

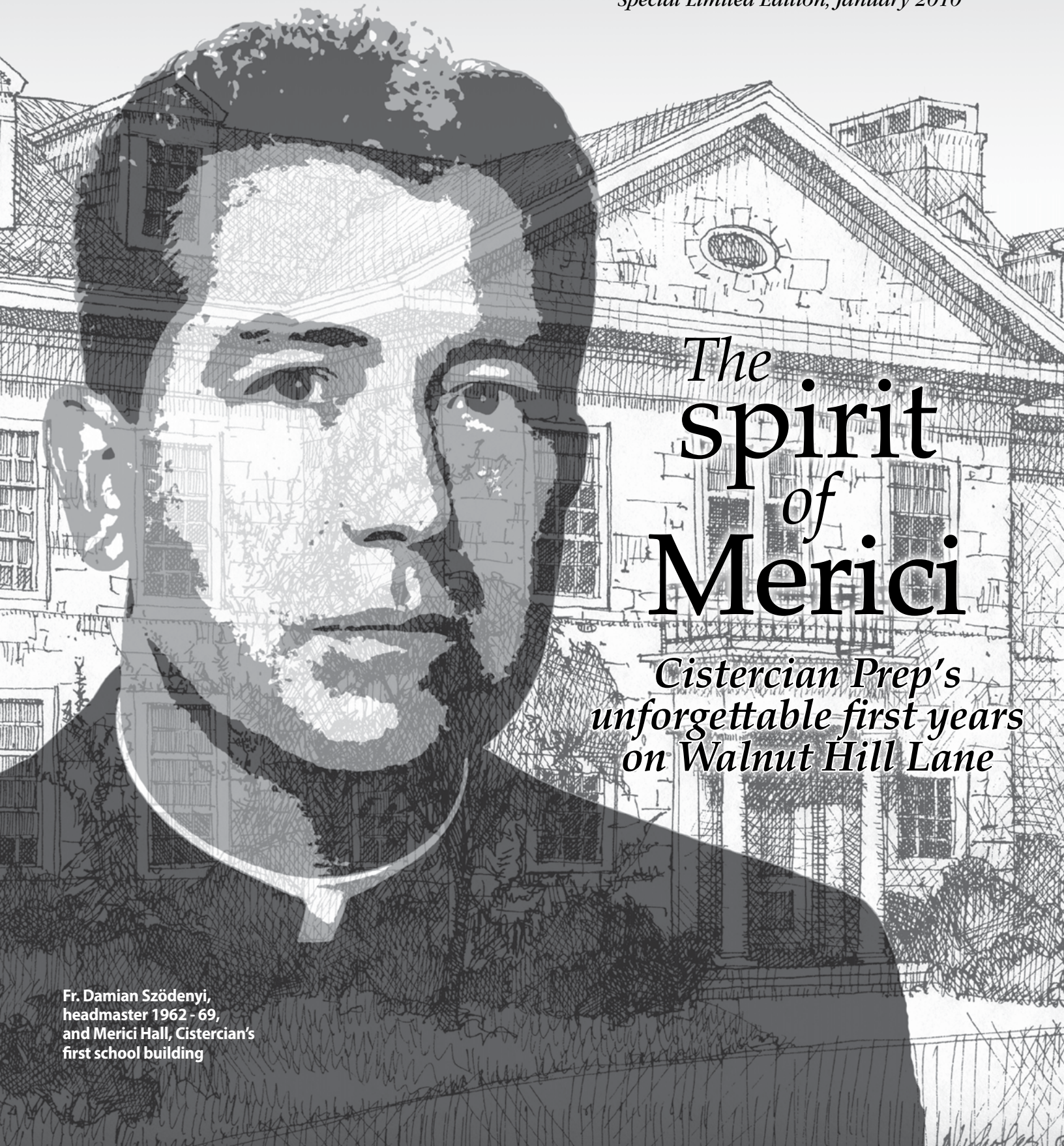
The

For family, friends, and alumni of Cistercian Preparatory School

CNTINUUM



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The spirit of Merici

*Cistercian Prep's
unforgettable first years
on Walnut Hill Lane*

Fr. Damian Szödenyi,
headmaster 1962 - 69,
and Merici Hall, Cistercian's
first school building



The spirit of Merici

*Cistercian Prep's unforgettable,
formative years on Walnut Hill Lane.*

By David E. Stewart

"If you think I'm going into that creepy, old place," erupted nine-year-old Brian Melton as his mother's car stopped in front of the new Cistercian Preparatory School for the first time, "you're crazy."

Dear me, thought 42-year-old Janice Melton as she glanced at the carpool line in her rear-view mirror.

The massive stone structure towered condescendingly over her open convertible Thunderbird. Nothing about it resembled a conventional American school building.

But perhaps these anxious times required something out of the ordinary.

The threat of nuclear war between the US and the Soviet Union appeared to grow by the day (the world would come to the brink of nuclear war just weeks later during the Cuban Missile Crisis). The space race had taken off. In February 1962, the US had responded to the Soviet Union's launching of the Sputnik spacecraft with John Glenn's triumphant orbit of earth.

How could their boys compete in this ever-changing world if they didn't receive a top-notch education? Public, parochial, and private schools were failing – not just to challenge – but even to teach effectively.

Some leading North Dallas families had proposed that the recently arrived Cistercian fathers would make the perfect men to lead a new kind of school for boys – one in which both traditional and advanced scientific studies would be emphasized; one that would

Sept. 12, 1962

Why the moon?

*"Why, some say, the moon?
Why choose this as our goal?
And they may well ask,
Why climb the
highest mountain?
Why, 35 years ago,
fly the Atlantic?
Why does Rice play Texas?"*

— John F. Kennedy,
Rice University,
Houston, Texas

prepare boys for the best colleges and universities.

The Cistercians, who had escaped Soviet-oppressed Hungary, were becoming well-known through their work as professors at the University of Dallas. Their order boasted a centuries-old tradition of operating first-class gymnasiums (schools for grades 5 through 12) in their homeland.

At this new school, parents could rest assured that the best would be demanded from their boys.

All the parents of the 47 boys enrolled at the Cistercian Preparatory School had looked forward to this Wednesday morning, September 5, 1962 for some time. A new era in North Texas education was dawning.

The day had started well enough for Mrs. Melton and her son. Driving on Walnut Hill Lane towards the new school, the two discussed the opening mass at the Cistercian monastery held in Irving the day before.

With sunglasses gleaming in the sunlight and her bouffant hairdo wrapped in a pink chiffon scarf, Mrs. Melton resembled a blonde version of Jackie Kennedy, the glamorous wife of the young president. Melton was feeling rather sharp himself in his new gray pants, loafers, and black tie.

Until, that is, his mother slowed at the bottom of the hill, where a creek known as Bachman Branch met the two-lane blacktop, and she turned her T-bird onto the driveway at 4838 Walnut Hill.

As the convertible followed the creeping carpool line along the

long curving driveway, Melton's mood changed. Cedar trees lined both sides, like soldiers leading young Melton to the gallows. Strain though he might, he could not see beyond them. His hand reached for the top button of his scratchy new Oxford shirt; he stretched his chin up.

A one-story building eventually came into view, followed by the side of the massive home.

