



CONFESSIONS OF A GENIAL ABBOT

By ROBERT A. HUTTENBACK

The telegram from Dr. Lee DuBridge offering me the jobs of Master of Student Houses and lecturer in history at the California Institute of Technology reached me on a searingly hot day in 1957 in Delhi. I was overjoyed, for it had been my ambition to work at Caltech ever since I had heard Dr. DuBridge speak about the Institute while I was still an undergraduate at UCLA. I accepted the proffered position without hesitation and thus insured the continuation of a career at the Institute that had commenced on something less than a lofty intellectual plane.

It began, in fact, while I was still a senior at UCLA in 1950 and became coach of the soccer team at Caltech—a team that managed to win the league championship for three years. In mid-1953 I added the duties of freshman baseball coach, and we had two quite successful seasons, due largely to the enthusiasm of the players and a lack of baseball knowledge on my part that encouraged me to do the unorthodox.

In 1956 my wife and I went to England on a Fulbright Fellowship, and in the following year we travelled to India and Pakistan under the sponsorship of the Ford Foundation. We were just beginning to wonder how we would butter our bread next when Dr. DuBridge's welcome telegram caught up with us.

Despite my very real enthusiasm, I was not sure of what lay ahead. I knew that the master had charge of the four student houses and that he was provided with a residence known as Arden House. Whether he was supposed to be a saintly spiritual and intellectual guide or a deputy-sheriff-in-residence was not clear, but I presumed that it was evident from my past career at the Institute that my credentials were somewhat better for the latter.

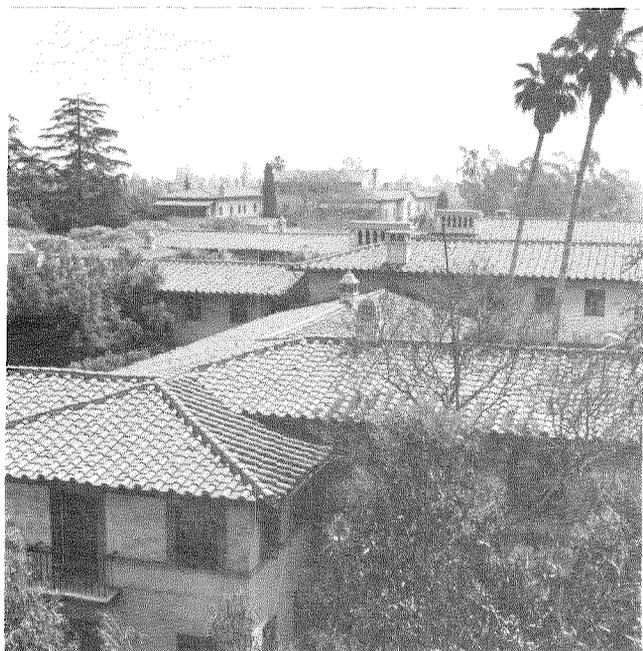
A statement of the "Qualifications and Responsi-

bilities of the Master of the Student Houses" was forwarded to me in Delhi. It said that the master "must have a real interest in youth and its problems—particularly the problem of the formulation of a new attitude toward life which is the inevitable consequence of the maturation which takes place in the college years. And above all he must be willing to spend time, time talking and listening to students . . ." At home the master was to maintain "an atmosphere of adult and friendly hospitality."

My wife and I moved into Arden House in mid-August. I immediately went looking for my new office, nervously wondering if I would measure up to my predecessors in the eyes of my new secretary, Mrs. Ned Hale, who had also been secretary to all the previous masters. I was directed from the courtyard of one of the student houses toward an unlit stairwell that led into a vast and dank basement at the end of which I could discern a dim light. Following the gleam, I found my office, desk nestled beneath a web of overhead pipes. No view of the outside world would ever distract me! And no visitors would ever drop in on their way to anyplace else! As for Mrs. Hale, she was as apprehensive about me as I had been about her. I quickly found that she was a warmly human woman with a great fund of good sense, that she was prepared to be tolerant of my foibles, and that she liked lagging coins down the hall to see who bought the coffee.

One of my first duties was to make student house room assignments. There were only four student houses then and, consequently, room for only about one-half of the entering class. We used a strange, but in its own way fair, system for deciding which boys were to be assigned the rooms on campus. We determined how far each freshman was from home, and starting with those who had come the greatest distance we went down the list until we had no

As Robert Huttenback moves from Master of Student Houses to his new position as Dean of Students, he looks back on his colorful 11-year career as spiritual counselor, intellectual guide, and sheriff-in-residence to Caltech undergraduates.



