

RICHARD B. SINGER

FRANK SIEBERT THEN, AND MORE THAN
“FORTY YEARS ON”

Richard B. Singer, M.D., is a consultant in medical risk appraisal and lives in Falmouth, Maine. He and Frank Siebert went to school together in the late 1920s. At a class reunion in 1980, they rediscovered each other and have corresponded since. In what follows, Singer describes their encounters over the past seven decades.

At the end of the decade of the 1920s Frank Siebert and I were classmates for two years at the Episcopal Academy, a private day school founded in Philadelphia in 1785 that had moved just outside the city into a baronial country estate just across City Line Avenue in 1921. Although Frank and I were among the forty or so students who graduated in June 1930, our lives diverged for most of the following decades until our fiftieth class reunion in 1980. As the class historian, I corresponded with Frank Siebert. We exchanged visits and cemented a friendship that had lapsed for so many years. Although we do not see each

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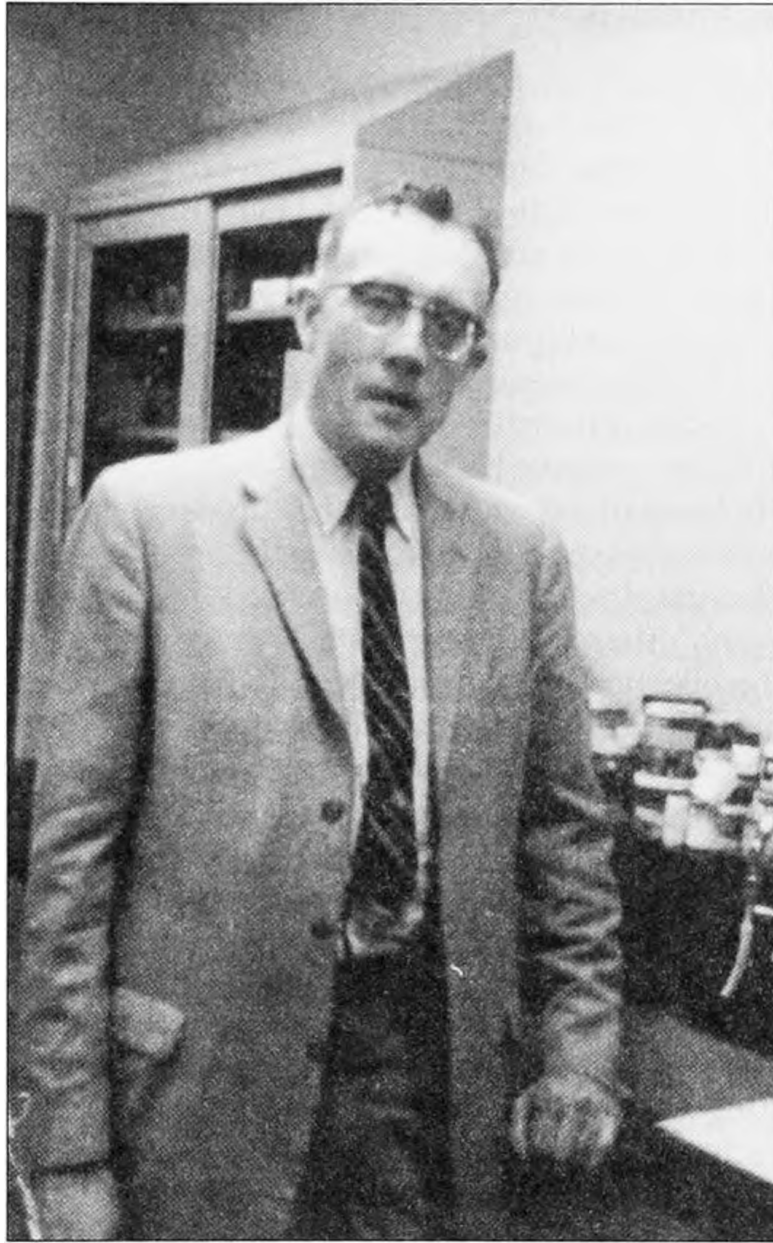
other often, these contacts since 1980 have caused me to stand in awe of Frank's accomplishments and to regard him with affection as a close friend.

In our nostalgic reminiscences about student days at the Episcopal Academy, Frank and I have both recalled one element of the Friday morning singing period that used to be part of the weekly routine. The words "Forty Years On" are taken from the refrain of a song we sang:

Forty years on when, afar and asunder,
Parted are those who are singing today;
When we look back and forgetfully wonder
What we were like at our work and our play;
Then it may be, there will often come o'er us
Glimpses of notes like the catch of a song;
Visions of boyhood will float them before us,
Echoes of dreamland will bear them along.
Follow on! Follow on! Follow on, twenty and
thirty and forty years on!

I still remember how difficult it was for me, as a youngster, to visualize what it would be like for our class to be twenty, or thirty, let alone "forty years on." Now, even "forty years on" is in the past, and I have the initial task of trying to recall from the mists of the past the Frank Siebert I knew in 1928-1930.

What I remember is a tall, serious young man, wearing glasses, whose outstanding characteristic was his taciturnity. This is confirmed by the whimsical write-up by Andy Grey with Frank's picture in the 1930 *Tabula*, our school magazine: "Two great pinnacles of wisdom and virtue, towering high above more petty qualities of some other members of the class, seem to have reached their fullest development in the gentleman whose picture appears on this page. These are silent unobtrusiveness and complete disdain (as far as we know) of the female sex." From my memory and from my contacts with Frank since 1980 I believe Andy Grey hit the nail square on the head. I do not recall that Frank and I ever had classes together, a severe limitation on my opportunity to form a closer friendship than I did. Modesty and few words are what stand out in my memory,



Frank T. Siebert, Jr.
Courtesy Frank T. Siebert, Jr.

