

## Cormac McCarthy in High School: 1951

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In the 2003 issue of the *Cormac McCarthy Journal*, Wesley G. Morgan published the first account of McCarthy's years at Knoxville Catholic High School. Drawing on the high school's incomplete archive of the student newspaper, the *Gold and Blue* from 1948 through 1950, Morgan has provided glimpses of the youthful McCarthy's interests and his role within his high school community. Most significantly, Morgan uncovered in the *Gold and Blue* of November 22, 1950, a poem penned by the young McCarthy, "Autumn's Magic" (Morgan 7). Missing from the high school archive are several issues of the *Gold and Blue* from McCarthy's time there, among them the issue of May 25, 1951, presumably the final issue of the school year.<sup>1</sup> This graduation issue was graciously lent me from the private collection of Robert B. Gentry, who was a freshman at the school when McCarthy was a senior (Gentry, Letter). With its account of graduation activities and legacies to younger students and its retrospective commentary on the seniors about to leave the school, this issue offers hints of McCarthy's interests and relationships with his school fellows that complement those Morgan explores.

The high school that McCarthy attended was remarkably intimate. Housed in the remodeled Gregory Ashe mansion, a large brick Victorian home purchased for \$25,000 in 1932 (Pulliam; Clounts), the school initially had offices, a cafeteria, kitchen, library and four classrooms, one for each class cohort--two upstairs and two down (Chandler). In 1942, before the McCarthy children were enrolled there, the first of several additions on the grounds provided for laboratory facilities and a small auditorium (Chandler; Clonts). The student cohorts were small. McCarthy's graduating class consisted of only thirty-one ("KCHS Alumnus" 1). Most of the students were from Catholic families and attended either Immaculate Conception Church, as did the McCarthys and the Longs, or Holy Ghost Catholic Church. And families tended to send all their children to the school, resulting in the kind of family legacy that Morgan discusses, in which the freshmen were already known in the school by association with their older siblings. The school offered tuition breaks for families with multiple children attending. For the 1968/69 school year, tuition was \$225 for three or more Catholic siblings in attendance while a single Catholic student paid \$150 ("Catholic High Enrolment"). Thus McCarthy's family certainly would have paid no more than \$225 when he was attending with his sisters and brothers twenty years earlier, and probably considerably less. The school was parochial and offered religious instruction, but it was open to Protestant and Jewish students at higher tuition if there was space for them. These pupils usually comprised fewer than twenty percent of the student body (Klebenow 1; Fiske), but some had attended the Knoxville parochial schools since first grade, so it seems likely they were well integrated within the school community (Fiske). As late as 1978, the school's principal, Father Xavier Mankel, who himself had attended Catholic High, could still comment, "Because we are small, . . . our problems, as such, are 'family' problems; there are no institutional hangups . . . . I know every child by name and we all get along very well" (Klebenow 1, 5).

Although the total student population of approximately 125 in McCarthy's day<sup>2</sup> was tiny by the standards of most public city high schools, the inclusive feel was mitigated by a traditional segregation of the classes—at least as students entered and left the building: "A freshman wouldn't think of using the seniors' entrance. If he were caught doing such a thing, he'd have to shine shoes or do some other such chore" (Clonts). Robert Gentry recalls that by the time he was a senior, this student-enforced rule had been relaxed (E-mail, 4 Mar. 2008).

