immigrants is no longer abstract. The mystery becomes more and more entangled until, in a nail-biting episode, the murderer is revealed

Lyn Snyder's fourteen years as a choir director make her setting ring true, and her plot kept me reading eagerly. *Murder in the Choirloft* was published in 2011. A sequel is in the works.

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## Becoming A Quilter

Quilting is a solitary activity, but for me, very therapeutic. When my husband first died, I found it very helpful to come home from my morning class at the Y and have an ongoing quilt project to keep me busy. I was not just returning to an empty house, with no plan for the day.

My first quilt was pieced by hand. It took a year. In the late 80s we made templates out of sandpaper and cardboard, used scissors to cut fabric and pencils for marking. Those tools were much like what was used in the nineteenth century. Now there are rotary cutters, specific rulers, and special washout markers. My second quilt, sewn on a machine, took two weeks. There are newly popular techniques, foundation

paper piecing, ruler quilting, and many are buying long-arm quilting machines at great cost. I have just bought my first (very basic) computerized machine.

Back then I made quilts with just two fabrics: the first two were mauve and Wedgwood blue. Now I prefer bright colors, batiks and contemporary designers, but with traditional blocks. Fabrics are more exciting now, and new lines are coming out all the time. In the early days, I had only one project at a time. Now I have several ongoing, in various stages. (Quilters call them UFOs: unfinished projects).

I was not artistic as a child. I knit argyles for my father in the '50s and sewed for my three daughters and myself in the '60s. When we moved to New





Jersey in 1975, I started classes at the local adult school: needlepoint, investing, Chinese cooking, French and Italian, and, finally, quilting. Now I belong to the Garden State Quilt Guild, which meets monthly, with nationally known speakers and workshops.

The most common questions from non-quilters are “What’s it for?” and “How long did it take?” I usually respond that no one asked Picasso that or expected one of his paintings to match the living room decor! Non-quilters expect to be able to buy a bed-size quilt for what it costs at a store, when in reality it costs several hundred dollars for supplies and many, many hours of work. There is now only one quilt shop locally and that is an hour away (maybe just as well as I have literally a wall of fabric and some in other rooms . . . and there is always the Internet!)

I sew on my machine almost every day. I sit on my kitchen rocker and hand-quilt (not so well) before dinner, watching the news. I do donate some lap quilts to the Guild charity, but often what I make is not really appropriate, and I must admit sometimes I do NOT want to share a particularly successful project. I have also found that family members are not always THRILLED to get another quilt!

I have probably made close to two hundred projects, from potholder-size (now called mug rugs) to king-size bed quilts—and my “to-do” list continues to get longer. For me, it is not just a hobby, but a passion!

Liz Ritchie Topper  
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## All Our Love Letters Are In French

I live in Switzerland; it is a small country, with such unbelievable variety. I have been infinitely happy here, married to my Swiss husband for sixty-two years. One travels short distances, and all changes: the landscape, the architecture, the language. There are four official languages (German, French, Italian, and Romansch) and numerous dialects. The written language is High German, but there is a small amount of literature as well as some movies in Swiss-German.

My German 101 professor, were she still alive, wouldn't believe it (I was not the best in her class!) but I am as fluent in Swiss-German as in English (it does wonders to marry a language). It is what I speak with our four daughters and eight grandchildren, and it is also what I speak most of the time with my Swiss husband, Fritz (or to his Swiss friends and relatives, and to me, FritzRuedi—short for Fritz Rudolph).

Fritz and I met at a youth hostel in Tours, France, in 1952, just before I entered Wellesley. I didn't know any German, and his English was very rudimentary, as he had chosen Italian instead of English in school. That's why I majored in French (in order to spend my junior year abroad) instead of English Literature or History of Art. During my junior year in France, I spent every holiday and every long weekend in Switzerland. We conversed in French (all our love letters are in French). At the beginning of my senior year, I had to go up on stage at a meeting of the Alliance Française to tell a bit about my year in Paris. A friend of mine told me that two of my French professors were sitting behind her, and she heard one of them say, in French, "That's strange, Mademoiselle James has just spent a year in Paris, and she talks French with a Swiss accent."

I am including here two of my poems. I have probably written several hundred, about half in German, half in English, a few in French, and a few in Swiss dialect. Several years ago, a small book of my poetry was published here in Switzerland, but it was almost

immediately out of print, as my publisher tragically had a fatal accident when he fell down the flight of stone steps in front of his house. I am toying with the idea of self-publishing my poems in English, unless I find some other way to do it here in Switzerland.

I had a stroke a year ago, from which I fortunately completely recovered, except for being very tired all the time. The poem "Stroke" expresses my fear of another one. From 1983 to 1993, Fritz was Director of Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid for the Swiss government, in which capacity he visited many developing countries and several refugee camps. The poem "Drought" was influenced by what he told me and by what I read about the situation.

Hearty greetings to all classmates who read this!

