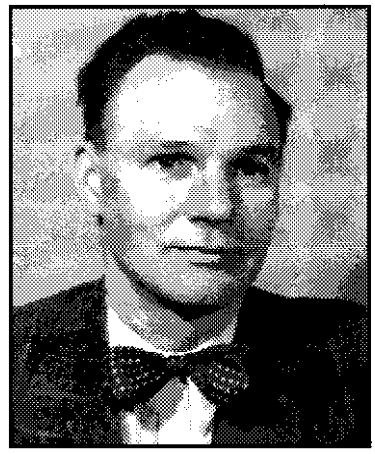
CHAPTER THREE

The Boom Years: Harry at the Helm

"Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do and they will surprise you with their ingenuity."

George Patton

Harry Collins came to Northfield at age 30, retiring from Sunset Ridge at age 62.



Fifteen years after finding William Cray, Dorothy Clark recruited District 29's second principal, Harry Collins.

The Evanston YMCA is only eight blocks from the Northwestern University campus. And that was a good thing for Harry Collins, a 28-year-old teacher taking classes there at night.

It was 1942. Harry's wife and two young sons lived 40 miles away near Naperville on a dairy farm where his wife had grown up. The nation was at war. Gas was scarce. Harry lived at the "Y" weeknights and drove home to spend Saturday and Sunday.

Northwestern was the big league. The son of a postmaster in Lombard, Ill., Harry had always wanted to teach. At nearby North Central College, he majored in English and the classics, Latin and Greek. His first teaching job was in Rockford. Now, he was teaching 8th grade in Stickney, Ill. Each evening, he caught a streetcar to Evanston to study for his master's degree at night.

Harry didn't know what his next step would be. But his professor did. Paul Meisner, superintendent of the Glencoe Public Schools, was teaching "education administration" at Northwestern's night school. Quietly, over the course of the year, he singled out Harry as the one student he'd like to take back to Glencoe with him.

So in 1943, with master's degree in hand, Harry went to the North School in Glencoe to teach 6th grade.

That same year, Meisner pulled him aside and gave him some advice.

"I can remember him walking into my classroom and telling me about a job in Northfield," Collins recalled. "Meisner told me: 'It's just a little country school. But if you go, it's going to grow up around you pretty fast.'"

Harry went for an interview and spent the day with Dorothy Clark, head of the Sunset Ridge search committee. He liked what he heard.

"She gave me her vision for the school," Collins said.

Since Cray's departure in 1942, three teachers had been running Sunset Ridge, handling administrative tasks and hiring. Some board members felt that worked fine. But Dorothy Clark wanted to find an academic focal point for teachers, children and parents—someone to run the school. She also had a list of needs like adding a kindergarten and bringing back the 6th through 8th graders who still rode the bus each day to Winnetka.

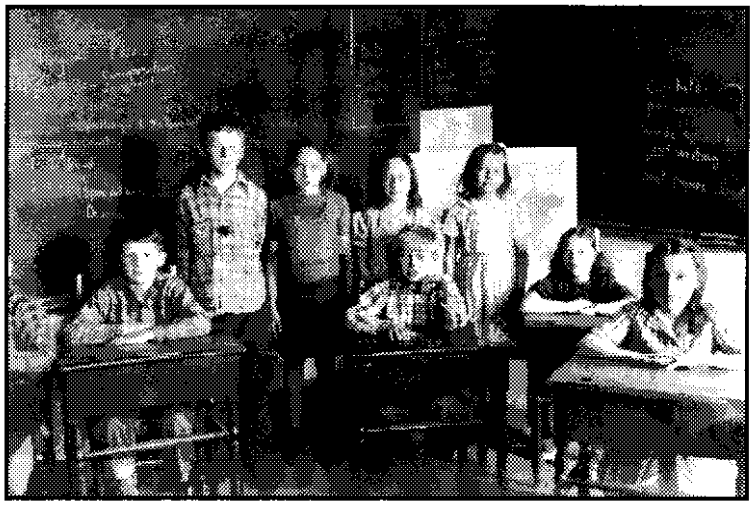
"It all sounded good to me," Collins said. "And they wanted to pay me more money than I was earning in Glencoe."

So he took the job, heading up a faculty of three plus a janitor, serving 60 kids spanning grades one through five.

