

MEMORIES OF COWDRY – STRONG HOUSES AND THE CLASS OF 1962

Submitted by Jon Strolle '62

As we were moving into our homes on Woodlawn Avenue in the fall of 1961, I received a call from the Dean of Men's office. Someone had to be the nominal "housefather" for the fellows who were going to inhabit the improvised housing that the college created for the senior men. We were able to live in somewhat more intimate spaces than the dormitories then in existence or under construction. I happily took the job because it paid my housing costs, all of which I promptly spent on a motor scooter that I shared with Jim Burrows. Jim and Steve Steury lived in the next room over from Al Buhl and me and we worked out the details of sharing the luxury of motorized transportation in the midst of Oberlin's reins on any wandering students.

With improvisations all around Cowdry-Strong became quite a livable space and we shared accommodations back and forth across the street, in the backyards for picnics and in the houses for receptions and general conversation and cooking, even a party now and then. As I recall it we improvised and pioneered the integration of housing a few years before the college opened the way to true gender neutrality. Since we were children of the 50s as much as the early 60s, everything was done with the utmost discretion and mutual respect.

There were a great number of rituals of the houses: fresh bath towels provided by our dear honorary housemother, Jane Havell, whenever Steve needed a scrubbing; a bent coat hanger in the form of a G to signify the presence of a woman on the premises. I don't know if that hanger ever came down or we just forgot about it. There was the usual mixing of men and women and changes in affections over the course of the year, but all in all it was a welcoming and cordial environment for conversation, drink, food, talk, talk, talk, study, writing and some worry about what we would all do after graduation. Just about everyone went on to further study, some academic, some professional but always moving onward.

The 40th reunion put many of us back in touch with each other. Not all will be there for the 50th and for the women and men of Cowdry-Strong, it is with us always that Al, Jane, and David were taken from us most unfairly and far, far too soon. At least the contributions in Al's name will be engraved in the next generation of scholars, and I get to gaze on Dave's plaque every time I visit the Alameda hospital.

When Abe Burrows came to visit and saw the piano in Strong house, I knew we were in for a whirlwind of showmanship and song. Where else on campus could that have happened?

As the years went on I was lucky to see most everyone because I traveled the university circuits and became bicoastal. There was never a shortage of hospitality and on my visits to Washington, Brussels, and California since I always shared the kindred caring of Jane, Steve, the Toms, Leigh, Anne and David among others.

I am not going to catalog all the names because I might miss someone who moved in briefly or get them in the wrong order of roommates but I can say CS was unique, not simply distinctive, and by itself a marvel in a sea of academic toil.

Fun is not the first word that comes to mind when I think back 50 years, but along with the blood, tears, sweat and toil there was also a great deal of comity, respect, sharing, good humor, raucous and even a bit of clever raunchiness that went into the stew. Most of all, clear solid memories of people, friends, and mutual esteem I have found in no other group. That is immortality enough for me.