THE NARVA

Recent questions about the odd name of our college yearbook have sent me back to my early days at Park, fifty years ago. When I was a freshman in 1967, all of us newcomers were expected to undergo an initiation called Hell Week. During those few days, thirteen upperclassmen, dressed in smelly clothes and scary makeup, would terrorize those of us who were willing to play along. Among the things we had to do, besides wearing our clothes inside out and backwards, was learn the answers to college history questions such as “Why is Mackay tower crooked? – Where is Spencer Cave? – Who is buried near the soccer field? – Who was Narva?” Even today, I’ll bet some of my classmates can remember the answers. Any upperclassman could ask us poor Frosh a question and if we didn’t know the answer, we were ordered to perform some silly stunt like “guppying,” but that’s another story. Despite the frivolity, we did learn a great deal about college history.

We knew, for example, that Narva was the name of an Indian Chief. However, I am not sure we knew he was fictional.

The name of Park’s yearbook was taken from a thirty page poem entitled The Vision of Narva: A Legend of Parkville written circa 1891 by leading Platte County citizen William McClung Paxton. Paxton had arrived in Platte County in 1839 and was one of the earliest settlers. A lawyer by trade, he gave up his initial practice to pursue other livelihoods. After marrying in 1840, he farmed for nine years but eventually became tired of prairie life. In 1850, he moved to Platte City and operated a store until 1857. Paxton also had an interest in the Platte City Water Mills but lost everything due to the deaths of his partners and the looming Civil War. In 1862, he went back to law practice and managed to pay all his substantial debts by 1870. Meanwhile, he had been elected to several different civic positions including public administrator.

Later in his life, after he became hard of hearing, he began to write poetry and to research genealogies. He is best remembered for his Annals of Platte County, a compilation of information about Platte County families and local history. Apparently, people who wanted to be included had to supply their family trees and pay a fee. At any rate, Paxton’s Annals of Platte County is full of wonderful information about families, businesses, crops, crimes, Civil War battles, property squabbles, and political intrigue. The book is far more interesting than his poetry.

Paxton also knew George Park and John A. McAfee and followed the growth of Park College with great interest; he included many references to the
college in the Annals. As part of his heartfelt tribute to the two men, Paxton reprinted a portion of his poem *The Vision of Narva: A Legend of Parkville* in the June, 1890 section of the *Annals*:

**CORONACH**

“In your lives ye were peerless,
And in death not divided;
For the right ye were fearless,
And for God were decided.
You have gone where vexation
Your communion can’t sever,
And where peace and salvation
Shall be yours and forever.

Let the shepherd be taken,
And the flock will be scattered:
And the ship is forsaken
When its rudder is shattered.
But your prayers have been heeded,
And your work shall not perish;
For the Lord when most needed
Will deliver and cherish.

We have come here to cover
Your dear forms ‘neath the sod;
But your spirits now hover
Round the throne of your God.
We are left broken-hearted,
But our tears will soon cease;
For the work you have started
Shall go on and increase”

The rest of the long narrative poem, which Paxton first recited in Parkville in 1891, relates the story of Narva, chief of an unnamed tribe of Indians. The tribe’s original home was in Detroit and there the young Narva was befriended by a Frenchman named Pierre Alloe. Alloe had taken Narva in, educated him and converted him to Christianity. Later, after Narva became leader of his tribe, enemy attacks prompted him to move his people to a more peaceful place.

Narva and his tribe traveled to Missouri where they settled in what is now Parkville. They lived in a cave beneath the future college hill. Narva had a
beautiful daughter named Morning. One day Morning was out riding when she ran into a handsome white traveler who, miraculously, was Claude Alloe, son of Pierre. He had come to look for good old chief Narva, a man whom his father had told him he could trust.

As the tedious tale progresses, Narva becomes sick and on his deathbed has several visions that he describes to those standing around waiting for him to die. One of the visions is of the future Park College and its religious foundation:

“Before us, see a charming villa,
    That nestles at our very feet;
    It is religion’s holy temple,
    And education’s noble seat.

    Here poverty has found a shelter
    And toil and learning is combined;
    And here the youths of faith and promise,
    A home and free instruction find.

    Above the college hangs a banner,
    With ‘Holiness to God’ inscribed;
    For virtue, truth and pure religion,
    By eager youths are here imbibed.

    An atmosphere of classic learning,
    Pervades these academic walls;
    The Graces dance in fairy circles,
    And Muses sing through attic halls.
Here Science builds her brilliant temple;
   Devotion bows at lowly shrines;
   Religion lifts the open Bible,
   And truth is delved from Wisdom’s mines.

   Domestic arts and mental culture,
   Engage the zealous maiden’s thought;
   And youths in craft and agriculture,
   Are by adept instructors taught.”

Paxton also amended his poem; several years later, he included a reference to Eleanor Chesnut. Eleanor, class of 1888, was a medical missionary in Lien Chou, China where she was killed by an anti-foreign mob in 1905.

“The chief now lifts his hand in sorrow
   And moans: I see a martyr's grave.
Miss Chesnut's blood was shed in China
   By heathen whom she went to save;

   In yonder hall ten charming maidens
   Resolve, their solemn vows to keep
   Like her, to bear the word to China
   And, at her grave, to pray and weep.”

Another section describes George Park as a “sachem” and John McAfee, a “prophet.” Paxton even refers to the Park College Record, believe it or not.

To make a very long story short, before Narva died he pronounced Alloe and Morning man and wife and named Claude “White” Alloe chief of the tribe. Narva then instructed the tribe to move back to Detroit, learn the white man’s ways and become successful. After his death his mournful tribe did just that.

I remain grateful that the upperclassmen did not make us lowly Frosh memorize the poem – that memory would keep me awake at night.

For some reason, Charles H. Crooks,’01, business manager of the annual, chose Narva as the name of the first college yearbook, published in 1901. The editorial board liked it: “We have been glad ever since we first heard The Narva suggested for our annual. The words fall like music on the ear, a welcome sound of melody. Those familiar with William Paxton’s Vision of Narva recognize the appropriateness of the title.”
Regardless of how we modern, more “sophisticated” folks may feel about the poem, the early students embraced it. After all, it was typical of the amateur parlor poetry of its day and, for better or worse, the name stuck.

Volumes of the Narva were not produced annually until 1928. They vary greatly in quality and photograph identification. Some years were quite elegant, others were poorly done and cheaply printed. Naturally, these aspects were governed by the amount of money that was available for production and the talent and initiative of the staff. Regardless, almost all of them published before 1991 have photographs of students, faculty and staff that are identified in some fashion. They are helpful tools in both historical research and alumni relations.

The newer Narvas are more like magazines and contain articles, stories, poems and some event coverage. There are few captioned photographs of students, faculty or staff and, as a result, these booklets will not be very helpful in identifying people in the future.

Regardless, the main reason for compiling yearbooks, other than to preserve a historic record, is to provide a souvenir of college days for those who lived them. They are memory books that, in the words of the 1901 editorial staff, “…put in tangible form those things which we see here on the campus and which we will cherish throughout life. Thus, The Narva will carry us back to college days when silvered locks give warning, to a lingering few, of life’s close end.”

In these books, Park alumni are forever young.

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