

S THOMAS AT GURUTALAWA - REMINISCENCES -

I happened to have the good fortune to be one of the fifty seven pioneer students when S Thomas' College opened its branch at Gurutalawa in 1942 second term. My application had been late but as I had already been at Mount Lavinia for five years I was taken in.

We were like a large family of fifty seven children, with Dr. R L Hayman playing the "Father Figure", in addition to being the Headmaster. Mrs. Thelma Gunawardena who was the Matron played the role of the "Mother Figure", and we lived happily in spite of short-comings in diet due to the prevailing war situation in the Far East and in the West.

Our "Foster Parents" as they were, saw to it that we had the best available food. The farm supplied the eggs, milk, butter and occasionally a 'luxury' lamb. We of the Farm Club kept the kitchen supplied with vegetables to supplement what was purchased from the Welimada town. Of course we were paid for the vegetables we supplied the kitchen. This gave us additional pocket money in addition to what the College gave us, fifty cents a week paid to us on Thursday evening. We had to queue up for it and Dr. Hayman doled out the coin, and by next day this was over as we had paid it to the Tuck – shop for what we had already taken during the week. Fifty cents went a long way in those good old days, although one cannot have a cup of plain tea with it today.

The teaching staff, all transferred from Mount Lavinia, were also a homely lot. Understandably we had nicknames for them, for private use. To mention a few, Bullo, Longa, Poeta, Bolaya, Key Hole, Black Cat, Fatty and so on. These names were not used with malice but for convenience on our part.

The students were given the good rooms in the main building which was Mr. Leslie de Saram's farm residence, and the married staff got other little houses on the farm, but Dr. Hayman, the sacrificing man that he was, used as his bedroom a toilet room, next to the Science Lab which was also a bathroom. His bedroom was just enough to hold his four poster bed, while his baggage was in Rev. Foster's room.

During the weekends we climbed the hills around College, a pleasant past time, and we knew those hills and dales like the palms of our hands. Gongala Kanda and Hulan Kata were the regular haunts. At Hulan Kata lived a day scholar who came from Mount, and he refreshed us with a cup of tea after the strenuous climb. Incidentally this student was a fine essay writer and his works were circulated to all the classes by Rev. Foster as an example. He is today a "big shot" in a mercantile firm headed also by an Old Boy. This Hulan Kata resident wrote in my autograph album thus, "From Palm Fringed Shore to Mountain Plains – What next?" On our weekend outings we had another halting place at the house of a day scholar. It was in Dambawinna village. (His dear mother prepared grand lunches for us.) At Palugama (now Keppetipola) we had another home. This time it was not a day scholar but the home of the parents of a boarder with us. (There too we had very grand meals when ever we went there by trekking out on hills.) in between these

visits we did a trip to Welimada town for a rice and curry feed at National Hotel. This trip was in a G.O.C. bus known as the Kote bus, because the conductor had to walk behind the bus when it was climbing a hill as it sometimes refused to climb and stopped dead. On the days the bus did not ply, we walked to Welimada. All this for a rice and curry feed as the College lunch was a mixture of rice and wheat grain. We also had a British student in our dormitory. His mother ran a hotel in Nuwara Eliya and whenever she came to see the son she brought him ample stocks of canned foods from NAAFI Stores. He shared these with his dorm mates in true Thomian spirit.

Once a month we were taken in the College bus to Diyatalawa or Nuwara Eliya to see a film, if there was a suitable one, escorted by a teacher. However the film had first to be approved by Dr. Hayman. Going to Diyatalawa we had to pass a village known as "Little England".

One Saturday afternoon two of my friends, and I, one is now a retired planter and the other a Sri Lankan Ambassador abroad, were near the bathing well talking shop. Down came a soldier, whom we called "Maratis" and gave me a prod in my abdomen with his cane and we ran for our dear lives towards the dorm. He flung the cane and I "got shot" on my back. We hid in the dorm and later reported the matter to Dr. Hayman who promptly sent a message to the Commanding Officer of the Boralanda Army Camp. He came over and after hearing our story had later held an inquiry and it came to light that when the Army truck was passing the College, the soldier had been hit on his arm by a pebble and he had seen two boys running. They had used a catapult and hit the soldier. One of the culprits is now settled in Australia and the other is a planter at Ruwanwella. The major asked us to come for an identification parade, but we dared not, as we had been told that Marati soldiers were dangerous fellows.

We had Sinhala and English debating societies, the former organized by Mr. G.D. Wijewardena and the latter by Rev. Foster. In addition to debates we had speech making contests. One day a student while making his speech in Sinhala had his notes on a piece of paper to which he referred from time to time. While thus referring he bit off pieces of the paper and when he came to about half way in his speech he had eaten the whole paper, and then he had to abandon his speech as he had no notes to refer to. The entire audience of staff and students ended up in roars of laughter.