The ability to drywall wasn't part of the job description. But that was Harry's first challenge at Sunset Ridge.

To open a kindergarten, he needed a room. So Harry and the school custodian spent his first summer in Northfield transforming a basement storage room into a classroom, putting down tile floors and paneling walls. The school opened its doors to five-year-olds for the first time that fall.

Each morning, Harry taught third grade. The new kindergarten teacher took over for him in the afternoon. "That's when I did everything else," he said. "I was gym teacher, music teacher, administrator and bookkeeper."



Sunset Ridge only served students up to fifth grade when Harry Collins arrived. Older grades were bused to Winnetka. The school didn't serve all eight grades again until 1954.

First and second grade children met in one classroom; fourth and fifth graders met in the second. Third graders met in a small study room.

There was no cafeteria. Students brought their lunch to school and ate at their desks. "I got awfully tired of smelling lunch all day," Collins said. "I told the students: 'We're going to find a place in the basement and have a proper lunch break.'"

But there were no tables or chairs. "We were just a little country school," he said.

Over Christmas break he went to the lumber yard and bought enough wood to build twelve tables and benches. He painted them red.

"When the kids came back to school," he said, "we had a lunchroom."

The school's janitor resigned that year. Harry hired a replacement who frequently called in sick. On those days, Harry drove the bus to pick up the junior high classes in Winnetka. He also cleaned the school.

The following year, the Sunset Ridge lunch program got a boost when the PTA told Harry they had a plan to provide hot food for the kids.

They'd located a woman on Winnetka Avenue who could prepare a hot casserole each day. The PTA would serve the food, and provide dishes and silverware.

"The principal's job," Harry recalled, "was to go and get the casserole."

He did that for two years, carting two large pans of hot food that sometimes slopped onto the front seat of his Studebaker.

By the end of the decade, the federal government would offer lunch subsidies so that schools could cook hot food on the premises.

Most school districts took the subsidies and ran their own lunch program. But District 29, with 80 students by now, didn't have the manpower to do that.

"That's when the PTA went into the lunch business," Collins said. "I practically had to sign my life away to get them to do it. But they hired a cook."

The miles Harry drove delivering casseroles were nothing compared to his commute. When his family first came to Northfield in 1944, they rented a series of homes—and after finding nothing affordable, they moved back to the family farm near Naperville. Their round-trip was 100 miles.

Harry's wife Caroline came along each day with their two sons, Jim and Jeff. While they went to school, she did office work—as a volunteer.

In 1950, the Collins moved to Northfield for good, breaking ground on their Enid Lane home.

By then, ground had also been broken to expand the school. The days of battling Lucy Brachtendorf and lockouts at Brown School were gone. In 1948, the district easily passed a referendum to build a $10,000 addition onto the school.

The end of the war marked a new era in Northfield. As people flocked to the northern suburbs to start their post-war lives and families, the little rural town with its own train station and proximity to Winnetka seemed like a good bet.

The Metz's still ran their farm and produce stand behind the school. And Lucy Brachtendorf, now in her eighties, had outlived both her brothers and her friend, Julia Donovan. She lived in her Willow Road home until she was 92 with a rugged farmhand, Jack Murphy, who

Harry Collins' first year: 1944.

managed her farm, her animals—and Lucy.

When former Winnetkan Mary Hobart moved her family to Northfield in the early '50s, it felt to her family and friends like she'd moved "half way to the Mississippi River."

Sunset Ridge was proud of its four new classrooms for kindergarten, 1st and 2nd grade. A small gym had also been added in the basement. But there were limits.

"I remember how crestfallen my eight-year-old budding athlete was when he saw the 'gym,'" Hobart says. Her son Ralph couldn't help but compare the plumbing pipes on the ceiling and the cramped space to the more luxurious Greeley School athletic facilities he'd come from.

Newcomers felt the same way about the town's traditional fund-raiser, "Northfield Days." Since the '20s, old-timers had held the event each year, raising money for the village through bingo, roulette and liquor sales. The late '40s marked its demise. It didn't attract young newcomers in the community.

At the Willow Inn restaurant—the new eating establishment in town—the culture clash between old and new was best reflected by the large sign on the front door: "Men Must Wear Shirts!"