Merici Hall's size, severe character, and roughhewn materials inspired more nightmarish images. Its windows seemed to hide secrets. And the lawn on the other side of the driveway was teeming with trees, bushes, and dark corners.

Melton's right hand pushed the knot on his tie one way as he twisted his neck to the other. When the car made its final stop in front of the school, he couldn't help but erupt.

Mrs. Melton's eyes flashed between the three-story stone structure to her right, her spooked son in the seat beside her, and the priest hovering near the open front doors of the edifice.

After 10 minutes in carpool line – and with dozens of cars behind them – she pursed her lips briefly.

"Brian," she sighed, a stream of cigarette smoke slowly escaping her mouth, "have a good day at your new school."

Inside the double doors and up a couple of steps, boys noisily trampled the black-and-white-marbled floors of the

in the fifties).

Mrs. Jackson passed away in a local sanitarium in 1933. Mr. Jackson succumbed to stroke in 1938 after an automobile accident near his home.

On September 9, 1942, the Ursuline Nuns purchased all 28 acres and by November they had moved Ursuline High School from Bryan Street to the new location and renamed it Merici High School, in honor of St. Angela Merici, founder of the Ursuline Order. The Ursuline Nuns christened the mansion Merici Hall.

In 1950, the grade school and high school were moved into the new facility built near the corner of Inwood and Walnut Hill.

During the remainder of the fifties, Merici Hall was used as a boarding house and also served as a kindergarten.

After tight negotiations with the Mother Superior at Ursuline, Prior Anselm signed a lease for \$5,500/ year.

It is not known if the Mother Superior negotiated with Prior Anselm for a security deposit (but she should have).

From country estate to Ursuline's Merici Hall A magical, Old World incubator

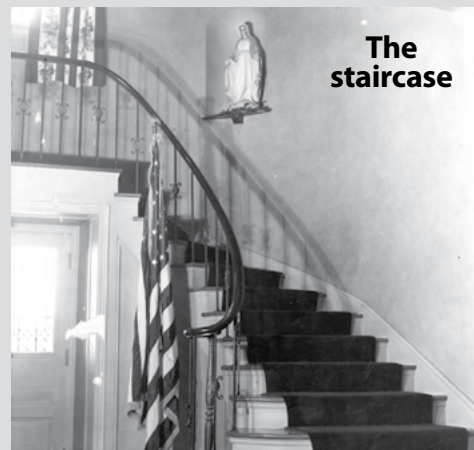
The mansion now known as Merici Hall was constructed by Albert Allen Jackson and his wife May in the 1920s. Its architecture contains elements of both the Georgian Revival style and the Neoclassical style, which was popular during the twenties.

Jackson built his fortune as a produce wholesaler, eventually selling his concern to Ben E. Keith in 1924. The talented businessman also loved to sing.

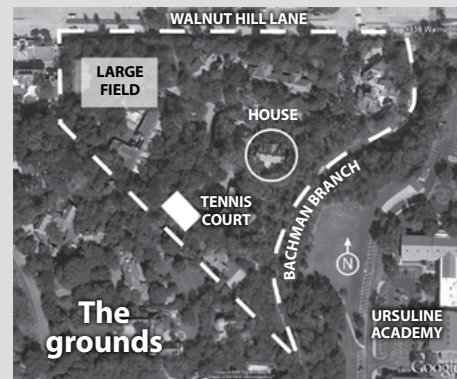
His country estate gave Jackson ample opportunity to indulge his other great passion: hunting. It included a small lake created by a dam he built along Bachman Branch (the dam was destroyed



Photos of Merici Hall courtesy of the Ursuline Academy Archives



The staircase



The grounds
Satellite image courtesy of Google

expansive lobby. In their hurried exploring and searching, they couldn't help noticing the height of the monstrous doorways and the twelve-foot ceilings that dwarfed them.

Back against the front wall, a grand staircase climbed to the second story. As they looked up and around in amazement – vaguely responding to directives barked by priests – bodies bumped, turned, and twisted their way toward the two classrooms.

Fr. Daniel Csanyi, 32, quickly corralled the 22 Pre-Form students (or fourth graders) in the home's large living room that occupied the entire east wing of the first floor. In addition to pairs of large windows on the north and south walls, the room featured a fireplace on the east wall flanked by two even larger windows.

As Pre-Form form master, Fr. Daniel had been selected by Fr. Damian Szödényi to shepherd this group through their years at the new school. He also would teach religion and penmanship (thanks to the nice job he'd done on the signs for each room in the school).

Brand new desks, ordered over the summer by Fr. Melchior Chladek, were arranged facing a blackboard on wheels at the north end of the room.

The 25 First Formers (or fifth graders) were directed up the grand staircase to the conservatory in the center of the second floor by their form master, 34-year-old Fr. Bede Lackner.

If the first-floor classroom felt elegant, its upstairs counterpart could safely be regarded as spectacular.

Upon entering for the first time, the students were struck by the far, southern end of the room with its semi-circular shape and seven picture windows, which bathed the room in light and offered a view of the thick trees in back of the house.

Fr. Bede, an accomplished historian with a degree from Marquette University, stood next to a blackboard in front of the windows and between two columns, urging the boys into their seats. He explained that he would teach geography, history, and music.

Upstairs and down, at approximately 8:30 am, Fr. Bede and Fr. Daniel led their classes in the prayer of the Holy Spirit and the Pledge of Allegiance.

Classes at Cistercian had begun.

"Cato, Cicero, Solon, Aristoteles," sang the First Formers in Fr. Bede's music class, "*caeciderunt in profundum maris.*" While reinforcing some of their Latin lessons, the ditty was Fr. Bede's way of teaching the boys to sing together.

"The melody is quite impressive," said Fr. Bede recently, "I had the boys perform it just the way I learned it from my Cistercian teacher in the old country. It is a 'round' [e.g., *Row, row, row your boat* sung over *gently down the stream*] and easy polyphony."

The text simply suggests that the giants of Roman philosophy "may drown in their sea of profundity." It proved memorable enough that members of the Class of 1970 remember it decades later.

In his Latin class, Fr. Damian used a stop watch to time the boys as they raced through conjugations. The competition made learning Latin fun.

First faculty

Math Jerry O'Brien
English* Mother Miriam
Latin Fr. Damian
History Fr. Bede
Biology Fr. Melchior
Geography..... Fr. Bede
Religion Fr. Daniel
Music Fr. Bede
Penmanship..... Fr. Daniel
Spanish Fr. Aloysius
French Fr. Balthasar
Art Mr. Ralph Quirk
PE Dr. Emeric DeGall

* Called Language Arts in the handbook (included grammar, spelling, and reading).

In addition to five class periods per week of Latin, math, and English, the First Form curriculum included three class periods of biology (sometimes referred to as "zoology" in school literature to give it an advanced-sounding ring).

Fresh from completing his master's degree in biology at St. Louis University, Fr. Melchior taught science with a hands-on approach that employed microscopes and lots of live animals and insects.

In addition to music, Fr. Bede taught his boys three class periods each of history and geography.

While the First Formers enjoyed the fruits of advanced, yet traditional subject matter, the Pre-Form suffered through a monotonous schedule weighted down by two class periods per day of both math and English.