We had a Farm Club, a voluntary group under the able guidance of Mr. Torrington Jayawardena, Farm Manager, better known as Torri. I was Secretary for many years as I was one of those instrumental in starting it, having been a member of the Farm Club at Mount, there too guided by "Torri". We did a lot of work growing vegetables and getting a thrill out of it when we got the money from the Matron for vegetables supplied to the kitchen. At the end of term we were allowed to take our produce home. I had the biggest thrill when I produced a forty pound sweet pumpkin. I made an automatic closing gate for our Farm Club and the members named me "Gate Mudaliyar". Another keen student of Agriculture and I worked a paddy field belonging to a villager. We did it just for the joy of it and were overjoyed when the harvest time came. Of course we were not called to help in the harvest; probably the farmer thought that we may ask for a share.

Another favourite past-time when we became seniors was to bathe at the spout in full Oxford style, no fear of juniors peeping as it was out of bounds for them, and no fear of girls straying that way as Gurutalawa was then only for boys.

Picking oranges and guavas from the Orchard was done on the sly as we had to avoid the watchful eyes of “Goluwa” the dumb orchard keeper; if caught and reported to Dr. Hayman one had to receive six of the best. There are many more little incidents I recall but if I were to add all that I would need a whole chapter in this book and that would be very selfish on my part. Our friends had nick names and to mention a few I can remember were Dopey, Meeya, Pinnnochio, Bull Swami, Big Anaya, Small Anaya, Polkatta and so on. The domestic staff had their share of names such Bus Simon, Bell Simon Aron Bada etc.

One end of term we wanted to have a dinner in the dorm and Mr. Davidson banned it. This was after the Getambe branch had broken up and we were joined by the “Kandy Boys”. Our dorm prefect would not have no for an answer.

“Operation Secret Dinner” was planned; groups of us were detailed for tasks to be performed. I was in charge of boiling water for coffee. This had to be done behind the toilets down below. All the food was made at the house of the prefect’s aunt at Bandarawela and brought on time at 5.00p.m. and from the road above the dorm it was smuggled in over the fence. That night we were all asked to skip our boarding dinner by just nibbling at it to pass the time. After lights out we commenced our Operation Secret Dinner only with the aid of one kerosene lantern. No clatter of plates as Mr. Davidson was in the room at the end of the dorm. Next morning the plates pots and pans were passed over the fence and taken back in the car to Bandarawela. That was a great feat.

Scooting out to the “Shit Shat Café” just beyond the Muslim School, for a bun and cup of plain tea with jaggery was another act of mischief on our part, but those who got caught had the cane coming on the buttocks with all the force of Dr. Hayman’s right hand.

Our family life was to end soon as the Getambe branch of the College was also shifting to Guru. Building work started off at a furious rate to provide dormitory space, dining hall, classrooms and chapel. We contributed our effort to the expansion programme long before Shramadana was thought of by any Government of the Country. We levelled down the present quadrangle chapel site and the playground. We did the earth cutting and Dr. Hayman in his one piece swimming costume and over it his khaki shorts wielded the wheel barrow and we saw to it that we loaded extra, but he never grumbled. We had never heard of caterpillar bulldozer then, but our “Wheel Barrow cum Human Bulldozer” did the work as well. The new buildings were designed and supervised by the Peradeniya University architect Mr. Shirley de Alwis, an old Thomian. The contractors were Mr. Dias and Mr. Perera. Some of the stone paving along the eaves of some buildings was done by me with the help of a few other students, at the request of Mr. Davidson. At the end of the day’s work he would invite us to the Tuck Shop and give

us a good treat. Good old soul he was. The building work over in double quick time, the Getambe branch came over in 1945.

The day I scooted out with a friend to the Boralanda stream for a bath, I had a nasty cycle accident using the brakeless bike belonging to the son of the Warden. At the sick room when surgical spirits were applied on my gashes I fainted. The sick room orderly Sirisena without waiting a second ran to Dr. Hayman and said “Sir, Sir, Master Ratwatte dead”. Dr. Hayman at the time been taking a stroll in the orchard and on receipt of this obituary notice had run as fast as he could to the sick room and had been relieved when he saw me alive. Dr. Hayman told me this when he came for the O.B.A. celebrations in the 1970’s. His memory was a computer when such machines did not exist then. The student who accompanied me for the bath is today a Provincial Councillor. Thus ends in brief a period of our lives at Guru.

**C S Ratwatte
(1942 – 1945)**