

# DEERFIELD

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RODGIN COHEN '61 RETIRES / SCI 691 / CHRIS DAVIS '77

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FIRST PERSON / *by Fredric Russell '61*

I asked Jessica Day if I could write something for *Deerfield Magazine*. As soon as she said yes, I was reminded of this universally recognized warning: Be careful what you wish for. Now I was competing with an internationally celebrated group of writers who had graduated from Deerfield.

I had brazenly promoted myself to an elite cadre of Deerfield graduates recognized for their writing prowess: there was John McPhee '49, whose attention to detail and mellifluous conversation-like prose had endeared him to millions of readers. His catholic grasp of a wide range of subjects included a beautifully crafted biography of Deerfield's legendary headmaster Frank Boyden. There was Budd Schulberg '32, whose novel, *What Makes Sammy Run?* (1941, Random House), brought to prominence the toxic effects of the narcissistic personality, and whose screenplay for *On The Waterfront* (1954, Columbia Pictures) starring Marlon Brando told a searing story about the Mafia controlled New York City based longshoreman's union, and whose *The Harder They Fall* (1947, Random House) was a brilliant and troubling expose of the corruption that pervaded professional boxing; the 1956 film version of which was the last movie Humphrey Bogart ever made.



## Deerfield's High Standards —Then and Now

I grew up in a family whose fortunes were linked with the newspaper business. My father wrote for the *Daily News* (founded 1919 as the *Illustrated Daily News*—it was the first US daily newspaper printed in tabloid format), the *New York Journal-American*, and finally, the *New York World-Telegram and Sun*, the last two of which struggled after the advent of evening television news and breathed their last in 1966 after a short-lived merger. My stepmother was immersed in the newspaper business as well, writing a daily column for the *New York Times*.

### THE FAMILY BUSINESS

Inspired by family tradition, and fortunately given entrepreneurial and business genes, I combined my writing interest with greed and started a newspaper in 1953, when I was nine years old. It had a narrow readership focus: seven apartment buildings close to the building in which I lived in a complex near the East River in Manhattan. I charged one cent for each two-page edition.

I knew that I had a small market; today we use the euphemism *niche* for such a market. Recognizing that I had a truly niche market in my hometown, a market with a maximum readership of approximately two thousand people, a market so small as not to interest any New York-based publication, newspaper or otherwise, I felt confident that my enterprise would flourish, especially if I priced the paper realistically.

There was no need for test marketing or any other expensive study to determine who would buy a paper that focused on what went on in the apartment complex. It didn't take a genius to determine my target market.

After a year, encouraged by a rapidly growing readership, I raised the price of the paper to two cents. Obeying the economics law that says when a product has "inelastic demand" (a demand that anything selling at one cent per unit would probably enjoy), the venture's net profit and return on equity (an uptown printing firm for production and a singular capital expenditure of the purchase of a typewriter), I experienced a dramatic increase in profits. They rose so greatly that I contemplated retirement, but before doing so I got lucky.

I had sold a copy of the newspaper to the producer of a nationally viewed television show, *Judge for Yourself: The Fred Allen Show*,

who arranged for me to appear on an episode a few weeks later. During this show, three contestants predicted which of three songs the audience would like the most, then the audience voted on its favorite. The contestants who guessed correctly would share a prize of \$1,000. That night, all the contestants guessed correctly, so I came home with \$333.32, which, given the progression of the Consumer Price Index from 1954 to 2017, would be worth about \$2,700 today.

Fred Allen himself interviewed me and confirmed that I had charged two cents a copy for my neighborhood newspaper. He then pulled out a dollar from his wallet and told me he wanted to get fifty issues. "That's fine," I balked, "but what about the postage?" We then negotiated a deal.

### ACADEMY ATAVISTIC

As I thought about what is unique about Deerfield, I began to think about what is unique about every institution—school, corporation, and family—that has survived and prospered over many generations and landed on this: integration of great values and adaptation to change to meet the demands of a new society. Deerfield has been able to do this, and I wondered how it had accomplished this feat. Schools that have developed high academic and ethical standards and married such standards with adaptation to the challenges of successive eras are unusually strong. Deerfield is one such school. But how could I trace the achievements of the school, starting with the first years under Frank Boyden and finishing with contemporaneous Deerfield? What would best describe such evolution? Was it a system, a phrase, or perhaps a word that explains the school's success across the ages?

What is unique about every institution—school, corporation, and family—that has survived and prospered over many generations?... integration of great values and adaptation to change to meet the demands of a new society.



