

JACK WILER'S WORLD

SUNDAY, JUNE 03, 2007

Ed Campbell

Third Grade you'll note was taught by a woman. A woman with a young son. First and Second as well were taught by women and Fifth and Sixth. Teaching was widely perceived as a woman's job in America in 1960. It was underpaid and the women who held the jobs were considered either to be in search of a husband or supplementing a man's income in the family. My world and Mick's and Terry's and Chris' was filled with women. We left for school without seeing our fathers. We returned from school to our mothers. Many of the men in town took the train to work in Philadelphia. We'd see them walking home just before dinner in their suits and hats. They were far away figures. We had yet to participate in organized sports. We had no coaches and few if any male teachers.

Wenonah Elementary had two exceptions, my Fourth Grade Teacher, Mr. McIntyre, and Ed Campbell. Ed Campbell was assigned the problem classes. The Second and Third graders that posed a difficulty. My classes were filled with good cooperative kids. Mr. Campbell's were filled with kids with learning problems, with discipline issues. It was thought that only a man could bring them in line.

Mr. Campbell was that man. He'd served in the Korean War. He was a father as well. But more than that he was a robust, energetic man who engaged his students in ways our teachers didn't. If a kid wasn't paying attention he'd toss an eraser at his head. Mike Smith, the younger brother of Michelle, was once hung out the window till he cooled down. He played football and soccer with us on our gravel schoolyard.

Especially soccer. We played a robust game with few rules and lots of contact. The only referee was Mr. Campbell and unless you were a bully or a cheat you got away with everything within the rules. It was always a joy when we were allowed to join with his classes in soccer or football.

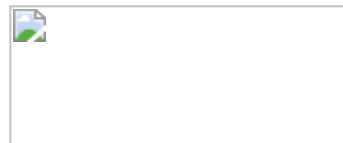
In summers he was a lifeguard at the Wenonah Lake. He'd plant himself on the raft in the middle of the lake and take on all challengers. We'd try to take the raft and he'd toss us off. He was a war hero and a man and everything we could want to be. He was fearless. Of course, he was dealing with boys and girls under the age of twelve so it's

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doubtful he was physically afraid of us.

You had the sense though that he expected better of you. That you could be a better man, a better person, a better scholar, by following in his footsteps. He was, most importantly, not our father. He didn't belittle you or make you feel stupid. He simply asked you to do the work you were assigned. He was never my teacher except in the way a male role model is for a young boy. Like my Uncle Al or my Uncle Ed he showed me the way to be a man.

It was a strange world not having men in it. Your father, my friends fathers, never involved themselves in our lives the way fathers do today. They came home, had a cocktail, ate dinner, asked you about your day, chatted with our mothers and went back to work. Their life was a mystery. But Ed Campbell was there with us daily. Striding the schoolyard like the cock of the walk. Loud, boisterous, argumentative, challenging.

In my town most of the men went to war. WWI, WWII, the Korean War, the Vietnam War were all a real part of the landscape. The county draft board was headed up by a man who lived in Wenonah. Nolan Cox. He lived in a large, dark Victorian home off the park. He seemed to take great pleasure in sending young men to battle.

Ed Campbell was one of the men of South Jersey who served and then came home to serve again in a largely woman's world. I have no idea how he might have felt working with the women in the school. He certainly never would speak of it. He seemed to say you should live your life as though every thing you do matters. As if it could all be gone in a second. We responded to that with an energy almost unchecked. Every boy, from the smartest, wimpiest among us to the most nasty, bullying thugs, loved him. And when he brought us together we played together. The private wars we had vanished in the joy of kicking a ball or tossing a football or stopping a run. My brother Mick had a good deal of trouble as a boy with scholastic endeavors but he worked hard for Ed Campbell. His friends and mine loved the man.

So.

I can imagine Ed Campbell feeling diminished each time he saw a man step off the train at 5:40 after a days work in Philadelphia while he spent his days with boys and girls. I can imagine him trying to learn what drew him to this vocation. More than that I can remember going to his house each Halloween and having him take the time to guess who each and every one of us was beneath our monstrous masks and grotesqueries. He was never wrong. No one ever took the raft.

Maybe you think about your job and what it means. Maybe you have sons and daughters and try to raise them up right. Maybe you fret about the men and women who teach them each day.

But in Wenonah in 1960 no one worried about this. You went to work and did the work you had to do to feed your family. You came home and ate your dinner with your cold milk and bread and potatoes. You smiled at your children and asked how they were doing and probably barely listened to their half hearted recitations of the days events. You trusted your children's lives to women and a few men with little or no

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knowledge of who they were or what they did.

It still amazes me I know almost nothing of their lives. I know Miss Quigley married a few years after I left Second Grade and became Mrs. Scott. I know Mrs. Kaufman lived at the end of my block for twenty odd years but I never had an adult conversation with her till I was in my thirties on the 4th of July. I knew Mrs. Fuller's son Greg but nothing of her or her husband. But Mr. Campbell strides through my life like a God. Strong and brave and fierce. A man like I wanted to be. He made books seem less like the world of ladies and more like the world. Not a bad thing for a guy in a little town in South Jersey.

