

## Part 5.1 Waltham School Stuff

### North Junior High School

Shortly after arriving in Waltham, mom asked Rolly what junior high school we would go to. He said his sons went to North Junior High School and imagined that the school district remained the same. Mom called the school office to make sure it was the right school. It was and received instructions about what documents she needed to bring to register us for the fall. According to Dick who has visited Waltham several times in the last 15 years, this school was razed many years ago. There is another institutional building in its place. This one looked like a penitentiary - and felt like one.

I could scarcely believe that there was a photo of the school on the web but I'm getting less and less amazed the more I find out there. This was used in a Waltham resident's autobiography -which interestingly is buried in his website names "philosophy-religion". <Chuckle> To right edge of this photo there was a cement playground that was surrounded by an Anchor fence which also separated our school



Figure 1 <http://www.philosophy-religion.org/nolan/north-junior.htm>

from a parochial school that filled the other half of the block. It was a Catholic school. At lunch time, we were allowed to go into the fenced-in playground as were the parochial students. I had never seen school uniforms and found them interesting. They were white and royal blue. Amongst the poor parochial students there were a few nuns. In those days the nuns had not been liberated so they wore the full length habits and white hats, which may be the reason they were so mean to the students. They carried rulers and doled out whacks on the hands of miscreants who had offended them some way.

The other interesting thing about the construction of this school was its entrance ways. You can see the east entrance on the right side of the school. On the opposite side was, you guessed it, the west entrance. On the left side of this image is the main entrance with an imposing set of steps and a pediment. Each of these three entrances was strictly limited to certain classes of people. The east

entrance was the "Boys' Entrance", the west entrance was the "Girls' Entrance", and the front entrance was for adults, officials, salesmen, anyone who was not a student. To enter through a door that you were not authorized to use ran the risk of a tongue lashing by any adult who caught you, so you didn't do it.

She collected whatever documents she needed, i.e. birth certificates, and took us over to the school. We entered through the imposing main entrance. I felt like I was being admitted to a reformatory school because it was so enormous and dark and cold. Remember, the school in Seward was only 2 stories tall and housed all twelve grades. This building was several times larger and was dedicated to grades 7, 8 and 9.

It was during this registration process that my identity to the world changed. Sounds strange, doesn't it, but it's true. My name change to Jim took place in an instant that mom was not prepared for and which she has resisted ever since. To this day she will not acknowledge that I am Jim - indeed, when I left work at the nursing home a few months ago to tell mom that I was going to call her that afternoon after her phone was fixed, she was distraught when I called because she had been waiting for "Her Jim" to call and he hadn't appeared like he promised. He appears to her frequently and she told me last week to tell him something I had told her about "next time you (I) see him." She just plain confuses me with him sometimes. Another time while we were talking she reported with some disgust that she had discovered that "Ron still doesn't know how to handle money!" Haha. I handle all of her accounts. Still another time while we were talking she reported that "Dick and Ron are away for a weekend." and then added that she was glad "Because Ron always has to have things his way." Chuckle. I have to be careful when I talk to her to sort out who she's talking to.

Anyway, the point: when mom registered me for school in Waltham in August, 1956, the office staff referred to me by "James" my first name. Mom corrected them and said, "No, he goes by Rondo." They replied, "No, we use the first name." and they did - and everyone else has since then. I became James/Jimmy in that instant and have been known as such for the rest of my life. Only family members persist in calling me Rondo, just as family members persist in calling dad "Alvin". Families are that way, you know. Don't ask me, "What way?!" But they are.

I think that for some reason Jim is sort of a sacred name to mom, not really sacred, but I don't know how else to refer to it. The name is one that refers to the love of her life and to apply it to a child is to disgrace the name. Dad at least would refer to me as Jim but mom will die before she does. Literally. An

interesting note I learned from Mable years ago had to do with my babyhood at the Avalon Apartments. She said that everyone called me "Jimmy", including mom, so I don't know when the change took place, but it did. I never liked the name. It was too odd and I was odd enough anyway. Plus it bothered me that the guy who I was named for was killed in a tractor accident. Sort of an ominous reason, isn't it.

