

T R I U M P H

O V E R

T R U A N C Y



George Cormier

## **Triumph Over Truancy**

**...How Middlesex County Truant School Changed My Life**



**The Way It Looks Today**

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Dear Readers,

This is a true story, told by me at the age of 81. It is the journey of a fifteen year-old boy that takes place before and after being sent to a Reform School for Truancy. Sentenced to six months, this is the story of how it affected me and what I learned in the time I was there, what might have been, what really happened, and where I am today.

I was born in the small town of Jay, Maine, on the 22nd day of February 1929, the 7<sup>th</sup> child in a family of nine children. In those days, parents used the help of their children in order to survive. So getting an education was not a priority. My father had no education at all, so he could not read or write. My mother had three years of schooling, and she could read and write two languages. The entire family could speak two languages - English and French.

We lived in low cost housing until I was seven or eight years old, then on a farm until I was 14. It was an abandoned apple farm, which had a seven-room house, attached sheds, horse stalls and a cow barn. There were also 175 acres of fields and standing timber. A family farm, we had chickens, cows, horse hay, gardens, and lots of apple trees - and I was so happy there.

My older brothers provided a lot of the help on the farm, but World War II took them away. My parents had no choice but to move to the city. We went to Waltham, Massachusetts.

I have tried to record the story and some pictures from my life as it was before sentencing, during my six months of incarceration, and my life as I have lived it until the present time. I hope you enjoy going back in time with me, and I hope you take away from it the thought that, in some ways, we are all responsible for what we become.

My name is George Cormier. Like so many times before, I am remembering 1944 and the six months I spent as a teenager at the Middlesex County Truant School in Chelmsford, Massachusetts. As you will see later in this book, I had never even heard of such a place, and to think that I would find myself there was to me incredible.

## *Chapter 1* *In the Beginning . . .*

I grew up in a very poor family. We lived a simple and quiet life in North Livermore Falls, Maine. I wish my life could have continued that way because, if it had, I would never have to know of Middlesex County Truant School.

There was plenty of room to run. We had animals and trees and lots of fresh air.

When I went to school in Maine, all grades one through ten met in a one-room schoolhouse. Children who were at different grade levels sat in certain rows of seats. There were even times when I was in the same classroom with my older brothers and sisters. Although one-room schoolhouses are almost unheard of today, that was the way it was done in country schools back then.

As children, we each had our chores, and my older brothers were a big help to my father when it came to running the family farm. Unfortunately, as each of them became old enough, they were called into the service. With my brothers gone from home, my father was left with very little help. And it takes a lot of work to run a farm.

Eventually, my father and my mother decided to move to Waltham, Massachusetts, where my sisters, Christine and Irene were already living. And with that move, I knew my life would never again be the same.



**Me in the Doorway of Our Farmhouse in North Livermore Falls, Maine**



**Me and My Dog, Chubb**

When we first moved to Waltham in 1942, we lived at 10 Sun Street, which was a small back street in the downtown area. The house was a duplex and had four bedrooms. Moving into the house with my parents were my sisters, Alma, Rita and Eleanor, along with my brother, Wilfred, and me.

It was while we lived on Sun Street that my brother, Wilfred, left to join the Army. My other brothers, Edward and Norman, were already in the military.

Both my parents went from farming to working in a factory on an assembly line. This had to be quite a challenge for my parents, especially since they had the burden of knowing three of their sons, were serving our country at the same time.

I was going into the 6<sup>th</sup> grade and 14 years old when we moved to Massachusetts.



**10 Sun Street, Waltham, MA**



**6<sup>th</sup> Grade Class Picture at Robbins School, Waltham, MA**

I attended Robbins School when I first came to Waltham, which is no longer in existence. I made several friends after I settled into my new home. My 6th grade teacher was Ms. Lane; she was my favorite teacher throughout my school years. That's me, the one on the far right in the front row.

My best friend, Lee Wong, is sitting right next to me. Carmella Gallitano, the girl I had a crush on at that time, is the second one from the right in the row behind me. I ended up being good friends with her brother, another George, before I was sent to the Truant School and again later when I became a business owner. In a strange coincidence, Carmella's older brother, Leo, who was in the service when I was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, became my insurance agent when I went into business.

Below is a picture of South Jr. High School, where I attended 7<sup>th</sup> grade. It reminds me of the real beginning of my life's journey. It was while I was attending that school that my parents were served with my truancy papers.



**South Jr. High School, Waltham**

## *Chapter 2*

### *From a Farm Boy to a City Kid*

As soon as I could after moving to Massachusetts, I got a part time job at a local drug store working at the lunch counter. Most days I worked until 10:00 p.m. and also worked some weekends. With that kind of schedule along with other issues I'll go into later, truancy was bound to happen.

Since I was only 14 years old, I probably shouldn't have been working at Prospect Street Pharmacy, but I was. I worked there for about six months. The pharmacist wasn't the owner, but he was a former Marine, who could be menacing if he wanted to be. How do I know that?

There was a middle-aged mechanic, who worked across the street from the pharmacy. One day he was in the pharmacy and observed me selling a pack of cigarettes to another person about my age – I had just turned 15-years old. The mechanic said it was against the law to do that. I smarted-off to him and the mechanic threw a punch at me. The pharmacist saw it, and he threw the mechanic out of the store.

