



DOC HAMM TRIBUTE

Class President Bob Stern, fellow classmates and guests.

Gerald C. Hamm was born on March 17th (St. Patrick's Day), 1910, in Weatherly, PA, a small town in Carbon County, Northwest of the Pocono's. He died last year at the age of 95 at Moorestown, NJ. His wife of many years Geraldine, preceded him. He had two daughters, Erika and Karen and the family lived much of their life in the Oak Lane section of Philadelphia. Doc was a faculty member of Central High from 1935 to 39 and 1954 to 1978 when he was forced to retire because of his age. He taught English and was my teacher from 11A through 12B.

Thank you Doctor Hamm!

He was sarcastic, ascerbic, cynical, witty, droll and many more descriptive adjectives. He was dapper, always impeccably dressed and resembled George Brent, a film star of the 30's and 40's. Doc loved the Arts and in particular Film, Theater, Opera and Literature. That last category is where his hand touched me. You see, he taught me to read. I mean read by pushing the envelope of a person who already loved to read, by using unique techniques.

Examples : Reading assignments were to compare two books of similar theme and content like "Path's Of Glory" and "Command Decision", two war novels regarding the psyche of decision makers. Some times he piled it on like requiring me to read George Eliot's "Middlemarch" (all 1100 pages) . However, he took pity on me and gave me Charles Dicken's shortest novel "Hard Times", as its complement. Only because I got the flu and was bedridden, did I finish "Middlemarch", but I loved it!

He also gave me Thomas Hardy's Mayor of Casterbridge to read. Most of it I read on the Frankford El when I courted my future wife Kit who was attending the Uof P. Again, I Loved it! Today I have read all of Hardy's novels and belong to the international Thomas Hardy Society.

Thank you Doctor Hamm!

One semester I entered his classroom and was amazed to see all desks in a circle. It was a day for Shakespeare's "King Lear". This unique environment allowed Doc to sit with us, allowed the students to read aloud, eye to eye, and permitted Doc to explain the melodious, obscure words of the "Bard"- all this by making it fun and personal. Some words are still penciled in my own copy of Shakespeare's works.

Thank you, Doctor Hamm.

In 11B, when I received my first report card, I was startled to see the letter "F" next to English. It had to be a mistake, I thought, and asked him to explain. Calmly he told me I was a good student, but had become lazy and was abandoning my strength in the subject. It was no mistake. I didn't tell him I was working part-time, playing football and spending many hours with Kit. They were excuses. Instead I reenergized and wrote the best essay I could at the next opportunity. When the paper came back I looked at the red letter at the top. It was an "A"! But ever the knee-breaking cynic, he had written one word underneath – Yours? The "F" became a "B" at the end of the semester.

Thank you Doctor Hamm!

As you know, Kit and I were married between my junior and senior years. After he knew, he asked us to baby sit while he and his wife attended a show. At his home I was presented with a crayon drawing by his daughter's of a football player. Doc

gave me a pocket book called "Autumn Thunder" about an aging football player. How apropos! When they left for the show, I sat in Doc's corner easy chair, my feet on an ottoman gazing at bookshelves over each shoulder. The cases were loaded with great novels and classic literature. I was in heaven and savored the evening and the surroundings of my English teacher's library.

Thank you Doctor Hamm!

After graduation, we lost touch. I did read about his suit against the City for age discrimination, which he lost, but time just went by.

Fast forward to the mid-nineties when the Central Alumni Journal announced his death. The memories and nostalgia of those early years flooded my mind. However, the next Journal printed a retraction and a nice note from Doc appreciating the sentiments. It was then I called Bob Stern and with his help, I tracked down Doc.

A letter and a phone call led me to his apartment in Glenside. He buzzed me up to his floor. When the elevator door opened, a small white haired man greeted me. "Are you looking for me"? he asked. I nodded yes and smiled- a flush of emotion rising within my upper body.

In his apartment he offered me a cup of tea. I had brought with me three things: a pictorial book on the life of Thomas Hardy, the crayon drawing from his daughters and my journal of reading lists where I had kept track, all my life, of books read and would like to read in my lifetime. But something was missing. There were no books! "I gave them away", he explained. "But come over here", he said, and we went to another room lined floor to ceiling with videos. He told me he was researching old silent films and writing articles for a silent film magazine. I gaped at this small but larger than life man standing next to me.

In that wonderful afternoon we talked about books and authors and he reviewed my reading lists. He asked for and received permission to place check marks next to "must reads". He panned some of my favorite authors with comments such as "can't stand him, disgusting, terrible", etc. Next to "War and Peace", he placed two check marks. "I loved it so much, I read it twice"!

I told him it was difficult to find some books and authors. He gave me a copy of the New York Times Sunday Book Supplement and circled several classifieds. "Try them. They do internet searches". Imagine that, a computer savvy old English professor!

After I left, we exchanged some notes from time to time before he faded from my life. On one note I asked him if he had really remembered me. His answer "I always remember the good ones", both flattered me and took me back again to those years at Central.

Thank you Doctor Hamm for pushing the envelope in my quest to read the best.

Only a block or so from here, Thomas Jefferson penned the words to the Declaration of Independence. He also is quoted to say "I cannot live without books". I can agree with and understand that phrase. And much of the credit goes to an English teacher in room 108 at Central High.

From one of your many appreciative students...

Thank you Doctor Hamm