Chapter III

CRANWELL -- ITS ORIGINS (1938-1942)

Cranwell School in Lenox, Massachusetts closed in 1975, after thirty-six years of service. It was a victim not only to a large capital debt, but also because it could not command a sufficiently large and stable enrollment. Its peak school year in enrollment was that of 1969-70, when it enrolled 267 students. In the next two school years, its enrollment fell first to 247 and then to 228. Then enrollment really began to plummet; 1972 opened with 168 students, basically 100 less than it had three years before. In 1974-75, it had 146 students, about what its enrollment had been in 1945 (142) and 1946 (149).

During the intervening years, however, from 1945 to 1974, there had been built and required maintenance a gymnasium, an office and classroom building, three dormitories (Hallowell, Founders, and Cunniff), and an addition to Cranwell Hall, plus the Chapel of Christ the Workman referred to as Pierce Chapel because one large donor, Clayton Gengras, had been a close friend of Fr. Michael G. Pierce. Cranwell's faculty, lay and Jesuit, had increased.

In its final years it had a strong faculty and administrative staff. But the time appeared adverse to private and expensive boarding schools even when they had some share of day students. If too many of the day students were enrolled, many parents objected to selecting such boarding schools for their sons.
The school used its facilities fully. Since 1942, Cranwell had sponsored a boys' camp which could possibly serve as a feeder for the school. Its golf course, well-kept, attracted enough of a clientele to pay for its upkeep and also to engender community goodwill.

Another (and later) reservoir of goodwill was the campus liturgy, first celebrated chiefly in summer months and gradually extended throughout the entire year. It aided many who wished a more intimate and meaningful liturgy and a carefully prepared homily.

Yet, despite its academic strengths, its sport and liturgical appeal to the neighborhood and visitors, the school was handicapped both by the national decline in registration in its type of school and by its capital debt, largely irreducible and carrying a high interest charge. With hindsight one might say that its last dormitory, opened in 1969, was not really needed, and its chapel was more expansive and expensive for its ordinary use and for the artistic values it symbolized.

The school had undoubtedly in its large scale drive in the late sixties hoped for some more substantial gifts such as were the Gengras and Galvin gifts. Many others were gratifyingly large. But expenses in construction and furnishings could have used another $750,000 in gifts. So a school that began with a most princely gift of land and buildings in 1939 became a casualty by 1975, and long remained a white elephant on the real estate market.
The estate on which the school began has its origin in the 1853 purchase by Henry Ward Beecher of 250 acres of land in Lenox from the shores of Laurel Lake (then Scott's Pond), to the summit of an eminence a mile off. With time this eminence was called Beecher's Hill. Mr. Beecher built a house on the site of the later Cranwell Hall. For water supply he used a well on the property. Contemporary litterateurs visited this home.

In the late 1870's the property was sold to a General Rathbone of Albany who added a more spacious stable and some greenhouses. In 1872 Captain John S. Barnes, a flag officer in the North Atlantic Fleet during the Civil War, built on the adjoining property of ninety acres a house called "Coldbrooke". This dwelling was known in Cranwell School days as St. Joseph Hall. It served in the course of time in many capacities: school offices, chapel, library, classrooms, infirmary, guest rooms. Captain Barnes added a stable and carriage shed which became Campion Hall. A southerly and adjoining estate was Blantyre, the property of the Patterson family.

In 1892 the Beecher-Rathbone property was sold to John Sloan of New York and Newport. The original Beecher house was moved behind the later football field, across Route 7 as it ascends past the property from Lee to Lenox. A new mansion, named "Wyndhurst", was built employing 100 men. Of this Sloan property's 250 acres, forty were in house and lawns, thirty in woodlands, and 180 in farms and gardens. There was a formal garden, the remains of which were still visible in the Cranwell grounds, a trout pond, a squash court, and tennis courts.
Produce from the farm were shipped to the Barnes residence in New York.

Wyndhurst entertained considerably. President William McKinley was among the house guests. The property passed from the Barnes family when the Captain's heir in the 1920's sold it to Howd Cole of Palm Beach and a group of his associates. Thus it was that Wyndhurst became the Berkshire Hunt and Country Club. This group also acquired the adjoining Barnes estate for $225,000. Later, in the twenties, Mr. Woodrow R. Oglesby acquired this extended property, plus Blantyre where he resided.

The crash of 1929 affected Mr. Oglesby's fortune. As a result of notes which he had signed, Mr. Edward H. Cranwell became the owner of the old Barnes Beecher property. Due to some legal maneuvering, he lost the Blantyre estate which he believed was properly his. At this time, too, he had some impasse on past taxes with the town of Lenox, which did not leave him with a good impression of Lenox. Initially he continued the Hunt and Country Club.