"There were only four undergraduate houses in 1958."

more beds. Parents, whose sons were leaving home in most cases for the first time, were not overly pleased to have them start life at the prestigious California Institute of Technology by renting a room in town. My first week was therefore filled with irate telephone calls, and my explanation of our wonderfully fair system did little to quench the fire within many parental breasts.

Another call I had that first week—at dawn—was from a freshman who is now a prominent faculty member at another institution.

"Mr. Huttenback?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied.

"I have just been ill in my wash basin," the voice explained.

"Are you all right?" I asked worriedly.

"Of course," the voice assured me. "I just thought you would want to know!"

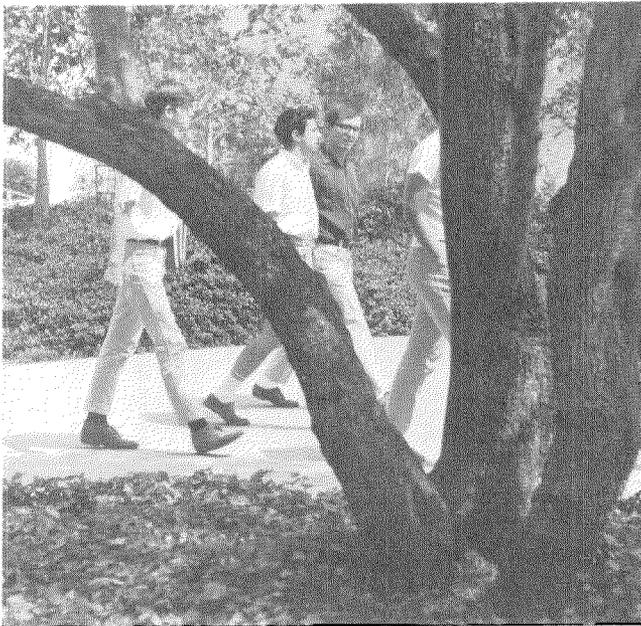
Was *this* how it was going to be?

What kind of a young man aspired to a Caltech degree in 1958? Certainly he was much less sophisticated than most of his intellectual confreres who chose Harvard, Amherst, or Swarthmore, for example. He tended to come from a blue-collar, ambitious, and upwardly mobile family. He had almost invariably been the brightest boy in his high school class, and, although a good achiever in all subjects, he had focused his attention largely on science. Despite statements in the catalog that the Institute placed a heavy emphasis on the humanities, he was surprised to find that he was actually expected to spend about a quarter of his time in nonscientific areas and to perform well in them.

As I look back on those days, I remember being struck by the tremendous ebullience of the freshmen and the eagerness with which they approached the prospect of gaining a science or engineering education. It was also evident that scholastic achievement had been their forte in high school, a fact that, along with their lack of attainment in athletics, made them tend toward intellectual arrogance. They were bright, and they knew it.

All of this made the process of erosion that took place in the first few weeks of school rather alarming. A certain amount of disillusionment is normal for students entering college and faced with the realities of what is demanded to achieve excellence, but far too many of our freshmen soon lost nearly all the enthusiasm with which they had arrived.

Some of the reasons lay rooted in the nature of the faculty, which was strongly research oriented. This did not mean that they took their teaching duties lightly; quite the contrary. But they taught as research scholars teaching students who were also



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to become research scholars. The knowledge explosion, particularly in science, placed the professor in a dilemma to which he responded by trying to teach more and more in less and less time. He tended to believe that the study of science demanded almost monastic isolation and complete dedication.

In May 1934 a committee on campus life and interests had issued a report which had asserted:

In the judgment of the Committee the attributes which are not sufficiently developed among students at the Institute, but which ought to be encouraged, are self-confidence, social adaptability, ability to express one's self, the capacity to live and work with others, and an appreciation of the value of personality. On the other hand he (the Caltech student) lacks an adequate appreciation of their material worth and is deficient in his desire to possess them.

These words could just as well have been written in 1958—or 1968.

