



BY JENNIFER NELSON '81

Recollections of Studying at ASL

A SL alumna Jennifer talks to two students from the early years of the American School in London.

SOME MEMORIES NEVER FADE—EVEN AFTER SIXTY YEARS.

After seeing the picture on ASL's website of Stephen Eckard on the steps of 17 Hans Place with students in the 1950s, I got to thinking about where those students might be today. On the whole, they seem a smart, happy band. What hand have the intervening years dealt them? And what might they recall of those early years of ASL? With the help of the School's advancement office, and as a journalist and ASL alumna, I took it upon myself to track down some of those early students. I had success in finding two of those boys who received an American-style education under the keen eye of ASL founding headmaster Stephen Eckard all those years ago.

Alumnus Bob Crawford '58 vividly remembers attending the American School in London during the post-war period when he was only nine years old. In the photograph, he stands proudly in front of the school's first building wearing a cub scout uniform with a buckled belt and tied bandana. He's one of the original thirteen boys who started school in April 1951 in the Knightsbridge flat of the school's founder, Stephen L. Eckard, an American journalist and former teacher.

Crawford recalls arriving in London just before Christmas 1950. His parents, who were with the military, enrolled their son in a British boarding school in Kent, because at that time they weren't aware of an American school. The French teacher hit students with a ruler, and Crawford was lonely. He'd never lived



away from his parents nor did he like how he couldn't visit them on weekends. "It was not a good experience," says Crawford, 70. "There was a different mindset about learning than what we have in the US."

At an embassy party, his parents found out that Mr. Eckard, who worked for the North American Service of the BBC, was starting a school that followed an American curriculum. Bob begged his parents to allow him to enroll. During spring break, his parents picked him up from his British school and he never returned. Thus, Crawford began three years study at ASL, starting with Grade 4.

That April, he and a handful of elementary and middle-school students

sat around Eckard's dining room table to learn the essentials: reading, writing and arithmetic. Mr. Eckard, who lived in the apartment, also set up card tables to accommodate students, who initially didn't use textbooks and instead relied on paper and pencil to complete lessons. Several grade levels were taught simultaneously. That first year, all students learned French. "It was like the classic one-room schoolhouse," Crawford said.

Like Crawford, Rocco MacAllister '57 also transferred from a British school to ASL; he couldn't get used to taking notes in a notebook, a mainstay of the British educational system. Both remember walking past destroyed buildings, one just up the street from their school at 17 Hans Place. "This was 1951 and there were still bombed-out sites that hadn't been fixed since the war," said MacAllister, whose father worked for the Air Force.

All around them was the devastation of World War II. "London was tremendously damaged during the Blitz, and there was still evidence of that," Crawford said, who lived within walking distance of the School at 100 Lancaster Gate, near Hyde Park. During the Blitz from September 1940 to May 1941, the Germans bombed London and other British cities, targeting populated areas, factories and dockyards.

Even in 1951, six years after the war ended, food rationing was the norm. Crawford recounted how it was difficult to get cheese, butter, eggs and milk, which were all in short supply. "We forget what the British went through during the war, and that they were still recovering from that. Lunch at school was a challenge."

During our interviews, both Crawford and MacAllister reminisced about their days in London, and fondly remember taking field trips to the British Museum,



Left to right
Classroom studies, early 1950s
Boys with a policeman, 1950s
School dance, 1950s
Stephen Eckard leads assembly, 1950s

“There’s a certain amount of insecurity, which is inevitable because you’re not able to establish roots and build long-term relationships. The other side of that is that you learn to cope. You can go into a new situation and immediately connect with people.” BOB CRAWFORD '58

Westminster Abbey and the Tower of London. Crawford was impressed by the Rosetta Stone at the British Museum; he liked how the stone, dating from 196 BC, exhibited three scripts—hieroglyphics, demotic and Greek—so that the priests, government officials and rulers of Egypt could read what it said. It also fascinated him how the stone, discovered in 1799 by the French in a small village in the Delta region of Egypt, was used to decipher hieroglyphics and other ancient Egyptian writings.

“It made history come alive,” said Crawford. MacAllister recalls viewing King George VI lying in state at Westminster Hall in February 1952. The King, who’s depicted in the award-winning film *The King’s Speech*, never recovered from a lung operation and died at the age of 56. His daughter, Elizabeth, was crowned Queen in June the following year.