The village government, newcomers felt, was also behind the times. Northfield trustees, mostly farmers, were paid to run the town. But they had limited access to lawyers, engineers and accountants. Decisions were often made on issues such as zoning without anyone's full knowledge or consent.

In 1947, newcomers sponsored their own candidate in the town's first contested election. They lost to Peter Selzer, whose family came in the 1860s. But the newcomers stepped up their efforts and staged a door-to-door campaign. Two years later, they won. Attorney John Van der Vries was elected village president in 1949. He was the first of a long line of young suburbanites who would mold the community to fit their ideals.

It was the little country school, however, that truly shaped the town.

As one graduate, Barb Baylor Clayton, says, "During the Harry years, District 29 really *was* Northfield. The entire community was defined by his vision and passion."

Former teacher Jim Clarkson explains it this way: "District 29—and all that we were doing for kids—became the heart of Northfield."

To Collins' credit, he not only tapped into the heart of the town, but he did it on a limited tax base.

Having money for schools depended on property values. And Northfield, with its extensive farmland, lower real estate values and limited industry, wasn't a rich district. Collins excelled at inspiring and drawing upon the skills and talents of the community, stretching resources as best he could for District 29.

In the late '40s Dorothy Clark retired from her active role in the school. But her vision for Harry would be achieved.

In 1949, the school got its sixth grade class back from Winnetka. School enrollment reached 100. Harry's days of driving the bus and cleaning the school were over. But he got to teach 6th grade. And he loved it.

"I remember how he read to us every day—classics like King Arthur," says Florie

Jim Clarkson taught physical education, art and fifth grade the year he joined the district: 1949.

Sick Baumann, who was a sixth grader when she had Collins in 1949. "He had such a wonderful respect for his students. You really felt that whatever your talent or gift, he wanted to help you make the most of it. You had his respect."

Harry could play the piano, so when there was time, he'd hold an all-school music class in the basement. Physical education was a bigger problem. He'd enlist "anyone I could talk into it" to sponsor activities or games.

In 1949, Harry began looking for the school's first physical education teacher. He liked to tell the story of the hot summer day he was gazing out the front window as his wife worked in the office.

"I saw this big black Chevrolet crawl up the driveway and stop," he recalled. "School wasn't in session, and you never saw cars much. I watched this young fellow get out. He had a girl in the car next to him and she stayed there.

"The young man came into my office and told me he was looking for a job. We chatted for a few minutes and I knew by his general demeanor and attitude: 'He's for me.'"

That intuitive skill—making hiring decisions by hunch—would be a specialty of Harry's. "I wanted teachers who were well-educated," he said. "But I also knew there was no way to predict how effective they'd be in the classroom. I had to go by hunch."

Jim Clarkson, the young man in the black Chevy, would be one of Harry's most successful hires.

A Chicago native. Clarkson had majored in P.E. at Indiana University and was looking for his first job. The girl in the car, according to Clarkson, "is the same one who's still in my car"—his wife Marilyn.

Clarkson's minor in college was art. That impressed Harry. "To find a combination like that was really unusual," he said. "I told Jim on the spot: 'You're hired.'"

That fall, Clarkson taught 5th grade, art and P.E. He'd never thought of teaching art before. "But I asked him to," Harry said.

That was a key Collins talent: his skill at finding fresh ways to stretch the limited resources of District 29.

The school fair, started in 1946, was one of many ways the community and Collins joined forces to raise funds for the school. It started humbly enough with one PTA mother approaching Collins about an after-school event with a few games and crafts made by students that could be fun and profitable as well. Collins ran with the idea—and the event grew from there.

Partnership like that between teachers, parents and the community spanned every facet of the school.

Patty Boylston, who moved to the district in 1950, remembers the first time she walked into the Sunset Ridge library.

"I had just dropped my daughter off for her first day in kindergarten," she recalls. "We're all big readers in my family and I was just learning about the school, so I stopped in to look at the library.

"I remember staring at these four empty walls and asking: '*Where are the books?*'"

As Boylston found out, the books were

still in the basement waiting to be unpacked. No one in the school knew the Dewey Decimal System, so they weren't sure how to arrange them anyway—assuming they *did* get them up the stairs.