North Junior High provided three distinct curricula. Each student had to pick one and only one at the time of entrance, and ever after was locked in that track. There was a Technical track, a Business track, and a College track. The curriculum for each contained a few overlapping classes as well as a unique set. Since we had more or less decided that we would go to college, although that seemed like a far off, impossible, unlikely thing to happen to me, we signed up for the College Prep track.

The most unusual aspect of the college prep track was the foreign language requirement. I don't believe that any foreign languages were taught in Seward. While I understood what a foreign language was, I had never imagined that schools would actually force you to study them. However, there was a certain generosity here. We had two options: either we could take three years of one language, or we could take two years of two languages! Man alive. Which should I do?!

The languages taught in this school included Latin, French, Italian, German and Russian. This was only a junior high school, and it taught that many languages. I was intimidated. Without any grasp of what I was doing, I opted to go the two years-two language route so signed up for Latin, anticipating that I would later sign up for French.

### Miss Bassett & Latin

I am not sure why I picked Latin to study. I suppose it has to do with the fact that I was enamored with mythology and ancient things and had devoured Edith Hamilton's "Mythology" book and anything else I could put my hands on during those long dark winters in Seward. If ancient Egyptian had been offered, no doubt I would have signed up for it. But I had not a clue about what I was getting into. In English class in Seward we never diagramed sentences and scarcely understood parts of speech, so I was absolutely unprepared what I was about to do.

As an aside, isn't it interesting how classical this college track was? It was a holdover from times gone by when people who considered themselves educated understood that this education automatically entailed learning foreign languages. No question about it so there was absolutely no alternative when we signed up for

the college track.

The teacher for this class was a woman who was as old as the universe, a Miss -not Mrs.- Basset. At the time I didn't know of the hound of the same name but see a semblance today. She had steel gray hair, eye glasses, looked as tired as she was old, saggy, jowly face with severe eyes, never smiled, was over-weight in her plain baggy dresses, and rapped her desk with a heavy-duty yard stick when she was so moved. She scared the crap out of me.

Declensions and conjugations? What in the H are those? And why were there more than one? What was the difference? Why doesn't English do all that stuff? And what did I get myself into?! Nominative, Genitive, Dative, Accusative, Ablative? Active and Passive Voices, Indicative, Imperative, Subjunctive Moods, Present, Past, Imperfect, Perfect, Pluperfect Tenses, Plural and Singular Numbers and First, Second and third Persons? My god what was this stuff? I was absolutely unprepared for that sort of systematic mental gymnastics and ended up getting C's and D's in most of my classes - and those were probably gifts.

The only memory I have of Latin is a sad one. For some reason one evening at home I shared what I was learning with dad. I didn't know what he would think though I knew he was generally taciturn and not given much to emotional displays of affection. But I took a chance and sure enough, I wasn't disappointed. I think we were in the little kitchen washing dishes and either a parent asked me what I was learning or I was bursting with pride at having mastered the cases for the word "femina" (obviously 'woman') I found languages difficult to learn at the time.

I launched into a recitation of the 10 forms of the word, singular and plural of Nominative, Genitive, Dative, Accusative, Ablative. "Femina, feminae,..." and so on (I've forgotten them now). Dad kept drying the dishes, studiously looking at the dish he held. He never looked at me, he didn't say a thing. When I proudly finished my recitation of something that had been difficult to master, he didn't even compliment me, let alone ask a question about what he had just heard. He changed the subject and I was stricken. He might as well have slapped me. Indeed, I was actually embarrassed at having been so egotistical - I don't really know what I felt but that seems like the closest word to capture how I felt. I never did it again. I remember wandering out into the yard, the sun setting behind the house as I stood beneath the large skeleton maple. I replayed the scene in the kitchen again and wondered. I wasn't sophisticated enough to form actual questions, but it seemed so wrong - and de-motivating.

So I dreaded Latin and did poorly, so poorly that the school counselor became interested in me.

