
SCENE

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COAST GUARD ACADEMY—1935 (SWAB SUMMER)

The Tehachapi Mountain range forms a natural boundary separating Southern California from Central California. The range runs from southwest to northeast and rises to eight thousand feet with the Tejon Pass at four thousand feet. The climb from the Los Angeles basin at four hundred feet to the pass was a challenge for the automobiles of the '30s, but easy compared to the ascent from the San Joaquin Valley. That route was so steep it was necessary to wind the road all around from which it has been given the name "Grapevine."

That climb is even a challenge to cars and trucks today. Pullouts are provided for stopping to rest engines and add provided water to radiators. Motorists are advised to turn off air conditioners.

It was spring 1934 that we received a long distance telephone call from my aunt Grace, Dean of the Bakersfield Junior College. (Long distance calls usually meant an emergency. Whenever we made such a call, the points to be covered were written down to get the message across without visiting, and thus staying within the minimum three-minute charge.) She wanted to drive down to escape the awful summer heat, but she would have to drive her stick-shift car over the Grapevine.

That would require pumping the clutch numerous times. She wasn't sure she had the strength to do so, and asked if I could come to help.

I was turning nineteen and thought it would be a great experience. I went by bus, and on arrival she informed me we were going to the Spring Prom at the college. I was not into dancing, but I had to attend anyway. I was standing around like a wallflower when a

college man approached me and said he recognized me from a Sea Scout event in Santa Monica. Conversation led to "what are your college plans, etc." He said he was going to the **Coast Guard Academy**. I had never heard of it. I had been interested in Annapolis but that needed a congressman's appointment. I had considered the California Merchant Marine Academy but wasn't sure I wanted that life. The Coast Guard sounded good. "How do I apply?" I asked. He said to write to the Navy, Bureau of Navigation, for an application. His directions were all wet, but somehow my letter got kicked around until it found the right place and I received an application to take the competitive entrance exam, which I did at Los Angeles City Hall, administered by a Civil Service man who knew nothing about the Coast Guard. I had read up, which I guess impressed him. It was just a matter of waiting to see what would happen. In fact, I waited almost a year.

I went back to Camp Emerald Bay in 1935 for another summer on the senior staff, in charge of the Handicraft Lodge. At the break between camp sessions 2 and 3, when we on the staff were free to do our own "thing," my closest friend, Bob Ruby, and I took a canoe to circumnavigate the west end of the island. We portaged across the Isthmus, and had supper at a snack bar there, and I telephoned home. There was no phone in camp and it was a perfect opportunity to telephone home, as we were within a day or so of my mother's birthday.

She was surprised and pleased at the call but could hardly wait to tell me that I had received a **Western Union telegram from the Coast Guard**. She read it to me: I had been accepted and would be made a cadet if I reported on a certain day in late August and passed the entrance physical exam. If appointed, I would be reimbursed for my travel expense. If I failed the physical, I would have to return home at my own expense!

Bob and I then continued on our voyage, and, as we entered Emerald Bay, put in at Sandy Beach, built a little fire, each drank a can of beer that Bob had somehow acquired, and we contemplated our futures!

I don't remember how I got rid of the Lodge, but I do remember I got a ride back to the mainland on one of the yachts that often participated in Sea Scout events. It belonged to a retired Chicago banker. Sailing with him were his beautiful twin daughters in their upper teens. *But*, sadly, both of these girls were *cross-eyed*!

Cross-country by train was another all new experience! I had ridden the rails on that trip to Seattle in 1928, but I was older now, halfway to an engineering degree, and would see things in a different light.

I would ride the **Santa Fe "Chief"** from Los Angeles to Chicago, change trains from Chicago to New York City, and take a local to New London, Connecticut, home of the Coast Guard Academy.

Steam engines exhaust their water supply powering the train, so watering stations are required. These consisted of elevated tanks located where water is available and alongside the tracks where gravity can feed the water to the engine. Rather than have a

dining carriage on the train, the Santa Fe route had eating houses at the watering places. These were built to accommodate the railroad passengers. They were known as **Harvey Houses**. From the *Slaton Slatonite*:

“Harvey placed ads in eastern and midwestern newspapers that read: ‘Wanted, young women of good character, attractive and intelligent, 18 to 30.’ Harvey Girls were trained to high standards of prompt and courteous service. They were the key to serving hundreds of passengers in about twenty minutes...the average length of time a train would need for servicing every four hours.