"I said: 'We've got to fix this!' So I rounded up a group of mothers, and we spent days lugging books!" The moms arranged the books alphabetically. Then they took turns volunteering to staff the library so that students could check books out.

It would be four years before the school could afford a real librarian.

The drama program also took a major leap from the '30s when Betty Horsman Heffner had students dance to "Shine Little Glow Worm" in the basement.

Collins liked to talk about one of the more memorable Christmas pageants in the early '50s. As he recalled, the audience arrived. The lights dimmed. The scenery, painted by students, was spotlighted beautifully and solidly supported by a large, square metal bar. The pageant was well underway when Collins realized they'd forgotten to put the Christ child, a borrowed doll, in the manger. Collins signaled to the school's Swedish custodian, Eric Benson, who dashed behind the scenery to get the doll—only to hurl his shin right into the square metal bar.

"He yelled words I didn't even want to know in Swedish," Collins recalled. But Benson regained his composure and grabbed the doll, throwing a high lob to Collins who tossed it into the manger. With the audience howling, the show went on.

By the mid-'50s, productions like "Our Town" and "Oklahoma" were featured attractions at the school.

The music program had an equally humble start. But Collins, with help from the community, built a program that rivaled any on the North Shore.

It started with a suggestion from a PTA mom, Ellie Martin. She wondered if Sunset Ridge might offer music lessons through the Dushkin School in Winnetka, forerunner of the North Shore Music Center that opened in 1956, known today as Music Institute of Chicago.

"David Dushkin was a European-trained musician," said Collins. "I went to talk with him, and we struck a deal."

Enlisting the PTA's help, the two devised a plan to offer private voice and music lessons to students, which parents paid for. In addition, each class would have formal music instruction on the recorder.

The instruction was exceptional; the facilities almost a joke. Flute instructor Louise Burge remembers being assigned to the boiler room to teach lessons. "I was always a little surprised to be there," she says, "but it didn't bother the kids."

As part of the pact, Dushkin also used the Sunset Ridge basement to make recorders for his students. The partnership between Winnetka's music school and Sunset Ridge would span three decades.

The program gained momentum when Collins hired Neil Burstrom, a social studies instructor who also played French horn with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Harry's "two-for-one" theory of hiring teachers paid off again. All the kids taking lessons became part of Burstrom's first Sunset Ridge orchestra—and the program took off.

Northfield families with a strong background and interest in music partnered with Collins and Burstrom to make the program a success.

"It was outstanding," recalls Edith Ballin, whose daughter, a Sunset Ridge graduate, is today a professional cellist with the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra.

Ballin remembers one musical father, after a particularly moving concert, telling Burstrom he'd just taped the performance.

"What he *really* did," Ballin recalls, "was tape a recording of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, instead."

"Neil dutifully listened to the tape," she recalls. "It took him a few minutes to catch on. But he loved it. You watched him perform with those kids—it was pure magic."

And there was more.

David Dushkin retired and was succeeded by one of the most passionate, visionary musi-

Northfield's Play Program: Product Of Working Fool

By Larry Graff

"He's almost an institution in Northfield."

"He's a working fool."

"I've never known a man more sensitive to other people's feelings."

The comments were about Northfield's Jim Clarkson, and they were from those who know him best—his boss and colleagues.

Jim Clarkson

Since coming to Northfield in 1949 as a fifth-grade and physical-education teacher at Sunset Ridge School, the 42-year-old "human dynamo" has developed recreation programs that offer something for almost everyone.

In addition to directing Sunset Ridge's physical education, recreation, and art programs, Mr. C, as he's called by his charges, runs a play club and the Northfield Park District's recreation program. The park district's winter program includes basketball, wrestling, games, ice skating, and hockey, and the summer program features baseball for boys and tennis, archery, and softball for girls.

'Shows Enthusiasm'

"Jim shows enthusiasm for kids in all activities," says his boss since 1949, school Supt. Harrison Collins.

Sunset Ridge got its first gym—and the PTA pitched in to buy curtains for the stage—in 1954.

cians to arrive on the North Shore. Dr. Herbert Zipper, a Viennese conductor and survivor of the Holocaust, came to America to pursue a dream: instilling in every child an awareness of the power of music. He and Harry were kindred spirits—and they enjoyed a lifelong friendship.

