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Carl Bode

What They Miss Out On: A Case History

BAREFOOT under a benign sun, the students sprawl on the grass in front of McKeldin Library at the University of Maryland, where I teach. Supplied with everything from books to bongó drums, they're enjoying a freedom denied those of us who went to college much earlier. For example, they can take almost any course they wish, then drop it at a whim. It's true that some faculty members are campaigning for a return to required courses including a whole year of composition in English, a language which is begging for restoration; but they haven't won yet.

The students can live their personal as well as their academic lives almost without restriction. If they want to reside on campus, the dormitories offer them seven different official options — not to mention a beguiling variety of unofficial ones. Though I'm not urging a return to one-sex,

supervised dorms, I admit that the notion makes a certain bashful appeal.

So today's students have it made, I think. But there's one minor delight they'll never know. It has sunk without a trace. I'm sure you haven't thought about it for years and will never guess what I mean. ("Oh yes, I will." Oh no, you won't.)

It's the laundry case! Mine was made of tough fiberboard covered with brown canvas. Around it went two straps of webbing, one going the long way, the other the short way. The front had a small glassine slot behind which you slid your name-and-address card. On one side you lettered your name and address, on the other your parents'.

For a brief time when I was outraged because my parents didn't indulge me as usual, I slipped in a new card with my home address but

above it simply "Resident." They forgave me, though I don't know why. After all, I was biting the hand that both fed me and kept me clean.

Everybody had laundry cases; everybody followed the same ritual. Every week or two you crammed the case full. It was an act of catharsis to get rid of your dirty clothes. You held the top down by kneeling on it while you tightened the straps. Then you lugged it to the campus mail-room.

When it came back through the campus mail you felt a lift of the spirit. In your room you took out the layers of clean clothes, the underwear, shirts, handkerchiefs, and the rest. They all smelled good. I can recall my mother out in the back yard taking down the family wash from the clothesline strung between the trees. Pleased by the way the wind and sun had done their drying, she'd sometimes bury her face

in a sheet and then remark to me, "Doesn't it smell clean? Just smell the ozone." It did smell clean. And it smelled of mountain peaks and salt air.

But that was far from all. Slipped in between the clean clothes were all sorts of good things. Rhubarb squares (chewy, they didn't crumble like some cookies), apples, fudge, raisins (they were full of vitamins), peanut brittle. . . I know they all couldn't have been there at one time but I'm glad to let my memory deceive me. Every now and then, a tube of toothpaste or a bar of soap. And at the bottom of the case, the comics from last Sunday's paper.

That's the way it was. Today the students use the local laundromat. It shows more independence and besides they meet some interesting people there, sometimes. But they don't know the pleasure of opening the laundry case from home.

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