In 1939, a decade before McCarthy's time at the school, the faculty was comprised of four nuns, one of whom also served as principal (Fiske). Despite Suttree's grudging memory of his Catholic teachers' "orthopedic moralizing" (S 254), the sisters were apparently popular among most students. In the personal information accompanying their senior pictures in the graduation issue, many, including Jim Long's sister Josie,<sup>3</sup> volunteered that they would miss their teachers--but Charlie McCarthy did not ("Knoxville Catholic" 4). The small faculty seems to have provided its students a solid grounding in the liberal arts. Graduates from the class of 1934 recalled instruction in English, Spanish, biology, mathematics and economics, with no practical courses such as shop: "it was all book learning" one recalled. He noted that no Catholic High School graduate had difficulty gaining acceptance to the University of Tennessee (Chandler). By the time the McCarthy children attended the high school, Latin had been added to the curriculum: the retrospective of the class of 1951 includes the reminiscence that algebra and Latin did not prove as bad as the class had feared when they were rising freshmen ("Historians" 3). Gentry remembers that Chemistry and Physics were also part of the curriculum (E-mail, 5 Mar. 2008; 17 Mar. 2008). The school's emphasis on a sound mind did not exclude the development of a sound body: at least one student in the class of 1951 listed her physical education classes among the things she would miss ("Knoxville Catholic" 4).

Extra-curricular activities were also available to interested students. The *Gold and Blue*, the student newspaper which McCarthy's older sisters Jackie and Barbara had edited (Morgan 6), had a long tradition of awards from the Tennessee High School Press, the Catholic Scholastic Press, and the National Scholastic Press associations (Branham). In McCarthy's senior year, the *Gold and Blue* won All-Tennessee honors ("Historians" 3). The newspaper's importance to the school is suggested by the presentation of journalism awards along with athletic awards at the graduation ceremony on May 28, 1951. Its four editors and managers were awarded Outstanding Achievement medals, and among the nine other *Gold and Blue* staff to receive certificates of honor that year was Charles McCarthy ("KCHS Alumnus" 1). Morgan's research found that McCarthy was to have been the staff artist for the newspaper during his senior year. No artwork appears in the graduation issue of 1951, and although Morgan found several cartoons in the 1950/51 issues, none was signed (7). On the other hand, McCarthy had at least one signed piece of writing in the paper that academic year, his poem, "Autumn's Magic". But given that most of the paper's articles, too, are unsigned, it remains possible that McCarthy did writing as well as artwork for the *Gold and Blue*. (One recalls his *Who's Who* entry of 1970-71, which indicates that in addition to novels, McCarthy has written "articles". Is it possible he was thinking back to his high school years?) Nothing in the graduation issue reveals what his specific contributions were, but clearly they were significant enough for him to receive one of the journalism honors.

Other activities suggest McCarthy's intellectual and artistic interests. Together with three of his classmates, McCarthy competed in an oratorical contest in his sophomore year. The graduation issue of the *Gold and Blue* comments that all four "ably represented" their class, but there is no indication whether they defeated their rivals ("Historians" 3). Catholic High School also sponsored an active Drama Club. In 1946 McCarthy's sister Jackie played the role of Amy in *Little Women* (*First Fifty* 44), and in 1956 his brother Bill directed the skit "Turn About Is Fair Play" for a National Catholic Week youth rally held at the school ("Rally"). Morgan found that Charles McCarthy had acted in a school skit in the 1948/49 school year (7). Morgan also notes that McCarthy sang in the school choir (7), and the graduation issue of the *Gold and Blue* offers further commentary about that. The class retrospective singles out a classmate, Tom Clancy, for his "beautiful voice" and continues, "Charlie McCarthy also has been a valuable member of the choir and soloist at several CYO [Catholic Youth Organization] parties" ("Historians" 3). And the rhyming "seniors' will" for 1951 includes this couplet:

To H. Gass a popular choice  
C. McCarthy wills his tenor voice. ["Seniors Bequeath" 2]

This seems to be something of a joke. Gentry recalls Horace Gass as a "corpulent, pink-cheeked kid well over 200 pounds" who would "crack a joke with high-pitched voice, bug eyes, and a wattle that wiggled a little." "Of all the cutups in my years at KCHS", Gentry reminisced, "Horace was tops in my book." Gass was a freshman when McCarthy was a senior, and Gentry thinks it unlikely that McCarthy and he were friends, but that McCarthy could not have been unaware of Gass's "funny, high-pitched voice". Gass left the school before his sophomore year (E-mail 14 Sept. 2009).

