

Memories from a 1936 high school grad: Learning about my mother-in-law's prom date, the future Catholic novelist, professor, and film scholar Roger B. Dooley



George's Mom, Eleanor Dohn, now age 96, lives in Getzville, New York near Buffalo: This photo was taken after her graduation from high school.

My husband and I spent three days in Buffalo last week visiting George's Mom. George grew up in the town of Clarence, just northeast of the city. His parents had a home there for over fifty years just off Main Street.

His Mom, Eleanor, now age 96, always saves some mail for us to go through when we visit since her eyesight has been failing in recent years. One of the items in the bag was a formally-addressed envelope from the high school that she had attended over eight decades earlier. Yes, more than eight decades ago. You see, Eleanor Giles Dohn graduated in the Class of 1936 of South Park High School.



Located in south Buffalo, South Park is celebrating their 100th anniversary this year, with a huge gala planned for the first weekend of May. Though the date had passed, I assured Mom that I would write a note and send her best wishes to those in the alumni office who planned the event. This elicited a nice conversation about memories of her high school days.

The next morning, the writer in me asked Mom more questions about her memories of classes, activities, and friends. She has an incredible recall of events that took place long ago, providing detailed descriptions and the correct spelling of last names. As Mom went on and on sharing detailed high school memories, I took notes.

Four years of Latin and three years of French studies were part of the curriculum for her graduation with a classical diploma. Mom spoke of teachers, principals, classmates, and social events. I later read about the school's history online and my research confirms Mom's memory down to the spelling of the last names!

Prom date turned author:

Mom reminisced about friends, sports, social activities, and going to the prom with a very smart classmate. She told us that this Roger Dooley later became an author after he attended Canisius College, the Jesuit school of the Diocese of Buffalo. They were Latin classmates for four years. Mom then spontaneously started reciting conjugations and quotes from Ovid. I loved it, a former Latin student myself.

She told us that Roger and their classmate William Williams (yes, that's the name she gave me!) were "smart kids" who later graduated with high honors.

Writer, teacher and film scholar:

I looked up Roger Dooley on my iPad while we were there with Mom and found his 1993 obituary from the New York Times.

Only 73 at the time of his death, we learned that this "writer, teacher and film scholar" had taught English and American literature at Canisius College, as well as Iona College, St. John's University, and Queensborough Community College. He was named dean of humanities and chairman of English in 1964 at Manhattan Community College. He wrote four novels "about the experiences of Irish-Americans in Buffalo: "Less Than the Angels" (1946), "Days Beyond Recall" (1949), "The House of Shanahan" (1952) and "Gone Tomorrow" (1961). He also wrote "From Scarface to Scarlet" (1981), a study of American films of the 1930's."

My mother-in-law was not surprised to hear about the accomplishments and experiences of her high school friend. She noted that he was incredibly smart during their teenage years. And I later learned that Roger had actually graduated at age 16, two years younger than his peers.

Catholic author:

The biography for Roger Dooley is listed on the Catholic Authors website. Really an autobiographical sketch, it was originally published as a chapter in "The Book Of Catholic Authors, Sixth Series: Informal Portraits Of Famous Modern Catholic Writers" edited by Walter Romig in 1960.

In his own words, Dooley speaks of the publication of his books as "the ultimate realization of the boyhood dream that has been closest to my heart ever since I was fourteen, a sophomore in high school:"

"It was then that I first vaguely conceived the grand ambition of trying to record in

fiction the world in which I was growing up, the whole complex network of families, most of them Irish, known to each other for generations, since their early years in Buffalo's colorful old First Ward."

Dooley shares much about his philosophy of writing styles, his academic journey through college degrees and professorial teaching and mentorship at New York-area institutions, and his great interest in film and the theatre.

In summation, Roger Dooley finishes his account on his writings by relating the importance of where he came from (Buffalo) as well as the life experiences he had as a professional in New York City.

"But no matter how my acquaintance here may widen through the years, I shall probably continue to convey my fictional observations in terms of people like those with whom I grew up. As Willa Cather observed, a writer does not choose his material, he adjusts himself to it, since it was basically absorbed before he was ten. But then, too, as Miss Cather herself was advised by Sarah Orne Jewett, 'How well you must know the world before you can begin to write about the parish!'"

Preserving family history through the oral tradition:

George's Mom told us that she had a copy of Roger's first book and kept it for many years in the bookcase of the family's Clarence house. It is always fascinating to listen to my mother-in-law, Eleanor Dohn, describe her teenage years growing up in Buffalo. Her amazing memory of details makes for extended conversation and more questions about the life she led before she married George's Dad.

Family history should be a required part of conversations in every household. You never know what you are going to learn.

Free Download of "Less Than the Angels"

Thanks to Archive.org, you can read Roger Dooley's first novel, "Less Than the Angels," published in 1946.

Click on this link to get your copy.