In 1958 Caltech had a quasi-rushing system in which all the freshmen who had received house room assignments were entertained in turn by the four student houses. This differed from a fraternity rushing system only in that each of these freshmen got into *some* house. At the end of ten days the freshmen listed the houses in order of their personal preference; the house members, meanwhile, devoted endless time to preparing dossiers on the freshmen and ranking them in order of desirability. Then all the house presidents and resident associates assembled in Arden House one evening to divide up the flesh. Preferences were matched if



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possible, and, if impossible, a flip of a coin or a hand of cards determined a boy's fate.

As soon as the new students had moved into their permanent campus homes, initiation replaced rotation. The former had attempted to seduce the freshmen into choosing a particular house; the latter was designed to integrate them into it by forcing them to participate in various stunts, for which I was supposed to give prior approval—an Institute requirement that reminded me of the early 19th century law requiring Indians to obtain a license from the East India Company whenever they wished to burn a widow alive. I found the system rather repugnant, not because I felt that all of life should be serious and without nonsense, but because I questioned condoning a ritualized system that permitted one group to chastize another. However, effective change at this level necessitates student involvement, and I foresaw many years of debate and slow change.

As luck would have it, a major incident marred my first days at Caltech. On the Wednesday night



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of initiation I was playing soccer on the field adjacent to the campus; the students were devoting the early evening hours to a mammoth water fight. Happily, I was far enough away to hear only the noise. Suddenly, a small sports car came speeding across the field; it was filled with boys obviously in an advanced state of alarm. Apparently the sophomore pledgemaster of Fleming House had become involved in an altercation with his Ricketts House counterpart. The young man from Fleming suddenly seemed to go berserk, and, loudly shouting abuse, ran to his room with the avowed purpose of obtaining a gun and shooting his adversary. It was at this point that I was summoned.

When I arrived on the scene, a number of Fleming boys had already taken charge. They were commiserating with the young man and at the same time trying to fill him so full of alcohol that he would be rendered senseless. Finally, sleep felled the overwrought lad, and we were able to enter his room and remove what was essentially an arsenal. Not only did we find a large number of guns and ammunition, but what was more alarming, a considerable supply of fulminate of mercury—enough, I was informed, to blow up much of the campus.

I discovered that the boy had just concluded a

medical leave of absence from the Institute based on psychological difficulties. Had his return to the campus been approved by the Institute psychologist? The answer was no. The Institute had no such procedure. Besides, Caltech's psychiatric staff consisted only of an able local psychiatrist who was willing to work part time for the Health Center. At this time, the California Institute, like many other institutions throughout the country, felt that a mature, well-intentioned adult—i.e., a dean or interested faculty member—could straighten out almost any boy. This method was clearly a failure in the case of this young man. Eventually we had to remove him to the psychiatric wing of the county hospital.

We at the Institute now had the opportunity—indeed the duty—to reflect upon our condition, for we had come very close to presiding over a tragedy. The visit to the Caltech campus of the noted psychologist Abraham Maslow—a three-day visit sponsored by the Caltech YMCA through their "Leaders of America" program—in November 1958 helped to highlight our dilemma. Students flocked to listen to and talk with him—so much so that he had hardly any time to sleep. One student described the all-consuming interest in Professor Maslow in a letter to the *California Tech*:

Dr. Abraham Maslow was virtually unknown before he arrived on campus last week. Yet from nine in the morning until one the next morning he was besieged (as few have been before) by students desiring to discuss psychology in general and psychological problems in particular.

Why? Perhaps it was his unusual warm personality, or his penetrating insight into the nature of the healthy human being. But I suggest that by far the most important factor was that students were curious about themselves and how their problems could be solved. Repeatedly he was asked whether it was possible to psychoanalyze yourself. (Answer: Only one percent can.)

To my mind, therefore, Dr. Maslow's visit underlined the widely felt need for a more adequate counseling program at Caltech. . .

Maslow's visit did in fact start a train of events which culminated in the appointment of an Institute psychologist. No one could have been happier about this than I.