Parents like Jane Bret, considered one of the founding moms of Cistercian (along with Beth Smith and Mary Healy), had pushed for the basics.

"There was a noticeable difference between my daughter at Ursuline who was learning to read and write," Bret remembers, "and my boys at St. Monica who couldn't do anything."

The boys at Cistercian received a full dose of the basics and substantial sums of homework. The teachers were encouraged to push the boys.

"I didn't deliberately change my vocabulary in my teaching," remembered Jerry O'Brien recently. "I used adult words, challenging the guys with the expectation that they would grow."

"It seemed to work."

"We were pretty good in class," remembered Paul DeCleva, who left Cistercian after his freshman year to attend Culver Military Academy.

"It was when we were out of class," he added, "that we went a little bonkers."

It was these moments outside the confines of the classroom's four walls that tested the mettle of the faculty, especially Fr. Damian and his philosophy that boys should be self-disciplined.

"It was brought to the attention of Fr. Damian," read the minutes from the school's first faculty meeting on the afternoon of September 4, 1962, "that there should be supervision of the boys during study hall and lunch." School hadn't even started yet.

At the September 19 faculty meeting, "it was decided that before and after the bells, the students must form recess lines. Teachers must lead the students up or down the stairs."

The grand stair case proved irresistible. Its narrow climb was divided into several sections, each with its own landing. A teacher at one end of the stair could do little about misbehaving at other points along its length.

"We used to love to show up early in the morning before anyone got there," remembered Buck Smith '71, who began attending Cistercian in its second year.

"We'd have these ridiculous games of bombardment on the stairway using chalk board erasers and volley balls.

"Poor Fr. Daniel would often arrive to find us in a lather from the early morning warfare. I am sure that he thought we were wild

hooligans.”

“Before 8 am,” the minutes of the January 11, 1963 minutes noted, “there is too much movement in the building. The students should go to their classrooms and study. The form masters are responsible for the discipline of their respective class.”

“Students may also be allowed to go to the library [the large wood-paneled room in the center of the house on the first floor] before school begins, but should be supervised while there.”

This problem would persist since many students lived very close by and the priests and teachers (other than Mother Miriam) didn’t.

The boys’ love for the place was clearly taxing the faculty’s numbers, time, and know-how.

Of the four priests Prior Anselm Nagy charged with the duty of opening the school, only Fr. Damian had served as a teacher before. Fr. Damian’s most relevant experience had come 20 years before at St. Emeric’s, the Cistercian school in Budapest where he had taught thirteen to fifteen-year-olds (including Fr. Daniel and Fr. Melchior). While in America, he had served only at the college level.

Jerry O’Brien and Mother Miriam had experience, but only in teaching girls at Ursuline.

None, of course, had ever started a school from scratch, or had conducted operations on grounds as large and rambling as Merici Hall.

“Teachers should be present during recess periods,” the February 8 faculty meeting notes stated. “Play periods should be held on the basketball courts and the field; students are not allowed to go near the bridge or the creek.”

If the house had posed a problem for the faculty members to supervise, the property’s unfenced, untamed nine acres, proved to be a potential nightmare.

The driveway provided spaces for games of four-square, “Snap the Whip,” or just running around.

Merici’s front lawn offered room to play football and soccer, plus its many layers of trees gave great cover for chasing games.

“I remember Mr. O’Brien’s amazing us with these booming punts of the football as we stood in the field trying to catch the ball,” said Buck Smith.

The Bachman Branch creek bed curved around the eastern and southeastern edge of the property.

“We used to love to run the creeks,” Paul DeCleva remembered. “You could wander around back there forever. We’d even go over there on weekends.”

“Our family lived in the neighborhood surrounding Merici,” Buck Smith said. “We used to have the greatest fun walking to and from school via our neighbor’s backyard access to the creek.”

“We would run up and down that creek on the way to and from school, often looking for snakes, frogs, and turtles.”

“There was an old iron bridge that crossed the creek between Merici and Ursuline Academy,” added Mike Kurilecz recently. “We were warned not to cross under pain of death.”

A second wooden bridge crossed a smaller creek to the west.

“We ran across that one every day to play in the larger field as well as get to the tennis courts and to play in the woods,” Kurilecz said. “If we got enough of us on the bridge we would jump up and down and it would bounce.”

An educational philosophy for sixties’ pre-teens

Fr. Damian envisioned a school that inspired self-discipline

Amidst the troubled educational landscape of the early sixties, Fr. Damian Szödényi’s lofty, optimistic prose helped distinguish him and Cistercian Prep from other middle school options available in North Dallas.

The basic business plan of the school had been laid out by Prior Anselm and the founding parents: an academically rigorous curriculum founded on the traditional liberal arts principles

EDUCATIONAL OPTIMIST
Fr. Damian believed that even Middle School students could be inspired to discipline themselves once they learned the importance, and the fun, of becoming educated.

extended to the fields of science. This model appealed to parents traumatized by Sputnik.

Fr. Damian’s educational philosophy, however, extended beyond this basic, strategic platform.

“Our attempts to bounce it out of existence usually came to a halt when Mr. O’Brien would yell, ‘You guys. Cut it out!’”

“In the woods and the big field,” Kurilecz added, “we would often separate into groups of Yankees and Confederates and play war games during recess.

“Stalking each other behind trees and shooting imaginary guns. Don’t tell our parents but sometimes we threw rocks at each other!”

“It was a jungle full of adventure,” Smith remembered, “that gave us the opportunity for all kinds of *Lord of the Flies* type mischief that does not bear repeating. Among other things, I remember a large group of us taunting the elderly neighbors who lived in big houses along the creek bed and who seemed to take umbrage at the spectacle of unruly gangs of unsupervised boys running wild in the woods. Boy that was fun.”

The headmaster’s office on the northwest corner of Merici Hall’s second floor featured 12-foot ceilings, expensive molding, and splendid views of the large front lawn through six-foot windows.

The room’s elegant shell contrasted with Fr. Damian’s stark furniture, which included a makeshift desk – comprised of a door atop two file cabinets – wooden chairs, and assorted bookcases.

The office provided little refuge for the priest at the

He envisioned a “homely atmosphere created by emphasizing self discipline, responsibility, and freedom, instead of pressing hard and rigorous disciplinary measures.”

“The purpose of education is the full integration of the individual,” Fr. Damian told parents in 1964, “for only in this way can he act freely, fully, and responsibly.”

“We believe that there is only one method through which the education of the individual can be successfully maintained,” he continued, “that is the love of the individual.

“One cannot love without knowing,” he continued as if proving a philosophical argument.

“We relax discipline and let him discover the need of self discipline.”

“By eliminating fear, we hope to create freedom, without which real love cannot exist.

“The model of an educator, in our way of thinking, is not a drill sergeant,” he added, “but it is Christ as He was understood by the greatest men.”

While many teachers agreed with Fr. Damian’s principle – that man, even in the form of a boy, is good at heart – they found its application problematic at times.

Fr. Damian sought bright students – identified through individually administered I.Q. tests – upon whom “the importance of education” could be impressed.

“When students made aware of the importance of education,” he said. “They mature early and they understand that school is necessary; that it is not their enemy.