A few weeks later, reading an article in a scientific publication, I came across the word atavistic, which is usually considered to mean what is primitive or what is, especially in science, a biological throwback. But there is another meaning or use—less common—that atavistic suggests: It is the ability to retain what is great from one era and integrate this greatness with intelligent adaptation into a new period, another era. This is the genius of Deerfield: All the great values that Frank Boyden inculcated in his students have been retained and embellished by his successors—from David Melville Pynchon to Margarita O'Byrne Curtis, incorporating them into the new Deerfield.

Few institutions accomplish this, that is, create a truly positive atavistic experience where young men and women realize their emotional, intellectual, and athletic potential.

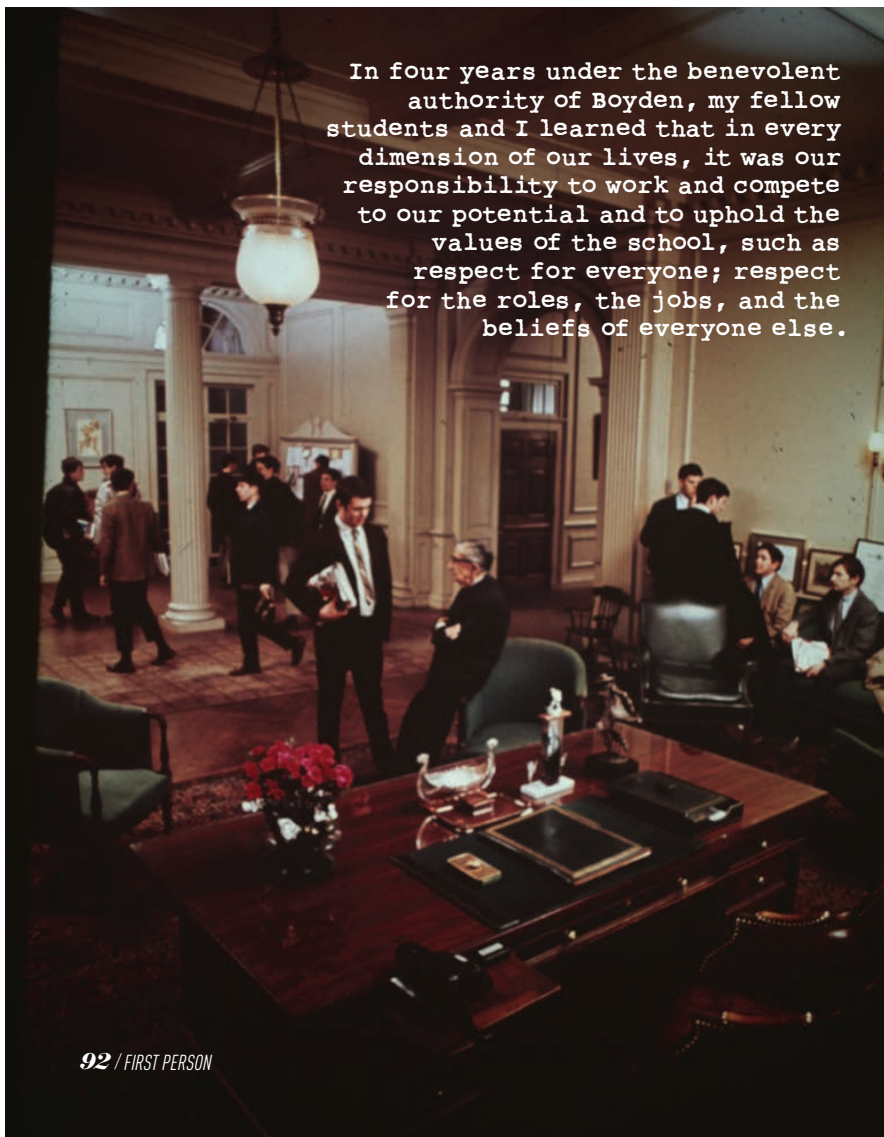
I entered Deerfield as a freshman in 1957. I can never forget taking the Boston and Maine Railroad from Grand Central Terminal in Manhattan on a March Sunday in 1957 to have an interview with Frank Boyden after lunch in his house, which was situated along Albany Road in the center of the campus.

My parents and I had worked hard to prepare for an interview with the man who had become, by then, a legend in secondary school education, a role model's role model, a brilliant educator who had arrived on campus in 1902 and had taken a virtually bankrupt school to one enjoying international acclaim.


When Mr. Boyden entered the room, I jumped up to address him properly. He took a few seconds to appraise me and then remarked that one of his closest friends had said many good things about me. He then thanked us for coming and assured us that he would personally look at my application and that the school would rule on my admission application as soon as possible.