The primary competitive sport for both boys and girls was basketball, judging from the account of what each graduate would be remembered for ("Knoxville Catholic" 4-5). Gentry recalls that the boys' team was among Knoxville's best in 1950/51 (E-mail, 4 Mar. 2008). Given his shorter stature, one would not expect that McCarthy played on the team, and the graduation issue provides tenuous corroborating evidence: for many students, the entry under "Remembered As" lists their sports and activities. McCarthy's entry does not. (Then again, it does not cite his participation in the choir or on the *Gold and Blue* staff either.) He may have played intramural softball. Several students indicated that after graduation they would miss playing softball at recess, and McCarthy listed among his hopes for the future "To be as good a shortstop as Harvey" ("Knoxville Catholic" 4). Gentry identifies Harvey as Harrigan ("Hop") Moyers, class president and "one of the nicest guys I ever knew in Knoxville." He notes that intramural football was also popular (E-mail, 4 Mar. 2008).

How was McCarthy seen by his classmates? No doubt he was one of their "family"—someone they had grown up with and knew well. In a brief piece entitled "Ideal Seniors Are Selected", in which each graduating student is mentioned for some special attribute, McCarthy is singled out not for brains, wit, personality, looks, or voice—all of which were assigned to other boys—but for "talent", suggesting perhaps that his school fellows recognized the breadth and depth of his interests and abilities (2).<sup>4</sup> We know that he had a wide range of hobbies as a boy (Woodward 31) and that eventually he was drawn to writing novels because, as he told interviewer Richard

Woodward, that form can “encompass all the various disciplines and interests of humanity” (30). But likely his childhood friends had little or no inkling that they had shared their developmental years with a boy who would become an internationally acclaimed novelist. Other students in his class had won writing awards that year, but there were none for McCarthy, and no evidence that he had submitted any work to writing contests appears in the *Gold and Blue* issues either Morgan or I have examined. Indeed, McCarthy told Woodward that he had never considered writing until he was twenty-three (31). At any rate, when it came to making light-hearted predictions for the future of each graduate, becoming an author was not in the stars for McCarthy. The graduation issue’s forecasts for the class of 1951 are structured as a 1961 dialogue between two high school sweethearts, now married, as they look through a photo album of their old friends and comment on their current activities. The first photograph they encounter is of “Charlie McCarthy and his ‘Chas-Mobile.’”<sup>5</sup> One recalls, “I saw in the evening paper a couple of days ago where he won another of those midget auto races” (“Star-Gazer” 6).<sup>6</sup>

Next to McCarthy’s senior photograph—smiling, dark-haired, even-featured and youthful-looking even among his classmates<sup>7</sup>—is the notation that he will be remembered as a “Carefree lad” who makes “clever remarks” (“Knoxville Catholic” 4). But it is difficult to assess these entries. Beside each student’s picture are blurbs in five categories: “Remembered As”, “Pet Shudders”, “Will Miss”, “Favorite Song”, and “Hopes”. The authorship of these notations seems to shift, the first written by the newspaper staff and the other four supplied by the students themselves. McCarthy has virtually the only entry under “Remembered As” that is evaluative rather than factual. And we know that he was himself a member of the *Gold and Blue* staff. It may be either that another staff member was having some mild fun by breaking the mold when it came to McCarthy’s entry, or that he wrote it himself, in some kind of self-mockery, repudiating the conventional rehearsal of high school activities and accomplishments. The playful tone is carried through and intensified in the other categories. For his “Pet Shudders”, where many students offered such things as “gum chewers” or “gossipy” boys/girls, McCarthy, who led Woodward to believe that he was malcontent in school (31), ironically listed “Three minute periods; lunch; early dismissal” (“Knoxville Catholic” 4). Many students indicated they would miss the students, teachers, and activities after graduation; McCarthy said rather mysteriously that he would miss “Study periods with Clunk; J. Long on graduation night; \$13.10” (“Knoxville Catholic” 4). “Clunk” was Jim Cloonan, a star player on the basketball team. “J. Long” was McCarthy’s friend Jim or J-Bone, commemorated in *Suttree*.<sup>8</sup> According to Gentry, who interviewed Long in 2004, Jim was not allowed to graduate because under the pressure of working while going to school, he had missed assignments and had not completed his make-up work (E-mail, 4 Mar. 2008). Probably because he was not graduating, no photo or mention of Jim Long appears in the graduation issue of the *Gold and Blue*, except for McCarthy’s comment about missing him and the rather poignant rhyming couplet in the senior class will:

