

The Conversazione

by BRUCE McKEEN

IN THE BEGINNING

On March 22 that term-break known as the "Con" will be held in the gym. From the dance programmes, girls in formals which they will have wheeled from their dotting fathers, escorted by young men of whom many will be rather the worse for wear, will learn that they are enjoying the 176th Annual Conversazione—at least, those who are capable of noticing it will. But why the event is so special, why it has lasted for so many years, why it should be called by the Italian word for "conversation", few know.

Today the affair is a far cry from the social functions from which it has developed. In the early years of the university, the annual Conversazione was just the "get-together" its name implied: students would join in February for an evening of fun—they would go on a sleigh-ride or some such activity, return later for a lunch, and depart in a festive mood rather like that felt today—rather like

By January, 1892, however, there was a general feeling that this sort of function was inadequate, and, since the students were also feeling that Frederickton should be repaid in part for its consideration for the university, a new Conversazione emerged. It was to be one that, as the University Monthly said then, would give the students "an opportunity for repaying the kindness and hospitality received from the town," as well as a "big night" for their own pleasure. Within a year the event had developed into a gala social gathering in the Great Hall of the Arts Building. As the college newspaper related of the evening of February 10, 1893:

"The main hall was so transformed as to be hardly recognizable, and it seemed indeed a glimpse of fairyland . . . to behold such a galaxy of youth and beauty gliding about to the strains of the soul-inspiring (sic) waltz. In the middle of the hall a huge arch of evergreens was erected, and the pleasing effect was heightened by the artistic distribution of flags and bunting. The halls and the lecture rooms were lighted by candles, whose soft glow produced an effect otherwise unattainable.

"The main hall and two lecture rooms were used for dancing . . . A running supper was served during the evening, in the reading room upstairs.

"For those who did not dance other amusements were provided. Dr. Bailey and Prof. Duff performed many interesting experiments in their lecture rooms in connection with the subject of Sound and Electricity. Many were attracted to the library by the sounds issuing from that modern miracle, the phonograph. The guests . . . (numbered) between three and four hundred."

(The use of evergreens mentioned above was part of the "greening" which U.N.B. students felt was their special creation: evergreen boughs were festooned about the Great Hall and interspersed with paper roses of white, yellow, and red, on which the co-eds had worked for weeks before.)

The idea caught on: in *The Brunswickan* of 1928, it was said that "The Conversazione is rightfully recognized as one of the premier social events of the season, the guests assembling from all sections of the Province." As an energetic student had written, and had had published two years before,

"The lights were bright as we came up the Hill,
We entered in and everything was gay,
The people were all wandering at will,
The music had not yet begun to play.
The Governor and Lady Todd were there,
And all the ladies, Oh! a crowd so fair!"

It was in 1920 that Dr. E. O. Turner, now Dean of Engineering, and Mrs. Turner first chaperoned a "Con", and, for thirty-five years, they continued to attend as such. Dr. Turner remembers the period in which he came here as one of high formality at these events: white tie and tails were the preferred dress for men, while the ladies decked themselves out in their finest. Hot-air registers were then in the Great Hall, and the atmosphere was close. Incidentally, the extremely cold weather which hit New Brunswick in January was equalled at least once in the '20's: Dr. Turner says that, on one occasion, the metal bars on the inside of the front doors were covered with frost, and that, on reaching home after the ball, he found the mercury hovering at 40 below. At that period couples called the Barker House Stables, run by Mr. Roy W. Smith, when they wanted to come up the hill to the 'Con', but the taxis were horse-drawn sleighs. One night one of these pungs, having discharged its passengers, was run away with by the team; it crashed and severely injured one of the horses, which had to be killed. Dr. Turner also recalls the active participation in the festivities of the townspeople, many of whom were alumni or persons otherwise connected with the university. They provided the food for the midnight lunch which was then an important part of the 'Con'. The evenings began earlier than they do now, and usually were over by one o'clock.

The 'Cons' were held with great success in the Arts Building for over thirty years: in *The Brunswickan* of December 1926-January 1927, it was still being said that "The scene of the 'Con' was unanimously agreed to be

the Arts Building, which, besides lending itself more suitably to decorations, preserves a certain attractive atmosphere of tradition and ceremony.

Yet the next year the scene had shifted to the newly-constructed Memorial Hall. The old decorating scheme of greening was preserved in the basement, which was used as a refreshment hall, but not on the dancing floor itself, as there was a ban on using tacks on the walls. The next year "the question of bringing the 'Con' back to the old building wasn't even aired", says *The Brunswickan* with rather too much assurance.

Whatever the scene, however, certainly the expression of gratitude towards the town gradually changed. An irate article in *The Brunswickan* of February 1931 commented, "The old type of 'Con' survived, until a few years ago, when for some obscure reason it took the form of a dance, at which the students received as much entertainment as anyone, and the chief amusement of our staid guests was the watching of our antics on the dance floor." In that year, therefore, a different sort of function was initiated: in a student forum in the college newspaper appeared, "We have brought about the GRAND CHANGE . . . In place of the OLD CON has been substituted a formal Reception and Dance." That year the presentation by the students of two playlets, "a lively reading", and piano selections by students and faculty, entertained the outside guests.

Memorial Hall remained the scene of the 'Con' until 1941, when, in April, it moved to "that versatile building, the Lady Beaverbrook Gymnasium." As a writer in *The Brunswickan* of that month flippantly noted, "This year marks the third change in the location of the Con. 'Way back when grandpop went 'Up the Hill' the Con was held in the Arts Building lobby. Then when big brother was here the Memorial Hall became the accustomed place. Now, due to the increased number of patrons, the new gym takes over." This was in war time, and formal dress was waived for a while, without diminishing the enjoyment of the new building.

And there the dance so far remains, carrying on in part or at least the intentions with which it was founded during those 'gay '90's'.

Sigma Lambda Beta Rho

By the "Jones Boys"

CANADA'S ODDEST STUDENT PUBLICATION

Oh the "Jones Boys"

With mouth full of Grit, and quite dry of spit,
They'll lobby all night, and they'll debate all day,
Lest we compromise our Tory principles away.

The spreading sands of political intrigue are enveloping the already arid Province of New Brunswick. It seems that even in the distant future the only oasis where thirsty tongues can be slaked will still be the N.B.L.C.B. The wind-blown Grits have stung the eyes of the tortured Tories, as they squint across the desert plain into a mirage of Ultimate Utopia.

On two occasions in the last couple of weeks a Conservative Government saw fit to vote down a proposal by the Liberal opposition to establish a Committee on the liquor problem. Both in the Model and Provincial Parliaments the representatives of the Conservative Government waived all personal feelings to defeat what their respective leaders called a motion of non-confidence.

We "Jones Boys", though strong and reliable Tories, shudder inwardly to think that our principles were compromised to satisfy the demands of Party Politics.

It is only to be hoped that as good Tories throughout the Province sit and sip their Scotch, that they too will not feel that they have inflicted a restriction on the liberty of the Majority to appease the Minority of Tory teardrinkers.

The problems of this desert are those of extremes of heat and cold, drought and flood. Now the boot is on the leg of an underground source, to quench our thirst when what we need is irrigation.

This policy of Conservatism seems to be spreading throughout the Campus. It is often said that extremes in Party Politics are dangerous, that there is little difference between the ardent Communist and Fascist. Perhaps this is the reason for the banning of the "RED 'N BLACK Party".

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