

Augusta Military Academy

Oral History

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The school grew up around the Roller homestead, which still stood in the middle of campus, the home of **Maggie Bell Roller Robinson**, when I was there. It was, from beginning to end, a family affair - when the founder retired in 1907, his two sons, **Colonel Thomas J.** and **Major Charles S., Jr.** (B.S. VMI; M.S. Furman Univ.) took over.

Colonel Tom and **Colonel Robinson**, Maggie Belle's husband, died while I was a cadet. The Major held on for some years, but some years after he was gone the place finally folded, perhaps because no family man was interested in taking over.

It might have been otherwise. The 1947 "Recall", lists all the "First Captains of Augusta" from 1886-87 through 1946-47. In the two years 1894-96 it was **W.C. Roller**, who was still active as the "Post Surgeon", in my day. In 1897-98, **C. S. Roller, Jr.** was First Captain, and then, in 1927-28, it was **C. S. Roller III**, and finally, in 1935-36, it was **T. A. Roller**, who in my day was listed as instructor in math and aeronautics, but didn't really seem to be on the scene much. I don't know if he tried to carry on after the Major died, but I doubt it.

Charles S. Roller the IIIrd. was a different story, if we believe the prep school myth we all heard. The main quadrangle barracks was built in 1920; there was a sentry box about the size of a phone booth in the middle of the courtyard that attracted the attention of cadets from the beginning.

It was regularly painted in gorgeous nonmilitary hues, but to my knowledge it was only blown up once. We all knew how to make a serviceable bomb out of kitchen matches, ten penny nails, pipe, and electrical tape, and more serious explosives were certainly available around so no one knows for sure what explosive was used.

One night in the Jazz Age, the century box was blown to smithereens. No clues - the culprit could not be found - so the next evening at dinner the Major got up on a chair, as he would do, and berated the unknown rascal for his sneaky, nonmilitary, indeed, COWARDLY, act, saying: "*And I'll wager that the boy who did this deed has not the courage to stand up now and say 'Major, I did it.'*"

Whereupon Charles, the IIIrd. stood up and said "*Major, I did it.*"

Despite this crime, Charles the IIIrd. still made First Captain, something old Colonel Tom didn't do, and I assume Charles would have had the right stuff to follow in his dad's footsteps, but it wasn't destined to be. Charles the IIIrd died when he crashed his car into a bridge abutment after a dance at VMI.

We always considered him a hero.

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I think this was the year I roomed with **Adolph Null**, a big, good-natured guy who was quarterback (?) and captain of the football team. One night I woke up and looked across the room and there was the Major standing at the head of Adolph's bunk doing something - rubbing Adolph's nose???

A practical joke going around about that time was to sneak in at night and paint sleeping faces with liquid shoe polish. Next morning Adolph said - "*I figured it was somebody painting my nose and just before I was ready to let him have it, I opened my eye and it was the Major!*" We couldn't figure what in hell he was up to, but we knew he was an odd old duck - God and the Major work in mysterious ways.

That day the football team played Front Royal and we won, thanks to Adolph, as usual. The Major always sat under our goal-post in an oak library chair and a favorite cheer was "*take it to the Big Boy, take it to the Big boy*" until somebody finally did take it to him. The boys would hand him the ball under the goal-posts when they made a touchdown.

That evening at dinner he got up on a chair, like he always did, to deliver his speech about the game. By then he was a heavy man and we kept waiting with anticipation for the day the chair would collapse - it never did - but our keen desire not to miss the glorious event gave us an air of respectful attentiveness that must have been gratifying to the Major.

He said, "*I won the game today. Last night when I was on my rounds, I went into Adolph's room; he was restless, tossing, not sleeping well. My mother used to say, 'to calm a restless sleeper, just rub his nose' and so I rubbed Adolph's nose and I could just feel the tension seeping right out of him and he got the good night's rest that made him strong for today's game.*"

It wasn't surprising that the Major came into our room in the middle of the night. He was everywhere around the barracks and even driving through the fields out back at night in his old (1939?) gray Plymouth (Chevy?) sedan- "**The Grey Ghost**".

He went into town in that car to buy groceries when the regular suppliers failed to deliver or we ran out of essentials. We had to hand in our ration cards every year to put sugar, jam, and butter on the table.

The other standing-on-a-wobbly-dining-room-chair speech that I remember had to do with the shortage of toilet paper during the war. It went like this: "*Now, all you birds who think you have to build a nest before you lay your egg - stop it! All you need is two or three sheets.*"

You can view the 1947 RECALL here:

<https://galleries.amaalumni.org/Recalls/Recall-1947/>