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Taking a new approach...



Arthur St. George Tucker

In the old days Bermudian children who misbehaved were threatened with being “put in canvas”. It was a reference to the canvas uniform worn by boys at the Nonsuch Island Training School that operated in Bermuda in the 1940s and 1950s.

The grandson of Arthur St. George Tucker, the first superintendent of the training school, was on the Island last month to carry out research for a book about the school.

“Really, the purpose to being here in Bermuda is to see if there is anyone on the Island who has recollections of this or has anything they would like to say,” said Dr. Arthur Tudor Tucker II.

“A lot of the children who would have been in the programme are rather elderly now. We did put an advertisement in *The Royal Gazette* and we have had a few people come back to us.”

Dr. Tucker is not a writer by trade and is looking for someone to ghost write the book. He is currently a state registered clinical scientist and honorary senior lecturer at the Ernest Cooke Clinical Microvascular

Unit at St. Bartholomew’s Hospital in London, England.

During the First World War, his grandfather, Arthur St. George Tucker, was in the Royal Navy as a gunner. He was wounded in the Battle of Jutland and was invalided out towards the end of the war. After the war ended he married Elsie Green, and the couple were put in charge of the quarantine station at Nonsuch Island.

During this period two boys who were considered too young to be sent to prison were sent to help Mr. Tucker. This inspired Mr. Tucker and his wife to open the training school. It opened in January 1934.

“Until my grandfather retired in 1958 some 276 boys passed through the school with over 80 percent not re-offending – a record that clearly has lessons to teach us in the current day,” said Dr. Tucker.

The school ran along military lines, and the boys were taught the principles of naval routine and discipline. They received a formal education as well as training in practical things such as cooking, bakery, seamanship, knots, sail making and repair and engine repair.

“The situation in Bermuda at the time was that your petty crime was out of control,” Dr. Tucker said. “This is potentially based on people’s feelings about themselves – the despair of the younger generation on the Island.

“I think after the First World War there was a lack of direction in Bermuda. There was very little work. I have heard tales of rum running and all sorts of strange behaviours just to make ends meet.”

Dr. Tucker said that with all the problems that today’s youth are experiencing in Bermuda, he has often heard that something similar to the training school should be tried

again.

“My grandparents gave these kids the discipline which was necessary, but also a degree of self worth and self belief which is critical to training children,” said Dr. Tucker.

The training school was not without excitement. Shortly before the training school opened Nonsuch Island was the headquarters of marine scientist Dr William Beebe and his bathysphere team. Mr Tucker was skipper of the deep-sea tugboat *Gladisfen* that transported and lowered Dr. Beebe and the bathysphere into the ocean. Later, the training school boys would sometimes help Dr. Beebe with his projects.

Today Dr. Tucker, still has some of the original Beebe dive footage.

The training school also had some unusual residents. In 1941, during the Second War World, a Nazi spy called Ruth Belcher, was transferred to the training camp at Nonsuch Island from St. George's.

Dr. Tucker was inspired to write a book about the training school when he recently came into possession of documents relating to the school.

“I have the original ledgers from the training school including things like the accounts, how much was spent per boy, a list of all the boys' names, when they were taken to the school and when they were eventually discharged,” he said. “I have only just come into receipt of the ledgers, but it has some very interesting details.

“For example, the ledgers show that the boys were well fed. Malnourishment on the Island was quite common, and today malnourishment is an issue, which is worrying considering this is one of the most affluent places on the planet.”

At the training school boys slept in hammocks. According to Mr. Tucker's notes, this was “to prevent lounging and to a great extent other practices”.

When the boys were punished they were made to walk around the Island carrying their hammocks on their shoulders. As a reward, well behaved boys were allowed to go with Mr. Tucker to town to get supplies and go to the cinema.

Among Dr. Tucker's documents are notes and memories written by his grandfather. Mr. Tucker wrote: “If a crime is committed, let's say stealing, wilful damage to property, or anything likely to upset the ordinary tranquillity of the ship (the school), we have an enquiry on the quarter-deck, and if found out, which is generally the case the guilty party lands in the Captain's report.”

Mr. Tucker's wife Elsie acted as matron and nurse to the boys, and the couple treated the boys like their own children, even though they had three sons and a daughter of their own.

“My father, Arthur Tudor Tucker I, use to tell me that at Christmas he didn't get his meal or his presents until the boys had been looked after,” said Dr. Tucker. “The boys got priority. It wasn't a regime of brutality.

“These were disaffected young men. As you do in the military you take all the negative and you rebuild it the way you want it to be.

You can't judge what was done 50 years ago by current standards. It's always tempting to do so, and say we couldn't possibly do it this way. You have to also think about the self reliance they were taught, the life skills.”

However, Mr. Tucker's own thoughts on the causes of delinquency were surprisingly progressive and insightful.

He wrote: “It should be borne in minds that every single boy needs individual attention. He has his own problems, sometimes bordering on the tragic. If you get to know him, then you may help him over a difficult period.

“There is a tendency to get rid of a very difficult boy by transferring him to the Senior Training School for the convenience of the staff. This is wrong; it would be hard but rewarding work if he can be retained. Some of the most resistant boys have turned out the best.

“The officer who is not really fond of children and cannot find pleasure in their company is not a suitable person to train and teach them.

“If a boy is misjudged or blamed unjustly, no time should be lost in putting right, even by humble apology on the part of the officer. Thereby he gains the boys’ respect. A boy should never be misinformed, if the officer does not know the answer to a question, he should tell him so, and then find out for him. The boy will appreciate it.”

Mr. Tucker believed that many boys misbehaved either out of desperation or because they had never had a better example to follow.

He listed unsatisfactory homes, overcrowding, parental neglect and discontent, and the bad influence of comic books and movies as some of the reasons boys went wrong.

“Not many years ago families went out together, on picnics, often rowing miles in a small boat,” Mr. Tucker wrote. “One, these days, seldom sees the older minor with his parents. Why? Because the latter are too busy having a good time themselves, leaving the former to their own devices, probably some mad cycle ride through the parishes, there meeting others. And then what? The smaller children being left with, grandmother.” He believed that some cures included schools equipped with properly supervised playgrounds, not necessarily the norm in the 1930s.

“There are too many advisors, and not enough hard workers who are willing to make the necessary sacrifices, to effectively help these youngsters,” he wrote. “We seldom have any real trouble, and then mostly by a boy who has been sent down late – say about 14 to 16 years, but they knuckle down after awhile.”

Mr. Tucker and his brothers, Dickey and Edmund, all received MBEs for service to the Queen during their lifetimes. Mr. Tucker died in 1958 not long after handing the reins of the school over to someone else.

“I would be interested in hearing from anyone who knew my grandfather or father,” said Dr. Tucker. “I am particularly interested in those who passed through the school or who were associated with it and their memories and recollections of their time there. The experiences gained, good and bad to help maintain the balance of this record.

“It is the heartfelt wish of the Tucker family to commit these experiences to print for the benefit of posterity and for the common interest of all ‘Onions’.

“Furthermore, we are seeking a local researcher to assist in the compilation of this text.”

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