

Family Business

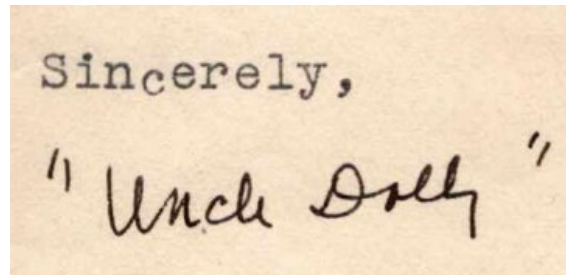
Last month, I mentioned a bombshell. I don't mean to dangle that, but first, some prologue.

I have answers, not all of them, but finally I have a sense of what's happening. There's certainly not space here for the whole story, but I hope to make it all available eventually, because it's a fascinating conflict of ideals, interests, and personalities that roiled far behind the scenes of cadet life but which was a silent turning point in the history of the school. What it is not is a conflict of Right vs. Wrong. About that, more later.

I want so much to do this story justice, but I probably won't. Please be patient as I get all the pieces on the table and assemble them for you as best I can. What I've read this past month has been like discovering the Dead Sea Scrolls – if the scrolls had been kept in plastic sleeves in a binder in Charlottesville for 75 years. The documents I'll describe in this and future articles were a revelation but not a discovery. A few have always known where they were and a lot about what was in them. Their contents were never secret, just obscure. I wish I could personally thank everyone in the chain of custody for their stewardship of these old documents, but only one is still alive, and her generosity to the museum has been a historian's horn of plenty.

Elizabeth Andrews is the great-granddaughter of Col. Tom Roller. She inherited all of the documents, photos, and even garments of AMA/Roller history meticulously organized and preserved by her grandmother, about whom, much more to come. Elizabeth has shown me family pictures and letters that cadets never would've seen, because they weren't for the *Bayonet* or *Recall*, just the family photo album and scrap book. That makes Elizabeth the only source of these artifacts that depict the early history of the Roller family and its school and give its members personalities beyond anything that was ever published. This matters because this place wasn't known as [The Roller School](#) for nothing. Students, faculty, and staff were the daily life of the school, just as sailors are the life of a ship. They make it function while the brass on the bridge decide where the ship goes and how it gets there. Likewise, the Roller family's decisions and relationships had an outsized influence on the trajectory of the school as a business. You can't fully appreciate how this school evolved without knowing the family owners, and the lessons we can take from that knowledge make it useful history.

The 3 players in this story are the next-of-kin to Col. Tom Roller. Two were his children: Hilton Roller Somerville (later Grasty) and younger brother [Thomas '36](#), who went by Tommy. The third was Col. Tom's brother, Col. Charles S. Roller, Jr. (though to the young Hilton, he was just [Uncle Dolly](#), as he signed his letters to her even in 1947):

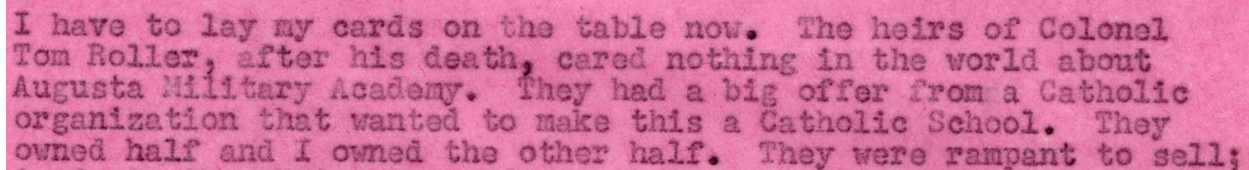


Sincerely,
"Uncle Orelly"

Last month, I detailed the fraught 1951-52 letters from Charles to a parent who had fallen behind on tuition. The letters show Charles warning of the school being sunk by dozens of past-due accounts.

This was startling, because I'd assumed this was a prosperous time. If it wasn't, I wouldn't have suspected parental debts of being an existential threat. That The Big Boy, of all people, would admit in writing – *to a customer* – that he needed money “desperately” was a further shock. For him nonetheless to make no demands on this parent who owed so much was baffling. I also questioned whether these delinquent accounts could've brought down the academy, unless it was already weakened by some preexisting condition.

