

“A SENTIMENTAL CUSS, I”

by Luke Longstreet Sullivan

During Dad’s itinerant youth, his father took a pastorate at the Methodist church in Daytona Beach, Florida.

There in the same town, several miles away in the halls of Seabreeze High School, walked our other grandfather, the school principal. The clipped approach of his steps got the attention of students lingering outside classrooms but it was his voice that ran Seabreeze High for 30 years. Long before there were public address systems, there was the booming benevolent basso profundo of my maternal grandfather, Rubert James Longstreet.

Grandpa began his career in education first as a teacher, then advanced to overseeing several schools in the district and finally became supervising principal of the entire peninsula. This post included Daytona Beach’s new high school – Seabreeze – and it was here he kept his office.

He ran the school for 30 years and 30 classes of kids graduated loving him. Even in 1965, decades after he retired, a group of middle-aged Seabreeze graduates sought out their old principal at his Jacksonville retirement home and feted him with a day of love and respect. Seabreeze was eventually torn down in the late ‘50s, but today in Daytona Beach there stands an elementary school bearing his name: R. J. Longstreet School.

Over the course of his 77 years, RJJL was an assistant beekeeper, a soldier in World War I who met Sergeant York in France, a science teacher, a principal, a hymn singer, Red Cross and Boy Scout leader, a published ornithologist, bookbinder, editor of the Florida Naturalist, author of seven books, bander of a thousand birds,

college professor, husband to wife Lotta, and father to son Jimmy and daughter Myra, my mother.

He, too, attended church and often read the Bible, but in his scholarly fashion enjoyed translating it from Greek to learn the language. His hunger for knowledge was consuming and his mind had room enough for both a belief in God and rational Western thought.

In his little home on Lake Winnemissett in DeLand, Florida, he kept a library of 2,000 books; on ornithology, history, religion, science, and philosophy. He loved the smell of old books and would stroke them as you would a pet. He kept a telescope to monitor the moons of Jupiter and was thrilled when told a pelican he'd banded as a young Audubon Society member in 1933 was retaken 31 years later a hundred miles north.

He seldom met anyone who could correctly identify ten birds and the fact troubled him. His wife (whom we called "Monnie") remembered years later how he'd often pull the car to the side of the road, stop the motor and say, "I wanted you to hear that mockingbird."

He was loved by many but none more than my mother; she was devoted to the old man. And when she took the train north to attend college at Ohio Wesleyan in the fall of '41 they began a correspondence that would last almost 30 years until Grandpa's death in 1969.

Their letters were written on the small blue composition notebooks, the same kind the old professor handed out for essay tests. They called their letters "Blue Books." When a year's worth of letters piled up on his desk in Florida and on hers in Minnesota, Grandpa would gather them all and bind them in green hardcover books. The complete set of their correspondence stretches across 37 inches of my shelf today.

Grandpa's letters were written in a doctor's scribble, muddled by a slightly arthritic hand, and as if to cipher them completely he adopted his own shorthand in the Blue Books which, themselves, were referred to as "BBs." Where his intended thought might be, "Your mother off to see wife of schoolmaster in Daytona Beach," he wrote "Ur M off to c yf of schoolmaster in DB." He also enjoyed flipping the letters of words in spoonerisms: "for rum season," "Birthington's Wash-

day” and “what a quellish foostian” were common.

This playful shorthand did not hide the strong, classical mind guiding the pen. Grandpa’s sentences sometimes read like Latin translated from Cicero’s Orations. He never used poor grammar. And he never swore.

From Grandpa RJL’s letters, January 1956

For the past few days we have enjoyed the presence of our last year’s visitors i.e. white-throated and song sparrows. We keep chickenfeed on the ground not far from this window and several times daily these little travelers amuse me greatly. One white-throated wears a tiny bird band on his slender right tarsus and without any doubt he is one of the three I banded here last year. Our visitors, they do give us great pleasure, simple souls that we are. Your mother is busy feeding them.

What would I do without your mother? I continually implore her not to run off with a younger, richer man.

Well, Sis, here we are on last page of this BB and the radio has some cuss holding forth on “the Second Coming” and I judge he knows all about it. (Wonderful to be so well informed on difficult matters.) The music is good, hence I refrain from turning him off. So closes another BB. . . a sort of personal conversation with a very brilliant young woman whom it is my pleasure to know, but from whom I am sorrowfully separated by 1,500 cruel miles. Love, from Dad.

Mom writing to RJL, June 1956

10:30 p.m. I love these Blue Book letters, Pop. There is so much more of a personal element in them – not just because of the handwriting, but because there is also something of abandon in your style that is not so apparent in your typewritten letters. Your BB habit is the best habit you’ve taken on in your old age. I look forward to your BB’s with an eagerness paralleled only perhaps by receipt of a package marked “BOOKS.” So don’t get out of the habit, Poppa. This year I’ve known what you are reading and much more of your mental activities than in any previous year.

Grandpa

At this moment, your mother is going through pictures of our two children, dating back to the ‘30s – and how we do love to look at them and have our old hearts moved by being thus reminded of the days that are gone and in which our dear

children were little shavers. You will know someday what it is to have so many years to look back upon. Those days passed so swiftly – but as we live them we fail to take every advantage of them, forgetful, ever unaware they are important because they never will be again. Oh! that I could live more attentively those years with my blessed children! A sentimental cuss, I.