The pharmacist called my father and asked him to come down to the pharmacy, and he did. Then the mechanic, my father and I sat down to talk in one of the booths. My father explained to the mechanic that I was just a kid and he shouldn't be so hard on me. The next day, the pharmacist didn't show up for work, and we all wondered what had happened to him. Sure enough, later on we found out that he had been drinking and was looking for the mechanic to avenge the wrong done to me! The mechanic heard the pharmacist was looking for him and went into hiding to keep himself safe. Eventually, the pharmacist sobered up, and the mechanic was unhurt. Nothing was ever said again about that pack of cigarettes!



**Me at Prospect Street  
Pharmacy-1944**



**A Different Business is Now  
Located on the Pharmacy Site**



**My Parents in 1944**

My parents went to work in a war plant doing assembly work. My mother worked for about a year. Because my father was illiterate, he didn't do that job very long but, instead, he went to work in the paper mill. This was easier for him, since he had worked at a similar plant in Livermore Falls, Maine. From there he worked in a wool mill. My sisters Christine and Irene worked at some of the plants as well. It was during this time that my brother Wilfred went into the service.

My mother became somewhat of a hypochondriac; it seemed there was always something wrong her in one way or the other. Anytime she felt moody or something she would write a note to my teacher excusing me from school, saying she had a headache or something, and the teacher would excuse me. I really didn't mind missing school because I would be tired from working nights at the drugstore. The thing I wasn't aware of was the seriousness of missing so many days of school. In the country, staying home and taking care of my mother was the right thing to do, but in the city missing a lot of school days resulted in serious consequences that neither my mother nor I knew anything about.

Well, about six months later, I was home with my mother. She had asked me to stay with her because she had one of her headaches. Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. I went to answer it. There was a gentleman standing there wearing a badge who turned out to be a Truant Officer. He asked me if I was George Cormier, and I told him that I was. He told me who he was and that I was in trouble. I said, "I am?" and he said, "Yes you are." Then he asked me if my parents were home. I told him my mother was, that she didn't feel good, and I was home looking after her. He then handed me a piece of paper, told me to make sure I gave it to my parents and left.



As he walked away and I closed the door, I read the paper he'd given to me. It said that I was being summoned to court for truancy. I had no idea what truancy meant. It was a very strange word to my parents and me, for we had never heard the word before that day.

Before long the court date arrived, and I really don't recall how I even got to the courthouse. Most likely it was by bus, because we didn't own a car or any other type of transportation. It was just my Dad and I that went that day. My mother made the excuse of having a headache or something that demanded her to stay at home. Dad and I waited our turn; soon they told us what room to go to, a room where other people also waited to see the judge. All of this didn't mean anything to me because I had the mindset of a 15-year old kid from the country where you just go from one day to the next and do whatever is asked of you.



**Middlesex County Courthouse in 1944**



**Middlesex County Courthouse Today**

Someone called my name, and my father and I got up, moved to the front row and sat. The judge read from a piece of paper that said how I'd missed so much school and other court terms I can't recall.

Then the judge looked at me and asked, "George, do you have anything to say for yourself?" What could I say? They already knew everything that happened so I said, "No." Then he turned to my father and the judge asked him the same question. Because my father was illiterate and had no idea why we were even in that courtroom, he simply stated, "No." Well, as soon as my father said the word "no," the gavel went down and the Judge said, "You are now sentenced to the Middlesex County Truant School in Chelmsford, Massachusetts. You are to stay there for a period of six months or until you are 16 years of age.

Here I was in my new city for only a year and a half, and I was being carried off to the Middlesex County Truant School for "truancy." While I was trying to grasp what had just happened, I watched my father go one way, and I went another. I was put inside of the officer's car, with no personal belongings - absolutely nothing. There was no saying goodbye to my

family or anything. I can remember it just like it was yesterday sitting there in the officer's car. I was so naïve, not even realizing that I'd left my job without notice and left my mother without saying goodbye.

Being ignorant about such things, it all seemed weird, so foreign to me. I had no idea what was happening to me. If I'd been street-smart, like most kids who were taken off to the Truant School, I would have had my eyes peeled on everything that was happening around me, and maybe I would have understood it all. But I wasn't that kind of kid. I was fresh off the farm, used to moving from one chore to the next, and never thought about what might happen to me if I wasn't looking!

Anyhow, we took the 50-mile drive to Chelmsford, MA, which took approximately 90 minutes from the courthouse. There were no highways like there are now, so, it took much longer to get there than it would today. All the way there I just kept my head down and didn't say much, except when the officer asked me a few questions about my family, my father, where I came from, etc. I didn't volunteer anything. I just kept silent with my head hung down.

### *Chapter 3*

#### *My Introduction to Real Life*

We soon arrived at Middlesex County Truant School. It was a huge place that included several buildings. The driver dropped us off in front of the Administration building. I was introduced to the officials of the schools when we arrived. (I imagine they knew I was coming and were waiting for us). I met the receptionist and then the supervisor, Mr. McCoy. He was dressed in a dark suit and was very nice. He was gentleman-like to me, and I remember I was the only kid present at the time.

I looked at him, and he said hello to me, introducing me to his wife. Mr. McCoy explained how the place was set up with different cottages and that I'd be placed in one of these cottages with boys my age - no younger than fourteen and no older than sixteen. Mr. McCoy told me there were other cottages with kids younger than I was, twelve and thirteen year-olds, but during my time there I never saw them. We just lived in and around our own cottage, and that's where our lives happened.

After he explained the set up, Mr. McCoy said, "I'll take you over to your cottage as soon as you get through talking with the superintendent, Mr. Robinson." He said this as he brought me into the superintendent's office. Mr. Robinson was a stout, kind of husky guy, and he was sitting behind his desk as we came into the room. He got up and said with much authority, "Have a seat young man."

