

An Acting President's Report

By JOSEPH S. ISEMAN

I became acting president of Bennington College suddenly last January. President Gail Parker had left after a bitter intramural dispute since referred to as "one of the most talked about academic flaps in years."

Until then, I had known the 600-student liberal arts college solely from a trustee's viewpoint—I had served seven years on the college's board. I fancied my half-year term as a sort of sabbatical from 35 years of New York City law practice. I would learn to puff reflectively on a pipe, wear leather elbow patches and find time to teach a seminar with a weighty name like "Law and Society."

That was an illusion. I found the president of a small rural college must be poised around the clock to make tough and immediate decisions—not only in educational policy but also in dog control and electric power supply. As crisis after crisis surfaced, I soon felt like the Dutch boy whose thumb in the dike held back the raging sea.

On a snowy day just after I arrived in Vermont the college's main power line disintegrated—totally. It had to be replaced in hours or I would have to send students home.

My two experts, doughty outdoorsmen, disagreed on whether to place the new line underground or on poles.

"If ye go aerial with the cable and 'Hendricks' it," Mr. Billings said to me, "the frost can't bile up and heave the line when the ground thaws."

I nodded, pretending to understand. "Naw," Mr. Wilkinson interrupted in disgust, "th' ice storm'll pull down an overhead line. Ye'd better trench the cable five feet down and conduit it."

Both proposals cost the same. In my mind I flipped a coin. Heads came up, and I authorized the overhead pole line. A month later, lightning struck it. No one had warned me about that.

Problems zeroed in on me from every corner of the campus. The students wanted new varieties of wheat germ and yogurt on the menu. Everyone seemed to have brought a pet and a Volkswagen to school. Dogs formed into predatory packs; cats shredded upholstery; cars congested and polluted the beautiful campus.

When I ordered a round-up of all stray animals and imposed a \$25 fee to redeem each impounded pet, the student council formally notified me that my policy was acceptable for dogs, but "as to cats, it represents overkill."

My efforts to confine the VW's to peripheral parking lots brought screams from instructors whose cars were tickled while they picked up their mail.

Academic problems were just as exotic. Should the drama division be required to teach an alternative to the Stanislavski method? How much American history should be offered in this Bicentennial year? Had a teacher of

expressionist painting demonstrated sufficient professional cachet to deserve academic tenure? Did the music and black music divisions really require separate but equal pianos? Would it be better, in view of budget limitations, to freeze faculty salaries or reduce positions?

As the world now knows, Bennington has a defiant tradition of open governance, and I was required to defend my decisions, some of them far from popular, before the entire faculty. Meetings were held in a hall shaped like a Roman arena. I stood in a sort of pit while the faculty above—individually friendly to me but collectively still prickly from the previous term's tensions—questioned my decisions for hours on end. During these inquisitions, which called upon all advocacy skills I had ever learned, I was often tempted to relieve my aching feet by sitting down. I would fantasize that all my tormentors suddenly turned their thumbs down and brought in lions to martyrize me.

I found uses for techniques I had learned as a lawyer: negotiating with the maintenance employees' union; controlling a nonprofit affiliate that conducted summer programs; disposing of surplus college real estate; servicing a bond issue floated to construct the new arts center.

I also had diplomatic functions: welcoming new students; touring the nation to raise funds from alumni; orating in medieval Latin at a mock academic ceremony; binding up old political wounds by inviting past enemies to the same cocktail party; meeting with presidents of other small colleges on common problems; appearing nightly (and enjoying) student plays and concerts; introducing Betty Ford

as speaker at the dedication of the arts center—it had been completed a few hours before Mrs. Ford's arrival.

A flood of paper engulfed me. All incoming mail not addressed to a particular department somehow found its way to the president's desk. Every criticism had to be given a considered answer. Relations had to be maintained with sources of Federal and state funds, foundations and other donors.

I was interviewed regularly by the local media. Newsletters to the college community had to be composed.

One day I was told that the time had arrived for the 10-year accreditation study of the college. Weeks would have to be spent preparing detailed statements on every facet of Bennington. I heard that the accrediting agency had a new director who had been thrust into his job as suddenly as I had been and was equally over his head in work. I found him receptive to postponing the accreditation study for a year.

The snowy landscape merged into spring mud and then summer greenery, campus politics subsided, classes proceeded, students re-enrolled and Joseph Murphy of Queens College was selected president and would succeed me in the fall. I began to feel less like the little Dutch boy.

The senior class asked me to be its commencement speaker, and the college year ended as I handed them their diplomas. I felt strong kinship with the seniors. We were graduating from Bennington together.

In early July, as my wife and I drove away from the administration building to return to New York, the staff lined up, each holding a large letter. Together they spelled: "Thank you and God-speed." My term was over.

When the School Gets i

By ROBERT F. BUNDY

Five years ago Rosemarie and I decided school was getting in the way of our son's education. Rob was 11 and attending Jamesville-DeWitt Middle School in DeWitt, N.Y. The school had a fine academic reputation and Rob was doing quite well there. But we felt that he was spending too much time being a student and not enough time being a useful human being in the community. There were other important ways and things to learn besides what school offered, we thought.

We came up with an alternative educational plan and asked for a meeting with the school. Our plan was for Rob to go to school three days a week. One day would be spent as an apprentice to his uncle, who works in a building trade. And on another day he would perform some social service such as working with retarded children. School

"Couldn't the nonacademic activities occur on the weekend?"

"No," we replied. "We want our children to understand that helping a retarded child to swim, or doing building repair, are as important as sitting in an algebra class."

"But you're expecting Rob to handle the entire curriculum in three days a week. Suppose he can't?" a teacher asked.

"We would simply drop something out of school so we didn't affect his education in any way."

"Are you really then, teaching negative attitudes toward the school?"

"No," we answered. "That would be a waste of Rob's energy."

"But what about credentials and social development? Won't you be shortchanging him?"

"Look at it this way," we offered. "Credentials are important but does matter how he gets them? Rob may be able, through independent study, to pass a math Regents and never attend a math class. Or, he could decide to take a math course for credit, but