

## Reminiscences of Gurutalawa

by Peter Weerakoon (Gurutalawa 1947- 1952)

## *The Guru Appeal - The Student*

Those were the halcyon days of yore. The term would start with the boys from Colombo and beyond meeting on Platform 7 of the Colombo Fort Railway Station to take the Up Country Day Train. Besides the crying and the sad goodbyes to parents there would also be sense of joy and happiness of meeting up with old friends, whom I recall were L.M.Fernando, Majintha Perera, Nicky Rose, Micheal Silva, Bandu Wanigasekera, V V Vandersmaght, John (Bill Bunter) Marasinghe, Peter Ondaatjee, John de Vos and the two boxers, Joe "Louie" Somasunderam and D.G. Welaratne. There were also many others whose names seem to eluded me. We were allotted two reserved compartments on the train and the Masters in Charge would see that the seniors went to one compartment and the juniors, to another. Amongst the Masters who regularly traveled with us on the train was Mr. A.M.S Abeyawardene, a strict disciplinarian and Cadet Master who had served in the army and was never known to spare the cane. In contrast, Mr. Ashley Tennekoon who was more a Poet and loved to make spontaneous rhythms. Then there used to be the most respected Mr. Kילו Chapmen, husband of Betty Chapmen, elder brother to Doctor Ben and Ivor Chapmen and Rowena Cook. Also on the train were Old Boys going back to work at College whilst awaiting University results. All along the way, at certain stations, we would pick up more boys like Jagath and the late General Rajan Wijeratne and S.K. Alawwa. Larry Schokman would have entrained at Gampola and at Nawalapitiya we would await the coming of Cyrus and Edward (Ted) Bartholomuesz.

We would of course indulge in normal school boy fun with the "Wade sellers" and the "Topy Sellers (Toffee) -- where one boy would buy from one window whilst another boy would pinch something off the tray from the other window. Meanwhile, others would be on the look out for the Masters.

Our trains were powered by the famous Coal engines (the Diesels came much later), with one engine pulling and the other pushing through the lush green hill sides.

At Nanu Oya Station, the Seniors would disembark, with trunks and suitcases and climb into the College Bus driven by none other than that indomitable *Bus Simon*. The drive to Gurutalawa was about one and half hours drive and the Juniors went on to Bandarawela which took another two and half hour train journey. If all went well, *Bus Simon* made it to Guru and on to Bandarawela to pick up the other boys, on time. As the Bus drove up to the Gates of The College every voice rang out in harmony to sing the College Song, which echoed off *Warden Hill* or *Gongala*, loud and clear, for all to know that we were back to a place so dear.

Dr and Mrs. Hayman, Rev'd Foster and few members of the staff would assemble at the Main Entrance to welcome each and every boy, as they disembarked from the bus. This was easy in those days, as we had only ninety nine boarders and one day boy in school at that time. There would be a list of names on the Notice Board indicating your House and Dorm and that was where you stayed for the entire term. It was one mad dash to the dorm to get the best bed and position. Some did not want to be too close to the Prefects Cubicle or the Night Toilet and often the first term's newcomers would get those two or three spots.

The junior dorms were formed on a Quadrangle, and had Winchester, Read, Garnier and De Saram, the main toilets were outside, and served all the dorms. The water was fresh from the water tank and icy cold in the mornings. Today these toilets have been improved and modernized with the support from OBA's and other Donors in Sri Lanka and around the globe. During the first few years at Guru the Junior Dorm had a Manna (a native grass, which grew abundantly in the hills) thatched roof.



The Chapel of St Francis of Assisi was the focal point of the College at the entrance to the Farm, adjoined by Garnier Junior, and the quarters used by the much loved and greatly respected Rev'd A.J. Foster. Below the chapel was the first swimming pool which was a square -- five foot deep and twenty feet in length and breath. This pool was popularly named the "Duck Pond" The New Swimming Pool was donated by Dr Hayman in 1952 and completed in 1953. He also donated the pool in Mount Lavinia when he was there before the outbreak of the war. Somewhere in 1949-50, the classrooms, which were about a mile away from the main building, were set on fire by a disgruntled minor employee. A colleague of mine at the time, L.M.Fernando recalls that it was one Rex Wanigasekera who first saw the flames from the Senior Dorm and drew attention to all by yelling "Fire Fire" until the house Prefects opened up the Dorms. The Senior Dorms were directly opposite the classrooms, as the crow flies, but about a one mile walk on the normal road. I remember hosing water on to the junior dorm roofs during the dry month of August *Katchan Winds*, as a precaution.

Gurutalawa was opened in 1942, gifted by Leslie De Saram, cousin of Warden Canon R.S De Saram. They had no children, and were proceeding to England to settle down there. It was gifted to STC as Mount Lavinia campus was taken over by the British Army as an Army Hospital after the fall of Singapore to the Japanese. The *School by the Sea* broke into four segments with one branch at Girls High School on Hotel Road in Mount Lavinia with Rev'd Barnabus in Charge, where I remember as a junior, the late George Arndt, Morley Pereira, and Dr Ben Chapman. The second one at St Paul's Girls School in Milagiriya, the third one at Getambe Peradeniya with Mr. Davidson in Charge and one at Guru with Canon RS de Saram in Charge.

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## The Guru Appeal - The Student(cont...)