Mr. Cranwell had been born in Utica, New York, in 1868. At the time of the acquisition of the Lenox property, he was the President of the Ken-Well Contracting Company with headquarters in New York City. While he had an appreciation for the beauties of the Berkshires, he was considered an archetypical New Yorker. Wherever possible, his visits to the Berkshires began in the morning from New York and he took a late afternoon train back.
The narrative of the acquisition of the club as Cranwell School begins in August, 1938. At that time Fr. John J. McEleney, then rector of Shadowbrook, learned that the Berkshire Hunt and Country Club was to go on the market for $250,000. A local tax assessor had valued it that year at $425,000. Some 600 acres, the buildings and facilities were for sale. The main house was still in excellent condition, and the golf course had an enviable reputation. There was a series of four cottages which the club had erected for renting to families visiting the area and employing the club's facilities.

Fr. McEleney decided on a bold stroke. Instead of seeking some price lower than $250,000, he would ask for the place outright as a gift. He envisaged the property as a secondary boarding school, a New England Georgetown Prep, as it were, or a Jesuit counterpart to the Benedictine Portsmouth Priory, or Dr. Nelson Hume's Canterbury School in New Milford, Connecticut.

So Fr. McEleney arranged an appointment. Accompanied by the affable and erudite Fr. William J. Healy, then dean of the juniorate, and its treasurer, and the story-telling and shrewd business operator, Fr. J. Leo Sullivan, he went to meet Mr. Cranwell. The four met on the club grounds and after some initial small talk, the bold request was made directly.

Mr. Cranwell reacted with a laugh and indicated how tight his financial situation was, giving no warrant for a gift in preference to a sale. He added that a group of priests (Stigmatine Fathers, it is said) had come the day before with the
idea of purchase. He had been turned off when, on showing them
the eighteenth fairway, they had remarked that it might make a
good baseball field or, better still, a good potato patch. Not
long before Mr. Cranwell had cleared that area, drained it, and
constructed a fine fairway and green. He was shocked at the
sense of value which would turn it to more plebeian purposes.

In his walks around that day with the three Jesuit
fathers, news was given on how the different estates had become
one. It was during the negotiations on procuring all of them,
due to a default on notes which he had countersigned, that
Blantyre had been lost through some legal device. In these
conversations Fr. McEleney pointed out how Mr. Cranwell's name
would be perpetrated with his name on the school in return for
the gift.

No impression appeared to have been made. If he was
not in a position to give the property, he could at least give
passes for the use of the golf course. These were accepted
without much reluctance, Fr. Leo J. Sullivan wrote at a later
time. During the summer of 1938 both Fr. Sullivan and Fr. Healy
often used these facilities. They often waved to Mr. Cranwell
from a distance, and occasionally kept their presence and project
visible by chats with him.

Fr. Healy, who wrote some comments later on
Fr. Sullivan's account of the request, maneuver and final gift,
has an interesting observation on what may have weighed well with
Mr. Cranwell in view of the legal battles he had waged with the
town of Lenox on back taxes which he had been requested to pay on
the estate. When he realized that a school could have a tax-exemption on this property, there seemed to be some glee in his eyes and added strength in the property for a tax-exempt purpose.

The following December Fr. McEleney received a letter from Mr. Cranwell in New York asking for an appointment. On arriving in Lenox for this meeting, he indicated a change in mind and asked Fr. McEleney to go ahead on the supposition that the property would be a gift. So Fr. McEleney informed the provincial, Fr. James H. Dolan, and requested that some group come to Lenox to view the preferred property and, if possible, to refer the matter to Fr. General.

The province consultors (Fathers John M. Fox, William J. Murphy, Francis J. Dolan and Robert A. Hewitt) came in mid-January, 1939. There were three feet of snow on the ground. The property was ploughed only to the minimum amount to permit access by fire apparatus. All the buildings were locked, windows were shuttered, light and power were turned off, and protective drop-cloths covered the furnishings.

Understandably for people who had not lived in the Berkshires, the consultors submitted an adverse report. Such a place, they held, could never be translated into a boarding school. This unfavorable report dismayed and depressed Fr. McEleney and, for the time being, he conveyed no news on the report to Mr. Cranwell. But he did not give up. By late April, he had induced the superintendant of the Club, Mr. Al Fraser, to uncover the windows and the drapes, to open the doors to make the
place attractive if a second look was forthcoming. Then he persuaded Fr. Provincial to have a second inspection.

