

**SERENDIPITY IN CRAWSFORDSVILLE**

**by Robert J. Bonner**

**The Indianapolis Literary Club**

**November 19, 2012**

My last paper was spread before this Club on November 15, 2010. The clever title was "Red or Blue." No one guessed the topic.

I am not a too willing public speaker, and I realize I am ahead of schedule by again inflicting my ideas on this renowned group, but my reason or compulsion will or may become apparent. It has been a short and a long two years.

Being in a groove, but some may say, I will repeat the beginning of my last paper that begins by repeating my previous paper.

I will begin my paper where I ended with "The Emergence of a New Left" in January, 1998. From George Washington to James A. Garfield, our presidents were right handed. Garfield was ambi-dexterous. Herbert Hoover was left handed. Harry S Truman was a natural lefty but he was forced to use his right. So was Ronald Reagan. He was converted to the right more than once. Gerald Ford, George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton were all natural left. When Bill Clinton, George H. W. Bush and Ross Perot ran for the office, all three were left handed. Americans did not even have a choice to move to the right.

Bob Dole was left handed as the result of a war injury, when he faced Bill Clinton. Again there was no choice.

In January, 1998, I said the probability was 10 to 1 in favor of having a right handed president in the new Millenium, although

there were left handed possibilities like Colin Powell. The right handed son of a left handed former prseident was elected in 2000 and 2004, George Bush.

Then the improbable happened in 2008 for the third time in our history. Both Senator Barach Obama and Senator John McCane were left handed. Americans did not have a voice. We were going to the left.

On this November 6, the American people remained true to the left, although Mitt Romney did offer a real alternative. And what happened in Indiana? Joe Donnelly followed in the wake of Barach Obama into the Senate, a breeding ground for many. Gentlemen, especially our forth estate members, keep an eye on Indiana's Joe Donnelly. He is left handed.

Now I feel more research should be undertaken on gifted hands in the White House. Perhaps what we witnessed is not accident but by design. Right handed dominance was ~~compulsive~~ <sup>often</sup> and forced until the middle of the 20th Century. Many more of our presidents, especially the great ones, may have been lefties but forced by their uninformed or superstitious parents to ajust to an unnatural life. Their true destiny may have been sweep under the first parent's carpets.

This Club even has a member that may want to explore this sinister avenue. Perhaps he will be a retired left handed Marian

University historian.

My paper in 2010 - "Red or Blue" - was about safety razors and safety blades, and it began in earnest by discussing the gradual disappearance of facial hair in the White House. Of course, red or blue referred to Gillette Thin Red Blades or Gillette Blue Blades. The superior blue blade continued a disposable blade revolution in 1933. The red blade appeared in the Depression. Two for a dime or four for a dime. King Camp Gillette was the father of the disposable safety razor blade, an original symbol of a throw away society and foundation for profit.

King Gillette was a conflicted person. In 1884, before he got into blades, he was stranded in Scranton, Pennsylvania. Joe Biden's home town and one of Hillary Clinton's home towns. It was a cold and gray day and Gillette wrote about an "Eureka" moment he experienced there in his book, "The Human Drift."

Gillette proclaimed Capitalism a decaying system and competition was the source of all evil and wasteful. He envisioned glorious corporations owned by all the people that would eliminate poverty. He envisioned a megalopolis of about 60 million people living in massive circular apartment towers near Niagra Falls, its source of electrical power. People would only work for a term, maybe five years, but their main pursuit would be knowledge, culture and brotherhood. In short, he argued against his own future wealth and disposable legacy.

After he retired, Gillette returned to this "Eureka." He incorporated ~~this idea into~~ a World Corporation in the Arizona Territory in 1910, and offered Teddy Roosevelt a million dollars to be its first president. Teddy refused. No other supporters were found and his Utopia died.

I mentioned in this paper that my mother's maiden name was Paternoster, and I asked the <sup>foot ball</sup> coach at Penn State if his family shortened their name. Jo Pa said "no." This left handed revered *Nittany* Lion was still in Happy Valley when I spread "Red or Blue" before the Club.

Serendip is the former name of Ceylon, now Sri Lanka. Horace Walpole coined the word Serendipity in 1754. He said he got it from the Persian fairy tale "The Three Princes of Serendip" whose heroes "were always making discoveries by accident and sagacity of things they were not in quest of." It is the faculty of making happy or unexpected discoveries by accident. This definition was taken from "The Oxford Universal Dictionary" or Onions. Horace Walpole furnished the machinery for a genre of fiction wherein the wildest fancies found refuge noted the Encyclopedia Britannica.