I sat down without saying a word. This wasn't a good idea, however, because if there was one thing I quickly learned, it was to speak when I was spoken to. But, what did I know? I hadn't even begun to adjust to city life. I'm in trouble for missing school and taking care of my mother, and now this man was speaking very harshly to me (which has never happened to me before).

I had committed no crimes, and I was still wondering why I was sent here to this strange place for six months.



**Administration Building at MCTS**



**Rear of the Cottage Where I Lived at MCTS**

Then Mr. Robinson said, "Let me explain something to you, George. You will be staying in a place with 30 to 35 other boys and you will have a headmaster that will be with you throughout your term here. We have rules, and you will follow them. You will wear a uniform like all the other boys and keep yourself clean," and this and that.

I can't recall exactly what else he said except for this one thing; "I want to tell you that there are no fences around here which you can see. We don't have them because you're free to take off anytime you want. But remember, there will be a harsh penalty waiting here when you get back, and I'll describe it to you. I would suggest that you think long and hard before you decide to run away. That's what we call those who do run - 'runaways.'" I didn't say anything. I just looked up at him and listened to what he was saying to me. I had no intention of doing any such things, so the lecture meant very little to me.

Mr. Robinson continued, "Well, okay then, welcome to the Truant School. Mr. McCoy will now take you over to your cottage." Mr. McCoy and I left then and went over to my cottage where I was introduced to my headmaster, Mr. Davis, who I would see on a daily basis. Mr. Davis took me around and explained how things would be at the cottage.

"There's your locker," he said. The locker room was a large square-shaped area with steel lockers along the walls that were numbered one to thirty-four. "Any belongings you have, you keep in there. You have no business in any of the other lockers, and that will be your little home in there while you're here."

Outside the locker room there was a hallway that led into the shower room and from there another hallway leading into a large recreation room. Mr. McCoy said to me, "Here are your clothes. Put them on in that room there." I can remember the uniform was a copper-colored shirt and tan pants. "And then you can come into that room which is the dining room," he said. Mr. McCoy told me it was getting close to dinnertime and that I would be assigned a seat at one of the tables. After I changed into my uniform, I went down to the dining room that contained round tables. I was shown where to sit and told that I would sit in that very same seat at that same table for every meal.

After we finished having dinner we all went into the recreation, or "rec" room, as we called it, for about an hour. Unlike the dining room where you were not allowed to talk to anyone, I was able to speak to the boy next to me - only the boy next to me. All I could hear was mumbled speech or whispered talking. It was really an odd thing, at least to me, because I'd never been in a situation like that before. From the "rec" room we went into the shower room to

get showered. Then we went to bed in the dormitory where everyone was assigned a certain bed. Just like the assignments in the dining room each boy slept in his assigned bed every night that he was at the School. This eliminated any squabbling and fighting about the sleeping arrangements.

The next morning around six o'clock they got us up. We made our beds, got dressed in our uniforms and headed for the lavatory - a bathroom much like you'd find in a school with sinks and toilets all lined up against the walls. From there, we headed into the dining room for breakfast and, of course, sat in our assigned seats at the table. Mr. and Mrs. Davis, the headmaster and his wife, sat at a table in the corner. Sometimes, they would have other people sitting with them, but most of the time it was just the two of them.

Boys who were part of the kitchen crew set up the tables, and after we were done eating they did the cleanup. This was the way it was in the morning the entire time I was at Middlesex County Truant School.

But I remember that almost every morning for breakfast we were given two boiled eggs with the shells removed, fresh-baked bread made by the boys who worked in the school's bakery, and a big glob of peanut butter. Delicious! Even today, I still have peanut butter with my boiled eggs! We were allowed to have salt-and-pepper if we wanted, as well as fresh milk and sometimes even juice. I don't remember juice being served very often though.

Once in a while they gave us fresh fruit and there really wasn't any complaining about the food; it was always plentiful. Mr. Davis would say grace or someone else would be asked to say grace, but it was only after Mr. Davis started to eat that we could begin eating. We ate everything on the table and in our dishes; we didn't leave a thing because the food was so good. After breakfast, Mr. Davis would announce that it was time to leave for class, where we stayed until lunchtime.

## *Chapter 4*

### *A New Kind of Pain*

Early on in class the teacher asked all of us to write a note or a letter on how we would describe ourselves. I didn't know until much later that this was done so they would have more information about each of us boys. We were often encouraged to write letters at least once or twice a week. These letters were to be sent home to our parents or other family members. The teachers would correct the English, the spelling and the different phrases we used so we could learn how to do all of those things. It was pretty nice, if you ask me!

There were things we wouldn't dare say in our letters, like complaining about the school and things like that. If anyone did write these kinds of things, he had to give the teacher the letters. Then, he'd be told that it wasn't allowed. I explained this process in my first letter to my mother. She couldn't understand why certain things were being kept from her. Not only were my letters were being censored, but also the letters my brothers sent home while away in the military. It must have been so difficult for her when all she wanted to know was where her boys were and what they were doing. Unfortunately, I guess the way my mother chose to handle the censorship was to not write any letters to me at all.

I kept writing every week, but I would never get any mail back. I found out later that my mother also got letters from my brothers, but there's a very good chance that they never received a letter back from her. My mother was the only person in my family, who could read or write, and the fact that she never wrote to me affected me deeply, especially when the other boys in the school were getting mail from home every single day.

