

Augusta Military Academy

Oral History

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GRAY GHOSTS AND PHANTOMS

I fondly remember **Colonel Charles Roller's** gray 1937 Dodge sedan as my father had one exactly like it, except that his was black. As Colonel Roller would park his car exactly where the band company stood for formation, and I was always in the band, I could not but have memories of riding in my father's car day after day, as it was parked next to **Mrs. Robinson's** front lawn facing the dining room.

Everyone knew the car as the Gray Ghost and in 1948 Mrs. Roller purchased a Gray Dodge sedan, which became known as the Gray Phantom. Colonel Roller's car was always in excellent condition and I wonder how many more years he kept that car. I believe it had great sentimental value as his son died in 1937.

I once had the pleasure of riding in the Gray Ghost with another cadet when we were given a ride by Colonel Roller on a Monday afternoon leave to Staunton. It was a memorable ride as my memory went back to when I rode in my father's car. I even remember our conversation with Colonel Roller and how he showed so much interest in what we said. My friend told Colonel Roller that he was going to buy a record on theme songs and the Colonel gave us his complete attention and asked details about the record.

Another memory that I cherish is having been invited to dinner with Colonel and Mrs. Roller after Sunday room inspection. Colonel Roller would just call out two cadets' names at random and afterwards we were taken to White Hall for lunch. I remember Colonel and Mrs. sat at each end of the dinner table while each of the two cadets sat at the sides. I remember that a butler served at the table as I mistakenly used a wrong fork and asked the butler for a replacement. I really enjoy reading all the memories that former cadets have been sending in – keep them coming!

1952 WAS THE BEST CLASS

I am not aware how many classes might have been awarded this distinction during the entire history of AMA, but the Class of 1952 was declared The Best by Colonel Charles Roller during the commencement ceremony held in the school gymnasium.

He was very emotional when he surprised everyone with the declaration that the school year that ended was the best in the history of AMA. To show his appreciation, he then removed the gold ring from his finger and awarded it to **Roger Messick** who had the rank of First Captain.

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Does anyone remember a class with this distinction before or after 1952? Not having given the Big Boy any worries during the school year gave the corps the deserved title. I'm sure that the AMA Alumni Museum would be honored with the prized ring.

ABOLITION OF THE RAT SYSTEM

How many remember when the Rat System was abolished? It occurred during my second year at AMA in 1947. First year cadets, referred to as new cadets, were subjected to hazing by old cadets. The Rat System was tolerated by the school's administration as it was ingrained in all military schools.

One fine day Colonel Charles Roller just had enough of it and magnificently declared that the Rat System was henceforth abolished at Augusta Military Academy. With absolutely no opposition from the corps, the Big Boy with alacrity compensated the docile corps with a day's leave in a nearby city.

Thus ended the Rat System at AMA forever.

ODDITY IN THE DESIGN OF MAIN BARRACKS

Perhaps Main Barracks was not designed based on a perfect square, as while standing at the sentry house in the courtyard one day, for no apparent reason, I began to count the columns supporting the stoops. I then proceeded to also count the columns on the other facing side.

To my surprise, I found that there was one more column on one side than on the other. There are six columns on one side and seven on the other. What would the reason be for this discrepancy I have wondered through the years.

If having the same measurement between all the columns, then Main Barracks was not designed as a perfect square.

NIGHT BOMBS

Do you remember during your time at AMA being disturbed by night bombs?

Listening to detonations of night bombs was a frequent disturbance we had to endure. I'm sure no one has forgotten about them unless he had a hearing problem. This phenomenon persisted throughout my years at AMA and I wonder when it began and if it ever terminated.

Bombs were detonated to disturb during the darkness of the night, some were very loud while others were of less intensity. Nevertheless, I was awoken by every explosion as the bombers had the satisfaction that the sounds were intensified because of the enclosed area.

The Big Boy often encountered these inconveniences during his after-midnight inspection of Big

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Barracks and would loudly express his annoyance at the anonymous bomber.

Fortunately, no one was ever injured by these bombs and I don't remember if a bomber was ever apprehended.

MOST COWARDLY TRICK

Perhaps the most cowardly trick played by one cadet on another was known as "Drowning". This cowardly trick was performed by stealing into a darkened room in the barracks and emptying a trash can of cold water over the head of a fellow cadet while he slept.

Waking up and realizing that he had been drenched, he had only to remove his wet clothing and drape the wet bed coverings over the stoop's railing. I had the experience of this dreadful trick and the drowner never claimed responsibility.

This trick probably came to an end when, during my Class of 1952, door locks were legalized.

MOST CHERISHED LETTERS

How I remember with nostalgia when on Sunday nights, just before Taps, a bugle call reminded everyone to be at formation with a letter addressed to their fathers, mothers or guardians.

Many of us considered this to be a nuisance and enclosed a blank sheet of paper, while others, perhaps, scribbled a few sentences to remind them of something they wanted. Others, with loving care, wrote with their best penmanship showing their homesickness and appreciation for the sacrifice being made so that they could attend AMA.

Colonel Charles S. Roller, as a father, remembered how much he valued a letter from his son and thus instituted the ruling that parents and guardians shouldn't be denied the pleasure of a cherished letter.

I remember when Colonel Roller frequently mentioned parents' complaints of not hearing from their sons -- these were probably the ones having received blank pieces of paper in an envelope.

With his deep wisdom, and understanding, Colonel Roller did everything he could so that parents and guardians did not suffer the anxiety of not receiving those cherished letters.

GOLDEN DAYS

As I look back, the most beautiful days I spent at AMA were those from the golden days of Autumn. After the euphoria of greeting the returning fellow cadets that remained after the previous school year, we were soon engulfed in the pleasant days of Fall.

Most memorable was the foliage with the hues of red, yellow, brown and blue that colored

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the leaves of the maple trees lining both sides of the short and narrow road after entering the campus. My appreciation of the beautiful trees remained until the leaves had fallen and carpeted the ground where they fell.

My enjoyment of this treat from nature was special, due to my coming from a tropical country - Panama - where trees are forever green and never denuded.

Fall was an extremely busy season at AMA and football was the topic that was on everyone's mind. Thanksgiving Day was occupied by the traditional football game between Augusta and Fishburne, which alternated between Ft. Defiance and Waynesboro. We were given leave after the game that was prolonged until the 11 p.m. curfew.

Our Thanksgiving Day meal was enjoyed on the Saturday night that followed. The dining room would be profusely decorated with pennants borrowed from our rooms, while we attended classes, giving it a very festive atmosphere. The tables were decorated with an immense amount of different fruits and after Colonel Roller had handed out the awards, a delicious turkey dinner with all the trimmings was enjoyed by the Corps.

The Halloween night bonfire is also remembered as we were treated to a huge blaze which was located in the middle of the back athletic field. Many enjoyed being helpful collecting debris alongside the hauling truck. Dressed as we wished for once, we gleefully played and ran around the bright bonfire.

On November 11th, AMA was always invited to participate in the Armistice Day (as it was called then) parade in Harrisonburg and afterwards, we were allowed to remain there until almost the 11 p.m. curfew.

Soon the golden days would be over and our minds looked forward happily to the Christmas season and going home on leave, but keeping the wonderful memories of Autumn forever.

You can view the 1952 RECALL here:

<https://galleries.amaalumni.org/Recalls/Recall-1952/>