The personal touch, respect and the courtesy, is something that Frank Boyden brought to Deerfield and instilled in his students and faculty. He didn't spend more than five minutes with us, but for a man of such power and prestige to personally interview a twelve-year-old for admission was an experience that my parents and I always remembered.

In four years under the benevolent authority of Boyden, my fellow students and I learned that in every dimension of our lives, it was our responsibility to work and compete to our potential and to uphold the values of the school, such as respect for everyone; respect for the roles, the jobs, and the beliefs of everyone else. If you enjoyed economic or social privilege, or in the case of a student at Deerfield, the privilege of attending a great academic institution, it was a privilege that ought not to be held in a boastful or superior manner. If you were lucky or fortunate enough to have enjoyed such privileges, then they ought to be enjoyed quietly, not boastfully, but with discretion. They were never used to demean any of those who had not been as fortunate.



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Few institutions retain the best of their culture as they move into different eras, while simultaneously remaining dynamic and of central importance. Those that manage to do so by selecting their subjects of emphasis and concentration judiciously and not in response to fads or short-lived trends; they introduce new dimension to their organisms so that they remain attractive to, for example, students in a modern setting: Reading with insight and writing with clarity remain indispensable, but being facile with computers is now mandatory for control of one's personal and business careers, and Deerfield has restructured the curriculum to reflect the demands of both the traditional and the contemporary.

Today, students sit around a table with the instructor and thus can constructively challenge each other as well as the teacher. There is another reason why Deerfield has adapted well to the 21<sup>st</sup> century: In 1988 the school returned to admitting girls, thereby giving both boys and girls a rich social experience, and a dimension in interpersonal learning that was not available when I was in school. With the potential applicant pool larger, the standards for admission have risen. As a classmate and good friend of mine, John Sutor, who was head of the Aspen Country Day School, told me a few years ago, "Freddie, you were really smart, but you would not be accepted at Deerfield today." The first part of his statement is subject to audit and verification. The second part is most likely accurate.

#### **HERE AND NOW . . . AND THEN**

Today I live in Oklahoma, where we are known for swaggering, wildcatting oil millionaires (and three billionaires), college football at the University of Oklahoma and Oklahoma State University that is played on almost as high a level as the National Football League, and two internationally recognized programs in petroleum engineering. We have two vibrant investment communities in Oklahoma City and Tulsa, the latter of which I am a part. Unfortunately, we also have sweltering summers where the temperature often exceeds one hundred degrees Fahrenheit for consecutive weeks. In Oklahoma, air conditioning is not optional. It is a necessity. And we have the world's best air conditioning.

Nevertheless, we cannot hide from the sun and heat forever, and by July we begin a desperate search for a cooler climate. My tastes in vacation are eclectic. Last year I wanted a place that was cool and quiet with a swimming pool. Why not Deerfield? I thought. It is quiet, it is beautiful, and it offered my kind of entertainment and recreation: My stimulation would be the Boyden Library; my recreation would be the Koch Pool and walking around the beautiful town and the tranquility-inducing campus.

I made reservations at the pleasant Deerfield Inn and found a flight on American Airlines that would take my friend and myself from Tulsa to Chicago where we would switch planes and fly to Bradley International in Hartford, CT. From there it would, according to Google maps, be a fifty-minute drive along Interstate 91 and US Highway 5 into Deerfield.

Finally, I made a right turn onto Deerfield's Old Main Street. I felt as if I was in a different world. It was quiet. There were cars but no traffic, no neon signs, no billboards. You could not hear the unpleasant sounds of interstate traffic. The houses were beautiful, and there was a harmony in their design and appearance without the plastic assembly line feel of many suburbs or the cacophony of many urban neighborhoods with monotonous, nondescript or ugly façades juxtaposed against another.

As I slowly drove down the Street, I felt that I had been transported to an atavistic period, not in the primitive sense of the word but in the sense of being thrown back to a world that was more orderly, less frenetic, more peaceful than today, all enhanced by a quiet, impressive sense of respect for education and learning, intertwined with a respect for civility.

And as I drove up to the Main School Building, the respect for order, for learning, and for curiosity was as palpable as when I first walked into the same building in 1957. //

# *DEERFIELD*

M A G A Z I N E

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June 6, 2018 marked the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Thomas Ashley, Class of 1911, in the battle of Château Thierry-Belleau Woods during World War I. Before enlisting in the Marine Corps in April of 1917, Tom had devoted all his energy to the Academy, preparing campus plans and writing a catalog and description of the school's mission. His educational philosophy for Deerfield still rings true today: Intellectual development, a desire to do service thru influence, and a high standard of character. //