



Discipline Was No Problem At Bingham School

by Billy Arthur

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EDITOR'S NOTE: The following article is reprinted with the permission of the publisher. It originally appeared in the March 1986 edition of The State magazine.

When it was time for punishment, the famed school master offered students a choice of "Dr. Black or Dr. Brown"

Today's opponents of corporal punishment in the schools would certainly have targeted Col. Robert Bingham, once called "North Carolina's greatest schoolmaster."

As joint or head principal of mobile Bingham School from 1860 to 1927, he not only inflicted bodily punishment with leather strops but also encouraged students to "fight out" their enmity and confined disobedient ones to cramped solitary guard houses.

Students took their punishment good-naturedly, because that was the tradition and code of the historic school, founded in Wilmington in 1793 by the colonel's grandfather, then moved to Pittsboro, the Oaks and Mebane in Orange County and finally to Asheville in 1890.

Many students reported they never knew of any classmate who ever bore the "national figure in education" any ill will. M.C.S. Noble, longtime dean of the UNC School of Education who had been a Bingham student, called him "just and fair." The solid foundation on which the strict discipline rested was Col. Bingham's constant effort to build up in the boys their inborn sense of right and honor."

The 10 Guard Houses

Everyone who got more than a certain number of demerits within a week was imprisoned in a guard house all day on Monday, which was the weekly holiday, instead of Saturday as at most schools.

The ten guard houses were about four feet wide by five feet long with a cowcatcher extension at one end to accommodate the feet if one chose to lie down. Entering just after breakfast, the student received his midday meal on a tray and was released just in time for supper.

Often there were more culprits than guard houses; so, for some there was the alternative punishment -- a vigorous beating with a leather strop by the colonel himself. But no boy was ever beaten against his will. He was always permitted to do his turn in the guard house when one became available on a Monday.

Another student, *Chapel Hill Weekly* editor Louis Graves, said he had seen more than a half dozen boys at a time crowding around the colonel on Mondays, each insisting he preferred a thrashing to confinement. "It hurt and it hurt bad," Graves said from experience, "but when it was all over the slate had been wiped clean."

No Disgrace

There was no secrecy about the whipping. Nobody cared if other boys came into the room. "It was a tradition that no disgrace was attached to the lickin' -- it was simply a price that was paid for excessive neglect of the rules -- for idleness, for lack of cleanliness of room or person and so on," Graves said.

The candidates would come in after breakfast, and the colonel would take down two thick strops -- one black and one brown -- about two inches wide. Very ceremoniously, he would ask the boy to choose "either Dr. Black or Dr. Brown." Also the boy chose whether he would be licked on the hands, legs, "the sitter," or equally distributed. Both Graves and Noble said the boys took it almost without flinching, then went happily off to Asheville for the holiday.

Though the rules forbade fighting, if enmity between two boys reached a boiling point, Col. Bingham sanctioned a fight -- in the presence of him and the student body -- but only after he had failed to get the boys to settle their differences without one. The whole school gathered between the dormitories with Col. Bingham as referee. Each boy had his partisans who cheered when blows were landed.

The colonel was completely in charge. There were no fixed rules. If the fighters clinched too long, he separated them; if they evidenced fatigue, he called for rest. When they became exhausted or had had enough, they went to their rooms, "washed up, applied salve and lotion, and -- no longer snarling -- were in column when the battalion marched to the mess hall," Graves recalled.

Smoking

Not in accord with Col. Bingham's strict policies was his toleration of smoking when it did not interfere with classroom or military duties. However, because of danger of fire, a student would be expelled forthwith for "smoking in the bunk."

Col. Bingham's stated educational creed was to "make men of boys . . . Our men stand at the top everywhere they go. We have taught 5,000 boys. Ninety-five percent have made good, five percent went to the dogs . . . and ten percent of those had already gone to the dogs . . . before we got them," he said in 1920.

Graves said Bingham "demanded and compelled close attention to classroom duties. He believed in a simple curriculum and in thoroughness. He sought to develop in boys a devotion to truth, honor and courage. Long before the honor system was much talked about, it was functioning admirably at Bingham School."

Col. Bingham was a leader in establishment of NC State College, of the NC College for Women at Greensboro (now UNC-G), and adoption of a compulsory school law state-wide. Through his efforts Asheville was the first city in the south with compulsory education. He died in 1938. A son, Robert, once owned and published the Louisville (Ky.) *Courier-Journal* newspaper.