

# village view

by Andrea Leonard

As the school year draws to a close, the students at Barnstable High School are understandably ready for summer vacation, eager to be done with classes and studying for a few months.

As a child, I, too, anticipated with pleasure summer vacations; even now, I plan long months ahead for vacations from work, and usually go south during winter months to enjoy time in the sun.

Although it lacked the last day of school by a week, the other day I watched three teenage boys leaving Barnstable High. One of them was carrying a book and as they walked together along West Main Street, he began to tear the book apart.

First the covers came off and were flung to the ground. Then the pages were ripped out in handfuls and tossed high into the air. Like winging snow-white birds, the sheets landed along the roadside, in the bushes, fluttered among the scrub oak, flapped in the dust.

The boys walked on, one of them at least having expressed his emotions about books, teachers, school and education in general.

My own emotions weren't so easily expressed. They were anger mixed with dismay; sorrow and sadness stirred with indignation. I couldn't leave it there. I gathered up the tattered litter and brought it home.

The book had been one we purchased several years ago. We — that's you and I — bought it with our tax dollars.

It was an expensive book; fine linen covers, high-quality paper, four-color illustrations and maps; nearly eight hundred pages of learning had been handsomely included in the book.

The silver-hued cover was decorated with a stylized blue eagle, touched with red for accent. "History of a Free People", by Bragdon/McCutchen, was published by The MacMillan Company and had been issued, new, to a Barnstable student in 1971. Even now, if it were rebound, it would be in readable condition.

From the rich heritage of the Colonial period and our country's struggle for independence, through the New Frontiers administrations of Kennedy and Johnson, the book traces the history of our nation.

How our government is organized and conducts its business, the political parties, the effects of foreign entanglements, our wars — hot and cold — the emergence of modern America, and a final chapter on the years since present school children were born; it's all there.

Perhaps this book is outdated. Perhaps it can no longer be used to teach American history to our school children. Perhaps five years is the life-expectancy of a textbook in the classroom today. Over 200 years of history with pictures, portraits, vignettes, hundreds of pages of readable copy was written and published; is it now worthless?

It's not worthless to me. This book may have to be held together, now, with a rubber band, since its destruction was quite complete. Nevertheless, it's still a fine reference and resource book.

That's the part about the incident that dismays me. In ripping the book to pieces, the youngster destroyed, for himself, material he could have used — if not this week or next, maybe next year — or maybe fifty years from now.

In my bookcases are books I used in school, books my parents used when they went to school. There's an English version of *The Antigone* of Sophocles; Sophocles was a Greek dramatist who lived approximately five hundred years before the birth of Jesus Christ.

Books are never too old to be useful.

While I was angry, watching the schoolboy destroy a book that was more mine than his (since my tax dollars and yours helped buy it), I was more than angry.

I was sorry. I'm sad the lad hasn't learned to respect, to cherish, to love books. I'm sorry he'll never have this one to turn to, to help him make comparisons in the future. That young man will face many problems; he will begin to face them quite soon.

If he had learned the pattern of the country's history, he might at some future date see his problems in proportion to the ones Americans have faced in the past. With some perspective, he might arrive at valuable conclusions.

To the boy who tore the book apart, however, it was no more than an object made of paper, cloth and glue. The paper was covered with millions of "squiggles" — we call them letters — and they carried no message for this young man.

A book is no less than a wondrous medium through which one person's thoughts and ideas are preserved and transmitted to another person. Those thoughts and ideas are expressed precisely, just as spoken words are; the spoken word, however, fades within a second's memory; the written word remains to be read, re-read, communicated and re-communicated, over and over again.

I'm dismayed that the youth who studied the "History of a Free People" has gained so little from his years of schooling that he could tear a book apart and toss it aside.

Where do booklovers learn affection for volumes? Does it begin before they can read? Does it begin with adults reading to their children from story books, while lovingly snuggling the child in encircling arms? Does it begin with careful handling of books within the home?

And does it grow with passing years? Does it grow with birthday or Christmas gifts of books that soon become cherished possessions, dear friends of children starting to read?

Does talking with a child about a book, about the ideas and feelings of the people who live between a book's covers help to bridge the chasms of misunderstanding between generations?

What does a child feel about a book that brings tears to his eyes — or laughter to his lips? When he identifies with a character in a story, and when he feels the emotions that person feels, isn't that the beginning of learning to love?

Books — and also other people?

To the man who never learns to read, who can never find upon the printed page an explanation, a description, a revelation, a message, a healing thought, the world is a much smaller place than to the literate man.

For the book, ripped asunder, I am angry.

For the boy, for that deprived young man, I grieve. He has not learned — and he may never learn — how tragically he's been cheated.

We may spend our millions upon our educational plant. We may hire teachers til there's one for every child in the system. But until we can provide each child passing through the system with a better feeling for the tools of learning, we're being cheated, and the kids are being cheated.

And it's a crying shame.