

RICE TOWER AT CHMA AND  
THE UNUSUAL BOTTLE OF COLOGNE

Second Thoughts

By J. B. Leftwich, Columnist

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There it lay. The Tower. A pile of rubble, a heap of bricks that once cloaked a noble building. In little time, the wrecker's ball had razed Rice Tower, formerly the target of cadet jokes and formerly militantly defended by its cadet residents.

Rice Tower was the oddest building on the Castle Heights Military Academy campus, named for Col. L. L. Rice who had owned the academy during some of its glory days, and part of a circle of buildings which included Rutherford Parks Library, Main. Ingram, Smith Chapel and Armstrong, came tumbling down last week.

I never learned why The Tower was built four stories high with three rooms on each floor. It made no architectural sense. Maybe there was this little plot of ground too small for a conventional building so Rice was built.

It was never "Rice" Barracks. It was always The Tower. To the cadets who were assigned rooms in Tower, the building was fiercely defended. There were stories told by the cadets on fourth floor about how the building swayed during wind storms. The Fourth Floor boys loved to brag about the building's swings. They left heroic in surviving the rigors of the fabled floor.

I always suspected that cadets living on the upper floors loved their quarters because it was impossible to surprise them with an after taps inspection. The old building creaked and groaned with every step on its uncarpeted stair steps. Everything always was in order by the time an inspecting officer reached the top floor.

There was only one bathroom, on the second floor, in Tower. There were stories, unconfirmed, of course, that in the wee small hours some cadets of Fourth simply raised a window. Most of us thought those stories, like so many others coming out of Tower, were greatly exaggerated. Maybe. Maybe not.

Here is one of those stores: John Granville came to Heights from Texas where he was an amateur boxer of some fame. John was hardly ready for the military discipline, and before he settled in, there were a few confrontations. One occurred with me in algebra class. Both of us emerged with greater respect for the other and became friends. I am using his real name because he became a fine cadet.

John lived on the third floor of Tower. Usually, when I was Officer in Charge and making a barracks inspection during CQ (night study), I would stop and chat with John.

One night, I noticed on his cabinet shelf a cologne bottle with a brand name I had not seen before. So I picked it up and started a discussion.

“Never heard of this brand,” I said. “Where did you get it?”

John stalled a moment.

“A Christmas present from my girlfriend at home,” he replied.

I discarded the idea of taking a sniff of the new cologne, terminated the conversation, and left the room.

Years later, now teacher and alumnus, we resumed the conversation.

“You remember the time you stopped in my room and picked up my bottle of cologne?” he asked.

It took some memory searching, but I finally recalled the incident.

“Did you know what was in the bottle?”

“Cologne?”

“No,” he said. “Not cologne. Gin.”

I registered my surprise.

“I had always wondered if you knew what was in the bottle and used a ruse to let me know you knew. Or if you just idly picked up the bottle and was ignorant of its contents,” John said.

“I was totally ignorant,” I said.

“I took no chances,” John said. “Before you were out of the building, the gin was down the drain. I never touched another drop as long as I was in Heights.”

In those days, possession of booze would have resulted in dismissal.

(Leftwich was a teacher at Castle Heights Military Academy for 38 years, retiring in 1979. The academy closed its doors in 1986. Since then, several buildings have been razed.)

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