Webster would add that a coincidence is an accidental and remarkable occurrence of events, ideas, etc. with no apparent causal relationship. Three left handed candidates for the presidency - Clinton, Bush, Perot - may be a coincidence. Having no choice for a right handed president in three out of four elections in a short time period may call for some fancy word, like serendipity, and may entertain a thought about design.

The day was bright, clear and pleasant on January 7, 2012, a Saturday. My friend, Patti, a clinical dietician, was going to visit a patient in Crawfordsville, and I went along for the ride. After Crawfordsville, we were going to Greencastle and another patient. My plan was to explore Walbash when she was occupied. Maybe on a whim, I changed my mind and asked to be deposited at the public library, the Crawfordsville District Public Library.

On the ride to Crawfordsville, I was pondering or musing about

several things. Father Melvin Bennett had passed away before I heard him spread a paper before The Indianapolis Literary Club. He joined our Club in 2006 - 2007, our 129th year. Ken McGinity, a left handed member of Fr. Mel's Church, offered a Memorial to the Club.

Joe Paterno was recently fired from Penn State University after his record breaking 409th win. I worked at Penn State from 1968 to 1974 and had a passing acquaintance. We went to the same church, Our Lady of Victory. I don't think Joe Paterno influenced the name.

I could not comprehend what happened at Penn State. When I was there football was popular but I did not sense it dominated the environment. I was proud of the program and wished we had some real competition. I did witness three of four of Paterno's undefeated teams. I was there when John Cappelletti received and dedicated his 1973 Heisman Trophy to Joey his eleven year old brother with leukemia. We were so proud of him as a person, student and athlete.

Joe Paterno and Fr. Mel were both left handed and I was thinking about them and my lefty papers. Also, the Club was scheduled to meet in two days and I was speculating about the surprise Dr. Richard Gunderman had in store for us with "Enhancing Male Performance." Another Greek or maybe Roman classic?

However, I did not get a chance to enjoy exploring the library. My first stop was near the Reference Desk and immediately a black bound set of books drew my attention. "Ouiatenon." Ouiatenon is the oldest literary club in Crawfordsville, established in 1883. Of course, we are older, 1877. The membership is composed of representatives of town and gown who met every two weeks to listen to and discuss papers dealing with an infinite variety of subjects. This is a men's club which once a year held a ladies' night when an invited guest presented a paper. The literary society was named after Fort Ouiatenon, on the Wabash River. I then remembered that Fr. Mel told me he was a member of this club and added that they presented papers in French. What a coincidence I thought with a smile.

Soon I left "Ouiatenon", and walked over to another shelf and my attention was drawn to a rather thin book. Curious, I took it off the shelf. The title "Descendants of William Bennett: Early American Frontiersman," by Father Marvin J. Bennett, c. 2009. I was no longer smiling. I was a little perplexed. I had no idea that this book existed. It was just there buried among a bunch of other titles with nothing to distinguish it. I did not see the title until I held it. Serendipity? Maybe!

On January 23, 2012, the next Indianapolis Literary Club night, Stephen Jay presented a paper: "Microbes, Medicine, and Metaphors: Lay Down Your Arms" - and Joe Paterno laid down his arms and died that day. He was a metaphor for university sports and conduct.



When Patti returned, I was almost finished photocopying Fr. Mel's geneology. One copy for personal use. Although our president wrote about him not too long ago, Lew Wallace did not come to mind. When I left Crawfordsville, the Athens of Indiana, I had a feeling about doing something. Perhaps a paper about Joe Paterno and Fr. Mel. Not likely, I concluded.

Fr. Melvin J. Bennett enjoyed three things:

His Family.

History, especially church history.

Vactions, especially cruises.

His book, "The Decendants of William Bennett," tell us that he realized that as a priest in the Roman Catholic Church he would not have decendants, and he then details eight generations of Bennetts, both history and geneology. William Bennett is traced back to Washington, Pennsylvania, and we find him in the Militia during the Revolutionary War. Fr. Mel proudly shows this legacy of patriotism up to the Iraq war.

Fr. Mel's father, Fred, was the fifth generation. He was drafted in the Second World War but sent home after his second physical. He was color blind. He was also 38 and had too many kids.

Fred Bennett settled in Earl Park, Indiana, and served as the town marshall and fire superintendent until he retired. He was a laid back, gentle and quiet man. He provided quiet stewardship.

He married Agnes Elizabeth Benner. They had eight children.

Melvin Joseph was born on July 17, 1941. I am Fr. Mel's senior.

I was born on July 3, 1941, two weeks earlier. We were both left handed and we wore our wrist watches on our right hand facing in. Not many lefties do this.

