

Lowell, Massachusetts

Brother Provincial had simply said that I would still be teaching in the grammar school, but that there would be some extra work; and he was right. Provincials were always right, as I have learned since then. So I found myself in Lowell, Massachusetts, in the St. John the Baptist Parish, which is serviced by the Oblate Fathers of Mary Immaculate. Across the street from the church was St. Joseph's School, where I was assigned to teach the seventh grade. This, too, like in New Hampshire, was a community of eight Brothers, but they were much younger than those of Manchester, and best of all I would be with my buddy Bro. Norbert Cote, who would be teaching the eighth grade. He would have fifty-eight students in the eighth grade, while I was scheduled to have sixty-three in the seventh. This was a wonderful surprise for it was the only year ever that we would be together, living and working in the same house. I looked forward to it.

I had been warned that there would be additional tasks, and it was not long before the fine old Brother Director called me in to inform me that I would be the procurator for the community, which required me to do the purchasing for our community. I had a room directly opposite his, which made it much easier for him to reach me. He was an elderly Brother in poor health and would have seizures that could last two or three days. The seizures would confine him to his room. Sometimes he would knock at my door ask me to get him the medication he needed. This experience would be useful later when I would have to attend to the various sicknesses of the young Brothers assigned to my care.

At this time television first came out, and we were given one by a benefactor. It was put in a room that had a lock on the door. The room would be unlocked for our use for a couple of hours on Sunday afternoons and strictly controlled so as not to be abused. I laugh at the fact now, but there was a lot of wisdom in not becoming a slave to a new toy that could be useful in helping our teaching, but should not be allowed to hinder it. The Brother Director briefed us about television watching at our Sunday conference. The Brothers' residence was just a five-minute walk away from the school, which in many ways was a blessing, as we were not bothered by parents or students coming to the residence.

St. Joseph's School was a solid brick building of three floors, and I had the good fortune to be on the top floor where I had sixty-three students. This was still when one teacher taught all the subjects. All were boys of the many French Canadian families. Many of these families made a living in the local mills.

I remember an incident that happened about a month after school classes had started and everything was going smoothly. One day there was a knock at the door, and in walked the Brother Principal and the local pastor, and with them was one of the parishioners with his son. The son had just been thrown out of the public school because he was difficult to handle.

They asked me if I would accept this public school dropout. The boy's father gave me a broom handle and gave me his explicit permission to use it freely if his son ever disturbed the class. As there was no extra desk, I sent for a chair, and placed it in the back of the room. I assigned that seat to the latecomer. The pastor and father were pleased, and the father repeatedly suggested that I beat his son into obeying. I politely asked him to take the broomstick back with him; I had no intentions of using it. With sixty-three students already, one more would not be a burden.

It was then that I took a lesson from the past and told the father that since there were already sixty-three students, his son would help me. The young boy's job was to sit in the back of the classroom and notify me of anyone who was disturbing the class, not listening, or cheating. He was told never to touch a student for if he did, I would personally throw him out of the window.

When it was time for recess, he headed the two lines of students who marched down the hall in silence, and I would bring up the rear. He also distributed papers and picked up assignments, and I managed to keep him busy working. He never once gave me any problems. I did keep him after school a few times for a small amount of time to brief him on what would be special for the next day and to thank him for his help. The pastor and the

father checked back a few times, and when they knew that he was completely under control they did not return. Keeping a delinquent busy with a job to do had been the best solution so far for problem students.

At the beginning of each class we took the roll. I simply read out the family names and the student would say "Present." I looked over the list of French names and saw that by reading three of them in a row, it would make a question and also cause laughter: The names were Florian Hetu, Wilfrey Jolis, and Ramond Lamoureux. So when I called "Hetu, Jolis, Lamoureux," the students laughed, for it meant in Canadian dialect, Are you good-looking, Lamoureux?

I was asked to take care of the Boy Scouts and to get two or three groups organized. There were a lot of volunteers and applicants. Eventually we formed three separate groups that were not too big, just large enough to manage. But we needed funds to get uniforms, instruments, etc.; so I went to the three local undertakers of the parish and asked them to each sponsor one of the clubs. That was how we got uniforms, tents, and all the materials needed to begin organizing outings, hikes, and local service. Our scouts also took turns appearing at church functions and visiting the sick in the hospitals. They became very active and quite popular and received much support from parishioners and businessmen. So now we could teach our students and keep them busy and out of trouble after school, too!

There was an old custom for all the French missionary Brothers to gather two or three times a year at one of the houses to exchange ideas and meet old friends and celebrate. This became an occasion for all the young Brothers, mostly Americans, to have their own gathering at a different place from the old Brothers. We had to be sure to have the right menus and the right diversions for the two very different groups of New England communities when they gathered twice a year. It helped the good spirit that existed.

Time passed quickly, and before we realized it, the year was over. It was already the summer of 1937 and the year of the New York World's Fair with its famous Trylon and Perisphere. One day I was walking home after school with my Brother Director, who was as short and stocky as I am tall and thin. I had to slow down so he could keep pace with me. We were talking quietly when we passed two local mothers chatting on their porch. When they saw us, one called to the other in French, "Look we have our own Trylon and Perisphere right here in Lowell!" Teaching, shopping, parties, Boy Scouts, altar boys, and unwanted boys: it had all been a profitable year.