“On the contrary, for them learning becomes high adventure.”

| CISTERCIAN PREPARATORY SCHOOL | | | | |
|-------------------------------|----------------|---------------|-----------------|---------------|
| REMARKS: | | | | |
| NAME: PRITCHETT, James | | | | |
| AVERAGE | FIRST SEMESTER | RANK IN CLASS | SECOND SEMESTER | RANK IN CLASS |
| 1ST PERIOD | | | | |
| 2ND PERIOD | | | | |
| FINAL | | | 2.30 | 13 |

FORM MASTER'S SIGNATURE: Fr. Bede, S.O. list.

HEADMASTER'S SIGNATURE: Fr. Damian

TEACHER'S SIGNATURE: Mother Miriam

TEACHER'S SIGNATURE: Fr. Bede, S.O. list.

TEACHER'S SIGNATURE: Fr. Damian

TEACHER'S SIGNATURE: Fr. Bede, S.O. list.

TEACHER'S SIGNATURE: Fr. Damian

TEACHER'S SIGNATURE: Fr. Bede, S.O. list.

TEACHER'S SIGNATURE: Fr. Damian

A rough report

The academic load was heavy and first year grades reflected it. The Form I class GPA started at 1.89 in the first quarter before rising to 2.49 by the end of the year.



hub of the school’s operations, just as it failed to insulate him from the odor of Fr. Melchior’s turtles in the nearby bathroom.

Midway through the school’s first year, the headmaster’s problems were mounting.

Grades from the first quarter had shocked parents. The Pre-Form – with its emphasis on basic writing, reading, and arithmetic – scraped by with a class average of 2.37.

The First Formers – with their accelerated load of ancient history, biology, and Latin – had managed a class average of just 1.89.

Parents wanted a challenging curriculum for their boys, but they didn’t want their boys to fail.

“The faculty expresses its appreciation for the interest the parents showed after mid-term examinations,” read the December 10, 1962 circular to the parents. “We are certain that this mutual understanding will be the only basis and healthiest method to solve the great problems of education: both intellectual and moral.”

In January, Fr. Damian instructed teachers to ease up on the grading for the end of Cistercian’s first semester.

“Final marks will be a picture of the child for the whole year [fall of ‘62],” the notes from the faculty meeting of January 11, 1963 stated. “There should not be an averaging of the grades, but a complete picture of the boy.”

“Marks are not the most important thing at this level,” Fr. Damian noted as matter of record in the faculty meeting, “rather what the boy learns and achieves is of primary importance.”

“It is possible,” he continued, “that a child may receive lower grades in this school than he did in his former one and learn more than he did previously.”

On January 18, a faculty meeting was held “to discuss the grades

and ranks of the students” for the end of the first semester.

The result: a healthy jump in GPAs, especially for the First Formers, whose class average leaped from 1.89 to 2.16 (the Pre-Form improved from 2.37 to 2.48).

Student behavior proved a more difficult issue to remedy.

“Discipline was an issue from the get-go,” claimed Daniel Csanyi (the former Fr. Daniel). “Fr. Damian had read some books on the subject and became a true believer in the power of motivation rather than punishment.

“Most of the time it worked,” emphasized Csanyi, “since the kids were from solid homes. But not all the time.”

“Back in 1963, I had no inkling of what ADD or ADHD was,” he added. “But some of the kids exhibited definite symptoms of attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder and were beyond the reach of ‘motivation.’”

In the early years at Cistercian, each teacher had their methods.

“[Fr. Daniel] will be your friend if you are his friend,” a First Former wrote in the first edition of *The Nest*, the school newspaper. “If you misbehave in his class, you will get a penance or a tap on the head with his book.”

“If someone got out of line,” remember Csanyi, who also served as the penmanship teacher, “I would sentence him to writing down fifty times in his best cursive: ‘I will pay rapt attention in Father Daniel’s class.’”

Not every teacher had such powerful deterrents.

Much discussion on the issue of discipline took place during faculty meetings.

“Punishment of no recess can be given to students,” the notes from January 11, 1963 read. “Keeping them after school is not permissible at this time.”

On February 8, a note was made that “the sending of notes to the parents and the keeping of students during recess may be used to handle disciplinary problems.”

A glimmer of hope appeared with an entry on March 15.

“Discipline in the school appears to be better as a result of the use of workbooks,” although it was added, “politeness should be used by teachers and pupils. The boys should show respect for parents and teachers.”

Occasionally, teachers had difficulty disciplining boys politely.

Class masses, celebrated by the form masters, could be particularly difficult especially in that first year when the chapel was located downstairs on the sun porch. The semi-circular room just off the library featured seven large French doors with southern exposure.

“With vestments on top of my religious habit, and with fifty or so warm bodies squeezed into a very limited space,” recalled Csanyi, “celebrating a mass in September or May was a real ordeal.”

Fr. Bede maintained order partly through his mastery of the 20-minute mass, remembered Jim Pritchett ‘70. “And, that was in Latin.” (“Those masses were challenging for the altar boys,” added Charlie Williams ‘70, “Try saying ‘*Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*’ in two seconds.)

But Fr. Daniel was not so fast.

“The boys were squeezed together like sardines on two or three

There was a young man at Cistercian

Allergic to mental exertion

He sneezed at his books

Gave them very few looks

Don’t look for him now at Cistercian!

Weatle Special, 1965

rows of bleachers,” according to Csanyi, “No wonder they were restless and squirming.”

In one particular mass, “Owen Love not only would not shut up, but he kept picking on the kids around him. Since I was supposed to be caught up in prayer, I had no way of controlling the ‘congregation.’

“By the time we got to consecration, I had had it.

“I started out, ‘*Pridie quam pateretur...*’ then I put the host down and thundered, ‘Owen, shut up!’

“The sudden interruption of the monotonous flow of Latin caught Owen totally unprepared. He stopped mid sentence

and was quiet the rest of the way.”

On May 14, 1963, at the monastery in Irving, the Abbot’s Council approved a contract with the University of Dallas that provided the Cistercian Fathers with 30 undivided acres on which they could develop the school and monastery.

This crucial step concluded a nearly three-year negotiation with University officials, settling once and for all the future location of

the Cistercian Prep School. (The Cistercians had seriously reviewed the possibility of building the school near the intersection of Marsh Lane and Valley View and another location near the intersection of Royal Lane and O’Connor.)

With the location of the school finally settled, planning of the first building began in earnest.

Bryan F. Smith, husband of one of the three founding moms, played a key role behind the scenes advising Prior Anselm. He had served as the lead lay advisor since early 1961. The Smiths had hosted a buffet for interested parents in May 1961, when Fr. Moses Nagy was presumed to be the best candidate for headmaster.

Smith had been there the following month when Prior Anselm offered Fr. Damian the job as headmaster (in fact, it may have been at Smith’s suggestion).

And as chairman of the advisory committee, Smith was hovering in the background throughout that first year at Merici, even though his oldest son remained in fourth grade at St. Mark’s, rather than in Pre-Form at Cistercian.

By May, Smith’s two oldest boys (Buck ‘71 and Jimmy ‘72) were poised to enter Cistercian in September.

Representing the parents (and perhaps Prior Anselm), Smith provided a concise assessment of the 1962-63 school year from the parents’ point of view. It targeted two of Fr. Damian’s seminal principles of education.

First, Smith believed the official school policy on discipline (as stated in the Rules and Regulations dated October 1, 1962) lacked clarity.