This is where the storylines collide. Back into the student folder, it's now March 25, 1952, and the next letter to the same indebted father has Charles quickly outdoing himself in breathtaking candor. First though, he again opens apologetically, conceding that the father must think him “a pest” and “rather unreasonable” for sending so many pleas for what is owed. Again, he insists that if this was the only delinquent account, “I would smile it through and say nothing.” This time though, instead of disclosing, like before, how many other families were behind or what bills the school had to pay, he launched into new territory (transcribed below the picture.):



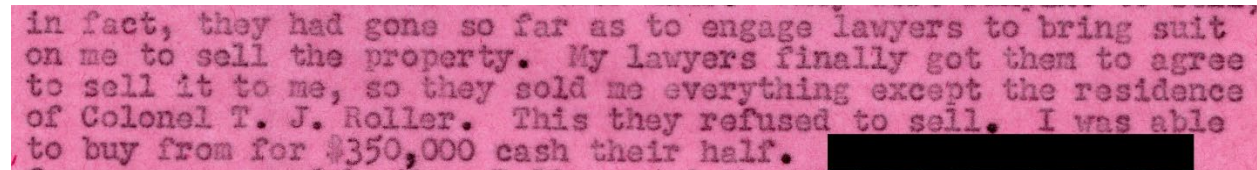
I have to lay my cards on the table now. The heirs of Colonel Tom Roller, after his death, cared nothing in the world about Augusta Military Academy. They had a big offer from a Catholic organization that wanted to make this a Catholic School. They owned half and I owned the other half. They were rampant to sell;

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I'd seen nothing about this anywhere. Rhoades mentions the International Order of Odd Fellows offering around \$10,000 for the school, but that was after the Professor died in 1907, and they envisioned an orphanage (pp.58-59). How did the Catholic Church know AMA might be up for grabs? Why did they want a military school?

Precedents were close by. Benedictine monks founded [Benedictine College Prep](#) in 1911. The Holy Ghost Fathers took over [St. Emma Military Academy](#) until its failure in the late '60s. Interest from the church was plausible, but that's not enough for The Big Boy's extraordinary claim. It's a claim as (formerly) doubtful as someone telling me that he could sound panicked. Then, as now, I wanted proof.

That would have to wait, because Charles was not done oversharing. Having made accusations about motive and agenda, he moved on to claims of action and fallout:



in fact, they had gone so far as to engage lawyers to bring suit on me to sell the property. My lawyers finally got them to agree to sell it to me, so they sold me everything except the residence of Colonel T. J. Roller. This they refused to sell. I was able to buy from for \$350,000 cash their half. [REDACTED]

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And *BANG* went the shell. This was stunning. Charles, strongarmed by his niece and nephew, pays what amounts to a ransom for the school [equivalent to](#) \$4.5 million cash. This is an audacious statement even for Roller, because not only are his claims more specific than ever, but they're about a transaction that would be public record. How many AMA families were in arrears was a matter of internal record under Roller's control, but a sale like this would be on file at the Staunton courthouse and in a newspaper at the library for anyone to see. It still is.

I hope now you'll understand the quandary I posed last month. For me, insisting on proof feels uncomfortably close to calling Charles a liar, because it's not hearsay that he made these allegations. We have his own written words claiming the heirs "cared nothing in the world" about AMA, with Catholics and hostile lawyers at the gates. He leaves no room for interpretation. On the other hand, giving him the benefit of the doubt puts me just as close to accusing Tommy of both deception and greed, because as you'll see, his words contradict the picture painted by his uncle. Plus, in 2003, Hilton became the first non-alumnus to win the [2003 Alumni Medal](#), and there are two plaques in her honor at the museum. It's hard to square this with two people bent on cashing out their father's legacy.

I'd like to take everyone at their word, but when the words are diametrically opposed, the only fair treatment of all parties is to gather evidence and assume that these cases are never as simple as the look.

