

## QUESTION TO THE CLASS

### Special memories of Van Pelt...



Thanks to our contributors:

Dennis Picker, Alan Feinberg, Barry Guryan, Mia Argentieri, Lonnie Schooler and Lee Gordon.

From **Dennis Picker**: My freshman dorm room in the Quad (Chestnut Hall) was pretty noisy in the fall of 1964, as it was right above what was called the Quad Crotch (if my memory serves me correctly). Sometimes I would seek a quiet place to study, sitting in one of the carels by a window on one of the upstairs floors of Van Pelt. It was quiet, all right. But I didn't usually get my studying done, as it was too tempting to browse the open stacks, which had lots of fascinating old books. I would pick a Dewey decimal system number, go to that area and just browse. Fascinating way to waste time.

From **Alan Feinberg**: I remember Grace Kelly doing lunch with GPH

From **Barry Guryan**: I do but have to get clearance from the person involved.

From **Mia Argentieri**: Van Pelt was a great place to study. And we had great reunions there. I remember dancing with classmates.

From **Lonnie Schooler**. My strongest memory of the Van Pelt Library is the party atmosphere that seemed to prevail on the lower level where most of the "freshies" hung out in the evening.

From **Lee Gordon**: Philosophers often talk about Elysian Fields, a peaceful and beautiful region, full of meadows, groves, sunlight, and fresh air. So how is it that my personal Elysian Field was Van Pelt library? How can an indoor venue possibly compare to an ethereal Lost Horizon? Well, if you love books as I do, and are surrounded by these priceless gems, then you can experience something sublime.

From my childhood, I was told that books are to be treated with tender care, much like a parent would nurture a child. It is obvious that, for us '68ers, books were an invaluable tool in furthering our education. So when I entered Penn, I was awestruck by this new structure that was built only two years before my matriculation. No antiquated Furness building, housing a too-small library, but, instead, a sparkling gem, a major presence on campus, that would hold the key to my eventual success as a history honors major.

In my senior year, I embarked on my thesis under the guidance of the heralded Civil War historian Roy Franklin Nichols. My topic: "Zachary Taylor and the Election of 1848". In that election, Pennsylvania was the key to the Whig victory, because Pennsylvania voted for the Whig candidate, Zachary Taylor, over the Democratic candidate, Lewis Cass. Taylor won Pennsylvania by a slim margin of 3.62%, and this state proved to be decisive since the Democrats would have won the Electoral College had they carried Pennsylvania.

So in 1848, Pennsylvania had lived up to its honorific title: the "Keystone State." Historically, Pennsylvania's essential role in the founding of the United States had earned it that nickname. (The term "keystone" comes from architecture and refers to the central, wedge-shaped stone in an arch, which holds all the other stones in place.) During the early days of our nation, Pennsylvania held a key position geographically, economically, and politically, and was noted as "the keystone of the federal union" by Thomas Jefferson in 1802.

Back to Van Pelt. How can I research this intricate thesis topic without having to travel to the Library of Congress? The simple answer was found in Van Pelt's Dewey Decimal System numeric classification of 900-999, which held the groups of history, biography and geography. I was overjoyed to see how many books were shelved that could promote my research. Day after day in that turbulent 1968 Spring semester, I found a respite from my Vietnam anti-war activities. Yet, my thesis happily resonated to the protests outside, because of the presence of a third party led by former President Martin Van Buren. His Free Soil party was formed during the 1848 presidential election in the aftermath of the Mexican–American War, where the hero "Old Rough and Ready" aka Zachary Taylor emerged as the victorious general. Abraham Lincoln had been a vocal opponent of the Mexican War, fearing that our aggressive imperialist campaign would lead to the spread of slavery. Indeed, the central issue debated in 1848 was over this extension of slavery into the Mexican Cession. The Freesoilers vigorously opposed this political maneuver, pressed by the Whig candidate who wanted to catapult his war hero status to the White House.

The parallel between the opposition to the evils of slavery and the opposition to the evils of a brutal war against an Asian populace could not have been more striking to me in 1968. So, I immersed myself in the thesis research, finding myself in a glorious labyrinth of history books, traversing shelf after shelf in Van Pelt. Up this aisle, down another, in a seemingly unending quest. The feel of the books and the surrounding smell of their presence was heavenly to me. I

emerged after several months with enough scholarly research to complete my thesis. I could not stop the American War in Vietnam, but at least I could present a cogent and principled historical work that centered on a similar moral issue that held center stage six score years ago. Simply put, I could not have completed my thesis without the majestic Van Pelt Library.

As I write this, I am surrounded by some of those historical volumes, which, in my "Not Done Yet" stage of life, give me great comfort and warmth. My library, nestled in my home, cannot, of course, measure up to the Charles Patterson Van Pelt library; but my library is, nonetheless, a wonderful reminder of my 1968 journey within Van Pelt's hallowed stacks.