"Herbert was a ball of fire—an evangelist of music," says Jean Evans, a Life Trustee of the Music Institute of Chicago who helped shape the District 29 program. "He inspired everyone."

And Harry?

"He just believed—and he believed very strongly in what the Sunset Ridge music program could be," said Evans. "We were a little school with a top-notch program."

With Harry's encouragement, Zipper got the idea in 1954 to form his own chamber music orchestra that he could take to schools like Sunset Ridge to expose students to the classics.

And those seeds of learning could lead anywhere.

Today, Collins' oldest son, Jim, is the U.S. Ambassador to Russia. He says his early interest in Russia came from those days of standing behind the curtain with his brother at Orchestra Hall while Herbert Zipper led the Businessman's Symphony in the Russian opera, "Boris Gudonov." As part of the staging, the Collins boys rang the bell. "It exposed me to a language and a culture," says Jim Collins, "that shaped my life."

On the art scene, the PTA moms drove students down to the Art Institute where they toured the galleries and attended lectures. Students also got to select paintings from the galleries to take back to Sunset Ridge for temporary display.

While prominent families in the community were able to promote and bankroll cultural activities, the founding families in Northfield—some without the means to pay—still felt like a welcome part of District 29.

"I liked Harry Collins," says Louise Burmeister, whose inlaws settled in Northfield in the late 1800's.

Burmeister's husband Bob spent his career as a lineman for the Public Service Company, founded by Samuel Insull. He also attended Brown School, but never finished high school.

"A lot of high-powered, educated people were moving into this community," Burmeister said. "I had a tendency to feel inferior. But Harry Collins was very kind to me. I had two girls who were high-achievers. Harry's focus was always on what's best for the kids."

In Burmeister's case, what was best was drama and music instruction.

"I remember Harry telling me: 'Take this seriously,'" she says. "The school even helped arrange for scholarship money so I could give my kids music lessons."

Burmeister's oldest daughter Nancy starred in the Sunset Ridge production of "Our Town" in the '50s. At New Trier, she competed with Ann-Margaret for the same role. Burmeister got the part.

The other daughter, Patty, a talented violinist and singer, became a Miss America finalist after winning the Miss New York pageant in 1968.

The Burmeisters also had a son, Robby, with cerebral palsy. Today, he works in the computer department of a local pharmaceutical firm. He also thrived at Sunset Ridge.

"Harry watched out for everyone," she says. "We were all part of the family.

That's how it felt."

Mary Osborne, who worked for the district longer than anyone, echoes those thoughts.

She joined the district in 1948 to teach first grade. In 1959, she stepped in to head Middlefork School, retiring in 1988.

Osborne recalls the first year she came to Sunset Ridge. It was her second job out of college. Since age five, she had wanted to teach first grade. "My mom said she got her grey hair watching me pull all the neighborhood kids around in a wagon," Osborne recalls. "I loved kids."

When Osborne had her first interview at Sunset Ridge, she was 24 and already juggling three job offers. Harry's intuition about her, however, won out. "In his typical, low-key way he told me, 'Come on—give us a try.'

"I didn't sign on thinking I'd stay 40 years," she says. "But looking back, I can't think of a place I would rather have spent my life.

"Whenever anyone told me I was a good leader," she adds, "I told them, 'I had a great role model!'

"I truly believe I would have been a different kind of teacher if I'd worked for someone other than Harry Collins."

Osborne got her first taste of Harry's leadership soon after she came to Sunset Ridge. She'd just left school for the day, and was walking into a nearby Glenview school to pick up a friend who taught there.

"It was about 3:30 p.m.—and I saw my friend sitting with a group of coworkers in the teacher's lounge," recalls Osborne. "They were all waiting for the 4 o'clock bell to ring. They weren't allowed to leave."

Collins, on the other hand, didn't impose restrictions or rules. "Harry gave us the freedom to set our own schedules and figure out things our way," she says. "He trusted us. He always told us: 'You decide what to do. And if you ever have a problem, come talk.'

"That inspired us," says Osborne. "Teachers gave their jobs 100%. No matter what hour you drove by the school, the lights were always on."

Adds Jim Clarkson, "Harry's attitude fostered a lot of creativity. He stood behind everything we did. We really were a family."

