THREE TEACHERS

*By Fred Hobbs*

School days were generally pleasant days for me over the years. My mostly positive memories must have something to do with the totally inconsequential fact that I can remember almost all the names of my teachers starting in first grade with Mrs. Duncan.

For this essay, though, I have chosen to write about three other teachers, one each from elementary, junior and high school days. All of them had contrasting, but lasting places in my school days’ memory bank .

First, Miss Ward. On day one in her sixth grade class, she stepped to the blackboard and wrote her name carefully in that teacher-style Palmer Method penmanship common in the era (1940s near the end of World War II.) She turned to the class and announced in a commanding voice: “My name is Miss Ward.” Clutching the eraser she turned, continuing her introduction by swiping the last letter of her name off the board and booming, “But if anyone misbehaves in here, I erase the “D” and it’s WAR!

The class sat stunned and silent. She had certainly claimed our attention.

By all accounts, she must have been considered a good teacher and I suppose I learned from her most of what a sixth grader should. But, Miss Ward always had a look that was dour, if not a glower. She wore her hair in a tightly severe bun and although it’s unfair to criticize a probably poorly paid teacher, she apparently possessed only two dresses, both green, which she alternated each day.

The most dramatic moment in her class came when she committed an act that today would cause her to face legal action. It was a hot day in late spring; the windows of the first floor classroom were open. A boy in the class named Marty was admittedly goofing off, looking out the window and not paying attention. Marty happened to have a German surname. This was sometimes a problem in wartime America. “Get out of this class, you little Nazi,” the teacher shrieked. Miss WAR grabbed Marty by the scruff of the neck and dropped him out the window onto the playground about seven feet below. He wasn’t hurt…physically. I’ve always wondered, though, what that incident recalls in Marty’s memory.

In junior high, our homeroom teacher was Miss Stubbs. She was a short, attractive blonde probably in her late 20s. All the kids seemed to love her. I definitely had a crush on her. She talked frequently about her boyfriend, Dennis King, Jr. who was an officer in the Coast Guard. His father, Dennis King, Sr. was a fairly prominent actor on the Broadway stage. Mixed in with lectures on American History and lessons in math, Miss Stubbs talked a lot about Dennis, Jr. From time to time, she even led us in singing the Coast Guard official song. The class learned her birth date and when it approached, I bought her a piece of very modestly priced costume jewelry (read “cheap.”) Too shy to admit it was just from me, I delivered the gift to her apartment and told her it was from the whole class. I could tell by the twinkle in her eye and that she knew the truth.

A high school teacher I encountered does not elicit such a happy memory.

He was the leather craft shop teacher, Mr. Wright. I choose to call him Mr. Wrong. I knew my abilities at all things “crafty” were severely limited. The great comedian, Jonathon Winters proclaimed that he flunked clay class because he couldn’t make a bunny. I understood perfectly. I was hopeless in the belt tooling business. Other students made beautiful leather items; purses, wallets and, of course belts.

Try as I might, the pattern I traced on the piece of leather, didn’t fit. When I used the tooling implements they bit down into the leather creating ugly scars instead of making handsome, fancy indented designs. When I turned my“sorry looking” belt over to Mr. Wrong, he called the class to attention and, sending a snearing, smirking glance my way, he held up the scraggly looking piece of leather for all to behold. “Look at this, class. In all the years I’ve been teaching, I’ve never seen a worse looking belt!

I was humiliated and since the subject was a belt, a thought flashed briefly in my mind, of giving him one…on the snout! Ultimately I passed the class by fashioning a couple of quick and easy wallets, but never touched another piece of leather that didn’t come fully fashioned from J.C. Penney’s or Sears.

So what of the fates of these three characters from my school days? I know for certain Miss Stubbs married her Prince Charming from the Coast Guard. I assume Miss WAR never went up the river on assault charges and finally bought a new dress, maybe a red one. And, as for Mr. Wrong? It had to be. I read a story in the newspaper several years ago, quoting him in his capacity as a high-level administrator in a large local school system!