Ambiguity in this policy, asserted Smith, allowed individual teachers to discipline students in their own way. Presumably, Smith believed that a more consistent policy would be more effective.

Smith also noted that some parents believed that Fr. Damian was overly influenced by Professor John Dewey’s progressive educational philosophies. Dewey’s work pushed American education toward a “learn-by-doing” and team-oriented learning style rather than the traditional rote learning of classical material.

The second year of classes at Merici saw boys running everywhere. Seventeen new students entered the new Pre-Form class (well below the target of 25) and the first two classes returned pretty much in tact and ready to rumble.

Restroom facilities were expanded to accommodate the additional students and a playing field carved. The faculty was enlarged by adding Mr. Paul McArdle to help Mother Miriam in the “language arts” as well as Fr. Thomas Fehér and Fr. Matthew Kovacs to help with geography and Latin. Fr. Ralph March began a boys’ choir. Ralph Quirk was replaced as the art instructor by Arnold Favela.

Two new form masters were put to the task. Fr. Aloysius, who had served as a part-time Pre-Form Spanish teacher during the first year at Merici, took over as form master of the new Pre-Form. And Fr. Melchior replaced Fr. Bede as form master of the Second Form.

The smallish size of the new Pre-Form suited the building well. They could be accommodated upstairs in the bedroom on the southwestern side of the building that had previously served as the science room.

The elder two forms switched venues. The Second Form moved downstairs to the east classroom. The First Form moved upstairs.

“Our first form classroom was a long, somewhat narrow room on the second floor,” remembered Robert Bellamy ‘71. “We faced the south end of the room, which was a semi-circle conservatory. And the cool thing was that the blackboard was right in the center of the conservatory, framed all by itself. You couldn’t help but stare at it ... all day long.

“On either side of the room, two large perforated screens, about four feet tall, hid giant radiators that provided heat in the winter,” added Bellamy. “The perforations were the exact circumference of crayons, which we discovered would melt beautifully when jammed into the screens – impossible to clean up and an endless source of delight to us.”

A year older and accustomed to the routine, each other, the Hungarians, and the property, the boys began to spread their wings.

They began to exploit language and cultural nuances with which the highly educated Hungarian priests could not have been familiar.

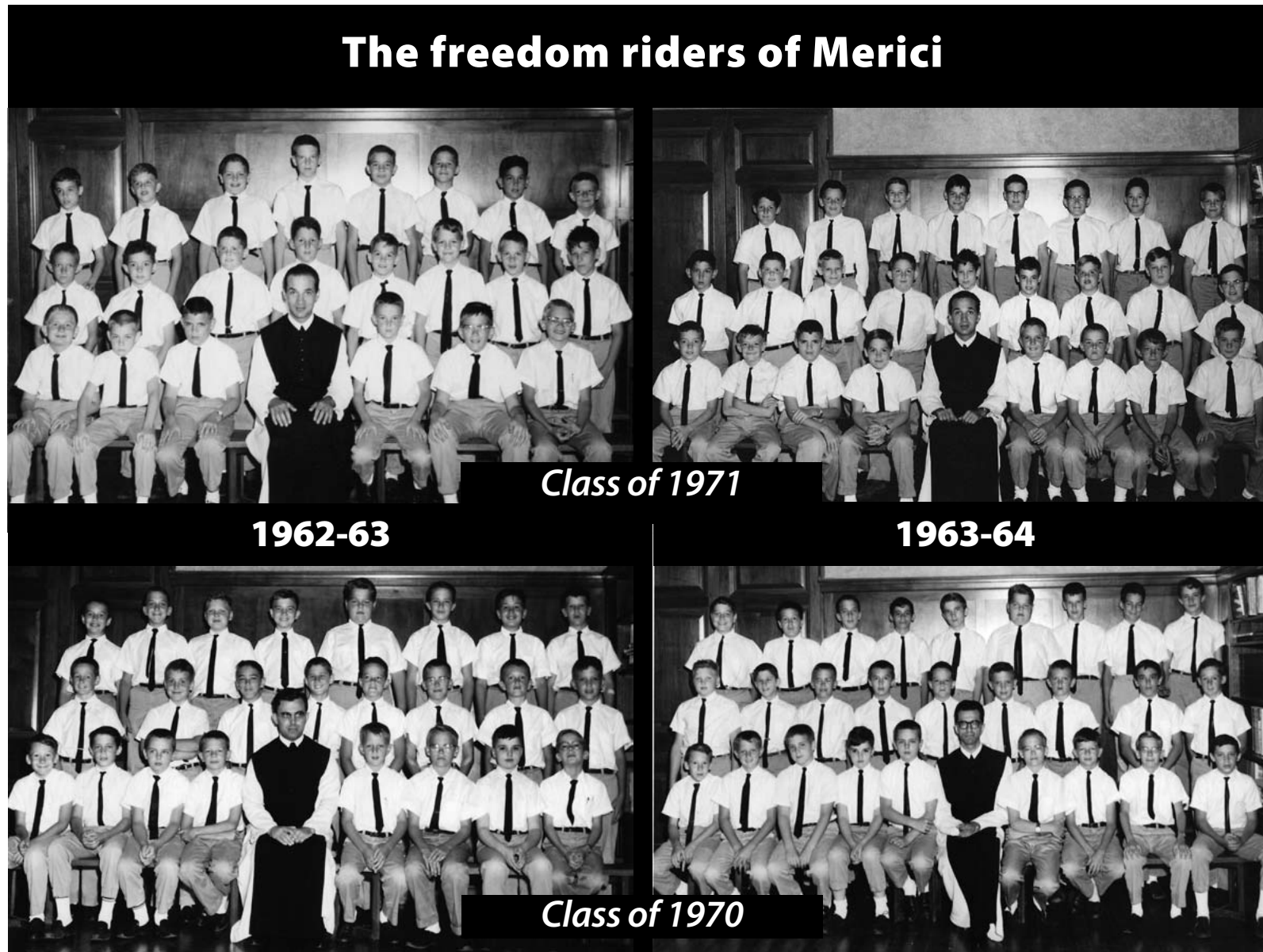
New recruits were subjected to Street English 101.

“The priests introduced us to Fr. Aurel Mensáros, a pink-cheeked cherub of a newly ordained priest who didn’t speak English very well,” Bellamy recalled. “Their idea was that he’d sit in the back of the classroom to pick up some English.”

“Well, he picked up quite a bit, especially the very special words and phrases we whispered to him, which he dutifully wrote down in a notebook.

“I think that little experiment lasted less than a week, but we

The freedom riders of Merici



laughed about it for months. Hey, we're *still* laughing!"

At their October 7, 1963 meeting, members of the Prior's Council sat down to discuss whether to approve a contract with O'Neil Ford, who had come highly recommended by Bryan Smith, as architect for the school and the third wing of the monastery.

The cost of the two projects was projected to reach \$500,000.

Two of the five council members raised questions about the wisdom of proceeding with the school project. They had heard some faculty members mention difficulties.

Fr. Damian assured the council that the difficulties were minor, and he was certain the school should move forward.

Fr. Daniel pointed out that some of the difficulties arose from exaggerated promises, especially related to the number of boys admitted and the qualifications of the faculty, as well as the casual approach to organization.

