

Golden Jubilee Celebrations of S.Thomas' College Gurutalawa OBA
THE SCHOOL IN THE HILLS

1942 was a year of travail and tribulation for S.Thomas' College. "On April 5th 1942, the Warden was informed that the school was to be handed over within five days to the military authorities. On 9th April, the sub warden, Dr.R L Hayman was sent to Gurutalawa to prepare a branch of the School" (Oliver de Soyza- The 1st Fifty years- a History of S.Thomas' College, Gurutalawa).

Mr.and Mrs. Leslie de Saram's fine gesture in gifting their farm, allowed Canon R S De Saram to set up a branch school with Dr.R L Hayman as the first Headmaster. It was indeed a significant event in the history of STC. May 12 1942 began with a nucleus of boys from the original school in Mount Lavinia. S K Wickremasinghe, famous son of a more famous father and C L Wickremasinghe- later Bishop of Kurunegala were among the first batch of students. There were of course many who distinguished themselves in various fields- civil servants, doctors, lawyers, planters, hoteliers, scholars of repute, teachers who came back to teach with distinction by contributing to their alma mater. A. Kitoe Chapman (Maths /Science) was later Acting Headmaster for a short period and Oliver de Soyza (English) editor of 'The 1st fifty years- A History of S.Thomas' College Gurutalawa. (1942-1992).

"The farm had an abundance of fruit trees, many varieties of oranges, mandarins, a variety of guavas including 'Chinese' guavas, pears and peaches.... Looking after the orchard was a deaf mute known as 'Goluwa' who had many a memorable encounter with the boys in his efforts to safeguard the orchards from depredation' (de Soyza).

Dr.Hayman, the Headmaster taught Physics and Mathematics in the higher forms in his inimitable manner. The Reverend (later Canon) A J Foster enlivened the teaching of English, History and Divinity (Canon de Saram's book, ' Christian doctrine for schools was mischievously turned by a wag to 'Christian doctrine for fools') Mr.E L Perera, one of the best Mathematics teachers of his time, made everything look so easy. Mr.(later Dr) G D Wijewardene fresh from Trinity College, was a specialist in Geography. Mr.W A Wijesinghe, a classics scholar from the University construed Virgil and Cicero, while Mr.R S D Jansz taught us the elements of general science.

Mr.Lucien Amerasinghe taught English and Geography in addition to being the Cadet Master. He also coached the tennis team along with his wife Gwen. All of them were excellent teachers with unforgettable personalities and were entirely devoted to their art. One still remembers them vividly after the lapse of nearly half a century.

Meanwhile, there were branches of STC at Girls' High School, Mount Lavinia, S.Paul's Milagiriya and at Peradeniya.

We shared the Girls' Schools by operating from 12.30 p.m to 5.30 p.m. Needless to say, no boy was late to school!! They were all lined up to admire the pretty girls as they left after school.

There was romance too- Mr.Budd Janze of our staff met and married Miss. Thelma Hall – pretty principal of Girls’ High School, Mount Lavinia. She travelled in a rickshaw, while Mr.Janze followed on his bicycle.

In 1945, the Peradeniya branch was closed and the boys and staff moved to Gurutalawa. For the first time Gurutalawa was the main school with Canon de Saram- warden, Dr.Hayman – sub-warden, Canon Foster- Chaplain, Mr.C H Davidson (later warden,) Mr.S J Anandanayagam (later warden), Mr.E F C Pereir, Mr.K Nesiah who taught us history and also created history in to the bargain by becoming the first teacher to wear national dress. Dr.G D Wijewardena, Mr.E S Ponnadurai, Mr.T G Flint later Reverend (all in residence).

The writer remembers the turbulent times with Spartan accommodation. The spout was the main source of water even for a wash. Seniors had a ‘pit’ system of toilets which had the advantage of concealing the remnants of the ‘raid’ on the orchards. The farm manager found his stocks of poultry diminishing and the fowls were cooked by the neighbouring villagers, not forgetting the two day boys, who helped to feed the hungry boarders.

Shramadana was seen to flourish with Canon de Saram wielding the mamoty, like the willow in his cricketing days. Dr.Hayman, sometimes in his full bathing costume was a sight to behold, moving the wheelbarrow. Father Foster used his long reach to level the playing field with Mr.Davidson and Mr.Anandanayagam. They gave the lead and set the example to us on how to help when needed. It was a family affair.

The present boys and girls in the college should be thankful to all who laboured unceasingly to maintain the highest standards in scholarship as well as in dignity of labour.

We now have Fr.Mark Billimoria, a Headmaster dedicated to his task of restoring the lost prestige of the college, with limited resources. He is now in the process of reviving the Old Thomian traditions and needs all the support and encouragement. Funds are needed to make good the lack of development. The grounds will be improved with the money obtained from the ‘Sing-a-Long’ organized by the writer. The three turf wickets are to be restored by Mr.Ranil Abeynaike after he returns from Pakistan. The tube well is being harnessed by engineer Mahen Ranasinghe’s (Senior Vice President, STC Guru OBA) contractors. The pavilion is being refurbished, thanks to the generosity of Mr.Nawaz Caffoor.

The STC Guru OBA is celebrating 50 years of its existence of February 28 and on March 1st, the Holy Eucharist will be celebrated and mention will be made of all those who served the College with commitment and dedication.

We hope that STC Guru – the school in the hills, like the school by the sea will be a centre of excellence. Esto Perpetua.

-By Gerald de Alwis

(The Sunday Times Plus February 22,2009)