His mother's maiden name, Benner, is only one vowell off from Bonner, a less common name. Like his father, Mel may have been color blind and I am color blind. No one will mistake us for

being <sup>twins</sup> ~~related~~ and this paper is not about geneology.

I met Fr. Mel in February, 2006. I <sup>took his</sup> ~~was his student in a~~ course entitled "Key Moments in Church Hiistory." This covered a very long period and dealt with highlights of highlights, but it was informative and entertaining. Fr. Mel's humor is in my notes:  
♦A conflict developed between the modern scientific point of view and the papacy which believed nothing good happened after the 13th Century. And this concerning the Second Vatican Council: The Anti-modernist movement petered out when John XXIII was elected in 1958. Mr. Towne should appreciate the pun. Concerning Constantine and his death bed conversion: He died with one eye open checking his options. Concerning a high church official: He had a personality by-pass.

But this paper is not about church history.

Fr. Mel loved vacations and cruises.

The following appeared in the St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Church  
Bulletin:

"When I am inundated with terrible weather as we are now, I start thinking about the future. The thing that is on my horizon immediately is a Mediterranean cruise that I will accompany as chaplain beginning on Sunday, March 6th. As you know, I thoroughly enjoy traveling and saying daily Mass for Catholics...

I was with Fr. Mel on his last cruise, and he was responsible for my being there. Serendipity? Maybe!

The cruise flier states: Save on this Repositioning Cruise. Depart March 6, 2011. Mediterranean Cruise Plus Italy Tour. Twenty Three days. MSC Poesia from Ft. Lauderdale, to Italy. Launched in 2008, it weights in at 92,000 tons, a perfect size for this trans-Atlantic Cruise. Your Chaplain, Father Melvin Bennett. This will be Father Bennett's 14th trip as chaplain with YMT Vacations (Your Man Tours).

The ship - as noted - was 92,000 tons not including the crew and about 3,000 guests speaking 40 plus languages. I have no idea about the number of cruises Fr. Mel took on other vacations.

Between March 6 and 28 fell Ash Wednesday and St. Patrick's Day. The 23 days included visits to many places: San Juan, St. Lucia, Madeira Island, Barcelona, Genoa, Pisa, Rome, Vatican City. Enough for several other papers with photographs, and I will save them for some other time. On the entire vacation, I can not

recall any unpleasant weather, but it did rain for a few minutes one evening when I was watching a film on deck.

Fr. Mel made it financially attractive for me to go when I got his letter. Quote: "I have been contacted by a Catholic gentleman named Jerry Moritz who is looking for a room mate for the Mediterranean Cruise. Jerry sounds very pleasant on the phone. He is a widower, and is 80 years old, but in very good health. He is not a smoker and is a devout Catholic. He is originally from Pennsylvania and lives at Cape May on the Jersey Shore."

My brief rewrite of this description: Jerry reminds me of the Club's Robert Hollingsworth. Many here will remember Hollingsworth. He is a big guy. He is 80, active, widower with great lung capacity for snoring. Mom and Dad were irish but Dad disappeared back to Ireland when he was very young. Mom remarried a somber German guy, Moritz. A good man. Jerry recently broke up with 75 year old lady friend. He has a bunch of kids. Most of career as administor in the computer side of banking and claims not to know much about computers. I believe him. Forgetful, talkative and impatient. He is a "meat and potato" kind of guy. Always complaining about the fantastic Italian meals on an Italian ship. Got him hooked on an evening Perfect Manhattan after the Cruise entertainment.

Incidentally, Sandy missed Cape May and Jerry is back with his girl friend.

I should mention that the first person I met on the Cruise was during our boarding, Celeste. Cruise ships do not provide any or many free things and she needed to borrow my pen to complete required forms. Celeste was with her brother Jimmy and both were recovering from a recent loss of their spouses. Celestial - a heavenly being, a god or angel. I recall thinking this was a good way to recover from a loss.

I was impressed with ~~really~~ being on the ocean for the first time, especially with nothing in sight for four days ~~except the ocean~~. I was also impressed and enjoyed the few people I met at about 5 a.m. Even if Jerry didn't snore, I would have been out by 5. We had the Poesia to ourselves.

Fr. Mel traveled with his baby brother John., and he was given the least appropriate named lounge to say Mass: the Pigalle. Instead of stained glass we had paintings of the Follies for meditation. Since he was from Carmel, the Palladium Lounge would have been more appropriate, but it probably cost too much. Brother John was his altar boy. On Saint Patrick's Day we had Mass in the morning and docked ahead of schedule in Funchal, Madeira. My joke for the day. Why do the Irish wear shamrocks? Real rocks are too heavy.

