

Colby



Colby Magazine

Volume 102
Issue 3 *Fall* 2013

Article 10

October 2013

Last Page

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Recommended Citation

Hadden, Gerry (2013) "Last Page," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 102: Iss. 3, Article 10.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol102/iss3/10>

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A BRIDGE NOT BURNED

In the spring of 1986 my classmates Dan Sullivan and Lawrence Collins and I burned down a bridge (sort of) in West Germany, got arrested for it, then skipped the country before the police could confiscate our passports. We had no other choice, really, since we didn't enjoy diplomatic immunity despite our status as ambassadors. Ambassadors of Colby College. At least that's what our German professor, Hubert Kueter, had told us we were as he led us off on that semester abroad to Lübeck. His point, however, wasn't that we were going to enjoy special privileges overseas, but that we had better behave.

So we were surprised by Herr Kueter's response after our arrest under his watch: He chuckled. Then he said something like, "You did what?" That was it. No admonishment, no letters to our parents, no report back to Colby. It would take me more than 25 years to understand his amused and, dare I say, decidedly un-German reaction.

Fast forward to this past summer. Sullivan, Collins, and I rented vacation cabins on a lake outside Jefferson, Maine, with our families. On our list of things to do of course was visit Colby. I hadn't been back since 1990. Just before my family and I left home in Barcelona for Maine, an old friend, Jen Jarvis McLin '92, sent me a photo of her and a remarkably familiar old fellow seated together at a wedding. "Recognize this face?" she wrote. It was easy; Hubert Kueter had hardly changed.

I got in touch by e-mail, and we agreed to meet on campus. We arrived early. What a homecoming. I'd read about all the changes, but it was essentially the same place. The memories came flooding back. Our two oldest kids, 7 and 9 years old, kept saying things like, "And they let you live here?" and "You could have sleep-overs?" And best of all, "I could come here?"

That's what I wanted to hear. I wanted the place to impress them, to leave a mark as it's left its mark on me. One day,



then, they might just decide to set out for Waterville themselves.

We passed the library and the chapel with its little hill we used to sled down on dining-hall trays. We tried to get into Butler dorm but needed a security code. That was new. Behind, Johnson Pond. "Can you swim in it?" the kids asked. "Er, technically, no."

Finally we met up with Herr Kueter and his wonderful wife, Nancy Brooks. It was just like old times. Hubert, retired now, even brought the chuckle. We invited them out to Jefferson for a sunset barbecue. Nancy brought her harp and Hubert a present for his three former students: copies of his memoir, *My Tainted Blood*. In his dedication he wrote how that semester in Lübeck had been one of the highlights of his career—despite our misadventure. Or maybe because of it? When I got back

home and started reading, things began to make sense. Hubert, it turns out, survived World War II as a young boy on his cunning, his willingness to bend the rules and take risks, and his openness to adventure. He was an expert scavenger, a sometimes-thief, and a really lucky treasure hunter. Everything he did he did to keep his family safe. By some miracle it worked. He and his mother escaped countless perils and made it to America.

A lifetime later his phone rings. It's the German police. Three of his students, taking a break from studying German language and grammar, have just been arrested. For what? For converting parts of a swimmer's bridge into firewood at an American-style beach party on the nearby Baltic coast.

Something about our rule-bending—although NOT motivated by a desire to save anyone from harm, but to stay warm—must have nevertheless touched that impish nerve of his, cultivated during his early years of hardship. He chuckled again, recounting it all as our kids listened in and the sun set over the lake.

And I realized that this, at last, was my homecoming. The one I'd been missing every year, without fail, for two and a half decades. It came without the capital H, and not over the official weekend, but what did it matter? I was with old friends and teachers, savoring what we once learned together. What we'd learned from each other. And marveling at where it had led us since.

Later I put our little ones to bed. In their eyes a thousand questions. What was this strange life their dad had once lived? Mission accomplished, I thought. They'll never forget Colby now.

But just to make sure, I bought them each a Colby sweatshirt.

Gerry Hadden '89 is a writer and reporter living in Barcelona, Spain. He covers European issues for PRI's The World, the CBC, and others. His memoir, Never the Hope Itself, was published in 2011.