## Beautiful Counselor & IQ Tests

She was a young, beautiful, woman who dressed well. In those days teachers wore professional, borderline formal clothing to class - and kids dressed well. She wore high heels, had a fancy hair-do and perfect make-up. She, too, intimidated the H out of me, though for a different reason than Miss Basset. I don't remember her name, just her fancy frilly dresses and scarves and bright lipstick and a direct and intimidating face when she looked me in the eyes. Remember, I was a pubertous boy.

One fine sunny day a messenger from The Office came to my home room early in the morning with a message for Miss Hanna. I'll tell you about her next. Miss Hanna read the message after the messenger left and then called me up to her desk. She told me that the school counselor wanted to see me right then and made sure that I knew where the office was. I headed out right away, not having any idea about what this was about. I hadn't heard anything to suggest that I would do this and was curious. I knew I hadn't done anything wrong, and since I was in the dark about what a "counselor" was, I just waited to see what she did.

She introduced herself pleasantly and gave a glib explanation that didn't really help me understand why I was there, but far be it from me to argue with adults. They are always right -whether they are or not. Today I imagine that the reason for these visits was the startling contrast between my intelligence and grades. It was enormous. So somehow someone decided that it might be a good idea to test me to see if there was really something wrong with me, hence this call.

She explained that she was going to have me come to her office two times to take tests, but I didn't understand why I had to take tests. It didn't really matter anyway. I have always liked taking tests and have done well. In Seward there were annual tests that most kids hated but I loved - because I always scored way above my actual grade level. I figured this was just another group of those kinds of tests that the school needed to place me, a student they had never seen.

So I returned to her office on at least one other time to take tests. These tests were really not like the ones I'd taken in Seward for some reason and they had some peculiar items I'd not seen. The most vivid example I recall involved mechanical systems, things that I naturally loved because my dad did. Drawings showed a set of shafts with different sized gears on the ends of each, the gears meshed together. The object each time was pretty simple: for example, two shafts out of the dozen were highlighted. There was an explanation that Shaft A is turning counter-clockwise. The assignment was to tell which direction Shaft B

was going to turn, clockwise or counterclockwise. That is actually a pretty simple thing to do. I'd grown up around mechanical things so didn't have any problem - just follow each gear and change direction each time you encounter the next one.

A lot of the questions dealt with things I'd never heard about. I don't remember the content but it had to do with things that hadn't been tested in Seward. I was never informed of the results. Miss Beautiful Counselor never called me in to tell me my score. I never saw her again and don't know what was done with that information.

### Miss Hanna & Ancient History

This woman was a character, likeable, energetic, excited and in love with her topic. I am sure half of her performance was staged but it was believable. She would say things about ancient personalities, as if she had known them personally, "Dear Cicero" or Caesar and so on. She was my home room teacher as well as my ancient history teacher.

The books we used were ancient, printed many years before, but I don't support that made much difference for this topic! At the end of the year, they were discarded and we were allowed to take our copy home for good if we wanted. I wanted and it is in my library somewhere.

There were four general segments to the class as I remember it: Egyptian, Assyrian, Greek and Roman. Miss Hanna knew her stuff cold and could rattle off dates and events and names like she really had lived back then. I remember that she had a favorite year when there were many momentous events. I don't remember the specific year nor do I remember the concatenation of events, other than it was the time the Hyksos invaded Egypt! They were unexpected, powerful and overwhelmed the pharaoh and ruled Egypt for generations until they, too, were expelled.

The neat thing about this class was that it jibed with my interest in ancient things. I had devoured every book in the tiny Seward library that dealt with anything like Egypt, Rome, Greece, mythology and so on so taking a class about this topic was fun, the only one that was fun. I got to look at maps like this one, and statues and images I'd never seen. I loved to see familiar names like Karnak and Luxor and Thebes, particularly since I was at sea in most of my other classes.

