

Reflections of the Class of 1981

By Barbara Reist Dillon

In March of 1979, members of the Class of 1981 were sophomores. Most of us lived in the dorms, few of us had cars on campus, none of us had cell phones. CNN and the concept of the 24 hour news cycle did not exist; the internet was still the province of DARPA or some geeks at MIT. We watched WGAL, listened to the radio and read newspapers, and the biggest news was that less than fifty miles from campus, there had been an accident at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant.

Earlier that month, my grandfather, Linnaeus Landis Reist, class of 1907, had died, so perhaps I was in documentarian state of mind, but I thought it important to keep a diary of those events. Reading over those entries now, I am struck by the fact that some of my reporting could be applied almost verbatim to this year's situation in Japan. Reading between the lines, it was clear that global and mundane were of almost equal importance: a possible meltdown was bad, but the cancellation of the ZBT formal? Even worse.

April 2, 1979

I am two days short of twenty—noteworthy fact to a limited audience—of far more consequence have been the happenings of the past few days:

Wednesday night, March 28, problems developed in Three Mile Island Nuclear Reactor, a water pressurized power plant about 30 miles away in the Susquehanna River near Harrisburg and Middletown. What exactly happened remains to be seen, but due to mechanical failures and human error, the cooling system failed and radioactivity began to leak out of the plant.

News of the mishap was broadcast to the general public Thursday morning and Gov 80 [statistics] was filled with nuclear jokes: “Look at the bright side, we'll all be sterile.” “The Harrisburg Syndrome” {current movie, “The China Syndrome” deals with the possibility of a nuclear meltdown}. People who lived in the general vicinity of Middletown were warned to stay inside and pregnant mothers and small children were advised to leave—but we weren't warned—not yet.

Friday came and the news was worse. Complications had arisen. The reactor was off, but the core could not be cooled down to a safe level. People started to get a bit more nervous. My hairdresser sold her stock in Westinghouse (the company who made the plant) and some people left. Then at school all hell broke loose. The news came out that a dangerous hydrogen bubble had formed at the core. The bubble prevented cooling of the core and if it grew, it would expose the fuel rods from their water bath and cause overheating and a possible meltdown with massive nuclear contamination of the area.

The Deans urged everyone to go home—classes were cancelled for Monday and by 7:00 the campus was virtually empty. Only six people remained on my floor that night. While

everyone scurried around calling parents, etc. those of us who knew we weren't going drank beers and cheerily sang along with Tom Lehrer's "We'll all go together when we go". I felt kind of uneasy though—the nagging fear of a meltdown left a cold chill in the back of our bravado.

That night, we watched all the network specials on the situation, went out and got Kentucky Fried Chicken, drank wine and played Scrabble. Saturday dawned, and following an almost solitary brunch, Gail, Sherry and I went out to Park City. Sherry got a dress for the ZBT dance which had been scheduled for that night. I got a new dress at Lord & Taylor over spring break. That night, we got word that school was closing Tuesday as well and the atmosphere grew so oppressive I knew I had to get out.

The situation at TMI was no better and in case a general evacuation was ordered, they would need to use the school as a base. The thing I was finding most annoying and a little scary was the credibility gap. The NRC said one thing, MET ED another. You really didn't know who, if any of them, to rely on. How much of the situation was being kept from us? We waited for the sirens to sound.

Sunday morning I threw some stuff in a bag and walked down to church—resigned to my own "Radiation Vacation" "Three Mile Island Fever" as it were. I felt like some sort of refugee with my plastic bag of clothes, a camera, some books and the empty streets. Eerie. President Carter visited the scene that day—the situation was stable, still unchanged. I had dinner with Rick, Eric and Marlene at ZBT that night. We all got dressed up and dined in solitary splendor at the house—everyone else had left and we were going out in style!

Well, this morning things had improved: the bubble is down so the core can be more readily cooled, so we are almost—just almost—out of the woods.

Some observations.

1. I think it was very interesting to note how easily a community of fairly intelligent people [F&M] panic and run—prey for the rumor mongers.

2. I think it's too bad, but I fear that nuclear power has been set back some 20 years. Next question—now where are we going to get the power?

3. That info gap thing was really bad—this cannot be allowed in the future.

4. What next? Last year F & M treated us to Russian Flu and a three day black out—next year?

I must go now—can only ask, very sincerely, what the future holds?