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with the grades of a good student. What Andy Grey and I did not know was that Frank was an Eagle Scout, with a love of outdoor activities. Nor did we know that he had an early and deep interest in the languages of the Indians of Maine, an interest that he pursued avidly even after embarking on a medical career as a pathologist. These facts of his youth emerged to me only after seeing a lengthy and appreciative feature article on Frank and his work in a Portland newspaper in 1996.

Frank loved to write about his 1930 Academy classmates, and from his archives he kept supplying me with additional details of his contacts with many of them after our graduation. There was always special emphasis on the accuracy of dates, the mark of a good scholar and historian; he would worry about “misleading” the class historian if later research proved an earlier recollection of a date to be wrong. Frank has clearly never been one to tolerate the slightest inaccuracy or sloppy recitation of facts, perhaps a reflection of the need for the pathologist to be precise in his reports.

Frank’s nostalgia for “good old days” (his term) appears repeatedly in his correspondence. In a thirteen-page letter at the time of the fifty-fifth reunion of our class, Frank told me about his experience at Haverford, an excellent small college outside Philadelphia. After a rough freshman year, Frank wrote, he settled down and did well in his studies as a chemistry major, graduating with high honors in 1934. Frank observed that “slow = me” in his maturing as a college student. In addition, with a sympathetic coach, Frank developed a superlative performance in both the low and high hurdles. Certainly this talent was not perceived by his classmates at the Episcopal Academy, and was probably not perceived by his coach. Frank also wrote, with uncharacteristic pride, that he set some local records in his last year of competition.

Frank and I both had our medical education at the University of Pennsylvania, but we were in different classes and interned at different hospitals. Because medical instruction is so highly compartmentalized, Frank and I only rarely had a chance to greet one another in passing. After receiving his M.D. in 1938,

Frank completed his internship, then a residency in pathology, and embarked on a career as a hospital pathologist.

Ten members of the Class of 1930 showed up at a special dinner in May 1980, with two more present on the following Alumni Day. We were fortunate to have our esteemed former teacher of English, then retired, William Ortlepp, as our guest and articulate bridge between the Episcopal Academy of 1930 and 1980. Before the meeting I compiled a roster of surviving and deceased classmates, but biographical information was received from only a few classmates, so I renewed my efforts in December 1980 and was rewarded with many replies. This was the start of my correspondence with Frank Siebert. Our correspondence continued without interruption as Frank retired as a pathologist, moved to Old Town, and began devoting himself to his work on a dictionary of the Penobscot Indian language.

Frank's wide-ranging interests were summarized in one letter in which he expressed the desire to write a chronological account of his experiences "from age 2½." (Note he does not aspire to go back before the age of his earliest memory.) His list of topics includes his impression of all the people he has known, the "good guys" and the scoundrels, observations on celebrities, world political leaders, actors, actresses, teachers, students, and "maybe even the Pope and Cardinal Spellman." Frank also wanted to include manners, customs and obsessions "of each period." This wide range of topics intrigued me so much that, in the spring of 1985, I dubbed Frank our "Class Philosopher." Frank did consent to write a short piece for the Class of 1930 booklet assembled in 1985:

Every century has been characterized by salient forces from the Eighth Century, the darkest of the Dark Ages, to the Eighteenth Century, the Age of Colonial Expansion and of Political Revolution. Several disparate forces seem to have highlighted the Twentieth Century, but five...appear to have dominated, namely, a series of futile but monstrous irregularities, the emergence of socialist totalitarian states, unrealistic

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and fatuous expectations, constant ferment with economic and social turmoil, and the great and rapid advance of technology. The latter may prove to be the most dangerous of all, since, although the creation of man, it may become the master of man.

Throughout Frank's letters there is a transcendent sense of integrity that permeates all his thoughts and attitudes. As a pathologist he had scant patience for surgeons he regarded as incompetent, but he rejoiced that good surgeons learned from their mistakes. There is one occupational hazard to which all pathologists are subject – the depressing effect of frequent contact with death in the autopsies they must perform. There is a theme of lament that recurs in his letters about the death of old friends from school, college, medical school, or his profession. For all too many of the "good guys," death came prematurely.

Frank describes himself as a Jeffersonian, by political philosophy, and I feel that is an apt description. He has a dim view of most of the leading figures in both parties who have held high office over the more than half a century. Although Frank and I did not always agree in our estimates of past political leaders, we did agree that the world had passed through turbulent times, indeed, in our lifetime. In the winter of 1942 I can still recall Pat, the janitor of the research laboratory where I worked in Boston, leaning on his broom, gazing out the window, and repeating "It's a nawful mess." I think this commentary accurately reflects Frank's own view of the world, then and since. Frank always gave evidence of a wide knowledge of modern world history and Maine history, and he always marshaled reasons for any of his views that were not orthodox.

In one of our visits together I spent a few hours with him in his office on Indian Island at Old Town. A major research project in philology was obviously in progress. All of these clues confirmed the high regard I have for the scholarship and the extent of Frank's work in this field, all the more remarkable because it all started as an avocation when he was a very young student. I think Frank is an outstanding example of what

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intellectual ability, determination, and self-education can accomplish in a highly technical field of science, without benefit of professional education, and outside the walls of academia. It is an honor to add my personal tribute, in these pages, to all that you have accomplished, Frank Siebert. This is a totally unexpected and magnificent achievement in the annals of the Class of 1930 of the Episcopal Academy, now, much more than "forty years on." The class historian salutes you.