It was during a home room session that I did something that this kid thought was a joke. He was a cool, likeable Italian kid with a name like Tony. He was writing some thing to send to another kid and I saw the note. I don't know whether he showed it to me to read or not but he thought I was smart so when I told him that he had mis-spelled the word "whore", he changed it to "hoar", the only similar sounding word I knew. Later, he found out that he had spelled it right so he came back to me and good-naturedly said, "You were teasing me, right?!" He didn't get angry which surprised me. But I still didn't understand what he was talking about.

## Algebra

This was one of the saddest parts of this story: I entered North Junior High in the ninth grade where students were already in second year algebra. So I gamely went to class and didn't have a clue what I was doing. It might as well have been taught in Chinese. The teacher was a middle aged man (probably 30) who wore the mandatory blazer, dress shirt and tie each day. He was humorless and about as tired as Miss Bassett when he stood at the blackboard.

Proof of how poorly I was doing is the fact that mom and dad actually hired me a tutor for the class. He was a Harvard student who drove out to our place once a week in the evening to sit for an hour with me. Gene England obviously knew what he was trying to teach me and was patient, but for the life of me, I could not get it. It must have been frustrating to him to take money from my folks when I made no progress, or so little that it seemed like none.

The other note about algebra contradicts what I just said. I was assigned to visit families with Leroy Nelson, a Ph.D. candidate in Electrical Engineering at MIT. One evening as we were making a long drive in the sunset, he got to talking to me about school and I must have mentioned how poorly I was doing. He was a quiet likeable kid, unmarried, awkward. His story in the end was actually a sad one. After multiple attempts to pass the qualifying exams to formally enter the doctoral program at MIT, the faculty finally took him aside and told him bluntly that he didn't have what it took to get to that level. They awarded him a Masters' Degree and sent him on his way.

Anyway, he was a nice person and thought he'd try and help me with algebra. I don't remember whether he did this each month or only that evening, but I specifically remember him teaching me how to solve quadratic equations in my head!

He explained the method, gave an example and carefully solved it out loud. Then he posed another problem and asked me to do it. The surprising fact is that I was actually able to start the solution. At some point I fell off the track but he was able to jump start the process. Too bad he wasn't the one who tutored me.

## New Clarinet

This is one of those memories that stings a bit - because it demonstrates that my experience in Waltham was not as uniformly gray as I paint it to be. I took my old silver one-piece clarinet from Seward more because mom and dad wanted me to than because I wanted to. That's true and the fact that I didn't express my opinion was the fact that it was their wish to buy that clarinet even though they denied it and said, "Oh, you can pick ANY instrument you want!!", I understood the subtext in the next sentence, "But if you want a clarinet, mom and pop Jones are selling Poodie's clarinet for \$12.00 which is about as much as we can afford to pay"... silence.....well, I got it, didn't I. I knew that they wanted to save money, always save money, so it was easier to just give in and agree that I "Really wanted to play clarinet" than to buck them. So the darn thing was one of my few possessions to make the cross-continent trip on the pick-up.

Of course, once we got in Boston and both mom and dad really did have to both -meaning that we were alone at home in the afternoon from 3:30 until 5:30 when they got home- it was apparent that they had grave concerns about us boys being alone. about us not having any goals or directions or objectives. I think, in retrospect, that they did sincerely care that we have meaningful things to do with ourselves, but that isn't how it came across. The subtext of their attempts at persuading us that WE really did want to do this or that was an anxiety that we're going to just get in trouble. Sad that I remember it that way when that was only part of their rationale.

The way I know it was only part of their rationale was the fact that they decided that they would buy me a new clarinet. For my 15<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1957. I had no idea. On March 31<sup>st</sup>, I was given a present to open and it was small case with a take-apart clarinet, the one that you kids messed around with at 5111. It was brand spanking new and they explained that it cost \$85 dollars which was a lot of money but that they thought I needed it so they bought it on a time payment plan, paying \$6.00 a month. I didn't know whether to thank them or apologize. It was always that way with them. Both of them were so poor that they could not

simply get someone a gift without making the point to the recipient of how much the thing cost. Bad manners for sure, but just a feature of their depression mentality.