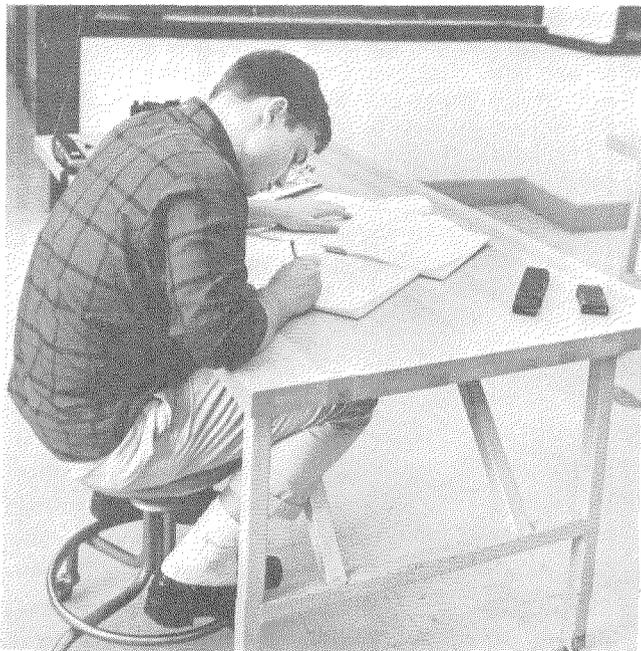
Speaking of student problems brings to mind problem parents. I remember far too many parents whose pressure on their children at Caltech amounted to persecution. In a decade as Master of the Student Houses I have encountered far more parents who have interfered with their sons' progress than parents who were an active support. One lad was

called at 6 a.m. every Sunday by his mother in Boston (she evidently never understood that there was a time difference), who regularly berated him for not getting better grades and for not having attended Harvard as had his brothers!

Mid-terms in November brought with them the first specter of failure for some boys who had never received a B grade in high school, much less a C, D, or F. Fortunately, some of their frustration was relieved by the labor of preparing for the annual inter-house dance, which transforms the student houses into fantastic, exotic, and often artistic wonderlands.

Usually the dance is a triumphal display of engineering ingenuity, it being one of the few times when the students in this highly theoretical institution can do anything applied and practical. However, I recall a magnificent 18th century man-of-war built in the flooded Blacker House courtyard. The deck was the dance floor, and as the festivities commenced, a character in a pirate costume shouted, "Avast, Ricketts House," and fired a broadside from a bank of artificial cannon. The dance floor and the pirate disappeared in a cloud of dust and smoke as the deck collapsed. Another time I watched in disbelief as hundreds of gallons of water flowed from the Ricketts courtyard, through a defective flower bed, into the basement below.

If Caltech's football fortunes are at a perpetually low ebb, there is one form of competitive endeavor



"It was evident that scholastic achievement was their forte."

at which the denizens of the student houses are pre-eminent. This is the so-called crew race. Ten men on each team line up with pint beer mugs poised a fist length from the point of their chins. At a designated signal the first man in line begins to drink his beer; when he is through, the second man begins, and so on down the line until all ten men have consumed their portion. The crew that finishes first is, of course, the winner, but of greater importance is the time it takes. No good crew man ever swallows; rather, by a form of epiglotal implosion, he manages to open his gullet and pour the liquid down. It may not be esthetically pleasing, but it is the one "athletic" event at which I have never heard of a Caltech team losing. The record for ten men is, I believe, about 12 seconds.

The annual senior ditch day is always scheduled for a time close to the end of the academic year. The seniors in each house leave for the beach, having first by intricate electronic and other defenses secured their rooms from invasion by underclassmen. Rooms are not to be entered by brute force, and yet by evening even the most complex locking mechanism has been mastered, and a souvenir is always left behind—a huge meteorological balloon filled with water, a solid bank of newspaper balls, or the lock reset with a new tripping mechanism.

In one case, a boy who had always boasted of his prowess with the opposite sex but who was suspected of gross exaggeration returned to find his room subtly illuminated by candlelight, a bottle of wine on the table, and a sparsely clad girl lying on the bed. No sooner had he entered than the door was silently locked behind him. A hidden mike broadcast his growing alarm and desperation to the rest of the house. He finally escaped through the window. Another lad was able, with difficulty, to discern a bucket of water barely visible over his door. He carefully took it down and poured it in the sink; unfortunately, the elbow pipe was missing.

The only effective defense I have heard of was devised by a young man who purchased a number of used books, tore them up, and left them on the floor of his room after having first upset his bed and perpetrated other superficial damage. When his confreres opened the door and saw that a vandal had preceded them and committed the unpardonable *sin of destroying books*, they were so ashamed and chagrined that they cleaned up the mess.

(First in a series of articles by Robert Huttenback)