

PRINCETON IN MY LIFE

Steve Ailes



Nellie and Steve Ailes – with some Yale friends.

For us in the class of 1933, the Princeton experience began almost 63 years ago, in September 1929.

Princeton at the end of the 20s was an idyllic place. It had a remarkable faculty, a beautiful campus. The student body was second to none. And academic pressure was scarce if not non-existent. The idea that we were there to get an education was not universally accepted. Life there, after the confinement of prep school, was too good to be true.

I enjoyed it to the utmost, but indeed was fortunate when my career sustained a mid-course correction. I had spent an extra year at the Episcopal High School in Virginia so college was easy for quite a while and when it became more difficult, I did not quickly change my work habits. My grades reflected this attitude and after midyear exams in sophomore year they were mediocre to say the least. Dean Luther P. Eisenhart called me in. He said that he was familiar with the pattern, that I had come in with a good rating but had not applied myself, so he confidently predicted that I would flunk out, which he said, would be good riddance. I was furious and deeply offended. I went directly to a cubicle I had found in the top of Chancellor Green Library and went to work. I spent a big part of that semester there and

was gratified when in the final exams for the year I raised all my grades two full groups. I even got a first in Baldy Smith's Architecture 201. Right after the grades came out, I saw Dean Eisenhart on Nassau Street. I had no intention of speaking to him but when I passed him, he said, sideways, "Well, Ailes, I see it worked."

I report this, not only because it was what would now be called a "defining moment" in my life, but because it indicates what a small, intimate community Princeton was in our day. I only regret that the Dean did not catch up with more of our wayward classmates.

Having been put firmly on the right track by the Dean, I made a more serious effort to become educated, and to take advantage of the remarkable opportunities that were before us. I put two fascinating years in the Department of Art and Archeology and experienced what I at least thought was some form of intellectual awakening. Because I planned to go to law school, I elected a course in the Politics Department each semester and even had the temerity to elect Prof. Corwin's Con Interp senior year. Since I was not covered by the Politics comprehensives, Prof. Corwin had to prepare a four hour exam just for me. He assured me that I would long remember it and he was right.

From 1933 to 1946 I had virtually no connection with Princeton or Princetonians. I went to law school at West Virginia University, taught in the law school three years, practised in Martinsburg awhile and came to Washington in 1942 to serve on the legal staff of O.P.A. during the war.

In 1946 I joined Steptoe & Johnson, a Washington law firm, and soon discovered an active, loyal Princeton alumni group, The Princeton Club of Washington, which regularly made the long hard trip to football games (once a year on a special train) and to other events. The club had monthly luncheons and a big formal annual dinner at the Chevy Chase Club, and enjoyed a lot of support from and participation by the University administration. I became active in the club, performed various roles and ended up as president in the late fifties. Ridiculous as it may sound, the training

I received presiding over those club affairs stood me in good stead when I went over to the Pentagon as Undersecretary of the Army in 1961.

The direct reason why I was asked to go to the Pentagon goes back to Frank Pace. He had a young assistant when he was Secretary of the Army in 1950 named Elvis Stahr. By 1961 Elvis was a university president and was asked by the Kennedy administration to become Army Secretary. He wanted someone as his Undersecretary who knew something about Washington and remembered me from the Pace era. Elvis was succeeded as Secretary by Cyrus Vance, whom I succeeded in 1964.

When I left the Pentagon in 1965 and rejoined the law firm, I was elected a Princeton Alumni Trustee at Large, having been nominated by the Princeton Club of Washington. I served four years in that capacity, had a year off and then was elected a Charter Trustee by the Board for a term of ten years. I served on a lot of committees, chaired some, and served as Clerk (pronounced "clark") for about five years. I once calculated that in those capacities I travelled to Princeton from Washington 135 times.

The Board underwent a substantial change over the time I was on it and not just from normal turnover. At first it was all male and the average age was in the mid sixties. Three changes were made. One was the election each year of a graduating senior to serve a four year term. The second was a limit on the term of Charter trustees to ten years. The previous rule had them serving to the age of seventy and discouraged electing a young person who would then serve a very long term. The third, of course, was the election of women to the Board when co-education began. These changes were excellent. The Board better understood what was going on in the student body, the average age dropped to the mid forties, and the women, particularly Mary Douglas and Sue Spears, contributed a great deal.