So I ended up with this fancy new clarinet and was really obligated to deal with it. Mom and dad also compounded my obligation by signing me up to take clarinet lessons. Gag. I didn't like the darn instrument and it turned out that I didn't like the teacher, a prissy, curly-headed Italian who came to the house for half an hour each week. He was a musician obviously, and he was apparently a poor musician because he hated these lessons as much as I did. It was apparent in his tone of voice, his irritation at the mistakes I made, and at the fact that I obviously did not practice. I have to sympathize with him. It must be terrible to try to teach an instrument to any student who refuses to practice daily.

In addition to teaching me how to play the instrument, he dared venture out into the world of theory. I'd never heard of the thing. Music theory? But since I was in this sophisticated, cosmopolitan city, there must be a thousand new things that I'd never heard about that were going to impinge on me. There were. However, after he got started, I was able to relax. He was just talking about time signatures and tempos and basic things like that. We never did get to the level of chord structures, probably because I never rose to the level.

He gave me an exercise that I did like. He told me to write out every conceivable combination I could of a certain number of notes of specific length, eighths, sixteenth, and quarters. I don't remember the number of notes he allowed, but I do remember that I was astonished at the number of variations that were possible. When he checked them each on the next visit, he was pleased, I had finally done something right. But that was about all I did right.

### Playing in the Band

In their fervor to keep us off the streets, to protect us from the hooligans and riff-raff, mom signed us up for band when she registered us at North Junior Highschool. Now I had been a crappy band member in Seward, really only being successful at filling a uniform. But getting into this band was a nightmare. There were so many kids, probably 50, and they knew what they were doing - and they knew what I wasn't doing. It was embarrassing, but when mom decreed that I do something, I did it, come hell or high water.

The band met regularly in the music room for practices during school hours

which was a mixed bag. I played poorly -because I didn't like the clarinet and I didn't practice- but on the other hand, it was an escape from the psychologically traumatic courses where I was at sea. I was simply over my head. I enjoyed being able to get away in my head while the other students made noises - I just held my clarinet in my mouth and pretended to play, literally. I am not kidding you.

The major function of this brave band was to perform at the foot ball games. Remember, I was not entirely in favor of cheer leading and didn't much care for any organized sports. Football struck me as one of the stupider sports, people intentionally knocking each other down and hurting them. Idiocy. And here I was, not only present, but I was aiding and abetting them by (supposedly) playing music to encourage and support them.

These games were played every weekend in the fall, a new concept. I was amazed at how excited people -adults and kids- got about who was winning. What was the point of that? It's just a game, but they got mightily exercised, cussed and yelled, cheered or jeered. I felt like I was inside a cage with a bunch of baboons. We used a school bus to travel to the away-games. I only remember going to Haverill but I went to other towns as well.

I hated these games because I was too embarrassed to take a sack lunch, so I starved. Other kids were given money to buy their lunches at the food kiosks and I envied them. They bought franks (hotdogs) that were served in an odd looking bun that resembled a tiny loaf of bread that was spilt vertically. The dog was placed in the slit, the bun was placed in a crinkled white paper sleeve like a large chocolate paper, and handed across. They smelled good. Chips, pretzels, and pickles completed the lunch. While my stomach ached. It was stupid to be so sensitive about having to take my own lunch. Other kids did, so why didn't I? Just stupid, false pride, but it was learned from my folks who rather die than admit that they didn't have money for something.

This band business ended badly. It was foreseeable I suppose that I was not suited to be in the band. I was not integrated into the student body, didn't know a soul, was intimidated, nervous, retiring, afraid, agitated, plus I didn't like the clarinet and didn't like band, so I was not able to seriously participate in band. The band leader was a crusty old man who also scared me. He looked mean and yelled at us for mistakes, irritated at our inability to do what he told us to do. I stayed away from him as much as I could, just finding my spot quietly, not even looking at him for fear he would ask me a question. When the time came that I just could not stand band and was about to come apart, I summoned up enough courage to tell mom about it. This time, she got it, she listened, she could see that

it was a mistake to force me to continue to stay in the band. So she did a remarkable thing, for her a remarkable thing. She told me that if I wanted I could drop out of the band.