Mary James Staehelin,  
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### STROKE

*by Mary James Staehelin*

honing the edge of my mind  
unknown what lies to think  
beyond the brink of tomorrow -  
if the conduits are cut at a stroke  
and I poke my way mad  
among lost memories  
the wishbone  
of my thoughts broken  
and no return token

## DROUGHT

*by Mary James Staehelin*

They left. They went to see where the green grass grew.  
Before going, from hearing reports they knew  
that there was a drought and that only a very few  
of the millions ever found enough to eat.  
They were not prepared for the shock, the impossible feat  
of conveying so much horror, of portraying in neat,  
concisely written articles the need,  
the enormity of the hunger, the starving. Indeed,  
how could they know if any taxpayers would read  
back home what they wrote and be able to visualize  
the skinny, bloated children with sunken eyes,  
wide-eyed with pain, their eyelids patched with flies.  
Children crouch, waiting with empty bowls;  
women scratch the ground, making little holes  
in the barren earth, looking under the soles  
of their feet to find a wind-blown leaf or grain  
or root, covered, hiding, waiting in vain  
for the parched, hard-baked earth to soak in some rain.  
Children crumble goat droppings. (Undigested kernels  
could sometimes be found to eat, but now the animals  
lie dead on the ground.) At their feet the sand fills  
the deep cracks in the earth where in the span  
of several years back millet, high as a man,  
was growing. The men are stunned, stare helpless and  
cannot understand what has hit them as they carry  
their shrouded children the short distance to burial.  
Giacometti men: skeletal - and weary  
Here and there a haggard mother props  
a child's head to her sagging breast - she stops  
death from coming, suckles the few drops  
that have kept the child staring death a few years  
straight in the face - now hardly any tears  
to wipe away, too weak to cry. Death steers  
a swifter course with every day that passes.  
They went. They saw that now no crops, no grasses  
grow in the deathwatch desert. It all surpasses  
human understanding. Can it be told -  
the ravaged youthful faces, wizened, old -  
in language that will take any kind of hold?

## The Chautauqua Mini-Reunion

Nine classmates met at the Chautauqua Institution this summer for a week of mind-bending sessions on “Russia and the West,” the lecture theme for week four of the season. Also in attendance were members of the Class of 1955, who joined us for dinner the first evening and invited us for cocktails and breakfast on their porch. In addition, a friend of Jane’s, who was teaching a course on Cryptic Crosswords, graciously invited us for wine and dinner on her veranda.

The lectures began on Monday, with Senator Chris Coons of Delaware presenting his view of Putin’s Russia. On Tuesday we heard from Ambassador William Burns, who presented a plan for future negotiations with Russia. Wednesday brought us Nina Khrushcheva, great-granddaughter of Nikita Khrushchev, a professor of international affairs at The New School and author of “Footsteps: Searching for the Soul of an Empire Across Russia’s Eleven Time Zones.” And on Thursday, Amor Towles, author of “A Gentleman In Moscow,” addressed a standing-room-only crowd of admirers.

We heard the combined Chautauqua Symphony Orchestra and the Music School Festival Orchestra perform Dimitri Shostakovich’s Symphony No. 7, “The Leningrad”; were entertained by the Pilobolus Dancers; and were inspired by the Morning Worship addresses by Fr. Greg Boyle, founder and director of Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles.

There were so many things to do we were going in all different directions! Cynthia ventured out on the lake in a kayak, I attended a piano concert of

Chopin’s Sonatas Nos 1, 2, and 3 played by a Cliburn Competition winner, several took a course in Hemingway’s short stories, and some attended the lectures on Spirituality in the Russian Culture. We did a lot of walking to the various events and did a lot of talking with each other. What a grand experience!

We are so enthusiastic about the week at Chautauqua that we want to return next year for another mini-reunion. Jane turned over the reins of organizing to Anne Sinnott Moore and me, so expect to hear from us about the eighth week at Chautauqua, August 10-16, 2019, when the topic will be “Shifting Global Powers.”

Maya McGrath Percy  
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### Mini Reunions

In addition to the Chautauqua event, face to face minis are planned in Florida, New York, and Boston in mid fall and one in eastern Massachusetts in May. I am hoping for many additional small gatherings throughout the country. Any self-starters for these?

PLUS!! Let’s all participate in our first ever “virtual” mini by phoning, from October 21 to November 3, close Wellesley friends as well as those with whom we long to reconnect. In early October each of us will receive a list of classmates with current phone numbers and addresses. I am looking forward to catching up with many of you and I hope you are too. Please call 607-257-0044 or e-mail (annsie999@yahoo.com) with any questions.



*L to R: Mike Reese Horn, Anne Sinnott Moore, Jane Kentnor Dean, Maya McGrath Percy, Cecily Parke Sesler, Ethel Larrabee. Missing: Cynthia Stephens, Ellie Zurn Hutt, Maggie Daniel Russell.*