

Dishcrew

By Judy Beil Vaughan

Colorado Rocky Mountain School

Class of 1961

Coffee "jello" was dessert. We dish crew members knew what was coming. We had already tried to eat it. Dish crew members ate early at their own table.

Maybe the cook who mixed the dessert up was distracted or her hand slipped when she added the gelatin granules to the sweetened coffee. Maybe the whole event was planned by some higher power. The clear tea-colored rectangular solid in the bowl had the jiggle of a proper gelatin, but its rubber texture defied penetration. Like some yet to be invented polymer used by NASA, a mere spoon could not separate a morsel to be tasted.

When the waiters brought their trays with the Bakelite bowls back to the kitchen for washing, it was clear that no one had eaten the coffee gelatin. The scraper dumped portion after portion into the slop bowl until it was filled. As she turned to the center kitchen table to get another slop bowl, a cube of the stuff teetered, then toppled, to a tall kitchen stool where it bounced visibly, arced to the floor, and tumbled across the linoleum, through the propped open swinging door into the dining room where the students socialized before scattering to their evening activities and study halls.

The conversation stopped and someone laughed. I laughed and the pots and pans washers in the room adjoining the kitchen with its giant sink left their skillets and stockpots to see what was up. The rinser experimentally pushed another cube off the overflowing slop bowl. It skipped like a rock across the knife-scarred wooden table and was handily caught by the washer. The pots and pans pair started a game of catch with another cube and were joined by the students waiting to begin the Madrigal singing group in the recently rearranged dining room. Our laughter drowned out the

Kingston Trio on the record player in the corner of the big kitchen table.

My face was red. My stomach muscles ached. I teared. I couldn't catch my breath. This riotous contagion of laughter brought on by a three dimensional inanimate object was a dynamic visual joke.

My children have told me for years that I didn't have a normal childhood. I don't think any kid who went to CRMS in the sixties had a normal childhood. Boarding schools harbored children because local schools didn't serve them. I came from a ranch so remote that I had better friendships with my animals than people. Some parents lived abroad. Sometimes divorce issues contributed to the decision to come to CRMS.

But it's not normal to go to a high school with no prom, It's not normal to be driven to town or skiing in Aspen seated on wooden benches in the bed of a stake-sided truck, only sometimes covered with a canvas top in the Colorado winter. You might see such a truck on the evening news transporting refugees or third world rebels en route to places way less fun than Aspen. There weren't even any seat belts in the cab to save the teacher-drivers in case of an accident spilling the students out onto the mountainside road.

Ralph Nader was just warming up on safety standards in those years. Today, my grandson has seatbelts on everything, his stroller, his highchair, his baby swing.

Colorado Rocky Mountain School was founded in 1953 in rural Colorado. I think the goal was to teach teenagers the Protestant Ethic without religion. This boarding high school located near Carbondale, Colorado was home to 64 to 84 ninth through twelfth graders the three years I attended from 1958 to 1961. The school routine was nearly as structured as an ashram or a monastery with work, study and virtually no free time except maybe midnight to 3:00 AM. Of course with all the work, we were all sleeping those hours even though we really were teenagers. I have a photo of the

sunrise taken *before* breakfast. I had already cleaned my room and done my dorm job (cleaning the toilets) as I crunched up the packed snow path from the dorm to the dining room.

Three afternoons a week after classes we had sports, some really unusual in the 50's, like soccer. The other two days we had – you guessed it – WORK, known by the redundant title of work jobs. You could build fence or make adobes to construct new buildings for the school in really normal shapes for school buildings like beehive.

Besides the aforementioned work job and dorm job for the school, we had another daily community job for the school. Yes, our parents still had to pay for us to attend CRMS.

Dinner dish crew was the plum job. First you got to eat early. Second, it was social, compared to say cleaning a classroom, knocking off eraser dust all by yourself.

The dishes were hand washed in an assembly line. The waiters (another job) brought the dishes in from their particular table of seven students and one faculty member. (How did they get teachers to eat dinner every night with the students? Didn't they have lives of their own?)

The scraper used an oversized rubber spatula to knock the big stuff off the plates before dropping them into one of the two washers' sinks. The washers swished them off and passed them to the rinser, who handed them on to the dryers.

I memorized every Kingston Trio song on dish crew and can sing them today. We aped in raucous unison, "You want green peppers? I GEEVE you green peppers. Come out the garden, Hee Hee Hee."

There was a pitfall in the social world of dinner dish crew. Pots and Pans. If you were assigned to pots and pans. you worked with just one other person, not of your choice. Typical pairings were the most beautiful popular senior girl with the squarest, acne-ridden freshman boy. It happened to me. I was the least popular,

introverted, snotty girl and did pots and pans for three months with the tall blonde soccer star whose father's name was regularly mentioned in the Wall Street Journal. Shock and awe at the beginning turned to a cautious friendship. We were puppies; how could it have been otherwise?

I learned more than the Protestant Ethic. Somehow soaking up the CRMS community, like someone who lives for a time in an ashram or a monastery (Think of Elizabeth Gilbert), I learned a new form of love, a limited version of universal love is the best I can express it now. I loved CRMS, my teachers, the other students, and John and Ann Holden, the founders. Add the mountains, the ranch, the horses...

After CRMS, I went to college. CRMS was, after all, a college preparatory school. But it took some adjustment. For me college was tame. I hadn't had a normal childhood and after CRMS, I hadn't had a normal adolescence.