Since I never received any mail, packages or any visitors, I became known as the "unwanted boy." I was asked many times if I had any family. During daily mail call it would sound like this, "Porter! Price! Cormier!" and then they'd say, "Just kidding," and they'd all laugh. So, each day at mail call the fact that I didn't get mail became the standing joke. But it wasn't funny. The one good thing that came from all the letters I wrote was that not only did I learn how to write with proper spelling and correct English; I actually wrote some very good letters!

Well, after two months and two visiting days went by with no mail or visitors, I accepted that it was going to be that way. The only communication I could hope to have from my parents was by way of prayer. I prayed for them, and I hoped they were praying for me. I was okay with that, because I really got a lot out of it; my faith grew, and it helped me get into the habit of praying often.

Families were allowed to come and visit once a month on "Family Day." Because I never had any visitors, I was given the job of inspecting the packages that these families would bring in for their boys. It may seem strange, but I didn't look at this as a punishment. I really enjoyed doing it! While they were in the waiting room I would inspect the family packages. The school did not allow any written material with violent content or anything that was off-color. Chewing gum was banned; weapons of any kind, anything that had sharp edges, etc. Parents would bring bags and bags of stuff. As a monitor, I would sometimes get to keep some of the stuff they threw

away like comic books. But when the visiting day was over I would have to give them back. Well, anyway, that was how Family Day was celebrated.

## Chapter 5 *A Different Kind of Work*

We not only had classes every day; we also had work detail. There were different kinds of jobs that needed to be done at the Truant School. For instance, some of the boys worked in the kitchen area; others worked in the sewing room, others in the dairy farm, and still others in the vegetation farm or doing woodworking. All of these things went on at the school. I didn't really pay much attention to the different work details when I first arrived. But after I was at the school about three weeks, Mr. Davis called me up to the rec room.

"You were brought up on a farm and dealt with animals," he said. He must have gathered this information from the letters I had written. I admitted that I had been raised on a farm, and then he asked, "How do you feel about chickens?"

I looked up at Mr. Davis and said, "I've always liked chickens. One of my favorite pets on the farm was a chicken. She had a crooked neck, and I felt sorry for her. I would pull on her neck to try and straighten it for her, and she became very friendly toward me. She would be behind me and follow me into the house and everywhere else I went." But that was beside the point for Mr. Davis. He wasn't interested in whether I had a pet chicken or how I played with it. What he really wanted to know was whether I knew how to *take care of* chickens.

"Well we have a hennery department," he told me, "and I'd like to send you down there if you'd like to do that." Of course, I told him that I would like that very much! "Tomorrow you will go with Mancini and he'll train you in what you have to do." This would be a great change for me.

Mancini was being released in a few weeks and they wanted to groom somebody new to take over his position. Mr. Davis was hoping that I would catch on quickly in learning how things were done, so I would be ready to take over Mancini's position of being in charge of the hennery.

The next day, I was introduced to Mr. Lloyd, who was the man in charge of the Wood Working Department. It was the department that was nearest to the hennery, and his job was to check in on us from time to time. Then I met this Mancini kid (we all got called by our last name), and he showed me the different chores and duties that had to be done. We walked all over the hennery that day. It was a one-story supply and grain building located between a pasture and a hayfield. It was approximately 15' x 100' long. It was really quite a place.

In the hennery were chicken houses with an office-like area at one end that led to another area called the "egg wash." Beyond the hennery, there were chicken coops with long benches. They were covered with chicken wire. This section went all the way to the opposite end of the building. They were divided into large rooms that held 30 chickens in each room.

In the first chicken house the chicken eggs were kept in incubators. Then, before the eggs hatched, we'd move them into the brooder house. Once they became little chicks and got their



feathers, we'd inoculate each of them. To do this we opened their wings and with a double point needle injected them with two different types of serums to prevent disease or infection.

The chicks would remain in the brooder house until they were about a month old. Then they were moved to the next house, and then another. They continued to grow, until they reached the last house where they were slaughtered and eventually brought to the kitchen for meals.

There were often rats all over the place around the coops. In the mornings when we walked into the chicken coops, we'd find a few rats scurrying around. They would scatter toward the hole in the corner where they had come in. Rats were dangerous. During the night while the chickens would all sit on the roost, the rats would come in and bite the rear end of one of the chickens. This would cause the chicken to bleed in the rectum. As the chicken would start to bleed the other chickens would pick at the injured chicken. If it went on too long the chickens would pick it to death.

Controlling the rats in the hennery sure was a nuisance! We had these poles that were like a broom handle, only bigger, with spike-like things sticking out at one end so we could spear the rats. We had many of these poles, and we'd throw two or three of them at a time into the corner toward the hole. Then we'd spear as many as we could while the rats were gathered around the hole. Every day this would happen, and Mr. Lloyd, the Master of the Woodworking Shop, had the boys there make some nice feeder boxes. It was really great that he did look in on us once in a while to see if we needed anything, and then he'd have the boys make things for us.

Like I said, the rats had become quite a nuisance, so Mr. Lloyd devised a rat-catcher. He took a 50-gallon barrel and cut the top off of it. He then inserted a rod through the center of it, put the top back on the barrel and it swung like a damper on a wood stove. This made the barrel an easy rat-catcher! Once that was done he took some corn kernels and glued them onto the top of the barrel and let it harden. Then we filled the barrel with water until it was a quarter full. The rats would get on top of the barrel; they would eat the corn kernels and then slide through the damper into the water. We'd have a barrel full of drowned rats to get rid of in the morning. This was just another daily job we had to do at the hennery.

We could hear the rats up in the eaves of the chicken houses. They ran the whole length of it and, as they did this, we would bang on the eaves. We could hear them run to the opposite end of the eave. Of course, we had someone at the other end of the eave with the barrel rat-catcher! The rats would run right out and fall into the barrel of water below. With this new rat-catcher we were able to catch a lot more rats. There were so that it made us sick to our stomachs to handle so many rats, some dead and some alive.