POSTED BY JACK WILER AT [8:11 PM](#) 

ABOUT ME

JACK WILER

JERSEY CITY, NEW JERSEY, UNITED STATES

Too much to put in one space. That's why I wrote two books and innumerable unpublished poems

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4 COMMENTS:



Bob Thomas said...

The piece that you wrote about Mr Campbell was very good. I didn't realize that you never had him in front of you for a year...

I had him for four years and it was a great show, part of me will always be in his classes.

The email I sent earlier I cut short to get it to you before you had written your piece. Since you have the thing about Mike Smith in it... I guess you got it.

Do you have a Gateway yearbook from far enough back to have a picture of Mr. Campbell? It would be neat to see a photo of him in his old days.

I have more stories to add -

Story one - from 5th grade. Mr. Campbell had asked the class to learn or memorize something in a shorter period of time than normal and someone complained out loud, "That's not fair, Mr. Campbell!" I don't recall who said it - but I seem to hear a girl's voice in my mind.

Mr. Campbell came to a dead halt and waited a few seconds - which seemed like an eternity. No one knew what was going to happen but he finally began to speak. He said, "Whoever told you that the world was fair has done you a great disservice."

He went on to say that the world in general is not fair and the sooner we understood that the better off we would be.

Story two - from Wenonah - I forget which year.

[the Wenonah school field - a short aside -

That field tore into more pairs of school pants than my mother could abide. She could have put up with grass stains if we had a grassy field but the gravel cut through dress pants way too easy.]

[Dress Code - In those days we wore pants to school - not bluejeans. I don't think that we were allowed to wear bluejeans - just as the girls couldn't wear slacks or shorts - though on the coldest days they wore snow pants over or under their skirts or dresses to keep from freezing. Besides wearing dress pants to school, we were never allowed to get down on the floor. Class photos were an exception. Crowding into the "all purpose room" to watch a space launch was another exception. Thinking back wasn't it was strange that our school had no gym or auditorium?]

We were playing baseball on the yellow gravel field. Anyway, Mr. Campbell was at bat. Whenever any of us were at bat we would be razzed by him and encouraged to SWING LIKE WE MEANT IT - IT'S JUST A BALL! He might come up with something funny if we weren't really trying. I thought that I would razz him from my position near shortstop. I was yelling something like, "Come on Eddie, hit a good one!" He didn't complain immediately but as we were walking back to the school he came by me and said, "I am 'Mr. Campbell' to you, Bobby, remember that."

I swallowed hard and fought back some tears and always did remember that. A rebuke from him carried great weight.

Story three - from Wenonah

I don't remember how or when it started. Who knows perhaps Mr. Campbell read something in his education theory books about stress release or relief. Anyway some days he would challenge anyone in the class to come forward and trade "shots". You could stand in reach of him and wind up your biggest punch and hit him in the shoulder with your best "shot". Then you had to stand there while he gave you one from his seat. I doubt he ever really laid into anyone but most kids had to step back to keep their balance after being hit. I know that I did it once or twice. I can picture Jack Shepard doing it and Gary Condell. I don't remember any girls taking him up on it. Can you name any other teacher would do something like that?

Of course a wrestling coach would wrestle with the students - but to trade punches in front of a class?

Mr. Campbell went over to Gateway for a few years. I had him for 7th and 8th grade reading. He would set us to our SRA (Scientific Reading Association) folders and often disappear to tend to some other business. Of course I was in 7C - the 'best' section - which they tried to hide by calling it 7C instead of 7A - so he was safe leaving us alone for the whole period most of the time. We would rather have him in class. He was much more interesting than a whole pile of Rate Builders or Power Builders.

11:11 PM

Anonymous said...

A great tribute to Mr. Campbell, who stands out in my memory as well, not just because he was a strong male role model, but also because he wasn't a typical school teacher academic. He sold me my first set of used clubs. When he heard me tell Duke Klinger I didn't have any he said - "I'll sell ya mine - \$8 - I can't play that game."

He was also the first teacher that really got me interested in learning history when he covered the Roman empire in 6th grade.

Later when he moved over to Gateway, he saved Brangan and I from getting suspended. We got caught outside the auditorium door smoking and hauled down to the Vice Principal's office. Ed was the acting VP, he pulled us in the office and said "don't ever do that again, now get back to class." The most amazing thing was that it was his reading class that we were sneaking out of !

I got more out of that look he gave us than any punishment I ever went through.

Chris DeHart

5:56 PM

Anonymous said...

Hi there! This is my first visit to your blog!

We are a group of volunteers and starting a new project in a community in the same niche.

Your blog provided us beneficial information to work on. You have done a outstanding job!

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1:24 AM

Anonymous said...

Hi there to every one, the contents existing at this web page are in fact remarkable for people knowledge, well, keep up the good work fellows.

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9:13 PM

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