

CONFESSIONS OF A GENIAL ABBOT—II

By ROBERT A. HUTTENBACK



At the start of the academic year 1959-60 the *California Tech* informed its readers that funds had been raised to construct three new undergraduate student houses. The paper implied, quite correctly, that the integration of the new houses into the Caltech house system—and particularly the question of how to induce members of the old houses to move to the new entities—was going to be the chief problem of the year.

After many weeks of conversation and endless effort, the interhouse committee, made up of house presidents, was induced to accept a proposal that the new student houses be populated through voluntary sign-ups from the old houses and that rotation be abandoned for one year. It was not an easy decision for the interhouse committee to make, and there was little doubt that the suggestion ran counter to house opinion.

As soon as the plans for the new student houses were partially completed, sign-up lists for those wishing to move were posted in my office. But absolutely no one came to register his name. We had hoped to open the new houses with an even balance of the four classes, but the total lack of volunteers forced the elimination of this idea. One ray of light was the decision, made in conjunction with the interhouse committee, to invite some foreign graduate students from Africa and Asia, who might have trouble finding rooms in our far-from-liberal community, to live in some of the houses, both old and new. I hoped it would add a new element to undergraduate living and would also benefit the graduate students.

Population problems or not, the walls of the new houses (eloquently dubbed House A, House B, and House C) were inexorably rising. One day the contractor in charge of construction entered my office carrying a black box that not only clanked ominously but seemed to tick as well. One of the workmen had found it in the forms for the exterior house

Robert Huttenback, new Dean of Students, looks back on his colorful 11-year career as Master of Student Houses

walls, which were to be poured that day. We gingerly took the object and immersed it in a tub of water. After a few moments, we pried it open and were confronted by a few short lengths of chain, a battery, some sort of mechanism, and a maze of wires. Was it a bomb? Time and patience, as in all similar matters, eventually brought enlightenment. If all had gone as planned, the box would have been sealed into the walls of one of the rooms, and the wires would have led to the room next door. At some future date the battery could have been activated, resulting in the clanking of the chains and, it was hoped, the utter terror of the occupant of the "bugged" room. Had the contractor and I known the contents of the mysterious black box, we would gladly have turned a blind eye to the prehaunting of House A.

Eventually the problem of transferring students from the existing student houses to those just being constructed solved itself. Elections for office in the new houses were scheduled for the same time as for the old, and it was announced that only those students already signed up to live in House A, B, or C would be eligible to run. Suddenly it occurred to many would-be politicians that the new houses presented a golden opportunity to achieve power. We were flooded by applications to join them, and our problem became one of preventing an excessive exodus.

Unfortunately, when the new houses set about organizing themselves, they slavishly copied the time-honored customs of the existing establishments, so that we had seven houses that were in inspiration and guiding philosophy essentially the same. I wish now that I had exerted more pressure toward the creation of diversity—to allow Caltech students a variety of living experiences from which to choose.

The student houses at Caltech are essentially effective self-governing democracies, depending for

the implementation of such rules as exist on elected house officers and a disciplinary committee of upperclassmen. Over each house presides the resident associate, who is responsible to the master but who influences more by precept and example than by force and coercion.

We have always emphasized good judgment and the spirit of the rules rather than the letter of the law. Some rules we consciously wink at; others are strictly enforced. That the system operates at all is a tribute to the students. Liquor is a case in point. Our rule in 1959 explicitly forbade the consumption of alcohol in the student houses. (It would be some years before Institute and public opinion would allow us to change this position.) In practice we just prohibited its use in the public rooms and corridors. This compromise was one the boys respected. They controlled house members who tended to drink too much and punished all transgressors; for they understood that they were being trusted in an area where the Institute could conceivably be badly embarrassed.

An even more sensitive area concerned the opposite sex. Girls could be in the public rooms at any time, but in bedrooms only until 10:30 p.m. and, on a few specially designated nights, until 12:30 a.m. This does not seem very permissive nowadays, but in 1959 our rule was considered very liberal. Again, the students understood their privileged position, which they owed to the determination of returning veterans after World War II not to be treated like children, and, with draconian severity, they punished any young man who emerged from his room with his date even at 10:31.

Usually the system of student self-government worked very well; once in a while, inevitably, it broke down. One of the rules about which we were absolutely firm forbade storage of arms, ammunitions, and explosives. As luck would have it, one of the most popular boys in Fleming House was dis-

covered cleaning a pistol in his room. Ordinarily the house disciplinary machinery would have smoothly taken over. But the house officers were insecure and afraid of insurrection in the ranks, and indeed there were ominous rumblings. Under pressure from me and the resident associate, the upper-class committee took the only action available to it under the circumstances—it asked the young man in question to move off campus. That night a great uproar broke out in the dining room, and the upper-class committee, allowing itself to be intimidated, rescinded its action and replaced it with a simple reprimand.

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The house government had now essentially ceased to operate, and the resident associate and I, with the not totally unwilling compliance of the house officers, asked for the resignation of the whole upperclass committee. For a few days the house president, the resident associate, and I ruled through a form of martial law. We then allowed applications for positions on the upperclass committee to be made to house officers, and eventually life returned to normal.

This Fleming House incident was the only time in more than a decade that I was forced to intervene directly in the internal operation of a house. Such action is nearly always best avoided. Students, not surprisingly, see any administrative interference in their affairs as unfair and unwarranted. Fortunately for us, many students felt that in the case at hand we had no choice, and we were consequently able to weather the storm. It was, however, to be many months after the reestablishment of normal house government before the house was able to rebuild its morale.