Another thing we would do is put lye in the rat holes that were in the building. If you get lye on your hands, and you don't wipe it off immediately, it can eat away at your hands without you knowing it. We put the lye right there in the hole so that the rats would have to run through it and carry it into their home behind the walls. Then we'd see the rats walking around with a leg missing or half their face was gone. The lye was eating them to death. It was a terrible thing to watch.

There were so many rats, and we were constantly thinking of a way to execute them. One day we were talking with Mr. Lloyd and got the idea that we could soak one rat in luminous paint, (a glow in the dark type of paint). It was funny, because the other rats couldn't relate to this luminous rat. They ran away from it. And when they did, they ran right into the barrel of water like the others. I thought it was pretty smart to have this luminous rat running with the other rats. I mean, in a way, it was fun coming up with different ways to get rid of those pests!

Mancini had served his time and was going home. Would you believe it? All of a sudden, I was in charge of the hennery and in a position of authority that was completely new to me.

On the farm back home in Maine you had chores to do and you just did them. We didn't need any authority over us; it was simply a way of life. To see a policeman or someone in authority like that was very foreign to me and then here I was - in charge of the hennery at the Middlesex County Truant School.

## *Chapter 6*

### *Lessons Learned*

Shortly after I was put into the position of authority at the hennery, (one I thought was so great), I was put to the test by a redheaded guy whose name was Mento. Mento was from Quincy, Massachusetts, who was street-smart and quite conniving too! We had to watch him pretty closely. If we were to describe his personality today, we might say he had A.D.D. (Attention Deficit Disorder). This guy Mento refused to do what was asked of him, and I now had a pretty big challenge on my hands. My challenge was to help him or report him to the authorities above me. If I reported him, he would get demerits for not following orders. If we got demerits, it would delay our release.

This merit system was illustrated on a big board on the wall in the rec room, where all our names were listed. There we could see a record of who received merits for doing good things and demerits for those who did some not-so-good things. Mento was definitely headed in the direction of demerits. All I had to do was complain to Mr. Davis about Mento and he would have received a demerit. But I thought maybe I could help the guy along, so I kept the offense quiet. Well, that decision would change my life big time when this guy introduced me to the real meaning of the words "street kids" and "street smart."

One day I asked Mento to do something and, once again, he refused to do it. He gave me some lip, and I had just about had it with him. At the same time, I didn't want him to be involved with Mr. Davis. Well, not only did he give me lip, he raised his fist at me. I grabbed him by the collar. Next to me was a claw hammer, and I grabbed it and raised it up at him. I am telling you the truth; I don't know what stopped me from hitting him, because I was so angry at that moment, I could have easily become a murderer.

Thank God something stopped me and I just shoved him in the corner against the wall. I gave him a punch and warned him that if he didn't smarten up I would turn him in. We were in the grain shed when this scuffle happened.

I left and walked over to the turkey house. When I was almost there, I heard Mento walking behind me. I was still really mad. Then, all of a sudden the pole with the spikes on the end that we used on the rats went flying right by me and stuck into the door of the Turkey house in front of me. It came so close to me that it could have stuck right in my back. I knew if that happened, Mento would have immediately run in the other direction. He would have left me to die before he'd go and get help, because he wasn't about to get blamed for it.

I knew I had to put a stop to the violence, so I turned and walked back to him to try and cool things off a bit. I told Mento, "Tonight, I'll tell Mr. Davis that you would rather do something else." I said that I thought it would be better if he didn't work at the hennery anymore. Mento and I came very close to going to prison for a long time. If I had hit him with the claw hammer or he had killed me with the rat pole, the result would have been the same. Someone would have died. Mento agreed with me, and I never had to deal with him on the job again. The only time I saw him was when we were around the cottage. Thankfully, Mento moved on to something else, and I still took care of the hennery.

## The Turkey House

Gilbert was the kid who helped me at the henery after that. When the time came to kill the chickens for the kitchen, we'd get some of the boys to come and help. We'd line the chickens up in a row, and I would hold the sticking knife. The chickens were hanging upside down, and I'd stick each one through the brain and twist the knife to kill them. I would show the boys how to stick the knife into the brain and the jugger vein and have it come out to the other side. This would cause brain shock and the chicken would eventually bleed to death. We did this until each chicken was dead. Another boy would be waiting the minute I would stick each one and then he'd pluck all the feathers off.

To the right of this building was the turkey house, which was painted white. Inside this house, the first thing I could see turkey chicks that were in a suspended cage. There were 30 or 40 chicks when I took over, and by the time I left Middlesex County Truant School in September, they were pretty much full-grown. Those turkeys would remain there until Thanksgiving, when they would be slaughtered and used for meals as well.

## Crime and Punishment

One day Mr. Lloyd came down and said, "Come on boys we're going to go find some runaways." Because we were trusted workers at the henery, Gilbert and I were given the privilege of helping to find runaways. On that particular day, a couple boys had run away. I forget their names but there were two of them, and Mr. Lloyd told us to look round for them. We eventually found the boys and brought them back to the school. Do you remember what Mr. Robinson told me about running away? Sure, there were no fences, but if we ran away, there would be consequences when we were brought back to the school. We all knew if we ran away, we would never, ever do it again.

