The Vernacular

“Your wooden arm you hold outstretched to shake with passers-by.”

Betty Vorenberg recalls stumbling over a “Harvard shibboleth” in the 1970s when her late husband, James ’49, LL.B. ’51, former dean of the Law School and Pound professor of law, was master of Dunster House. “Jim and I had left Dunster for the summer, arranging that the courtyard be renovated with new plantings and circular paths,” she says. “We returned to find that no work had been done. Jim called the planning office and was told that ‘circular paths were not in the Harvard vernacular!’ A hasty re-drawing with straight paths allowed the work to begin, but the returning students had to slog through mud and around bulldozers. Jim was furious.”

Robert LaMont ’49, of Lacey, Washington, had his own brush with Harvard regularity as an undergraduate. In the May-June issue (page 67), this magazine reproduced the shield of the new School of Engineering and Applied Sciences, which elicited a letter to the editor from LaMont. “The shield took me back some 58 years,” he wrote, “when I was studying cartography under Dr. Erwin Raisz at the Institute of Geographical Exploration. He was making a revision of his map of Harvard, and had been asked to make a border showing the insignia of the schools and Houses. I was asked to collect and draw up these insignia. The material that I was able to collect varied greatly in format, and as some uniformity obviously was necessary, I went over to Widener and looked at some books on heraldry. These told me that Radcliffe ought to be on a feminine lozenge and the Divinity School in a pointed oval, which I did. This lack of complete uniformity apparently did not please someone in Massachusetts Hall, however, and we had to change them.”

LaMont discloses that “someone also wanted a drawing of a student in the corner of the map (Harvard did not have so many buildings then). I posed for this in a borrowed gown, holding a stadia rod. A fancy finial on the rod and a mortarboard cap were drawn on. I probably appear, in this drawing, on as many Harvard publications as anyone!”

Sharp-eyed reader: J. Linzee Coolidge ’59, of Boston, had his head snapped back by a “Personals” advertisement in the May-June issue. “Bks” wrote in her ad that she is “Drawn to Vinylhaven, Positano, Lake Sevan.” Coolidge sent her an e-mail advisory, which he showed to Primus for the typographical record.

“Dear Bks: The spelling error jumped out at me from the page and, please forgive me, I feel compelled to bring it to your attention,” he wrote. “The Maine island is Vinalhaven, not Vinylhaven. Ouch! This is like wearing brown shoes to dinner at 770 Park Avenue. This seemingly inconsequential mistake may cause a certain type of New England Anglo-Saxon male reader to pass quickly to the next personal ad. This would be the pinch-nosed variety of Anglo-Saxon, whose nostrils can discern the 29 kinds of fog that prevail in the waters east of the Cuckolds bell. Included here would be members of the Cabot and Saltonstall families, and anyone descended from President Eliot of Harvard. I agree with you, though, for choosing Vinalhaven. We all long to be, to exist, in Vinalhaven; it is a place for the more rugged of spirit, where the eagles soar over long-abandoned granite quarries.”

~Primus V