But Fr. McEleney did more. It so chanced that, at the time, Fr. Zacheus Maher, American Assistant to Fr. General, was in New York. He, too, was invited to inspect the property. He came to Lenox without having to go through Boston and was impressed both by what he saw and at Fr. McEleney's exposition.

The second look by the consultors was more favorable. The sun was out, the gardens and lawns were beginning to take on new life. The buildings were open, bright and well-furnished. So, after the second view by the consultors, a letter went to Fr. General requesting the acceptance of the estate as a gift.

There were delays, some of necessity, about so important a project. By early May, Mr. Cranwell began to be uneasy. If the plan was not going to be accepted, he must plan on reopening the club, hiring help and drawing up promotional blurbs. By mid-May favorable word came from Rome and legal negotiations for the transfer began. Another delay arose from Fr. McEleney's being stricken with pneumonia. But, by May 28, he was well enough to drive to Mr. Cranwell's office along with Fr. John J. Smith, the novice master, and Fr. Robert Campbell, the spiritual father of the juniors. Fr. J. Leo Sullivan was chauffeur. On arriving in the office of Mr. Cranwell's attorneys, Brindler, Wass and Collins, they found him and Fr. Provincial, Mr. J. Paul Sinnott, the Cranwell son-in-law, and the firm's lawyers.
One great surprise greeted Mr. Cranwell. At least, on
driving to New York and probably earlier, there had been
discussion that the entire 600 acres not be accepted. It could
be too great a blow to the Lenox tax list, and such an amount was
not really needed. It was pointed out that 400 acres would
suffice. This was a surprise and disappointment to Mr. Cranwell,
but he acquiesced. So the Riding School area and the adjacent
woodlands were not accepted. This property was later sold for
$40,000 and the money turned over to Cranwell School.

A dinner followed the business meeting. At it, Fr.
Provincial appointed Fr. Sullivan as temporary minister of the
property with authority to inventory its possessions, to contract
for water, heat and sewerage all year round and, generally, to
convert the country club into a prep school. Fr. Sullivan, who
wrote a detailed account of this May event and told of his
wide-ranging appointment made over cocktails in a restaurant,
insists that all of this was not (repeat, was not) a sign that
Fr. Provincial had one too many at the time!

News of the transfer of the Hunt and Country Club from
Mr. Cranwell to the Jesuit Order was bound to appear early and
perhaps erroneously in the press. Mr. John Mahanna, the local
reporter for the Berkshire Eagle of Pittsfield, was on the trail
for news prior to the visit to Mr. Cranwell's lawyers' office on
May 28. To avoid premature and faulty publicity, Fr. Sullivan
asked him to hold off news on the understanding that he would be
the first to receive the news as an exclusive. So Mr. Mahanna
was called about noon on May 29 and given all the data. That
evening the *Eagle* had the story on its front page.

The next stage was the incorporation of the school and the selection of its first rector. On June 6, 1939, there was a preliminary meeting at St. Andrew House, Boston, of the prospective first members of the corporation. On June 22, with a representative from Mr. Dan Lyne's office as a lawyer and notary public, a document for incorporation was drawn up. The original incorporators were Fr. James H. Dolan, Fr. William J. Murphy, Fr. Robert A. Hewitt, and Fr. William A. Lynch. One week prior to this meeting, the province was informed, on June 22, that Fr. John F. Cox, then dean at Holy Cross, had been designated as rector by Fr. General. On July 3, in a simple ceremony at dinner, the appointment was read by Fr. Murphy.

On the following day, Fr. Dolan examined the plans for the use of the building, and Fr. Murphy examined the planned curriculum. The curriculum and advertising literature had been prepared by Fr. William J. Healy. Some two weeks after Fr. Cox's appointment, the rector asked Fr. Leo Sullivan to become the minister and procurator of the school and community. Fr. Provincial had authorized Fr. Cox to make such a personal choice. Fr. Sullivan, after conferring with his own rector at Shadowbrook, accepted the dual responsibility and continued in this post for three years. Fr. Sullivan had been among the number of actual or potential house treasurers who had been schooled in accounting by Mr. John Drummey, Comptroller of the Archdiocese of Boston.
If the place was to be ready for students even by an opening date in late September, many extra hands were needed. From time to time, novices and juniors from Shadowbrook assisted. Some younger fathers were assigned as full-time helpers. These included Fathers Richard Drea, Joseph Quane, and Hubert Cunniff, who later became the prefect of discipline (1942-44, 1945-75) and for whose years of service and genial severity, Cunniff Hall takes its name. One valuable aid in this and later periods was the work of Al Fraser who had been Mr. Cranwell's superintendent at the time of the changeover. His services were retained. He knew the intricacies of the buildings, underground services and utilities. He also knew how to keep up the golf course.

