

Graduation contrasts are Academic

By Gordon B. Seavey
Staff Correspondent

Among the hundreds who witnessed their offspring receive diplomas at the 197th graduation exercises of Westford Academy last Friday, there were just a few grandpas and grandmas who remember "their day." Just about the same type of program, but what changes is the general background.

Now they were sitting outdoors in a natural setting behind a multi-million dollar building, the fourth since the school was founded in 1792. Its capacity will permit an enrollment easily of a thousand students. Their school building, now the Roudenbush Community Center, had three rooms and three teachers.

Seventy years ago, there were speeches by the valedictorian and the salutatorian, the class gift, various (but limited) prizes given by the trustees. Every graduate had some part in the program. Even though most of the recitations were rattled off like the speed of the State of Maine Express which daily roared through Stony Brook Valley, there was generous applause as each speaker returned to his or her seat. If one didn't catch all the spoken words, remember, loudspeakers were not invented until much, much later.

And grandfather recalls many other differences. The trustees gave out monetary prizes to the best students: \$10 for the best, then \$5 for the next two. A freshman who showed the greatest improvement, like Frank Jarvis, got \$5.

Over 100 students last week received checks varying in amount and totalling \$50,000 to augment this fall's college expenses.

Town Hall exercises

From early days, graduation was held in the First Parish Church but after the turn of the century, the dance floor in the town hall was converted to an auditorium and the few graduates sat on the stage. Girls were dressed in white including shoes and hose. For the boys, who usually wore knickers, the occasion, maybe, prompted for the first time a new suit with long pants.

As each girl received her diploma, someone from the audience would rush up to present a bouquet of flowers, mostly gathered from a local garden.

Principal William C. Roudenbush was in his seventh year as head of the Academy in 1919, when only three girls and one boy were graduated. For 25 years, he was an admired disciplinarian and a good teacher, handling Latin and French. No other language studies were available.

Students from the Brookside area rode the little trolley to school at a "students rate." This lasted until 1920, when the line went bankrupt. Others drove horses or rode in horse-drawn "barges," later replaced by Reo Speed Wagons, but still called barges. Many walked or used bikes, one-speeders only.

The class motto for 1922 was "Honor Lies in Honest Toil." The boys probably had no part in

picking the class flower, the sweet pea. Money earned during the year was used to fund a seafood dinner at Nantasket Beach, a brief stay at a Boston hotel and seats for a production of "The Ghost Train," starring E.E. Clive, which played for many months at the old Stuart Street Theatre in Boston. A real thriller.

Incidentally, the school play that year was "The Man Next Door." Remember?

Comparisons

Again, in 1919 only four students solemnly marched to the tune of "Pomp & Circumstance". Watching were the underclassmen, which probably numbered 55, parents and friends. Last week 218 students received diplomas. Their choice of a class flower was the white rose.

Principal Roudenbush was assisted by two, sometimes three teachers. Turnover was great, as many left at the end of the school year to take a higher paying position elsewhere.

Particularly well remembered was Edith Lawrence Hildreth, who took charge while Roudenbush was on duty with the State Guard at the time of the Boston Police strike.

Once each year the entire student body would gather on the steps of their school, now Roudenbush, for a photo. A series of these photos is on exhibit, along with much more memorabilia, at the Westford Museum, which incidentally is the original Academy building erected in 1794.

Gordon Seavey is an Academy Trustee and a graduate with the Class of 1922.



Staff photo by Rick Silva

Academy Trustee Arnold Wilder presents graduating senior Christie Adams with the Principal William C. Roudenbush Memorial Scholarship at Friday's 197th Westford Academy commencement.