“Harvey Girls all wore the same uniform, a long-sleeved black dress with a stiff ‘Elsie’ collar, black shoes, and stockings. The company furnished a full, white, wrap-around apron that was so stiffly starched that it had to be pinned to a corset, longtime Slaton resident and former Harvey Girl Cleo Wolf remembers. The girls were closely supervised by their manager (or manager’s wife), and curfews were strictly enforced in the early years. They worked very hard and their eight-hour-a-day shifts were often split to conform to train schedules. In the late 1800s, Harvey Girls earned \$17.50 per month plus tips, room, board, and train passes. When the Harvey Girls were recruited in the early years, they were asked not to marry for at least a year. It has been estimated that more than five thousand women married and settled in the west, as a result of Harvey Houses.

“The combination of good food served in a fine dining atmosphere with imported linen, china, and silver created a distinctive contrast to the typical eating establishments in turn-of-the-century small-town Texas. And the hope of catching the eye of one of the Harvey Girls no doubt kept many a poor farmer, rancher, and railroader coming back to dine again and again.”

The Harvey Houses were a little expensive for me, so I followed the trainmen around the corner to the cheaper coffee house they patronized.

Boy! One thing you learned going from “sea to shining sea” is that we have one huge country! And it is truly “beautiful for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain, for purple mountain majesties, above the fruited plain!”

I was thoroughly enjoying the trip, but I had one worry as to whether or not I might fail the final physical exam. I didn’t have enough money for the trip home, should that happen. My worry? A big carbuncle on the back of my left hand. It was tight as a drum and paining a little. In the Chicago train station, I sought relief at the first aid station. The doctor said it would have to be lanced to relieve the pressure. I said, “Okay.” He grubbed around his medicine cabinet and announced he didn’t have any anesthetic, and could I stand it if he lanced without it? I saw no alternative, so said, “Yes.” I bit the bullet. He lanced. *I felt no pain!* The pressure was so great there was no sensitivity to pain, I guess.

The train out of Chicago was first class, as contrasted to the tourist class I had been on. It had a diner. A nice experience. I transferred at the Pennsylvania Station in downtown

New York City to a local that would complete the trip to New London. As we emerged from the city, I was very impressed by the fresh green foliage of the Connecticut countryside. It was in such stark contrast to our western conifers and arid lands.

In the same car with me were three others on their way to the Academy. We “bonded” immediately, needless to say, and wound up spending the night at the Crocker House hotel, ready to report in on schedule the next day. We walked the final mile or so lugging our suitcases (wheels on bags were unknown). We found the Academy reservation at the north boundary of New London on high ground and sloping eastward down to the Thames River where six twenty-six-foot knockabouts lay at their moorings in a nice little cove.

The buildings were red-brick-colonial-style, appropriate to the northeast and just two years old. The Academy had previously been at Fort Trumble at the downtown docks. The buildings lacked the warm look and lush landscaping of our southwestern college campuses but looked very “military.” Not missed in our first look around was the Connecticut College for Women, directly across the street from the Academy!

First Day. There were eighty-two of us reporting in! We were assigned rooms in the barracks to locate and then report to the sickbay for our final physical exam. I sweated it out when the doctor said he thought he heard a heart murmur. A second doctor said I was okay—and so I got in. (Phew!) When through with the physical, we were to report to the gym to be issued our uniforms: Navy Undress Whites with black neckerchiefs. White underwear, black shoes, and socks. Navy white hats, except ours had a blue band around the brim. And a black wool jersey to be worn under the jumper in cold weather. We were to put our civilian clothes in our suitcases and stow them in the attic. Civilian clothes were allowed to be worn only on leave, not even on liberty.

The Academy was ghostly quiet. The First and Third Classes were on a foreign cruise. The Second Class was on summer home leave. (Remember the military rating system? The seniors are First Class, freshmen are Fourth Class, etc.)

The swearing-in ceremony was the next day, and a small number of Second Class cadets showed up to begin our “indoctrination” immediately. The first order was to form a straight line. “Suck up your guts! Throw out your chests. Chin in. Hands relaxed at your side. Square up those hats.” (Those hats, square on top of your head certainly made you look stupid. But wait 'til you get the visor caps and square them up with just two fingers between the visor and nose. Now you look like a nerd!)

