On Campus

Cerberus of the Steamboat

Had Dudley really been gassed in the trenches?

By
Bill Henslee ’61CC
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In the late 1950s and early 1960s, students seldom had much contact with faculty outside the classroom. We passed through their academic orbits for only one semester like wandering comets, most of us never to be seen or heard from again. It’s not surprising that we knew little of them or they of us.

The closest semblance to neighborly contact we had was with University employees. We dealt with many of these people for four years, but their names, faces, and stories have faded. I didn’t realize it at the time, but I learned a lot about the polyglot culture of New Yorkers from the staff whose daily Calvary was to put up with thousands of hyperactive, over-intelligent, frenzied students.

To paraphrase the opening of the old TV detective show *Naked City*, “there are eight million stories in the Naked Columbia.” However, there is one that isn’t complete, a mystery that has persistently bothered me since I was a student.

During my years at the College, I was a gym rat, a wannabe athlete. I played on the freshman basketball B team and on the lightweight football team where I won my Varsity “C.” My routine during the off-season was an afternoon jaunt to the gymnasium in University Hall, which was known as the Steamboat on the Hill. Built on the cliff at 120th Street, the building was rounded on one end and had two smokestacks looming above it. Below the ground level that contained the bursar’s and registrar’s offices were the athletic facilities, including the gymnasium, with its indoor track, training rooms, basketball courts, and, on the lowest level, the pool.

To get to the gym, you had to descend a multistory staircase. The effluvia coming up the stairs made me think of Hades. Completing the image was a guard, a Cerberus

whose job was to make sure only Columbia athletes, students, faculty, and staff entered the Stygian precincts. I say guard with hesitation. Dudley didn't wear the regulation uniform of the campus police, but an ill-fitting mishmash of a uniform that draped over a crippled, contorted body. The small, wizened, bespectacled man rarely said a word to anyone but merely tipped a salute to his hat brim and nodded as we swept past. I don't recall anyone ever being asked for an ID. If Dudley had ever been called upon to stop someone, it would have been impossible because of his disabilities.

I usually stayed late in the gym and was one of the last to leave, so I often saw Dudley struggling home back to his room in the John Jay Hall dormitory at the end of his shift. He walked by placing one foot forward and then dragging his other foot even with it. His slow progress was painful to watch. He had severe breathing problems and wheezed as he made his way back to John Jay. Once, in the middle of a snowstorm, I found him sprawled on the sidewalk where he'd slipped and fallen on an icy patch. I got him up and helped him back home, slow step by dragging step through the deepening snow and cutting wind while he rested his entire weight upon my arm. It seemed to take forever, and I thought we'd both freeze before we made it to the warmth of Hartley Hall. When we finally got inside, he thanked me and hobbled away toward his room.

After that, especially in winter, when the snow piled up and the walks were icy, I made it a point to be around when it was time for him to leave. Helping Dudley home became a fairly regular occurrence, but we seldom spoke because it took most of his energy to breathe while walking.

Who was this man? Rumors around the quad and the gym had it that he was a former Columbia student who'd enlisted in the army during World War I and been gassed on the Western Front — which would account for the wheeze. I never had the brass to ask him, but I've often wondered what the true story was. Whatever his previous history, it was obvious to everyone that his guard job, as well as his permanent residence in John Jay, was a sinecure that the University had given him for some reason. It was a charitable action on the part of an institution that so often appeared to many of us to be a bureaucracy without a heart.

I began this story with the idea that we all learned something from our relationships with Columbia employees. Something about Dudley's story has stuck in my mind all these years. The memory comes up at odd times — such as whenever I reflect on

the fragility of the human body and how quickly and without warning one can become disabled. Perhaps the most enduring lesson was Dudley's dignity in the face of the daily parade of thoughtless folks who passed him by without realizing it took a special kind of courage and will just to show up for work at a dull makeshift job, day after day, year after year. It was a lesson I've remembered over the years and taught to my children and now to my grandchildren.

Was Dudley a disabled Columbia veteran of the Great War? Does anyone know the real story? Or is this one of those Columbia legends or myths that is better left alone?

Bill Henslee is retired and lives in Texas.

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