Mr. Robinson was true to his word. When the boys came back, he brought them over to the locker room, where there were about 35 steel lockers. He started at locker number one and slapped each of the boys in the jaw. Then he punched them in the stomach and told them to move down to the next locker. He did this at each locker until he reached locker #35. Bang! Bang! Bang! He did this at every single locker. Then, just to humiliate them further, he had each of the boy's heads shaved. Looking at it now I'd say Mr. Robinson must have gotten a charge out of punishing boys that didn't follow the rules. At least it seemed that way to me.

You see, the punishment didn't end there. After their heads were shaved, Mr. Robinson made the boys bend over the back of a chair. With a large shillelagh (a long piece of solid wood) he whacked them with it until their backsides bled. The boys were already sore from all the banging they got at the lockers. And even after all of that, when it was time for recreation, those boys had to walk the entire time around 20x30 feet of clothes lines that were strung right next to the play yard. Most of us felt really bad watching the punishment these boys received. We knew quite well that they were in pain, and it was a hard thing to watch. One thing I remember quite vividly is that I was thankful I'd never run away. I definitely didn't want to get that kind of punishment.

Gilbert, the kid who worked with me in the hennery, was always close to trouble before he came to the Middlesex County Truant School. Sometimes we'd have time to talk, and he told me about things he did back home. He told me about several close calls he had with the law. But, like I said, I had not lived in the city long before I came to the Truant School. I found it hard to believe some of the stories he told me. Gilbert told me he would break into different places and had even learned how to open safes.

The thing Gilbert talked about the most was what he was going to do when got out of the Truant School. He said that I should meet up with him, that he had a sister who could get some girls together, and Gilbert could get some guys together. He said that usually they all came over to his house when his mother and father weren't home and had fun. Then he asked, "You know?" Although he didn't say it, I knew exactly what he meant; I figured he was talking about what boys and girls do when they get together. Again, I was still learning how city kids think and wasn't drawn to the enticement he was showing me. I'd never heard of doing such a thing before that day.

## *Chapter 7*

### *Lessons Learned*

Yes, in the Middlesex County Truant School I found a place to grow up. I learned a lot of values that I still use today. My headmaster, Mr. Davis, took me under his wing and treated me like a son. I felt about him like a person might feel about a parent. He showed me how to be courteous and respectful. I learned to say "ma'am" to every woman, whether she was a matron who worked in the kitchen or any woman I came across. If it was a man, it was "Sir," whether I was standing before the headmaster or addressing some other man I might meet. I just learned good things. I learned that if I accepted the discipline it would do me some good, if I want to get something out of it. The best part is, when I left the School, I continued to carry these courtesies throughout my life. I was always polite and got a chair for others, stood when an adult walked in the room and was willing to serve others. I hadn't had that knowledge when I went in, but I truly wouldn't have known any better.

If I'd never gone to Middlesex County Truant School and continued to live in the city, there is a good chance I would have eventually gotten myself into real trouble. The rest of my life would have certainly turned out very badly. The boys in the Truant School came from all over the state; some of them came from rough living and were very street smart like I mentioned before. They would exchange crime stories. They weren't big crimes, but they'd been in trouble before they came to the School. Some of these boys were also very talented. One guy could draw pictures just like the ones I'd seen on magazine covers. He would draw World War II fighter planes and make them look so real, it was just like looking at a photograph. He would make those planes come alive, right there on that piece of paper.

Some boys had a difficult time adjusting to the Truant School. They were there because they were so stubborn and uncontrollable at home. Their parents were unable to do anything with them. About once a month at the School, the staff would bring out this bowl of jelly. Well, it looked like the jelly filling inside of a donut, but I'm telling you it tasted awful and really hard to eat. It did help when we were given fresh-baked bread and fresh milk to go with it. They gave us an amount like the size of a bowl of cereal. We had to swallow a spoonful of it at a time to get through it! It was just terrible to have to eat. This bowl of jelly was given to teach us self-discipline and obedience. And if we didn't eat it when it was served to us, we would find it in front of us at the next meal . . . and the next meal . . . until we ate it.

Well, this one boy who was assigned to a seat at our table said, "I ain't gonna eat that and you ain't gonna to tell me what to do!" Well, the rest of the boys (there were about eight of us) wanted to laugh knowing that he would eventually eat the jelly. We couldn't, of course, so we just sat there not saying a word. We knew how bad the jelly tasted but we just choked it down, ate the stupid stuff and moved on. Once you know the reason why it was served to you, you just ate it. But this kid didn't know that.

As I said earlier, the food at Middlesex Country Truant School was great overall - fresh baked bread right out of the oven was so delicious, coming to us all sliced with peanut butter to spread on top of it. There was always peanut butter. They'd have American Chop Suey (a pasta dish with ground beef and stewed tomatoes) and other really delicious meals. But, every once in

a while, they would throw in this jelly and that one kid would just look at it, close his eyes and leave it on his plate. Well, the next day there it was. While everybody got their breakfast of oatmeal there was that kid looking at his bowl of jelly. And we couldn't believe it. That jelly was there at noon and again at supper. The next morning – you've got it! It was there at breakfast. Finally, at lunch, he surrendered and ate it.

Most of the kids who were sent to the Middlesex County Truant School had disciplinary problems and the jelly was a kind of test to see just how rebellious they were. It was the role of the teachers and other authorities to teach them self-discipline and good behavior. Parents would pay to have their children go there for these reasons. Like I said, I was there for truancy, which wasn't actually my fault. The State sentenced me to go there, and the State picked up the expense of sending me there.

