GERALDINE JONČICH CLIFFORD

SERENDIPITY, OR SO IT WOULD SEEM

and in Melodious Accents I
Will sit me down & Cry "I! I!"
William Blake, Public Addresses

While teaching third grade in San Lorenzo, California, had I not been bored with the given approach to teaching spelling - still a “big ticket” item in the elementary school curriculum in the 1950s - I would probably not have turned my bundle of possibilities toward the history of education. No obvious signs pointed there: not in 1954 when I graduated from college, nor in 1958 when I enrolled in a doctoral program. Yes, I had enjoyed and done well in history courses; but I had liked and met the modest demands of virtually every subject leading to a high-school diploma, teaching credential, and two college degrees. (High school chemistry was the exception, a fact disguised on my transcript because Mr. Strauss gave me a “B” in exchange for my promise not to take his physics class.) And, yes, as early as my second year of teaching I had given idle thought to becoming a professor: perhaps a teacher educator, in some distant future.

Hence there was no way of predicting that the incidental fact of devising my own method of teaching spelling (including drawing the study words, not from the state’s lists but from my pupils’ personal “composition dictionaries”) would prompt a casual decision to write a masters-level course paper on the history of spelling instruction. This resulted in my professor’s proposal to forward my name as a fellowship candidate to an eastern institution about which I then knew little and cared less.

Life-history as a literary form and schooling as a coordinated effort of the polity pretty much grew up together during the 19th century. In the following memoir – too narrowly focused to qualify as autobiography – I weave together (“entangle”?) some inner and outer facts, and what Stuart Bates thinks essential, the “reconsideration of recollections,” with issues in education and themes in history that successively captivated me: matters I researched, wrote, taught, and came to care about. From this life-and-histioriography self-scrutiny the reader might better place my work in the field that I stumbled into some six decades ago.

“A PEDRO KID”

In the autobiography of his youth, A Walker in the City, Alfred Kazin wrote, “Every time I go back to Brownsville it is as if I had never been away.” Back in my home town for the 60th reunion of the Class of ’49 of San Pedro High School,
in a downtown shop window I spotted a tee shirt. It read “You can take the kid out of Pedro, but you can’t take Pedro out of the kid.” The motto fits better than the tee shirt, expressing both the leaving and inability-to-leave-behind the place and persons of ones initial “knowing self.” Like other working-class immigrant communities, San Pedro – it was Peé-dro to locals, not the Spanish Pay-dro – would lose many of its kids to other places, jobs, and life styles. The 3,000 Japanese went first, forcibly interned in 1942, an action that also removed most of the schools’ highest achievers; they never returned.

As for the rest, with each generation social mobility would draw away a progressively greater share of the offspring of the fisher-folk who settled this harbor town. During my growing-up years, immigrant fishermen together with the wives and daughters who canned the fish made San Pedro, California the nation’s largest center of commercial fishing.

We used to joke, about both the town and its one public high school, that “There are the Slavs, the Italians, the Portuguese, and the Americans.” The “Slavs” were largely from Dalmatia, an outpost of Austria-Hungary when my maternal grandfather left Europe in 1900, and part of the new Yugoslavia when my father emigrated in 1920. Our Italian-Americans, like most nationally, were from southern Italy and Sicily. The smaller number of Portuguese came slightly earlier, the first in the 1870s, chiefly from the Azores – proud that their countryman, Juan Cabrillo (Cabrilho) claimed the area, now southern California, for Spain in 1542. As for “The Americans,” in our insular view they were merely the remainder: overwhelmingly white, blandly “non-ethnic” as far as we immigrant kids could tell, and adherents of vaguely suspect Protestant churches. It wasn’t until I went to college in 1950, living in a campus dormitory with Jews from Beverly Hills and Fairfax High, that I realized that San Pedro’s “Americans” had indeed included Jews whose dry goods and clothing stores we had patronized.

Needing a harbor and armed with promises, Los Angeles persuaded San Pedro’s voters to accept annexation in 1909. The since-neglected town, twenty-five miles distant from the city’s commercial, cultural, and political centers, lay outside the wide-ranging streetcar system when most of the families I knew lacked cars. San Pedro High (SPHS) was, however, within the Los Angeles Unified School District,

Favorites from My Own Work