"I can't think of a place I would have rather have spent my life," says Mary Osborne of her 40 years with District 29.

Osborne remembers one Easter Sunday when the school's drama teacher, Lu Vandervort, stopped by to do some extra work—only to find the basement had flooded. "She grabbed a mop right along with the custodian and got the place cleaned up," says Osborne. "That's how we all felt. We were family."

Osborne had only been at Sunset Ridge a few months when she learned what "family" at the little school meant. Harry invited her to pack her suitcase and spend the weekend at the family farm.

"In the early days, all the teachers went there," she says. "Harry had a convertible. You'd bring your suitcase to school on Friday, then drive home with the Collins for the weekend, where you played with their kids and dogs. On Mondays, we'd all drive back to school together. We had a great time."

One of Mary's pet projects as a first grade teacher was a book she prepared for students each year called "All About Me." It was a hand-sewn folder that she personalized with each child's name and filled with special papers, drawings and pictures to mark the year.

After the Collins moved to Northfield, they would ask Mary over for supper. After dinner, they'd work on her "All About Me" books.

"Harry," says Osborne, "helped sew."

The first Sunset Ridge curriculum was written in the school basement by Mary, Harry and another teacher who spent an entire summer drafting lesson plans—and eating cheese.

As Osborne recalls, the federal food subsidy program was in full force. Earlier that year, the school had been given several huge bushel baskets of apples and a

A Mary Osborne tradition: "All About Me" books, personalized for each first grader, were hand-stitched by Mary—and sometimes, Harry Collins helped sew, too.

fifty-pound block of cheese.

"Whatever the government sent, you had to take," she recalls. "We had apples *everywhere*. And we weren't allowed to give any away. We fed those students every variation of apples and cheese we could think of."

They spent the summer writing the curriculum—and finishing the cheese.

Space was at a premium by the time Osborne arrived on the scene in 1948. "We were all squashed in," she recalls. "The kindergarten was about the size of my powder room." It was also the teacher's cafeteria and a storage room. On bad days, the kindergartners would get into the ketchup and "squirt stuff everywhere."

For kids with special needs, like the little Burmeister boy, there were no special services or training. "You just did the best you could," says Osborne.

For example, Osborne remembers one mother telling the kindergarten teacher on the first day of class that her daughter was a proficient reader. The teacher had her doubts. "Just to make sure, the teacher rummaged through her purse and found some old washing machine instructions, which she handed to the little girl," Osborne recalls. The child read every word.

"With students like that," she laments, "we had to wing it."

It wasn't until the mid-'60s that any formal program addressing the special needs of students would be offered by the state. In the meantime, teachers juggled as best they could.

"I remember one little boy named George who absolutely could not write legibly," Osborne says. "His mom worked with him. I worked with him. Finally his mother said, 'Forget it. When George gets old enough, I'll buy him a typewriter.'

"George grew up to be a doctor," says Osborne. "I used to tell people: 'Did you ever see a doctor's handwriting you could read?' I should have known!"

Teachers were also enlisted to help take the annual District 29 enrollment census by driving around the village, visiting each house. Osborne remembers interviewing one resident who informed her, to her chagrin: "I'm the school board president."

While teachers struggled with these day-to-day demands, sports at Sunset Ridge took off in the early '50s. Even without a gym.

As Jim Clarkson recalls, Sunset Ridge was one of the few schools on the North Shore to have a football team. "Harry wanted one," he says.

Baseball and basketball teams were also formed. And in 1954, the first gym opened as part of a new north wing with six more classrooms. There wasn't enough money for extras like a gym floor or curtains for a new stage. So the PTA pitched in and raised $11,000 to help with that, too.

That same year, the school got its 7th and 8th grade classes back from Winnetka. With the surge in population, District 29 also expanded its board from three to seven members, plus a new superintendent: Harry.

The school was growing, but the Sunset Ridge sports budget was always tight. Still, the school never said "no" to any student who wanted to play. And Jim Clarkson proved skilled at stretching every dime.

"The uniforms looked like something right out of Normal Rockwell," recalls Jim Christell who attended the school in the '60s. "Our football gear was the kind of stuff Knute Rockne wore. I always suspected that Jim spraypainted our equipment each year for the next class.

