

Milford's Maginot Line . . .

How Jesuit Seminarians Saved the JSC Campus

By Tom Cooper
Class of 1956

In the late winter of 1959, the high waters of the Little Miami River caused a massive collapse of the bluff opposite the "Rock House." Father Paul Allen, S.J., rector of Milford Seminary, consulted with engineers. They told him that the perimeter road and the "Rock House" would go next unless quick action was taken. Their recommendation: a concrete retaining wall costing \$75,000!

Fr. Allen had served as a chaplain on the



Burma Road during WWII so he was somewhat familiar with construction. He decided to do the job in-house. There were several seminarians with engineering degrees, but he chose 20-year-old Jim Zeller (first year Juniorate) as his construction manager. Together, they cobbled together a plan: (1) build a retaining wall at the foot of the bluff; (2) fill in behind it; (3) plant vegetation on the slope.

Labor would come from the ranks of the Juniorate. (Milford Seminary housed the Novitiate and the Juniorate. The first two years of Jesuit training was the Novitiate, where prayer and work dominated; the third and fourth years, the Juniorate, concentrated on a liberal arts curriculum.) The labor would be strictly voluntary; no forced conscription.



In the first phase, the site for the wall was chosen, the dimensions lined out and staked and the ground leveled for the foundation. Meanwhile, Dick Bollman's (first year Juniorate) father, a contractor, provided a concrete mixer. A Cincinnati utility provided 55 gallon barrels. Zeller's scheme of maneuver was this: a crew would mix the concrete at the top of the bluff; when ready,

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the concrete was released down a chute to a bin on the shore; wheelbarrows would draw concrete from the bin and then dump the mix into

a barrel. In turn, the barrels would be tied together by cable.

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While pick-and-shovel crews prepared the foundation, John “Nails” Hardner’s (second year Juniorate) crew constructed the bin and the chute. The chute was dicey: bent tin supported by wooden trusses running from the bluff’s top to the bin on the shore. Despite its crudeness, it worked – most of the time.

Initially, the labor crews were small – pick-and-shovel work was tedious. But by mid-May when the first barrels were laid, volunteers increased. During the week, classes and studies restricted the hours volunteers could work. But on Saturdays, volunteers forfeited their rec day at the farm and worked from breakfast to dinner.

“Zeke” Zeller was a dynamo. In addition to mapping out each day’s objectives and assigning tasks to crews, he moved among



the men joking, encouraging and bucking up morale. Whenever a task was finished, he had another job ready to go. He made every volunteer feel important and that included Fr. Allen, who often showed up, work gloves in hand.

By July, the base tier of barrels was laid and the second tier started. By then, the routine was settled and the project hummed with precision. Soon the third tier was started and the pace picked up. The fourth tier proved a daunting task. Balancing a wheelbarrow of concrete on a 2 x 6 plank fifteen feet up took some skill and a whole lot of nerve. There were several falls, but no broken bones.

The upstream end of the wall worried Zeller. If that most vulnerable part of the wall failed, the rest would cave. There, where the wall curled back to the bluff, he doubled the four tiers for added strength. I dubbed



that rampart, “The Battery” and it stuck.

By late August, “The Maginot Line” was completed. Fr. Allen secured two dump trucks and a contractor provided free fill. The “Red Ball Express” swung into action with Dan Coffey (first year Juniorate) and Jim Zeller driving the dump trucks and

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volunteers riding shotgun. The trucks ran non-stop for several weeks dumping fill from the top of the bluff.

Gradually, a slope began to take form. At some point in early September, the Detroit Province men (including Zeller) left for

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their new seminary – Colombiere – just north of Detroit. The Chicago Province juniors continued the march.

By late September, the slope was complete. After grooming, willows, trees, bushes – anything that would take quick root – were planted. Finally, the job was done. But, would it hold?

On Labor Day weekend, 1996, the Class of '56 (our year of entry into the "Soc") gathered at the Jesuit Spiritual Center for our first reunion. By twos and threes, we went down to the shore and inspected the wall. It's not easy to find because of the vegetation but it's still there in all of its crude glory. On Sunday afternoon, as the reunion broke up, Jim Zeller and I went back for a last inspection. As we stood at the base

of the wall, a young couple floated by in a canoe. The lady called out, "Are they still there?" Jim shot back, "All 589 of them."

The Class of '56 scheduled another reunion at Colombiere for Labor Day weekend, 2011. Jim Zeller didn't make it. He died of cancer on August 24, 2011. On my way up to Cleveland for his funeral, I swung by Milford, parked at the retreat house, put on some old shoes, and once more "trooped the line" in honor of my old friend. As I stood at the base of the wall, two canoes with teenagers floated by. I pointed to the barrels encased in shadows, "Can you see the wall?"

They paddled closer, "Wow, yes."

"I helped build that."



Jim Zeller and Tom Cooper at the foot of the Maginot Wall, 1996.

To Honor or Remember These Seminarians . . .

The Jesuit Spiritual Center has constructed a secluded overlook on the exact spot where once seminarians

braved heat, mosquitoes and the river to barrel-by-barrel rescue the campus.



If you would like to honor the efforts of these seminarians, or to honor or memorialize a member of their class, contact Joe (phone 513-248-3500, ext. 14 or jfoley@jesuitspiritualcenter.com) to purchase an inscribed brick. The brick will be placed on the overlook high above the Little Miami, with proceeds directed to our work with young people only a year or two younger than the seminarians who built the "Maginot Line."

