

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF BRUNSWICK | DR. JOHN VAN ATTA

*The following is an excerpt from A Place for Boys, by Dr. John Van Atta. Copies of the book are available in the Brunswick bookstore.*

When it started out in 1902, Brunswick connected to a very high-profile cultural debate, one relating directly to what many at the time saw as a real “crisis” of masculinity. In a new urban industrial time of soft-living for the privileged classes, a large question was: how could boys be kept strong and upright, and how could the distinctive qualities of males - their “manliness” - be prevented from degenerating? For boys’ educators, it was just as hot an issue as girls’ education would become in the last decades of the twentieth century--if not more so. Even the President of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt, talked about it. In the early 1900s, keeping boys vigorous and tough seemed as serious a concern as preventing them in the 1990s from becoming disconnected, alienated, or drug-addicted.

With the social changes their town experienced around the turn of the century, Greenwich parents had as much reason to be concerned about the condition of their boys as anyone. In 1900, there were no boys-only schools in town. The one that George E. Carmichael created was a Spartan-like “country day school,” a specially contrived environment where boys could develop without the supposedly enervating distraction of girls. Like others of its kind - Haverford in Philadelphia, University in Cleveland, Gilman in Baltimore - Brunswick drew subscribers immediately and in rapidly growing numbers, including a cadre of boys who switched from Greenwich Academy, which was then coeducational.

Carmichael had graduated from Bowdoin College, then under the “strenuous” aegis of William DeWitt Hyde, and in a way Brunswick was a spin-off from Bowdoin. In the program he designed, Carmichael tried at first to replicate some of his own all-male collegiate experience, and, of course, the new school’s very name derived from Bowdoin’s geographical setting: Brunswick, Maine.

Schools are called upon to answer the emotional needs of patrons as well as the educational ones. Carmichael’s school for boys “reaffirmed” the possibilities of “manliness” by preserving the adventure of conquest through competitive sports, along with a rigorous academic program and a pervasive ethic of hard work. Through Brunswick’s first fifteen or twenty years, one sees the values and methods of “strenuous” preparation, with its share of romantic overtones, superimposed on an old-fashioned Victorian conception of boyhood. Boys were to be noble, courageous, honorable, and truthful - models of chivalry in a world where those values seemed to appear less and less. Even so, this combination was meant to fit in, and perhaps reform, the business world that these boys were to enter as men.

The coming of World War I confirmed that young men of the early twentieth century had to be ready not only for business, but for battle. Many Brunswick boys welcomed the chance to serve, having been taught that every able-bodied man should do his bit. That challenge applied especially to the privileged sons of Greenwich, who needed to prove that material comfort had not eroded their characters. During the War, Carmichael boasted that his school turned out boys who exhibited “the best qualities of American manhood,” including the willingness to fight. He added: “Nearly all of its graduates are now serving . . . or are making active preparations to be ready when their call comes.” One might wonder how any boy who was less-than-”ready” must have felt.

The period after World War I brought a gradual mellowing of Brunswick’s original hard-nosed ideology. That founding fervor diminished as time passed, leaving a residue of conventional moralism that still served as a motivating ethos. In the 1920s, with the school two decades old – and the town two decades richer – concern about the corrupting potential of affluence heightened. Before, it had been more an issue of being too “soft” versus becoming “tough.” Now, the strident mandates of “manliness,” which at times sounded like “the survival of the fittest,” gave way to the more gentle view that winning might be less important than learning to play the game fairly, honestly, and well. In light of the influence that new money exerted over the town in the roaring twenties, that view came close to resembling latter-day Puritans trying to restore some sense of an old New England community - precisely what Greenwich no longer was.

If one were to criticize Carmichael’s Brunswick from a 1990s perspective, it would be hard not to see it as a “one size fits all” approach to schooling and boy-raising. That, too, was a response to the world around it. The pre-Depression period was an a difficult time for Brunswick - not because of poor finances or lagging enrollment, but because of the difficulty of maintaining its basic identity as an institution. Sometimes schools struggle as much in flush times to hang onto who they are as they do in hard times just to survive. As a result, the school tried to control its boys, insisting that they be alike in things that could be taught: behavior, attitudes, values. The emphasis fell on being just one sort of boy, as if there were only one acceptable or desirable way for boys to be.