"We usually felt outgunned—and outequipped by other schools," Christell

Northfield's population nearly tripled in the '50s, and District 29 opened a second school.

adds. "But we didn't care. We were proud to be in uniform and we played hard for Jim. It was a wondrous time."

And the teachers felt the same.

Harry *did* have one habit that unnerved Mary Osborne. He'd stay out of her classroom until the end of the day. Then, when the teachers were alone, he would stroll into the class and head for the back of the room where he'd sit quietly, puffing on a cigarette. He never said a word. He just sat. And he waited.

"It drove me crazy," says Osborne. "I'd start babbling about something like the weather. I wasn't sure what Harry wanted. But I think I know now. It was his quiet way of letting us vent or air our thoughts and ideas.

"Harry was a quiet presence. And a wonderful listener. The thing I loved most was that he didn't want to be 'boss.' He never missed much because he was always listening—to teachers, parents and the kids.

"He liked to bide his time. And boy, when he did open his mouth, wonderful things came out."

Like the time, for example, that a school camera was stolen by a student in the 7th grade.

The class had been given the job that year of producing the yearbook. One day, the teacher in charge told Collins, "The camera is missing."

Ideas about what to do were tossed around. Search the lockers? Question the suspicious kids? Punish the whole class?

"I told them, 'No. We're not going to do any of that,'" recalled Collins.

Instead, he pulled the entire class into the library for a chat. "I told them, 'Look, this camera that's missing isn't my camera. It's not the teacher's camera. It's *your* camera. I don't know what the motive is here, but I think it should be returned, immediately, so it can be used for the yearbook.' Then we talked together a little more. Some people asked questions. At the end of the meeting I said: 'I expect the camera to be back on my desk in the morning.'"

And the next day—it was.

"I always felt," Collins said, "that I had more effect on children by trusting them—by showing my respect. I didn't like the idea of searching lockers or acting suspicious. It wasn't productive. I'd rather praise a child for confessing a mistake than reprimand him."

Harry sought the same qualities in his staff.

"The issue of trust was the single most important thing," he said. "It threaded its way through everything we did."

"Harry really had a vision for Sunset Ridge: to bring out the best in people," says Osborne. "He wanted to help every child—and teacher—accomplish everything they could. Harry never pushed anybody. He just gave you the opportunity to be your best."

And District 29—along with the community, teachers and kids—kept growing.

Northfield's population surged in the '50s, from 1,426 residents to 4,005. To keep up, Sunset Ridge added seven more classrooms in 1956. In the eight years spanning 1952 to 1960, enrollment nearly tripled to 670. It was clear that District 29 needed more land. And another school.

In the meantime, concern was mounting about Northfield's growth. Because of the village zoning policies, a developer could easily come in and build dozens of small homes on narrow lots right in the center of town, between Old and New Willow Roads. One such plan was already circulating the village.

Middlefork School—the "crown jewel" of District 29—opened to 240 students in 1959. Mary Osborne *(right)* was principal until retiring in 1988.

"It was a boxcar arrangement — nothing good," recalls Bill Bacon, a former Northfielder who organized a group of Sunset Ridge dads to figure out a way to stop any developer who could change the look and feel of the town.

The dads got the idea to form a park district, which gave them the legal right to condemn a 28-acre parcel of land where Middlefork School and Willow Park are located today. Their idea caused some initial outrage from the local press and surrounding communities, charging Northfield with underhanded tactics to thwart the town's growth.

But the fathers prevailed. Land formerly owned by Lucy Brachtendorf's mother Mary—and later passed onto Tom Wagner, who married Lucy's sister—was eventually sold for $5,500 an acre to the new Northfield Park District. District 29 also bought five acres to build a new school.

That early partnership between the Northfield park district, schools and village still thrives today.

"I remember driving through Northfield years later and being amazed," says Bacon, who left Northfield in the mid-'50s, soon after the park district was formed. "Here was this beautiful school next to a park with a lot of improvements. Obviously the village, park district and school joined forces and did a very good job.

"That housing plan we battled," he adds, "would have changed the town."

Harry had a vision for the new District 29 school. Popular thinking at the time was to give older students a place to themselves. Why not, people reasoned, build a junior high?

"Harry had a different idea," says Osborne. "He was really ahead of his time. It was far better, he felt, to give the little kids a place all their own."