Funchal means "sugar from eucalyptus." Madeira means wood. The island is off the coast of Africa near the entrance to the Mediterranean, Gibraltar. Madeira is part of Portugal like our Hawaii. At this time, it would be the only city I would like to

revisit, if I had to choose.

Fr. Mel, John, Jerry and I decided to explore the area. Although YMT offered excursions, Fr. Mel argued that we hire a taxi and have our own tour. He claimed it was less expensive and better. As we approached the taxis and for some unknown reason, he asked me to do the negotiating. This is a skill and temperment I somehow lack.

However, I did manage to hire an excellent guide with the newest and best Fiat van at a discount. I managed to talk him down to 230 e from 250 e. I probably told him we needed the discount to leave a gratuity.

Mareira is enchanting: Volcanic origin, soaring mountains, glittering bay.

Funchal is a terraced city surrounded by terraced fields and irrigation channels. Balconied houses with red tile roofs. Cobbled streets and cable cars, famous sliding wicker basket toboggens on wooden runners with skilled runners. Quote Hemmingway: Exhilarating! Terraced botanical gardens with plants from all over the world. And the Church of the Blessed Mother and the tomb of the last of the Hapsburgs, Emperor Charles II. He died in 1922. The second highest cliffs in the world, 589 meters, and a serene fisherman's village with an unexpected beautiful chapel. The taxi I hired saved us the inconvenience and expense of

the cable cars and toboggen.

A late lunch at the O Barqueiro. A fish platter for the four of us that should have been a leisurely dinner for twelve. I think I ate the most and more than I should have from an assortment of local ocean delights.

We returned twice to this restaurant. Jerry remembered leaving his coat after about a mile. John remembered his camera after about a half mile. The guide I hired remained pleasant with our diversions.

The photograph of Fr. Mel and brother John was taken on the Cruise. He did not purchase it and I do not know why I wanted to and did.

I was told the island attracts mainland Potugese and British travelers. We were a novelty.

Before the cruise ended, Fr. Mel was planning his next vacation: A cruise around Australia in December 2011.



Fr. Mel was not in the best of health. On this cruise he was careful at meals and - although I remember he enjoyed a good martini - I can not recall seeing him with a drink. He had Type II diabetes and heart problems. He had his first angioplasties while in Mali in 1995. He had another in 2005.

He wrote in the autobiography part of his family geneology the following: ... I asked to become a Senior Associate at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Church in Carmel, Indiana. A Senior Associate is a priest who is employed full-time but is free of the administrative responsibilities of a Pastor and has no supervision of others. I visit the sick, say Mass, do weddings and funerals, spiritual direction and counseling. I live in my own house and really am very happy and at peace, enjoying relatively good health. ... My present assignment is the best assignment that I have had to date. I hope that my health will permit me to serve in this capacity for many years to come.

Fr. Mel's health did not permit this.

Fr. Mel was only one of more than 25 million Americans with diabetes. Excess sugar in the blood can erode the vessels and damage organs, setting the stage for life-threatening heart problems. But the disease is highly manageable and requires personal committment and responsibility. The core or heart of any treatment program is education, and education empowers people to control their condition. Nutrition instruction and counseling is essential and many people enjoy their favorite food in a well

structured program. Exercise is important in controlling the number one risk of being overweight. In brief, a diabetic prevention program focuses on healthy eating, physical activity, overcoming stress, and knowing and meeting goals. The program is greatly facilitated by a comfortable environment.

My short and shallow experience tells me that a cruise ship may be an excellent environment to conduct a prevention program. These ships are designed for vacations and many are not small. As I noted, there were about 3000 tourist on the repositioning cruise. The ship reminded me of the massive <sup>po</sup>apartments Gillette proposed in his book, "The Human Drift."

My guess is only minor changes would be needed to refit the ship for a program. The change in staff may not even be that significant an administrative problem. Designing a controlled environment for food, medical and drug protocols, providing education and support group areas, large theatre and exercise facilities may only require minor adjustments.

My guess is that the cost of the program may be reasonable. In my case, the cruise was less than \$100 per day but to be up at 5 a.m. slows down the night life and extraordinary expenditures.

In particular, my guess is that many would enjoy a controlled environment in a vacation setting learning and doing things that will provide a more profitable life. I see daily distraction and

unwanted temptations as a major problem for existing programs.

My idea is to promote a program like this. Maybe it is being done somewhere. Maybe someone here may have additional or suggestions.