The **Swab Summer** is a time to screen out those misfits who shouldn't become cadets. Many were obviously unsuitable. It made one wonder about the entrance exams and the interview that gave such weight to adaptability. And there were several who said “no thanks” to the obvious coming regimentation. They wanted to go home. “Granted.”

Our principal activity was a treat. A local cruise with our new Fourth Class divided between some 75-foot patrol boats and a 145-foot Bluenose Schooner. We visited favorite yachting ports, and in New Bedford we went to the movie *Captains Courageous*

starring Spencer Tracy and Mickey Rooney! The movie was staged on a sister ship to ours.

There was one other treat, or was it? A Tea Dance! We were all fitted out now in our ill-fitting Undress Whites. We were required to attend. Local girls were invited to meet the new crop, and we new cadets might meet a local girl to help us avoid being homesick.

The girls surely looked young. I believe they were still in high school. I was an “older man” at twenty. Hadn’t dated a high school girl in three years. I wasn’t a good dancer but felt I had to push someone around. I took a good look at the wallflowers and found one looking a little older. She was a good dancer and we carried on a pleasant conversation. When the music stopped, she led me over to meet her friends. *Egads! They were wives of the officers assigned to the Academy as instructors! She was a junior officer’s bride of just a few weeks!*

Swab Summer was drawing to a close. What had we learned? A LOT:

1. The **Coast Guard Motto**: Semper Paratus = Always Ready.
2. The **Coast Guard Academy mission** goes well beyond academics. It is: "To graduate young men and women with sound bodies, stout hearts and alert minds, with a liking for the sea and its lore, with that high sense of honor, loyalty, and obedience which goes with trained initiative and leadership; well grounded in seamanship, the sciences and amenities, and strong in the resolve to be worthy of the traditions of commissioned officers in the United States Coast Guard in the service of their country and humanity."

3. The **Coast Guard Marching Song**:

So here's the Coast Guard marching song,
We sing on land or sea.
Through surf and storm and howling gale,
High shall our purpose be.
"Semper Paratus" is our guide,
Our fame, our glory too.
To fight to save or fight to die,
Aye! Coast Guard, we are for you!

4. The **Coast Guard Academy Anthem**:

Men, we are Kaydets, Proud of our Corps.
Proud of our heroes brave who guard every shore.
Men, ours is courage, Service our fame.
So, hearts stout and minds alert
As we sing—Honor to thy Name.

Chorus:

Coast Guard fore'er Aye! Coast Guard fore'er!

Always we'll honor thee, Pride of our Nation.
Academy and Corps. Feel thy mighty lore.
We the Corps uphold thee, our Coast Guard fore'er.

When I refer to Classes, remember the military system of the higher the rank the lower the number. Thus, the seniors are First Class cadets and the freshmen are Fourth Class cadets. But stripes for designating rank go up with rank. An Ensign has one gold stripe. A Captain four gold stripes. That is enough for here.

Another tradition: you may address an officer by his rank from Admiral down to Commander, and, as a courtesy, a Lieutenant Commander may be addressed simply as Commander. Lieutenants and below down to Fourth Class cadets and Warrant officers are addressed as, "Mister."

In saluting, the junior recognizes the senior by his uniform, not the person, and initiates the salute. The senior returns the salute. This also applies to commissioned warships as they pass. They salute by dipping their nation's flag.

When in uniform out-of-doors, the hat or cap must be worn, this is known as being "covered." When indoors "uncovered," except for ceremonial occasions such as Color Guards and certain affairs where protocol calls for being covered.

Salutes, therefore, are normally not exchanged indoors for salutes are only exchanged when covered.

When in uniform, any equipment being carried should be in the left hand or over the left arm so as to leave the right hand available to render a salute.

One *No-No*: Don't try to make out with an officer's wife!!

I will end this Scene with my audacious request to check out one of those beautiful day-sailers still sitting lonesome at its mooring.

The other classes would soon be returning. This would likely be my only chance. We Fourth Classmen were not given liberty, but we were given the afternoon off to take care of personal affairs. I went to the office of the Officer-of-the-Day. He was seated at his desk. I knocked and asked permission to enter. "Granted," he said, without rising. "Sir, I would like to check out a knockabout for the afternoon." His eyes dilated as he gave me his most disdainful stare and said, "Mister, when you are a Second Classman, you can take out a boat, and, when you are a First Classman, you can take a date out with you. Dismissed!"



All Swabs scrub down fore-and-aft!