On Sunday nights we got to go into the rec room for one hour, where they put on the radio for us to enjoy. That was the only entertainment we had, just one hour and it was 30 minutes of the Jack Benny Show followed by 30 minutes of the Phil Harris Show. They were both musical comedies and we actually looked forward to it, because it was a real treat. Then after that we'd get showered and cleaned up for bed. But first, they sprayed an antibacterial solution in our throats by using an atomizer, I guess to make sure we killed any germs we might have picked up during the day. We went to bed, where we'd get a good night's sleep and be ready for the next day. Because there were kids from all different backgrounds staying in one dorm, things were bound to happen. There were 30-40 beds in each dorm, and there was one guy, Price, who was kind of big for his age, who walked around like a zombie. I swear he'd fall asleep while he was talking to someone, or even while he was eating. He must have had a sleeping sickness.



**A View of the Inside of MCTS**

One night there was this big disturbance in the dorm. It was this kid, Waylon, who spoke very sissy-like and was kind of gentle. Well, this Price kid was disturbing Waylon by trying to get into his bed with him. There was a whole bunch of yelling going on but I really didn't pay much attention until the next day when the other boys were asking me, "Do you know what that Price kid was doing? He was trying to get in bed with Waylon!"

I really didn't understand why they were all worked up about it. Growing up, I always had to sleep with my three brothers in the same room, so life in a dormitory didn't seem that strange

to me. I just thought Price must have been sleepwalking and didn't know what he was doing. Not so, from what these guys were telling me.

As it happened, this kid named Price was punished for this by walking around that 20' x 30' clothesline area the same way those runaway boys had to do. When kids were punished, they had to walk the line. He walked around and around the line while the kids played. As he walked you'd swear he was sleeping all the while he was walking. He had to have had a terrible sleep sickness like I said.

One day I couldn't get up and felt really sick. They called the doctor in after a day or so and said that I was running a fever. It turned out that I had the mumps. I didn't know what they were talking about. I had never heard of the mumps before, but it caused me to spend a whole week in bed! Strangely enough, I stayed in the dormitory, but none of the other boys got the mumps. I always wondered why I got them and the other boys didn't.

In the dormitory the floors were made of shiny hardwood. I can still see them. They were so beautiful, glimmering all the time. The boys would have to wax these hardwood floors using a mop handle that had a block on end of it. It was steel-like with a felt-covered bottom. The boys would take this heavy-weighted mop and push it back and forth. Once in a while I would get a chance to wax the floor. I'd never waxed a floor before, and I really liked it! I just knew by this one job of mopping the floors that they kept the place in excellent shape, and I remember it felt good taking part in the upkeep of the place.

Downstairs the floor was maroon-colored quarry tile. This floor went from the locker room to the shower room, down the hallway and out to the rec room. The tiles were about 8" x 8," and every once in a while they had to be mopped, scrubbed and wiped down. Well, I was there during Ash Wednesday and Lent Season. So, I decided to do penance every night by mopping, scrubbing and wiping down these tiled floor areas. Instead of being in the rec room with the other boys I would take a pail of water and I would scrub a section of the floor, washing it on my knees. Then I moved to the next section and so on. It wasn't long before some of the boys started asking me why I was doing that and I told them I just wanted to do it for penance and for Lent and that I liked doing it.

We weren't all Catholics, and so some thought it was kind of weird. I also wanted to do something that needed to be done and I knew that a floor couldn't be kept too clean. To keep this area of the cottage clean we weren't allowed to wear shoes when we came in from outside. When we came in we went to our lockers, where we changed into slippers in order to walk through that area. Anyway, I would do that every night and before you know it a couple of other kids joined me for the same reasons I did it. Before they came to the Truant School, they'd never experienced what it was like to see a nice clean floor either. They found they also liked to feel the satisfaction of helping someone out.

My mother was very religious, feared God and kept His commandments. It was through her guidance that I was trained to be a morally good boy and I am very thankful for it. This was one of the reasons why I felt it was incredible that I would end up at the Middlesex County Truant School where so many were sent for being rebellious and out of control. It was because of this



guidance that I wanted to attend the Catholic services held in the school's Chapel. As a small child, I began my education in a Catholic school and also made my First Communion. As I got older I remember my mother telling me to go to church, which I did at times. But while I was at the Truant School I felt it was my chance to get closer to my faith. So, I volunteered to work with the priests along with other boys and became an altar boy. I took part in the Mass but was getting to the age where I would be too old to be an altar boy. So I guess I looked at it like it was my last chance to be one and took advantage of it.

*Chapter 8*  
*Activities at the Middlesex County Truant School*

I got friendly with Father Manion, a Catholic priest, who volunteered at the school. I found out later that churches from all over would send volunteers to visit the school as well. Some of them had summer places where they'd go to relax, and Father Manion had such a place. One day he said because we had helped him to do things around the school he invited us to go to the lake with him. I remember we went three times and, at the time, I couldn't swim.

I remember standing in the water with the others flopping around and him sitting on the dock reading or something. I don't remember too much except that I was honored that I'd been chosen to go and realized that it was a privilege because not all kids got to go.

There were other times when we got to do outside activities, and often Mr. Davis would take us out when the weather got good. During the month of May, we were into a game of baseball and I was playing second base. The kid on first base threw a ball over to third base without warning me that it was coming. Because I wasn't looking, the ball hit me right on the side of the head! Of course, Mr. Davis was there. I went over to tell him, and he said, "Well just walk it off." I guess he couldn't show too much sympathy because, after all, it was a disciplinary school. What I did learn from that incident is, "If you don't want to get hurt, stay awake and watch out for whatever may happen to you."

