

## CHAPTER 3

### CORNELL UNIVERSITY (SEPTEMBER 1942-MARCH 1943)

Ray and I arrived in Ithaca, New York by Greyhound bus from Danville, in September 1942, and started looking for a place to live. It became clear that we could not afford to live in the college dorms. With luck and with some helpful advice from the college housing office, we found a furnished room in the converted attic of an old house in College Town. This area of Ithaca adjacent to the campus, contained many old large homes, which were now used to house students off campus. It really was a bargain compared to others we had seen. The room was small. It could not have been larger than 12 x 12 feet, and contained two cots, two small dressers, one closet, and two small desks. At least, it did have a window through which we could see some beautiful mature trees in the area. The bathroom in the hall was to be shared with other students renting rooms on the same floor. The room cost \$12.00 per month for both of us, and was close to the campus on an uphill climb, which became quite adventurous in the frequent icy and snowy winter weather.

We deposited our meager belongings in our room, and then went out to enjoy the warm early fall day, and the beauty of the Cornell campus. Certainly, Cornell must have one of the most beautiful settings in the country for a college campus. The campus was set between two gorges high on a hill overlooking magnificent Cayuga Lake and the town of Ithaca. The campus and hillsides were stunning in the early September sun, with a hint of autumn already in the air, and some early changes in the color of the foliage. In those days, the campus streets were lined with beautiful mature elm trees. Unfortunately, in later years, many succumbed to the Dutch elm disease. We walked to the social center of

the campus, Willard Strait Hall, which seemed to be crowded with students. It was quite apparent that many were well dressed, in comparison to ourselves, and, we assumed, they came from wealthy homes and were being sent to college, all expenses paid, by their parents. Probably, most students were in this category, but we later discovered that there were quite a few young men, who came from impoverished backgrounds and were trying to make it on their own. Many of them were Ag students like us! The place was alive with chatter, as we explored the building, gravitated to the taproom, and downed a few beers. It was a pleasant afternoon.

An immediate need for Ray and me was to find jobs to provide for room, board, and other expenses. My \$350 would be exhausted rapidly for books, fees, and some necessary clothes. We soon learned that in early 1942, the Navy had set up a school for training officers at Cornell, most of who were domiciled in the Baker dormitories. The cafeteria in the Baker dormitory was used to feed the cadets, and it was apparent that kitchen help was sorely needed. This turned out to be a good opportunity for us. We worked one hour for each of two meals during the day, and received payment of three meals. The work consisted of washing dishes, pots and pans, or working at the steam tables, dishing out food. Our ravenous appetites took advantage of an “all that you can eat” payment arrangement. If we worked additional hours, we earned \$1.00 per hour, a good wage in those days. Since we worked not less than four hours daily, we earned our food, and \$10.00-14.00 per week, enough to pay for room board laundry, and various school expenses. We had to arise early each morning, to be in the cafeteria by 6:30AM for the breakfast service. It was a struggle to get out of bed each morning. We would climb up the hill to the campus, cross Cascadilla Gorge, and walk on campus down the

hills to the Baker dorms. Fall and winter weather comes early to Ithaca, and many a morning we trudged through the dark and constant snow to get to the dorm in time. Unfortunately, I did not have adequate proper warm clothing and boots to deal with the Ithaca winters. When classes started, I had to scramble back up the hill and Tower Road to get to 8:00 am classes on either the Arts and Sciences, or the Ag campus. It was tough, but there was little choice. With the job, and our studies, we had inadequate time to study, none to play. I often found myself falling asleep with a book in hand, trying to study.

I registered in the College of Agriculture for my first semester at Cornell, as a preveterinary student. My courses were rather diverse, including general chemistry, livestock judging, bacteriology, English grammar, and algebra. In addition, ROTC was required of all male students. I was lucky that my grades during that first semester at Cornell were sufficient to keep me from being “busted”, expelled for academic reasons. I think I was always tired during that freshman year. Clearly, my grades didn’t suffer because I was partying too much. That had to wait until I returned to Cornell at the end of the war. But that is another story. And so began my college career, in the class of 1946.

In retrospect, it is a wonder that I was able to get through all of this. I presume that it was because of my mother’s influence on me. As far back as I can remember, I had an interest in animals and plants, and what I realized later to be biology and chemistry. My mother, although not an openly affectionate woman, obviously cared for her children, and her vision for me was to be a scholar. Her dream had been for me to go to Vienna, Austria, to study medicine. Prior to World War I, Vienna had been a major world center

of learning in Medicine and Science. This was an unattainable dream because of our poverty, and, furthermore, was not possible with the rise of Nazism in Europe, the “anschluss” with Austria in 1938, and the beginning of the war in Europe in 1939. There is no doubt, however, that my mother’s dream for me fashioned my own desire to get an education, even though there was no way that the family could finance it. It was a good thing I did not realize how difficult it would be, or I might have been easily discouraged.

During that first semester, I had little time to be a “freshman”. Wearing the traditional freshman Cornell “beanie” ( a small red and white cap) seemed ludicrous under the circumstances. As soon as I matriculated as a student, my name was put on various fraternity lists as a possible “rushee”, but all the fraternities lost interest when they became aware of my family background, my religion, my lack of money and proper clothing, and, clearly, my lack of social graces. I, however, was a rapid learner. I even managed to play the rush game for a little while, and was able to get a number of free meals around the houses before the brothers caught on to my game. My membership in a fraternity would have to wait until the end of the war and my return to Cornell, when I associated with  $\Sigma$ AM, Sigma Alpha Mu.

As the first semester advanced, I tried my best to keep up with my class work, but the job requirements and lack of sleep were taking their toll. As the weather became colder, with more snow and ice, and as I became more fatigued, I became ill in mid November with viral pneumonia, and was hospitalized in the Cornell Infirmary for about two weeks, losing income and time from my studies. When I was released from the infirmary, I had to return immediately to my job and my classes, although there was a brief holiday between Christmas and New Years. Although I did not distinguish myself,

I somehow managed to pass my courses and even ROTC that semester. I still remember close order drill in our ROTC field artillery unit (and the Pershing Rifle drill unit) with my mind in a fog, and, I'm sure, a low grade fever for weeks on end. I was grateful for the end of the semester at the end of January.

On my eighteenth birthday on January 5, 1943, I had to register for the Draft. I was anxious to get into the fight, and with the difficulty of my situation at Cornell, I decided to enlist rather than wait to be drafted. If I volunteered, I could choose my branch of service. At that time, you enlisted through your draft board, which in my case, was in the Bronx at my mother's address. I did enlist and selected the army air corps, with thoughts of becoming a pilot. It was not until the end of March that I was finally called up for active service, and began what undoubtedly was one of the most defining periods of my life.