The comments must have stung Fr. Damian, who had befriended Daniel as a Form IV Hungarian literature student at St. Emeric's in Budapest.

"My fondness for Fr. Damian was rooted in the fact that my love was Hungarian literature, and he was the teacher, and a good one," Csanyi remembered recently. "I felt enormously supported and encouraged by him."

"One of the most appreciated traditions of the Cistercians in Budapest was that they were totally accessible to the students, past school hours and beyond school premises.

"Their residence was about a twenty-five minute walk from the school, so every day you could see the priests in black and white walk the distance surrounded by an entourage of excitedly chatting students.

"In hindsight, this ongoing informal contact was one of the most bonding forces between the priests and the student body and contributed hugely to the immense loyalty we felt both toward the school and the priests.

"At the end of the school day I would linger around the entrance of the school to see which of my favorite teachers would emerge first and attach myself to him," Csanyi remembered. "Fr. Damian was one of those I hoped to attach myself to on my way home.

"Occasionally I also visited Fr. Damian at the residence. This too, was totally informal and spontaneous."

"I am afraid that my renewed connection with him after we rejoined each other in Dallas was a disappointment to him," Csanyi admitted. "He probably expected me to be a wholehearted supporter of him as Headmaster, and I was not."

After some discussion, the council approved the hiring of O'Neil Ford.

At the next faculty meeting at Merici Hall on October 17, 1963, initial plans for the new school building were displayed to the members of the faculty for their study and remarks.

"He looked right at me!" screamed Ray Foley '70 as President

John F. Kennedy's motorcade drove by the group of Cistercian Second Formers standing near the old Delman Theater, a few minutes before noon on November 22, 1963.

Dressed in their distinctive gray pants, white shirts, and black ties, the gaggle of Cistercian boys waving wildly seemed to catch the president's eye. In short order, Fr. Melchior gathered the boys together and drove them back to school.

Fr. Damian had sent notes home the day before notifying parents that classes would be cancelled between 11 am and 2:15 to make allowances for all who planned to see the president (and those attending the lunch at the Trade Mart).

Paul DeCleva, Buck Smith, and Jimmy Smith had been driven over to the corner of Mockingbird Lane and Lemmon Avenue, near the Coca-Cola Bottling Plant, by Mr. Smith.

"It lasted all of about five minutes," DeCleva recalled of the visit to the motorcade route. Since classes would not resume until 2:15, Mr. Smith dropped the boys at the Smith residence, just a short walk from campus. The boys began a game of basketball.

Cars began arriving back on campus at about 12:15. The students played outside on the warm, sunny day.

"I was out in the meadow behind the building," remembered Daniel Csanyi recently, "trying to maintain law and order in the rambunctious crowd."

Then the normally ruddy-faced Paul McArdle approached Fr. Daniel, white as a sheet.

"They shot the president," McArdle whispered. "Recess is over. Bring the kids up to the chapel."

Over at the Smith residence, the boys' basketball game was interrupted. "The president's been shot," screamed the family housekeeper.

"We didn't know what to do," Jimmy Smith remembered, "so we decided to walk back to Cistercian. Several priests and lots of our schoolmates were outside on the ball field in front of the school."

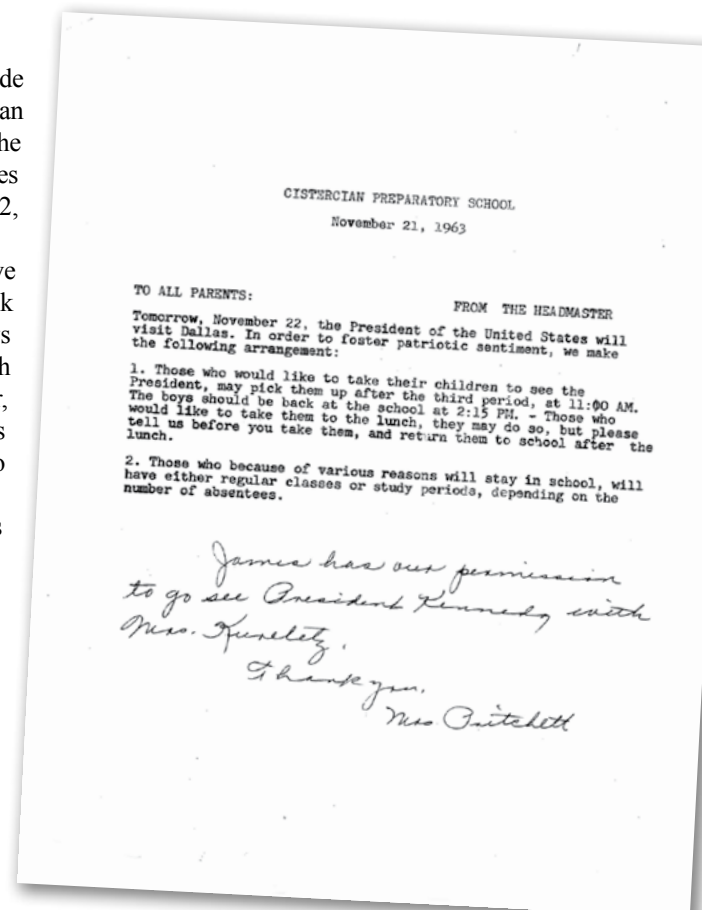
Teachers rounded up the boys from the various parts of the grounds and ushered them up to the chapel (now located on the third floor).

Fr. Damian delivered the solemn news of the president's death shortly after 1 pm.

"I remember watching tears stream down the faces of Fr. Daniel and several other Cistercians," said Jimmy Smith. "I had never seen grown men cry before."

Fr. Daniel led the school in a rosary and then a Mass, but he was overcome with tears on several occasions. Fr. Damian would step in until Fr. Daniel was prepared to go on.

"I would describe [the early sixties] as my honeymoon with



America," Csanyi said recently, reflecting on his outpouring of emotion. "I loved the idea of the Peace Corps. I credited Kennedy with negotiating the withdrawal of Soviet occupying troops from Eastern Austria (which, for the first time since 1945, gave Hungary a common border with a free country). I was enormously impressed by Kennedy's cool and firmness during the Cuban missile crisis.

"I was aware that he was not without flaws," he added, "but he was my hero."

"The assassination was the abrupt end of the honeymoon," he admitted. "I was crying not just for the man I saw two hours earlier, waving and smiling at us on Lemmon Avenue, but I was crying for America."

"Fr. Daniel's brave and emotional behavior that day had a profoundly positive effect on me and still does to this day," said Gary Cunningham '72. "It was one of the

most important lessons of empathy that I have ever received."

"Any student who went to Cistercian at the 'old school,'" commented Jimmy Smith, "heard lots of vivid recollections from the priests about their individual escapes from Hungary after the Communist takeover.

"It was especially wonderful that each personal story was a little different from the others, certifying their authenticity and richness.

"But, perhaps the most poignant indicator of the trials and terrors the Cistercians had experienced in their motherland was the pain and anguish on their faces upon learning of the assassination of the president in their new home country."

"Side-straddle hops now. Come on boys," pleaded Dr. Emeric DeGall in his thick Hungarian accent as he put the white-clad Cistercian students through their paces during P.E. classes on the old tennis courts located southwest of Merici Hall.