Thus, Middlefork—a school built and furnished for little people—became the crown jewel of District 29.

"You talk about Harry's respect for kids—Middlefork was the epitome of respect for *little* kids," said Osborne. "It was a place a child could spend four years without having to worry about the older ones. It was the first primary school of its kind on the North Shore."

The decision about who should run Middlefork was a surprise to everyone—including Osborne.

"I remember going to a meeting in the teacher's lounge where Harry announced his plans to build the school," she says. "He also informed the group that I'd be principal—without ever saying a word to me!"

The unspoken Collins philosophy was at work again. "He was really telling me: 'You know what to do. Now go do it. And any time you need anything—let's talk.'"

All the teachers helped with planning and furnishing. The little bathrooms off each classroom, for example, were the idea of one teacher.

Osborne admits feeling hurt the first few years she ran Middlefork when Harry rarely came to visit. "I used to complain to my dad: 'He never comes to see us!'

"My dad would always say: 'Do you really want a boss who's breathing down your neck?'

"It's funny," Osborne adds. "Harry never hung around much, but he always knew what was going on. I don't know how. But he knew."

The author with sisters and friends at the School Fair—late '50s.

Middlefork opened its doors in 1959 to 240 children, kindergarten through second grade. In 1961, the school brought over the third graders and added six more classrooms and a library. In 1966 another three classrooms were added, plus a music room, speech room and two tutoring rooms.

Enrollment in District 29 hit its peak in 1968: 849 students.

Programs launched in the early '50s like social dancing, the school safety patrol and gym show were now fixtures at Sunset Ridge and would be through the '70s. Other new frontiers were also explored.

Middlefork, for example, was one of the first primary schools in Illinois to do away with letter grades.

"Harry was always experimenting," says Osborne. "He'd hear about things like the ungraded primaries and then send you to investigate. He never said, 'We have to do this.' He just mentioned things in passing and let you think you came up with the idea yourself."

Camaraderie among the faculty grew. Harry spent hours in the teacher's lounge, bantering around ideas.

Students staged archeological digs on the playground. They met prominent authors like Studs Terkel and Gwendolyn Brooks, both visitors at Sunset Ridge.

They explored beyond the boundaries of Northfield. As Collins reasoned, "If children are going to learn to write, they need something to write about."

So they toured the inner city. They sat through court sessions downtown. One judge took such an interest in the Sunset Ridge kids who came to his court that he wrote letters to them explaining his thinking behind decisions made on the bench.

When Manny Ganz, the school's chief custodian, visited his Russian homeland in the '70s, he visited the tomb of Tchaikovsky. "Ah, Peter Ilyich," he intoned at the grave. "You should hear the children at Sunset Ridge play your music!"

Perhaps the clearest sign of just how far Northfield had come from the days of kids chasing Old Maid Donovan's cow after school was a weeklong trip the 5th grade students made each year to milk cows and feed pigs—on a Wisconsin dairy farm.

"We had a group of teachers," said Collins, "that didn't know when to quit."

But Harry did.

Enrollment in the district began to plunge in the '70s, part of a nationwide trend. By 1977, the student population was 460, nearly half of what it had been in the late '60s.

A new statewide formula for distributing tax revenues for education also seized District 29, along with every other North Shore school in the early '70s, putting more financial strain on the school.

"Harry saw what was coming," says Osborne. "The district was his life. He loved those teachers. He'd hired all of them. Cost cutting and downsizing for him were like putting out one of your kids. He was smart enough to know he couldn't do it. And he was lucky. He was at an age where he could retire."

Osborne remembers Harry telling her he was leaving. "He came to my desk. He didn't sit down. He stood right beside me and talked," she said. "I remember that moment so clearly. I cried as he spoke.

"I think everyone who had been part of Harry's family felt that way."

Harry's farewell: 1976.

The faculty held a farewell party for Collins in June 1976. He left the district that month at age 62. He had led District 29 for 33 years.

Each teacher paid a tribute. Among them was a brief farewell by Lu Vandervort, the drama teacher. She spoke of the "Magic Mountain" of life at Sunset Ridge—one they'd shared all too briefly.

"In the words of the hero of *The Hasty Heart*," she told Collins: "'*It has been a moment with kings.*' "