* * * * *

This case started six years earlier. On March 8, 1946, Charles' big brother and [partner of 41 years](#), Col. Thomas Jacob Roller, died of pneumonia in Coral Gables, Florida. He was 68. According to the colonel's obituary in the *Staunton News-Leader*, he'd been in failing health but had improved enough to journey south to visit Tommy. His decline had begun soon after losing his wife, Virginia Greider, in 1942. "His heart was broken, I think," Hilton [told](#) Bob Bradford '50. "He was not ever well after Mother died."



Col. Tom's family, 1942: daughter Hilton, granddaughter Virginia, wife Virginia, son Tommy

This made Hilton and Tommy the only heirs, so each inherited 25% of the business partnership between their father and Charles. Whether this share of ownership meant an executive role in operations wasn't necessarily certain. In his [2010 obituary](#), Tommy was quoted as saying that – in contradiction to his uncle's above claim – having a role at AMA "is what I was trained to do and that is what I had hoped to do." After graduating from UVa, the Ad Astra and former Battalion Commander returned to Ft. Defiance [as faculty](#) in 1940.



LIEUTENANT
RICHARD W.
MURDOCH

*Instructor
in
English*

LIEUTENANT
THOMAS A. ROLLER

*Instructor
in
Junior Department*

He doesn't say whether teaching was his sole interest in the school, or if he wanted in on high-level decisions.

Whatever the case, he had another commitment. His Selective Service card, which Charles signed, shows that Tommy was already in the reserve infantry, which explains the "U.S." lapel pin in the picture above.

Other obvious physical characteristics that will aid in identification
2nd Lt. Reserve Infantry U.S.A.

I certify that my answers are true; that the person registered has read or has had read to him his own answers; that I have witnessed his signature or mark and that all of his answers of which I have knowledge are true, except as follows:

Registrar for Wm. Dudley Augustin Va
 (Precinct) (Ward) (City or county) (State)

Date of registration Oct 16 1940

On May 5, 1940, the *News Leader* reported that he was on his way to Ft. Benning for signal corps training. It's not clear whether this was part of his reserve training or if he was quitting AMA to enter active duty. Either way, navigating C-46s over the Himalayas kept him away during the war.

There are differing accounts of what happened next. The [Fall 1999 Bayonet](#) reports that “Captain Tom Roller, USAF, came back to Augusta in the Fall of 1945 to resume teaching.” This is unlikely. The *News Leader* notes that October 10 that Tommy was only visiting Ft. Defiance on his way to Florida, and his father’s obituaries the following March in the *News Leader* and *Miami Herald* say that Tommy was living in Coral Gables.

Why he was in Florida is explained by the announcement that came 3 months later. On June 14, 1946, the *News Leader* reported that the succession was underway:

T. A. ROLLER CO-PRINCIPAL AT AUGUSTA

Lieutenant Thomas A. Roller, only grandson of the founder of Augusta Military Academy, will assume the position of co-principal of the academy at the beginning of the next school session in September, school officials have announced.
He will serve with his uncle, Major Charles S. Roller Jr.

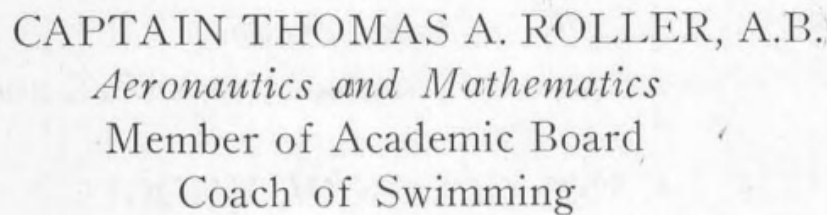
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(Note that he was the “only grandson” because his cousin, Charles Roller III, died in a car accident in Verona in 1938.) Besides his executive role, Tommy would be “inaugurating in

the school a comprehensive, accredited course in pre-flight aeronautics.” This part seems to have been the plan all along, even had his father lived. The article reports that, ever since his discharge from the army, he’d been preparing to run the course by training at Miami’s Embry-Riddle School of Aviation. Becoming co-principal on top of that was just a twist of fate.