When our Secretary, David Vanderstel, called for papers for the 2012 - 2013 year, I did not want to spread another paper before this club. It was too soon, and - as noted - I am not anxious to face an audience. I was also bothered about undertaking a subject that I was not comfortable with but felt I should consider. The serendipity question or thing was even more apparent than originally thought. I bargained. I would only consider a paper if something pointed in that direction.

Serendipity, I must do more research on this concept.

Soon after the Secretary called for papers and a year after Fr. Mel had a car accident, I attended Fr. Boniface Hardin's funeral at SS Peter and Paul Cathedral. I met Fr. Boniface soon after I moved to Indianapolis in 1974, and - although we sparred about issues - I considered him a friend as well as a notable and colorful priest. In some ways he was like Fr. Mel in his love of family and history. When <sup>we</sup> I first met, he was at the Sickle Cell Anemia Center he established or started. I was visiting my ex secretary he took away from me. Years later I enjoyed having him <sup>Fr. Bon. fo.</sup> stand behind me in an academic parade. The Anderson University Inauguration of James L. Edwards, October 13, 1990, had Harvard first (1636) and toward the end of a long line of delegates, I represented King's College (1946), Wilkes-Barre not Oxford, and Fr. Boniface ended the line, Martin Center College, 1977.

\*Coincidence: Horace Walpole graduated from King's and began writing his 3000 or so letters. One included the fancy word

serendipity.

When I walked into the Cathedral, I immediately bumped into a man I rarely bump into, our Secretary. I told David I would spread a paper, if he had trouble filling the slots. I knew I was scheduled when I received the Club's exercises.

Fr. Mel Bennett was in a car accident on April 1, 2011 (April Fools Day) at Ditch and 86th Street. The newspaper noted that he failed to stop at a red light, hit another car, and killed the woman driver. There was a child and another woman in her vehicle that survived the accident.

Fr. Mel was hospitalized and died on April 19, 2011.

Fr. Ted Rothroch, Pastor of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Church, wrote in the Church Bulletin that Fr. Mel suffered greatly. I thought I knew what he meant, especially harming another, but my distress increased after I found "Descendants of William Bennett."

Fr. Mel had five brothers and John is the only one remaining.

The following are taken from Fr. Mel's book:

Local newspaper article in 1956. One Dies as car, truck driven by brothers hit. Kentland. Two brothers, one driving a truck and the other an automobile were in a head-on collision Monday on U.S. 41 near Kentland killing one and slightly hurting the other. Dead is Gordon Thomas Bennett, 18, of Earl Park, who was enroute to work at the time of the crash. His brother, Muri Charles was driving a wrecker for an Earl Park Garage... brother in the wrong

lane ... he may have dozed.

Fr. Bennett was 15.

In 1958, the following appeared in the paper:

James Bennett, 19, Earl Park, was killed instantly Wednesday at 1:20 a.m. when his car struck a semi-trailer truck head on. State police reported Bennett's car veered across the center line of the highway into the truck.

Fr. Bennett was 17.

Thornton Wilder's Book - "The Bridge of San Luis Rey" - begins:  
On Friday Noon, July the twentieth, 1714, the finest bridge in all Peru broke and precipitated five travellers into the gulf below.

Brother Juniper - a Franciscan - observes what happened and goes on a quest to prove there is design in the Universe. The book unsettled me when I read it in college. The question of design or accident will not be settled by Brother Juniper but there are other lessons: how do you live, how do you bear the unbearable, how do you handle dimensions of love or faith...

Fr. Bennett probably struggled <sup>with</sup> ~~what~~ these questions as he lived a life devoted to others.

We flew from Rome to Philadelphia and left Jerry Moritz with his son at the airport. My last meal was with Father Mel and his brother. I ordered the local Chinese beer, Yeungling. The waiter told me they just served the last can.

I then told this story. I worked in Pottsville, my first Public Library job. Yeungling was near St. Patrick's Church and I viewed it as a happy coincidence. In fact I lived accross the street from these two notable buildings.

I told them John O'Hara was from Pottsville and he called his hometown Gibbsville in his writings. He lived om Mahantongo Street where I lived with Yeungling and St. Patrick. He called the street Lantenengo. I told Fr. Mel that my first paper to The Indianapolis Literary Club was titled "Gibbsville."

This past week I pulled my paper from my files to check some spelling. My title page:

Gibbsville

Paper presented to the  
Indianapolis Literary Club

by Robert J. Bonner

April 19, 1976

*Fr. Mel died exactly 35 years later.*

I was going to end my paper with a quote from T.S Eliot's poem, The Hollow Men. This past week his widow, Valerie, died, and her obituary noted she was the guardian of his estate. The estate has restrictions about excerpting.