With the mailing of the status on July 20 and its early promulgation, the first Jesuit community at Cranwell was established. In addition to Fr. Cox as rector and principal and Fr. J. Leo Sullivan as minister and treasurer, eight other priests were assigned along with two scholastics (whose status had been announced earlier in June), and one coadjutor brother. Fr. Charles E. Burke was soon appointed an assistant principal.

Standard classes in Classics and English literature with some other subjects were assigned to Fr. Francis J. Krim, James D. Loeffler, William A. Lynch, and Francis Ryan. French was taught by Fr. James A. Walsh, who inaugurated a frequent prize-winning French newspaper by the end of the first year. Chemistry and mathematics were cared for by Fr. Gerard M. Landry.
Fr. John P. Creeden, formerly both dean and president of Georgetown (1911-25) and the retiring regent of the Boston College Law School (1929-39) and dean of its graduate school (1925-29) and a professor of psychology there, taught history. He could call on a wide reading of history and biography, on which he spent many evenings while at Boston College, and on a wide acquaintance with public figures and events in Washington and Boston.

The one pioneer brother was Brother Francis L. Sergi, who left within the year and was more than replaced by a brother of wide competencies, Brother Charles A. Finn. The latter remained at Cranwell until the spring of 1947. Thereafter, he began a long and colorful tenure at Weston and, after a brief interlude at Ridgefield, Connecticut, came in a variety of capacities to Boston College High School. With all the stories told of him or alleged about him as a buyer and movie entrepreneur, he has seen to it that not all the famous characters in the province are priests.

While visitors on a large scale were shown around Cranwell in the initial summer of 1939, at the end of which World War II began with the early September invasion of Poland, potential students did not arrive in such numbers. By Labor Day, there were but twelve registered students for all the years of a prep school including post-graduate students. Later, in September, the numbers rose to thirty-five. Yet the official registration of this first year was sixty-eight, quite an increase over the twelve on Labor Day. Among the registrants for
the first third-year class was Joseph E. McCormick of Stockbridge who, on graduation, entered Shadowbrook and has, as a priest, filled many positions of responsibility and prestige.

The original school occupied two buildings -- Cranwell Hall and St. Joseph's, the former Barnes residence. The latter was largely a dormitory, but with some classrooms and offices. Over the years, while its dormitory use came to an end, it still served for offices, as the student infirmary, library and, briefly, as the student chapel. Within one year the funds obtained by the sale of the unneeded grounds were employed to remodel a former carriage house into a two-story structure known as Berchmans Hall. It long served as an administrative center and, longer, for classrooms and student living rooms.

For this second year (1940-41) came Fr. Hubert F. Cunniff as its long term prefect of discipline. To its staff was also added a scholastic regent, George V. McCabe, first director of the Shadowbrook drive, after the fire of March 10, 1956, and the first superior of the retreat house at Ridgefield, Connecticut, and, later, an assistant director of the Jesuit Center at Charlestown. Two scientists were added: Fr. Francis X. Wilkie for biology and Fr. Thomas P. Butler for physics. Although Fr. Butler was a chemist, he was informed by Fr. John Dolan that chemistry and physics were one and the same and that, hence, he was equally competent in physics! In this second year with a firmly established eighth grade as well as all the years of secondary school, the enrollment reached 108.
An intriguing comment can be placed on these earliest formative years and on the hope aroused by its first summer of preparation:

Looking back, I all but shudder when I reflect how disastrous the first academic year might have been; a school announcing its start only in June, when most prep schools have closed their enrollments, beginning with a newly assembled faculty and staff and with a scrambled and haphazardly recruited student body (beginners, transfers, postgraduates) could have been an academic abortion. Yet marvelously, there was a splendid spirit and morale from the start that set a high tone and established a tradition that would distinguish the school through all its future. The faculty proved expert, the mishmash of students became a superb student body. One realizes now the greatness of the gift; the entrepreneurs of the Club were building wiser than they knew. The estates were waiting to find their true status. The property, the grounds, the buildings, the equipment and furnishings turned over to the Society, were perfectly designed for a Preparatory School, whatever may have been their original purpose. The proof of the pudding was in the eating; as weeks and months (and then the years) went by, the magnificence of the facilities and the munificence of Mr. Cranwell became more and more evident.

This eulogy of Fr. William J. Healy was written in April, 1970, when there was but a cloud on the Cranwell financial sky, can make one's heart ache that financial circumstances and declining enrollments, national as well as local, brought an end to Cranwell School in 1975. It is still on the real estate market in 1979.