Getamba was closed down as it was affected by floods and the boys transferred to Gurutalawa, When Mount Lavinia reopened after the army handed over the college, Warden de Saram moved to Mount and left Dr Hayman as Sub Warden at Gurutalawa.

Besides the normal curriculum of the school there were many other activities one could partake in. Farming was taught by the Farm Manager Mr. Thomas and later Mr. Pegler, Carpentry by Mr. Scott. Each house had its own veggie patch and prizes were awarded for the best Vegetable garden at the Annual Prize Giving. We had a vibrant Scout Group, the 3rd Nuwara Eliya. A Junior and Senior Cadet Platoon commanded by Mr.

F.L.Amerasinghe and by Mr. A.M.S. Abeyawardene. I remember marching over hill and dale, stream and rocks in full battle dress to the Army Camp at Diyatalawa for the annual Cadet Camp. Two miles from the camp, we'd break for twenty minute to polish and straighten up the gear and march on into the Army, with the rifles on the shoulder as smart as if we were on parade. The Hiking Club explored the areas near and far and walked to Horton Plains and Worlds End, under the watch of Rev'd Foster and Mr. Ashley Tennekoon. There was also a miniature Rifle Club and some of us who were keen on agriculture were allowed to spend time in the Dairy and Poultry area. The milk from the cows and the eggs from the chickens helped make the school self-sufficient to some extent. There were also a small herd of Black Merion sheep and a wonderful Orchard of fruit trees that included Loquats, Guavas, Pears, Peaches, Naval Washington Oranges and the very special Persimmon tree. This tree was covered by wire netting and cared for by a man who was mute, but he could still identify any culprit who dared venture uninvited into his territory. The farm also had a great Big Stud Bull, which had an encounter with the Bursar's car and the Stud came out the winner!



**DE SARAM  
& GARNIER DORMS**

We had to play games and take part in all activities, whether for the school or for the House. Cricket was the most popular, second came Tennis, then Soccer, followed by Hockey, Athletics, and Boxing. In the early 1950's, we traveled to Jaffna to play cricket against the Jaffna College First Eleven and to Batticaloa to play against St Michael's College. My friend and planting colleague Larry Schokman was also a member of this team.

I recall with fond memories Mr and Mrs Kularatne who were in charge of the Kitchen and the "Tuck Shop." After a tiring game of Cricket, we'd trek two miles back from the playing fields, up and down hills, to a mug of hot Ovaltine and a plate full of "Pittu" that cost us about 15 cents. A quick icy cold bath in the sprout above the miniature shooting range and we'd run to the Dorms for quick change before for Prep in the Dining cum Assembly Hall. One hour of hard study later, we go back to the dorm to drop of the books and come back again for Dinner. A sedate walk back to the Dorms for Room Time and Lights Out until morning. The meal time dress code for juniors was always shirts, shorts and sock and shoes, whilst the seniors would be in longs, sweater or Blazer. Forks knives and spoons were compulsory at mealtimes.

If you fell ill, you were never sent home unless it was necessary. Mrs. Hayman, an Army Nurse, was a Matron who was able to handle any calamity that came along, whether it was influenza, Chicken Pox or Measles. Doctor Scharenguivel, an another old Thomian who had a practice in Bandarawela, would visit if urgently needed or drop in on his monthly visit. Mrs. Hayman also took it upon herself to treat a F.R.V.Cooray's leg that was broken whilst playing Hockey. He had slipped into the boundary drain and we carried him on a rough stretcher up to the Tennis Court, the edge of the road that was accessible by car. From that point onwards, he was splinted up and sent to Badulla Hospital in the College Van with Mrs. Hayman following in her Lancaster Car. I recall spending my Easter Holidays in the "Chickery", as the Chicken Pox ward was called (Read House Junior was converted to the Chickery) with the late John Marasinghe, Bandu Wanigasekera and the sick boy 'Barathan.' To while away the time, Mrs. Hayman would teach us to play Canasta and Rev'd Foster taught us to play Patience.

*Note: There is an unofficial Gurutalawa Support Group here in Australia, formed by Ed Rowland and Peter Weerakoon. A collection made by this group, in 2009, helped the Guru OBA set up a Sports Fund. The Fund's annual interest helps purchase games materials for the school, funds a Coach and makes possible an ex Gratia payments to Staff who supervise and encourage Sport.*

I am certain that most of us who went to Gurutalawa as little boys, came out as young men ready to face the world. We were groomed to be Thomians and men by that great and illustrious educationist Dr. R.L.Hayman, his close and loyal friend Rev'd A.J.Foster and by numerous other great teachers of our time.

Gurutalawa was built on a good foundation and some of its pioneer students are still its greatest supporters. In the Australian OBA we have Raji Casinander and Ivor Kelaart and elsewhere we have others like John Habaragoda, P.S. Duleep Kumar and my two brothers (late Ronnie and Bradmen Weerakoon). As age gives away to younger old boys, let the wave of enthusiasm that was instilled in all those us who passed through the gates of Gurutalawa never cease, and let us remember the good times and the bad, and encourage the present to hold fast to what is good, and guide the College to the heights of its Glory Days. Old "Gurutalawians" now is the time to give back to your Alma Mater what it gave to you..

"Let us not ask what Gurutalawa did for me, but what have I done for GURUTALAWA"?

**ESTO PERPETUA**