By the early 1930s, Brunswick was an “old school”--not chronologically, but in the qualities of character it expected boys to display. As that kind of school, some thought it had run its course. Carmichael’s time in school business was about done, and so was the prospect of the world taking the kind of shape the he and many of his generation had hoped it would. To help Brunswick to survive beyond its founder, a new parents’ association formed and quickly assumed ownership of the school. In the mid-1930s, new headmaster Thomas C. Burton (1933-1938) managed to antagonize a number of those parents--and some of his faculty--by trying to make Brunswick “Progressive.” In the late 1930s, William L. Henry (1938-1944) won a few of them back by restoring much of the traditional order.

Brunswick was anything but a simple success story. The tragic fire of 1933 almost destroyed the entire campus. The Great Depression very nearly sank the school, as it did so many other private institutions in 1930s America. And yet, the school managed to limp through, with heavy debt and sparse enrollment, until the postwar suburban boom finally rescued it.

For educators, the post-World War II wealth of Greenwich was both their greatest blessing and their greatest source of problems. It saved Brunswick, but it vastly complicated the lives of people whose job was the build character in boys. Under Alfred E. Everett (1944-1969), who tried more than anyone to maintain an

ultra-traditional, almost British-style school community, the key question was to how to keep schooling as a character-elevating force in a society that seemingly contradicted that purpose more and more. The distractions of the 1950s and 1960s might not, in themselves, have seemed strange to the previous generation, but the comparative extent of them was disturbing. “Holding the line” against an ever-increasing array of adolescent temptations became more of a battle than ever, one that proved energy-intensive, stressful, and wearing for all involved. And in their reaction to a school that struck them as increasingly repressive, some Brunswick students looked for outlandish ways to express the individuality they legitimately felt was being denied them.

By the late 1960s, some parents and teachers in Greenwich could see that running schools, especially a boys’ school, required a discrete balance between extremes of repression and chaos. Brunswick erred more in the direction of the former prior to 1969 and more in the direction of the latter for a time after a new regime replaced the stodgy Everett one in the fall of 1969. Asked for advice, many parents, students, and a number of the school’s alumni all said that Brunswick needed to be updated: offer more “real world” exposure, raise more money, improve the limited and inadequate physical plant, make its academic program better and more distinctive from the public schools, and, most radically, provide some kind of coed experience.

Norman A. Pedersen (1969-1987) and his faculty in the 1970s and early 80s tried to answer these suggestions and to restore a sense of community by different means: service projects, health and peer programs, enrichment of the arts, to name a few. And with racial integration, the hiring of more women, more scholarships for the less-privileged, and coordination with Greenwich Academy, the school for the first time made a real effort to become socially diverse.

Brunswick thus experienced many of the same changes that other boys’ schools did between 1960 and 1990--except for one thing it did not share with most: it continued to be one. Pedersen’s successor, Duncan Edwards III (1987-2001), who, like his father, was himself a product of Brunswick, worked at restoring a sense that “being a boy” was important in itself. During a time when the women’s movement sometimes questioned whether women needed men at all, Brunswick had tried to say that involvement with females was a necessary part of being a “whole male.” In contrast to the early-twentieth century ideal for Brunswick, the “whole boy” now had to be an integrated boy, both within himself and in relation to external variations of race, class, and gender.

Even if social, economic, and gender realities in American life have changed dramatically since the early part of the twentieth century, much of the basic appeal of the school has remained the same. Edwards himself - and the Edwards family - symbolized much of the continuity that did exist in the school’s history. To him, it would seem literally a world inherited from his parents and grandparents. Questions of institutional identity could translate in his mind into questions of personal and familial identity. But in building on the changes made after 1970, a less rigid, more nurturing and inclusive message than that of the old days began to emerge, calling for every kind of boy--each as an individual--to be “known, cared for, and loved.”

- Dr. John R. Van Atta

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