However, to do this thing, I had to do it alone - was that punishment on her part? She was the one who decided I should be in band, is the one who signed me up, so it seemed as reasonable that she could un-sign me up but that wasn't an option. So I had to go to The Office, that imposing, inquisitorial place with solemn, long-faced people who just knew every student was a miscreant and trouble-maker. Then I had to tell the secretary that I wanted to get out of the band. She was neither happy or sad. She took the information she needed to make this change and dismissed me. I sighed a deep breath, relieved that it had been so painless. I had anticipated being interrogated.

Sure enough, I was. The next week I was summoned to The Office, by the band leader. He was not going to let this take place without a fight. He scared the crap out of me and wouldn't accept the flimsy excuses I gave, that I was getting bad grades and needed to study more. He stared hard at me, didn't ever smile, and when he could see that he could not persuade me to change my mind, he laid into me. He told me that I was making a big mistake, that I needed to stay in the band and toughen up, that I needed to cut the apron strings to my mom, that I needed to become a man. See, I apparently blamed mom for wanting to take me out of band - which was not the truth at all. Pretty chicken of me.

Today, I look back at that band teacher and I have to say that he probably did really care about what I was doing. I had no evidence of it at the time, and since his demeanor was like that of my parents, I reacted to him as I did to my parents, with anxiety. He was probably 50 and seasoned in what students did, so he could see through me and understand that I really did need to grow up and to become part of the band so that I could be part of the community. He spoke the truth when he told me that I needed to stay in the band so that I could grow up a bit. I don't suppose he was nearly as upset at me as I felt he was, rather he was probably frustrated that he couldn't change my mind.

### Walter & City Council

Being basically a foreigner from a strange land, I had no friends. I knew no one east of Utah so the chances of having friends who would ease my entry into this new complex environment were about zero. The fact that I was shell-shocked by the move to a huge city, and was shy, also counted against establishing new

friends. So I was a nice thing that one of the kids in my home room was willing to be a friend.

Walter, was his name. He had shaggy wavy hair, not well groomed, wearing plain clothes. Looking back, I see that he was also an outcast from society, that he was an awkward kid who didn't fit in with the other kids. He was quiet, didn't volunteer anything, and stayed in the background. On the playground at lunch time he hung out along the wall so as not to be seen.

We each saw a possible friend who was quiet and out of the mainstream. At some point, probably on the playground, we started a conversation and this led to becoming friends. We never became really good friends where we went to each others home, but at school we were sort of a life ring for each other, I suppose. His shyness was painful. When a teacher called on him for an answer, he managed to get it out but was so nervous that I felt bad for him. He was smart but didn't excel in classes any better than did.

I don't remember which class it was in but at some point he and I did go somewhere together after school. It must have been in a civics class that the assignment was given to attend some sort of governmental activity. A range of possibilities were given and we had a deadline. It turned out that Walter and I both thought attending the City Council was interesting. This was an evening meeting so we arranged to meet in front of City Hall shortly before the starting time. Then we went in and sat in the public benches. We didn't stay for the whole meeting because it went much later than we were allowed to be out, plus it was boring as could be. I think that's what I learned, government is boring.

### New Waltham High School

The year I was to leave North Junior High was the year the new Waltham High School, shown here, was completed. It was a large three story building that we traveled to on the MTA. The only memorable thing about the year I spent there was a teaching intern from Boston College who taught my English class in the last half of the spring semester.

He wore a sport coat, white shirt and ties. Always. Tweedy preppy sort of guy. Tall. With a



Figure 2

<http://members.aol.com/erniewint/waltham/photo15.jpg>

passion for poetry. That he imparted to us students who were generally ignorant of the thing. In particular he taught me about the stirring mind-buzzing poet named Dylan Thomas. Remember that this was only a few years after Dylan had died so he was still close to a living person, hence more real in a sense. Of all the poems he taught, Spring Hill is the most memorable. What powerful writing. That was an introduction into the unique world of imagery where words mean what they mean through a variety of techniques evoke emotions and visions that has a powerful disturbing reality.