Springtime always brings with it a feeling of restiveness. In 1959 the denizens of one student house turned to raising Venus's-flytraps. In another house a student about to use a toilet was more than mildly surprised to see the head of a large snake peering from the receptacle. A pet anaconda, being kept in a student's bathtub, had decided to investigate the plumbing. He had consequently gone down the commode in one bathroom (from which his tail

still protruded) and had materialized next door. It seemed impossible to extricate the beast. Students hauled and tugged; the fire department did likewise. Only the total devastation of one set of bathroom fixtures brought any results.

Of greater moment was the parking issue. The students were convinced that a new set of campus parking regulations was unfair. Clearly a "riot" was the answer. First they managed to squeeze the car of George Green, the vice president for business affairs (whom they identified as the chief culprit) into Throop Hall and park it in the corridor outside his office. This display of engineering skill was followed by a rally in front of Throop, where the marchers took to yelling loudly the names of vegetables. I am sure passersby could not have believed their ears when they heard several hundred voices roaring what sounded just like "Cauliflower!" "Potato!" or "Spinach!"

For a finale the students decided to invade the trustees meeting then in progress, demanding: "We want George Green!" The trustees took it all in good spirit, and the students quickly left—not having found George Green. He was indeed at the meeting, but no one knew what he looked like.

The "parking riot" was followed by the idea of a pilgrimage to the grave of Robert Millikan, who was buried in the so-called Court of Honor in Forest Lawn Memorial Park. Apparently the students were at least partially inspired by their study of Chaucer, for they planned to walk the ten miles from the campus to the cemetery chanting in middle English.

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Ostensibly the purpose of the event was to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the original oil-drop experiment. The whole affair was a rather complex internal joke, but it was swallowed whole by the Forest Lawn authorities. Many of us who were aware of what was about to happen were extremely nervous, for unless it was handled with finesse, the Institute might easily find itself considerably embarrassed, though the students meant no disrespect to the memory of Dr. Millikan. The prospects did not look encouraging as 18 other students

took the opportunity to picket Forest Lawn for its refusal, they claimed, to bury Negroes or Jews. Undaunted, the pilgrims crossed the picket line and were greeted by cemetery authorities who presented them with a large wreath to lay on Millikan's tomb. The boys approached the grave, and some of their number spoke in sacerdotal tones of Millikan the scientist, Millikan the sportsman, and Millikan the humanitarian. It was the most private of jokes, carried out subtly and with style.

It was also, of course, a night in spring when the piano in the Dabney House lounge disappeared. The next night it was followed by the instrument from Fleming. Blacker House placed a guard on theirs, but he fell asleep, and when he awoke the piano-snatcher was found to have struck again. Ricketts prevented disaster by padlocking all the doors to their lounge at night. Frustrated by this move, the piano-nappers expanded their activities. They sent an anonymous note to the manager of the Athenaeum, threatening to remove the grand piano in the dining room if she did not place ten dollars in a certain book in the humanities library. Displaying high good humor and a sense of the fitness of things, the worthy lady turned the whole matter over to the police, much to their embarrassment. But Pasadena's finest were up to the challenge. They noted that the demand to the Athenaeum had been sent via the post office, and that, being extortion through the mail, technically made it fall under the jurisdiction of the FBI. The result was the appearance in my office of a sheepish FBI agent who admitted that he had been assigned to the piano caper. Happily it was about to solve itself. A boy in Blacker, with the aid of a single assistant, had secreted all three of the missing pianos in his second-story, single room. By the time the federal authorities entered the scene, he was more than ready to restore the instruments to their rightful owners.

Agents of the FBI were not infrequent visitors to my office, usually on routine security clearances, but one day a thoroughly exasperated communications expert from the local office arrived. He informed me that he had been sent because a Caltech student had been heard to claim that he could tap the Pentagon phone lines and tie up the entire SAC network. Of course, the agent knew this was impossible, but nevertheless he had to investigate. I called the student in and introduced him to the FBI man. The two were closeted together for two hours, and when they emerged, I thought I noted a

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considerable change in the demeanor of the communications specialist. He looked both incredulous and worried. After the student left, he said, slowly shaking his head, "You know, I'm not sure he can't do it."

I am told that significant changes in the SAC communications system were subsequently effected. The young man's explanation of how he discovered the secret was that it came from published material and the asking of a few questions during a tour of the phone company.

1960-61 was a vintage year for student pranks, and on January 1, 1961, virtually the entire nation saw the culmination of the one that involved the theft of the original University of Washington instruction cards for the half-time stunts at the Rose Bowl Game and the "planting" of substitute instructions for one of the stunts. The subsequent appearance of the word CALTECH before the startled leaders of the Washington card section—and the eyes of millions of TV viewers—is well known.

Not so well known is the amusing denouement, which came some months later when President DuBridge forwarded to the physical education committee of the Institute a letter from the Seattle World's Fair Committee. The letter went something like this: "We all enjoyed your clever little joke last New Year's Day. (Appreciation did not exactly ooze from the lines.) You probably did not realize that you displaced a card trick that was to read SALUTE TO SEATTLE WORLD'S FAIR. We wonder if you would not like to perform a 'make-good' stunt at your next home football game. Perhaps your card section or band might spell out the same words that were unfortunately passed over in January."

The Seattle committee was obviously unaware of the status of football at Caltech. The scruffy handful of fans who turn out to root for any Caltech home game, and the band—which consisted of about ten volunteers led by a conductor with a mop—would hardly have swelled the attendance figures of the Seattle World's Fair.

Second in a series of articles by Robert Huttenback.