“The event made quite an impression on me with the casket in the middle of the hall and the guards in big helmets with their rifles bowing their heads to the King,” said MacAllister, 72. “It was very impressive.”

The Tube and buses in London made an impact on Crawford and MacAllister. The youngsters didn’t worry about safety on public transportation, and took the subway to get to school and around the city. “In fact, I got in trouble with my parents for going off exploring on my own using public transport. Nowadays, one would be reluctant to do that as an adult, much less as a child. But London in the early 1950s was a very safe city.”

The men, who don’t remember each other from their ASL days, also talked about the School’s surge in enrollment and its subsequent move to a row house on Grosvenor Square. There, a handful of instructors helped Mr. Eckard run classes; each grade level had its own classroom. The Spanish teacher, Mr. Poole, made a particular impression on MacAllister, who attended ASL in Grades 7 and 8.

“He enjoyed the kids,” said MacAllister. “I kept up with the work and moved up with the rest of the students in the class.”

MacAllister admits his memory of those times is sometimes cloudy, nevertheless, some youngsters he won’t ever forget. “The students were all Americans, and a boy called Bruce was my best friend,” he

said. “I used to talk about going to West Point, and Bruce was going to go to the naval academy at Annapolis. I don’t know if he followed through with his plan, but I followed through with mine.”

In 1963, MacAllister graduated from The US Military Academy at West Point. After graduation, he devoted his career to the Air Force. Every three years, he moved to such places as Germany, Canada, Vietnam, Colorado and Washington, DC. In 1982, he retired, and now works part-time at H&R Block, a tax preparation company.

Crawford graduated from the US Naval Academy. Since 1963, he has worked in Washington, DC, for various companies, including his own information technology firm. He now helps companies win a slice

of the \$28 billion pie the federal government awards for information technology contracts. Similar to many students at ASL today, Crawford’s childhood was largely transitory. For him, this included stays in Washington, DC; Copenhagen; and London. “There’s a certain amount of insecurity, which is inevitable because you’re not able to establish roots and build long-term relationships. The other side of that is that you learn to cope. You can go into a new situation and immediately connect with people.”

Needless to say, Crawford pondered on how much London has changed over the past 60 years. No longer is it the quintessential British city inhabited mainly with English residents; now, it’s become more cosmopolitan and bustles with people from all over the world. “I remember how British London was at the time. It was a much friendlier city—not so overwhelming. You can’t walk on the sidewalks now because there are so many people. That wasn’t true back then.”

Both men rave about the education at ASL. “The education was fine—it never held me back on what I wanted to

do—and as a small school, I got to know many people there,” said MacAllister. Nor did MacAllister forget Mr. Eckard. On a layover at Heathrow airport in 1961, he called ASL to chat with the easy-going principal who knew all the students. Unfortunately, Eckard wasn’t available since he was traveling to New York to visit his sick mother. The airport was fogged in and the planes delayed even longer. MacAllister returned to the passenger lounge, and to his surprise sitting in the first chair by the door was Mr. Eckard. While they waited for the fog to lift, they talked about how Eckard was still running ASL, which by then had celebrated its first high school graduation, prom and yearbook. “All I could think of was ‘What a small world!’” said MacAllister. “I’ve never had an experience like that before or since.”

Jennifer Nelson '81 is currently pursuing an MFA in creative writing at Vermont College after spending many years writing for newspapers and magazines, and teaching French. She has three teenage children and lives in Hopewell, New Jersey.

Since Jennifer wrote this article, Frederick Killgore '62 shared a memory on the website. He has similar recollections to Bob and Rocco:

“I believe I am probably the barely visible boy (with a long-sleeved white shirt and hands in the pocket) on the far right-side of the 60-year photograph you have used showing Steve Eckard and the original school. I have never noticed this before. I remember going to school with the facades of bombed-out buildings and rationing still remaining in London. I also remember the happy sports afternoons with trips to the grounds of Winfield House... And I remember the morning that Steve Eckard came on the school’s public address system announcing the death of King George VI, and how ASL students needed to be quiet and respectful in public during this especially sad period.”