This didn’t leave Hilton out. Granted, as Bob said in his 2005 [eulogy](#) for her, that was “at a time when a woman was still, first, a wife, and when the ‘Rosie the Riveter’ experiences of the early 1940’s were being viewed as anomalies of wartime.” She was Mrs. [Louis R. Somerville ’34](#) and a mother of a young daughter, but she also owned a quarter of AMA. She couldn’t be ignored, but on campus and in public, the successor to the late Col. T.J. Roller would be his son, Tommy.

That partnership didn’t survive the summer, if at all. On October 1, 1946, the [first edition](#) of the *Bayonet* for that schoolyear refers to Charles alone as “our principal”. The paper’s only mention of Tommy is at the bottom of [page 7](#), where we learn that, over the summer, “Capt. Tom Roller” oversaw progress on the new science wing of the academic building. The 1947 *Recall*’s [History of the School](#) explains that, following Tom’s death, “Major Roller assumed the entire management of the school.” Tommy’s only mention in the book is in the caption for Beaumont and as one of the [faculty](#):



CAPTAIN THOMAS A. ROLLER, A.B.
Aeronautics and Mathematics
Member of Academic Board
Coach of Swimming

The 1947-48 school year started without him, but there’s no solid explanation for his departure. The only [direct quote](#) we have from Tommy is, “[i]f Dad had lived, I probably would have stayed on at AMA.” His *Bayonet* obituary also [only hints](#): “[y]oung Tom and the Big Boy had vastly different ideas on how to run the school and Tom realized that remaining at AMA was not a valid option.” What were those differences? What was Tommy hoping to accomplish? Why was he frustrated? How did the arrangement unravel so quickly? It seems we’ll never know for sure.

His uncle didn’t know either. On October 1, 1948, Charles wrote him a response to a letter. We don’t have Tommy’s letter to confirm exactly what he said first, but the colonel understood it as a request, or at least a need, for money. He proposes to endorse a \$5,000 bank loan, “because I know it would please your Father,” but adds:

The part that worries me is that you complain of having to pay so much for house rent and so much for food and yet without consulting me or letting me know, you deliberately cut yourself away from A. M. A. five months after Colonel Robinson, who had been a great help, had died. Your food and your house was free to you here. By this time you would have been getting a salary of at least \$400.00 a month.

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Colonel Warren S. Robinson '17 [died](#) on February 5, 1947. The husband of Maggie Belle Roller, he'd been a math teacher and tactical officer at AMA since [1923](#), assistant commandant by '46, and assistant principal at his death. The only explanation I see for Charles bringing up Robinson's death now is that Charles had been expecting Tommy to fill the gap, and with a pretty good compensation package. Even if this was true though, we don't know if Tommy saw the situation the same way. We only know that he was gone by the summer. His next stop was a [disappointing stint](#) with the FBI, and his role in the family business was over.

The school did sell. That's about the only fact in this story on which all 3 players might've agreed [and](#) which we can independently verify. We have the deed. Everything else...is complicated because: Tommy and Charles.

This is the value of that binder in Charlottesville. Some of its documents are in the men's own words. All of it is unfiltered. Unlike any publication, there's no reason to believe any of the contents were crafted with public perception in mind. It's just two smart opponents, and their lawyers, skillfully pursuing their competing interests. Included are official facts and figures that will become crucial for contextualizing how each player later told his story.

All of it was confidential at the time, but there's no longer any urgency to keep it so. There's virtually no potential substantive harm to anyone, 75 years after the events and 14 years after the last survivor died. Also, Hilton exercised her prerogative to preserve her family business documents and leave them to her descendants without restrictions. Elizabeth, the binder's current owner, is now the closest living relative. I have her endorsement for telling this story plus her uncountable hours of scanning, consultation, and additional research to help tell it.

Beyond the lack of reasons for secrecy are the incentives for the sharing that I'll begin next month. What's in this binder helps me know these two men more authentically

than anything that was published. They were real people: flawed and complicated with conflicting motives. Each pursued valid goals with occasionally dubious tactics, and the consequences were pivotal. That hasn't made my view of Charles and Tommy more cynical, just more complex, nuanced, and fair. That's what we want for the complete historical record of AMA, because that's also when it's most compelling, relatable, and believable with the most useful lessons for the future.

Much more to come.

Thanks for reading.

Chris Correa
AMA Historian