Once in a while Mr. Davis would take off for a few days. While he was gone, he had someone come in and take over for him. One day the person who took over was Mr. Barney, who was built like a football coach and at one point confronted the biggest boy in our group. Some of the 15 year olds there stood as tall as a grown man. Mr. Barney would annoy this big kid and make him mad enough to want to raise his hand at him. We were witnesses to this. He was a real good kid but that didn't matter to Mr. Barney. He was yelling in the kid's face like they do in the service and was very unfair to him. He was supposed to be there to make sure we didn't get into any trouble, and here he was causing trouble himself. This was definitely a discouraging moment while I was at the School.

There was another incident when I "wasn't looking." We were in the rec room. Like I said earlier, I was a quiet kind of guy and never outspoken. But for some of the guys it was really a punishment to be quiet and not be able to chatter with the others. Well this particular night the guys wanted to have a boxing match so they brought out two pair of boxing gloves. There were these two guys from the city and they were looking for an opportunity to work off some anger. They started moving around the room asking this one and that one if they wanted to fight, but all the other boys refused. Then one guy came to me, and I thought I might be interested in trying it.

When he asked me, I just said, "Sure," and then he says, "No thanks. You're too willing." I don't know what made him say that because there he was bouncing around like he's done it before and there were some pretty good fighters there. I did get to put the gloves on a couple of times, but not with those guys. They were far too good for me. I would have had my head knocked off. So, because I told him I'd like to fight it probably saved my neck! Who knows?

## Chapter 9

### *Saying Good-Bye*

The night before my discharge arrived. Mr. Davis told me that I would be leaving the next day. I didn't have anything to do to get ready, because no one sent anything to me. I came in with nothing and I left with nothing. I was going to leave with the same clothes I came in with. Mr. Davis acted kind of sad, and I remember asking myself, "Do I really have to go?" The place was beginning to feel like home, almost like being back on the farm, living in the country and caring for the animals.

Of course, I wasn't free like I was on the farm, but I really had found a new home. I was away from a strange city and working at the hennery. I had become comfortable with my duties in the hennery. I even thought that when I was old enough I might become Mr. Lloyd's assistant or take a job like the one Mr. Davis was doing. But that wasn't going to happen, and I realized I did have to leave. Mr. Davis and his wife told me they were upset that I was leaving the place. I don't remember exactly saying anything other than thank you. I wasn't very good at expressing my feelings.

Mr. Davis took me down to the main building to see Mr. McCoy. My mother and my sister, Irene, were waiting for me. Mr. and Mrs. Davis, and Mr. and Mrs. McCoy, started crying. When I saw that they were crying because of how they felt about me, it made me cry too. Of course my mother and sister were crying as well. Mr. Robinson was there (he looked just like Ed Asner from the Mary Tyler Moore Show) and I could tell he felt bad that everyone was so sad and crying.

As I think of it today it gives me a funny feeling. I didn't leave home or even the courtroom feeling as sad as I did when I left the Middlesex County Truant School. It had become my home for six months, and I would miss what I found there. It really was a very peculiar thing. I must say that serving my time for truancy probably was more of a saving grace than a bad experience. I'll never know what my life would have been if I stayed at home and lived in the city for those six months. I still carry with me today all the great values that I learned while doing time at the Middlesex County Truant School. I'll be forever grateful for all the good things that I felt privileged to learn there.

## *Prologue*

Yes, my life truly began the day the Judge's gavel went down and I arrived at the Middlesex County Truant School. I'm often reminded of how different it could have been had I never left the city streets of Waltham. Granted, many kids who leave a reform school often end up in trouble and running from the law, but I was one of the lucky ones and for that I am so very thankful. I didn't become another statistic in the society of juvenile delinquents.

I am living proof that it doesn't have to be that way. You can succeed in life when surrounded by good people, who really care about you, people who care about what you do with your life. Middlesex County Truant School has left such an indelible mark on my life. After I finally told Lillian about my experience at the School, she and I had the opportunity to travel to there in the early 1970's. I was so saddened to find that some of the buildings were gone and that there had been a fire in the main building.



**Middlesex County Truant School on Fire**

Fortunately, the building had been completely restored. My wife and I were able to go inside when we visited. For just a short while I was able to go back in time and experience once again the months I spent at the school as a kid. It moved me very deeply. It was while we were taking a tour of the School, I discovered it was purchased by the Wang Laboratories and the University of Massachusetts in Lowell, MA. It was no longer being used as a school for truant.

Even though this disappointed me a little bit, I will always have memories of the place where I learned to grow up. In my heart, those memories cause me to be so grateful for the positive impact the Middlesex County Truant School made on my life and continues to all these years later.

So, at 81 years old I would like to say that, even though things in life don't always turn out the way you plan, good things can be found among the unexpected in life - if you look for them. I've lived a full life and I owe it all to the unexpected plan in my life of spending six months in the Middlesex County Truant School.

I will be forever grateful to all who touched my life in such a positive way during those few short months in the days of my youth.

As written by:  
George E. Cormier  
February 22, 2010

## More Pictures of Middlesex County Truant School



*Cottage, Middlesex County Truant School,  
Princeton St., North Chelmsford, Mass.*

**Cottage, MCTS  
Princeton St., North Chelmsford, Mass.**



*Hall, Workshop & Laundry, Middlesex County Truant School,  
Princeton St., North Chelmsford, Mass.*

**Hall, Workshop & Laundry MCTS**



**Rear of the Cottage MCTS  
Princeton St., North Chelmsford, Mass**

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“Many thanks for the assistance of my daughters Susan, Joan and her husband Ron ”

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Washington, DC

To Fresh  
Joe