I look back on the experience of being a trustee as one of the most satisfying experiences of my life. In all the years I was a member, the Board worked hard, brought wisdom and experience to the many problems the University faced, was certainly congenial, got along well with the administration and was highly motivated to do a good job for the University. A trustee soon realizes that he or she has to think ahead rather than back in order to help the University play its proper role today and in the years ahead, and that sometimes things have to change to remain the same.

I wound up my tour in 1982 as the senior citizen on a board on which I had been a junior neophyte not long before, and with great respect for the many trustees with whom I served, and for the University administrators with whom we worked.

My major contribution as a trustee came about in a strange way. By way of background, the University had, a few years earlier, established two residential colleges, Wilson and Princeton Inn colleges, where a third of the freshmen and sophomores lived and took their meals. Some upper classmen lived in the colleges and faculty advisors were assigned to them. The colleges worked out very well, and the University was determined to build three more so as to take care of the entire freshman and sophomore classes.

One day, on my way to a Princeton Club luncheon in Washington, Lee D. Butler '22 fell in beside me. He said he wanted to ask me about the plan for some new undergraduate colleges. I told him that three additional new ones were planned. Lee said, "It is a matter of scale. The University is too big and impersonal now. The colleges solve the problem. I would like to donate \$3.5 million to endow one." I was stunned and assured him that I would get in touch with Bill Bowen at once.

That evening Bill was in town presiding at a Rockefeller Awards dinner and when I gave him the word, as I went down the receiving line, he recovered from his bad cold immediately. We agreed to meet in my office at nine in the morning. In the morning I had a hard time finding Lee, and when I did, he said he had reconsidered. I said, "You can't. Bill Bowen is coming here to meet you at nine." Lee said "Fine, I will be there," and he was. When Bill finished his lucid and persuasive explanation of what the University wanted to do, and why, Lee said, "Having been in sales all my life, I appreciate being the object of an outstanding performance by a genuine expert." And thus Butler College came into being.

All of us have enjoyed pleasant and rewarding relationships with classmates down through the years, bearing out the legendary remark of a Princeton president addressing the freshman class. "Look on your left and on your right. These are the men who will be your best friends for the rest of your life." I recounted some of my experiences with Frank Pace in the Newsletter last year. I would like to add one event out of a long association with H. L. T. Koren, aka Barney.

In a long and illustrious career, which he described in this Newsletter a while back, Barney did quite a few tours in Washington as well as abroad. In 1964 or

thereabouts, he was in the Philippines or so I thought. The Army had charge of Okinawa where we had a large and extremely important base. The State Department repeatedly tried to compel us to take actions which would help their problems with the Japanese but would be disastrous on Okinawa. It was agreed that we would make one final attempt to work out our differences and so a meeting was scheduled in one of their conference rooms. It promised to be a donnybrook.

My group and I entered the room, grimly prepared to do battle with the hard headed people from State. Imagine my surprise when the State delegation entered with Barney in the lead. Imagine the surprise of our two delegations when Barney and I greeted each other raucously and with unrestrained delight. Barney said, "Ailes are you in charge of this thing?" When I said I was, he turned to his delegation and said, "Gentlemen, you may return to your offices." So I turned to the Army delegation and said the same thing. Barney and I, after some personal catching up, turned to the business at hand, quickly agreed on the interests that each side had to protect and worked out a modus vivendi which went into effect and solved the problems. An unusual

form of Princeton in the Nation's Service, indeed.

In sum, Princeton has been an important part of my life and still is. As should be expected, after sixty years and operating in a quite different environment, it is different in many ways from the university we knew, but in many ways still the same. (Pause to consider how we and our University looked to the members of the class of 1873, reuniting at our graduation). It is coeducational, it is bigger, it has a larger graduate school, and it certainly costs a lot more. It still enjoys phenomenal alumni support, moral and financial. Its first rate faculty still places great emphasis on undergraduate teaching. It is still managed in a businesslike way. And last but not least it still attracts a superlative (although more diversified) student body.

While much is different from our time, it is always a pleasure to note the degree to which things that were important to us are important to the students of today. Finally, I am confident that current graduates, men and women, fully expect the University and the associations made there to play continuing and rewarding roles in their lives as they have in ours.



Co-editor Curly, with Jean & Phil Smith, lunching at Gasparilla Inn Beach Club - January, 1992.