The former Hungarian fencing champion boasted a still-muscular, though slightly over-fed physique, curly white-blonde locks, and a chiseled face with a ruddy complexion bespectacled with black horned rims.

Dressed in ever-present black pants with a whistle hanging over his white T-shirt, he made an Olympic effort to fit into the American athletic scene.

In fact, at the school's very first faculty meeting in September 1962, he "raised the question of football." The minutes recorded a terse response. "Only soccer will be offered."

During basketball season on the ancient tennis court, he kindly suggested to the basketball-challenged boys, "Just try to throw the ball at the backboard."



Primarily, Dr. DeGall stuck to soccer and fencing, European sports he knew well.

“Since soccer was new to most of the kids,” remembered Daniel Csanyi recently, “they instinctively played it more like rugby with a round ball.”

“Carrying his heft with surprising agility, Dr. DeGall would run alongside the field, following the ball and yelling at the players, ‘Don’t keek it vit your hend, keek it vit your foot!’”

The lion’s share of the sports budget was consumed by fencing foils, chest protectors, and masks. Out amidst the natural majesty of Merici’s grounds, DeGall’s French-laced instructions seemed very natural as a couple dozen masked Cistercian students performed a *lunge* before recoiling to the *en garde* position.

Several Cistercian students of this period went on to fencing success in high school.

But while fencing captured Dr. DeGall’s heart, he introduced another sport, perhaps inadvertently, that instantly won over the Cistercian boys.

The first edition of *The Nest* noted, “Besides fencing, Dr. DeGall has taught us to play Medicine Ball. Sides are chosen and some exciting games are played.”



The Old School

“We never called it Merici Hall. Outside: basically a huge thicket, full of tangled undergrowth and giant trees. A real lost-in-time world for me.”

— Robert Bellamy ’71

But, for the most part, Dr. DeGall maintained discipline with the flick of his wrist; using either his foil, a quick whip across the back of the legs would do, or his whistle, which was used to “crack your cranium.”

“It is a completely different feeling to be present at this meeting,” Fr. Damian told his audience after dinner at the Dallas Federal Savings & Loan on February 24, 1964. He was reflecting on the buffet at the Smith’s home in May 1961.

“Now we have the school,” he smiled, “we have the parents, pupils; a fine old school, sixty-two fine families, sixty-eight students of the greatest variety and a fine faculty: eleven Cistercian priests, one Ursuline nun, and four laymen.”

“And finally,” he added, “now I am not an observer but made responsible for all these [sic].”

With blueprints of the new school being finalized, the school was moving into campaign mode. And Fr. Damian was doing what came naturally.

“We have all four classes full for the next school year and have

The game eventually garnered the name, bombardment, which captured the spirit and import of this sport.

“Those monstrously heavy leather things proved anything but medicinal” remembered Brian Melton, “My nose is still sideways.”

Head injuries declined dramatically when volleyballs were substituted for the medicine balls.

When the weather turned rainy or cold, Dr. DeGall put the boys through their paces in the gymnasium on the third floor of Merici, where the boys would pound the floor with the medicine balls in hopes of disturbing the class below. An occasional rumble took place there as well.

a few on a waiting list,” he bellowed. “We have achieved this interest in our school with the minimum direct advertisement or publicity. We achieved it through the kind, good words of the satisfied parents of our students.”

But he also was responsible to those parents, and while many highly recommended the school, others continued to pressure the headmaster on a variety of fronts, and not always in a consistent direction.

“The headmaster reported the remarks of some of the parents,” read the minutes from the October 1963 faculty meeting, “who think that their children are not challenged enough because of their small amount of homework, and he expressed the opinion of those parents who think that the homework is too much.”

Still, Fr. Damian strove to work with parents right from the start.

Notes from the September 19, 1962 faculty meeting directed, “A relationship is to be formed between the parents and the school by means of working committees. These working committees will be organized for the purpose of aiding and strengthening the school.”

However, it noted pointedly, “Working committees will not be policy-forming organizations.”

The committees were organized by the spring semester of the first year and did accomplish a number of objectives that included taking the kids to an opera (“The Barber of Seville”) and organizing sports teams.

“We started working together only clumsily,” Jane Bret remembered recently. “Fr. Damian did not want interference.”

“Friendly relationships must be built between the school and the parents of the students,” Fr. Damian wrote in 1963. “This relationship should be based not on the principle of who dominates whom, but upon what is best for the education of the child.”

By the spring of 1965, he was more direct with the parents.

“It is wonderful that [parents] are ready to make sacrifices, sometimes very great ones, in order to give their children the best possible formal education,” Fr. Damian noted in his address at the Empire Club on March 21, 1965, celebrating the dedication of the Middle School.

“It is not desirable, however,” he added, “that parents make such a strong, almost paralyzing identification with their children, by which they would transfer a great many of their frustrated dreams and desires to the child, then expect, demand, and even press the school to fulfill all these desires in their children.

“We all have to live our own lives,” he emphasized, “and not ones which are burdened by fears, anxieties, and frustrations of our parents.”

The parents, however, were not to be denied. Parents had been the motivating force behind the school from the outset. They visited Fr. Damian in his office at Merici Hall. They invited him for dinner. He could not escape them.



By and large parents were happy, of course, with the education their boys were receiving at Cistercian. But the disciplinary issues continued to bother a fraction of them.

“Those parents who expected the strict discipline of the Cistercian schools in Hungary,” Fr. Melchior commented recently, “were disappointed.”

Some parents probably were confused by Cistercian’s pitch of a *gymnasium*-styled curriculum taught by Hungarians. While strict discipline played a key role in the European version, Fr. Damian felt that freedom should take center stage in this American one.

Fr. Damian believed that when intelligent boys were presented with an interesting curriculum, they would submit willingly.

But coming from parochial schools, the boys were experiencing freedom for the first time together with other boys who also were reveling in it. Factor in a fascinating school building on nine wooded, creek-side acres, and their curiosities and imaginations shifted into high gear.

Mix in a relaxed disciplinary philosophy with the unbelievably steep learning curve many of the Hungarians faced when it came to teaching pre-teens, learning the English language, and adapting to American teen culture, and it is a wonder that disciplinary issues didn’t close the school down.

“Those who expected quick success with kids who were a terror at home,” Fr. Melchior added, “they were frustrated that the school was unable to impose discipline on them.”

Parents weren’t the only ones who needed persuading that self discipline would work with pre-teens. Many faculty members found it difficult to digest as well.

“It was a learning process for each faculty member,” Fr. Melchior said. “Teachers had to learn how to apply it in their own class.”

“When a student has been removed from the classroom for disciplinary reason,” an entry in the March 19, 1964 faculty meeting notes read, “keep the student in close proximity to the teaching situation.”

Some still believed that the European disciplinary model offered important virtues.

“I have no doubt that the threat of physical punishment was an





effective deterrent,” Csanyi said in reflecting on his life as a Cistercian student at St. Emeric’s in Budapest, he admitted. “It was not used frequently, but we knew that if we got out of line, we’d get hit.”

“Slapping in the classroom was simply seen as an extension of discipline at home,” he explained. “You would have gotten the same from your own dad for getting out of line. Parents expected that the same style of punishment will be used in the school as was practiced at home.”