For Catholic Hi to carry on,  
Josie leaves her brother J. Long. [“Seniors Bequeath” 2]

Long recalled that McCarthy felt his friend should have been included in the graduation activities (Gentry, E-mail, 4 Mar. 2008). And Wesley Morgan's research has uncovered that in protest and solidarity McCarthy nearly refused to graduate himself. Only family pressure induced him to go through with it (Morgan, Interview).

Like several other boys and girls, McCarthy named the romantic Perry Como song "If" as his favorite: "If they made me a king,/ I'd be but a slave to you..." ("Knoxville Catholic" 4).<sup>9</sup> Perhaps this was a tune the choir had performed. Perhaps, as Robert Gentry wrote me somewhat facetiously, young Chas was in love (Letter). Perhaps he was mocking his romantically inclined classmates. Or perhaps his taste had evolved away from the "hillbilly" songs his sister Barbara claimed were his favorites in 1948 (Morgan 7) and his musical preferences at seventeen actually meshed with his peers'. Finally, what the adolescent McCarthy claimed to hope for the future, in addition to becoming a good shortstop, was "to become rich" ("Knoxville Catholic" 4), piling irony upon irony for the writer who lived in poverty for decades and only belatedly achieved financial security with the commercial successes of the Border Trilogy, *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Renamed the *Green and Gold* in 1953 (Chandler), in 1965 the school paper was issued only six times per year, with a circulation of about 600 (Branham). Morgan's research for the years McCarthy attended Catholic High School identified issues in November, December, March, April, and May, but since the graduation issue of 1950/51 is identified as number 8 in the 18th volume, there may have been yet other issues in McCarthy's senior year.

<sup>2</sup> In Fall 1939, the enrollment was 129, and the school was at maximum capacity pending the opening of the new building (Fiske). Judging by the size of McCarthy's graduating class, the enrollment in 1951 was probably not much larger.

<sup>3</sup> The confirmation register of Knoxville's Immaculate Conception Church indicates that on January 11, 1942, Josephine (age 8) and James (age 9) Long, children of Estella Long, were confirmed together with Charles McCarthy (age 8) and his sister Barbara McCarthy (age 9). Although Josie was younger, Gentry remembers Jim and Josie Long as siblings in the same high school class. Jim may have started school late or been held back a year (E-mail, 4 Mar. 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Josie Long was praised for her complexion ("Ideal" 2).

<sup>5</sup> Robert Gentry confirms that McCarthy's nickname was "Chass"—as Gentry spells it (Letter).

<sup>6</sup> Wesley Morgan has shared that McCarthy had a Crosley Hot-Shot.

<sup>7</sup> This photograph also appears in *The First Fifty Years* (81). The graduation issue of the *Gold and Blue* also prints another picture of McCarthy in a group shot of his class at the traditional May crowning of the statue of the Virgin Mary (3).

<sup>8</sup> Gentry writes, "To many of us males growing up in the early 50's, the words 'boner' and 'bone' (as in 'J-Bone Long') meant pretty much what they mean today: an erection, hard-on. I don't know how Jim Long got the name. He would know, of course, as would his close friends at KCHS, including perhaps his best friend, Charles (Chazz) McCarthy, Jr." (E-mail, 15 Sept. 2009).

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<sup>9</sup> Thanks are due to Robert Gentry for the lyrics of this song, for access to the May 25, 1951 issue of the *Gold and Blue*, which is the heart of this article, and for his gracious correspondence.

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