But on the whole, “I don’t think there was as much difference in behavior between the students in Hungary and the ones in Dallas as you might suspect,” Csanyi reflected. “There were some priests [at St. Emeric’s in Budapest] in whose class chaos reigned.”

“I held several parents’ meetings at Merici during which every variety of subject was discussed,” said Fr. Melchior, “and discipline was never a major issue.”

Nevertheless, according to notes of the faculty meeting through the Merici period, disciplinary issues would never stray far from the radar. The introduction of school bus transportation in 1965 would add a whole new dimension to the discussion.

Faculty members ate lunch, caught a few winks, and graded papers at their desks in the faculty room on the second floor of Merici Hall. Fans ran non-stop during the warm days of the year, sometimes blowing papers on to the floor. Having previously seen service as the master bedroom for Mr. and Mrs. A. A. Jackson, the room featured soothing views of the property to the east and south. The creek bed appeared during the winter months.

For a week during the first year of the school, Fr. Melchior’s desk was crowded with neatly arranged rows of jars, each serving as a student’s personal fruit fly colony.

“The critters were kept in each jar by a sheet of Saran wrap,” recalled Daniel Csanyi, “stretched to the top by a rubber band. Each jar had a sticker with a name on it. Atkinson, Galt, Slaton, Brennan, Witbeck, etc.”

“Problem was that some of the kids did less than a fair job sealing their jars,” he said. “Before long we were all swatting at fruit flies.”

“After several days of the Hitchcock-like invasion, I brought along a can of Raid, and squirted a puff of Raid into each one, then re-sealed them.

“When Fr. Melchior came back into the faculty room, there was no sign of life in a single jar. He was totally baffled by the untimely mass death of his protégés.

“As Mr. O’Brien suggested that the colony may have been the victim of a quick spreading virus, the rest of us buried our heads in paperwork.”

The minutes of the faculty meeting suggest that their small number, close (often sweaty) quarters, and common goals made for a tight-knit group.

In March ‘63, the faculty minutes commented, “at [the next] meeting Fr. Bede will discuss the curriculum for history and geography which could be used in a boys’ preparatory school.”

Demonstration classes were held so that faculty members would observe each others’ teaching techniques. Discussions were held afterwards.

“It would facilitate matters,” the faculty minutes from March 19, 1964 note, “if all the teachers would write their assignments in the attendance book. Students should be discouraged in calling one another for assignments.”

The issue of class rankings and the always laborious student

handbook (“grammar will be taken care of by a professional writer”) also came up frequently.

On February 8, 1963, the faculty meeting notes include, “thought should be given as to the type of awards that will be given to the boys at the end of the year. Each committee will sponsor an award.”

In May of ‘63, various book awards were presented along with three Religious Committee Awards, one for each class (including Tim Johnson ‘70 and Jimmy Smith ‘72).

However, First Former Paul Galvin’s Religious Committee Award read “for the outstanding student of the Cistercian Preparatory School. This award is based on character, behavior, and achievement.”

The following year, the Religious Committee Awards were renamed the St. Bernard Awards (silver and gold).

The final semester at Merici Hall burst into activity with one hundred and two students arriving at the doorstep of the venerable home at 4838 Walnut Hill Lane. The September 6, 1964 opening day carpool line was mitigated by a brand new Ford school bus that delivered thirty or so students to campus (a second was put into operation a few weeks later).

The faculty was expanded to accommodate the expanding student body. Fr. Henry Marton and Mr. Rodney Walter assumed important roles immediately.

Fr. Henry, 39, took over from Fr. Aloysius as the form master of the Second Formers (Class ‘72), who remained in the classroom on the southwestern corner of the second story. Fr. Henry taught Latin and German.

Rodney Walter, 25, taught history, plus the new physics class for Form III (a subject with which he was fairly unfamiliar). He also would help to start the school’s boy scout troop along with Fr. Daniel. (Scouting played an important role in the life of many of the Hungarians, including Fr. Damian and Fr. Daniel.)

The cigar-chomping, 40-year-old Fr. John Vereb, who had earned a master’s in economics from SMU, directed the Pre-Form (Class ‘73) in the downstairs classroom, where he taught math to the “leettle brudders.”

Three sisters from St. Mary of Namur, Sister St. John, Sister John Teresa, and Sister Mary Frances stepped in to help Paul McArdle with the English courses, allowing Mother Miriam to take her leave of the craziness.

The number of advanced degrees offered by the Cistercian priests was truly staggering; three with their doctorates, seven with their masters.

The music faculty that year would have qualified as a top-flight college faculty. Fr. Ralph March had earned his doctorate in music in Paris (and would go on to serve as the musical director at the Cathedral of Cologne, Germany) and Fr. George Ferenczy was a concert-level pianist.

Fr. Ralph put his Cistercian boys’ choir through rigorous rehearsals and dressed them in white robes for their Christmas performances. Only those who could truly sing need apply.

“We had to sing something in front of the classroom, in front of our peers,” recalled Fr. Peter Verhalen ‘73 who threw his hat in the ring in the fall of 1964. “I tried to sing *Jingle Bells*.”

“He told me to sit down before I even finished the word ‘bells.’”



Sept. 12, 1962

“We choose to go the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win.”

— John F. Kennedy,
Rice University,
Houston, Texas

A variety of events during those last few months at Merici gave the students, faculty, and parents the feeling that Cistercian Prep School was truly special and blessed.

Fr. Melchior invited a speaker from NASA who came and made a presentation on the history of space exploration. He also updated the students on the agency’s current operations, spoke of the need for scientists, and answered questions from the students.

A parent helped arrange for the Danish military band – in town for the Nieman-Marcus Fortnight – to perform on the front lawn at Merici. The parents and kids especially seemed to appreciate the band’s rendition of *Dixie*.

The boys participated in a fencing match at the Dallas Athletic Club under Dr. DeGall’s direction. Two finished in the semi-finals and one made it to the finals.

Cistercian also participated in the Christ the King Procession in downtown Dallas with other Catholic schools.

It was the prospect of moving into a brand new building in Irving, however, that gave everyone a spring in their step.

They couldn’t have known then what would be lost in the move.

“[Merici] was peaceful, stately and inspiring,” said Jim Bush ‘73. “The four small classes made it feel very intimate, as if we were all

a family off on a great adventure.”

“To me,” reflected Robert Bellamy, “the beauty of the place was the wildness outside and the rarefied interior of the building, combined with the arcane mysteriousness of the monks themselves.

“In retrospect, the miracle was not just that the combination worked, but how well it worked, and how fresh the memories still are, nearly 50 years later.”

From the distance of almost half a century, it is difficult to imagine the courage of Prior Anselm, Fr. Damian, and the other Cistercians who accepted the challenge of starting a school from scratch – in the space of just two years. But these Hungarians had stood up to the oppression of both German and Russian forces; they seemed to bubble with a sense of destiny.

Then there were the parents who demonstrated amazing faith (and patience) to entrust their children to the Cistercians and the lay faculty when other more established institutions were available.

While sparks flew occasionally as the Hungarians and parents worked together to help the school lift off, their common goal

did “serve to organize and measure the best of [their] energies and skills.”

Now decades later, we can look in the rear-view mirror with wonder.