

Oral History Interview with Robert Kaplan
Conducted by Angela Baker, August 3, 1993

Transcription by Denise Beaubrun

AB: Okay could you state your name for the record?

RK: That's it, Robert Kaplan,

AB: Robert Kaplan. And your date and place of birth.

RK: Halifax, June the 15, June the 11, 1915. I'm sorry.

AB: So what years did you attend St. Mary's?

RK: 1929-1936

AB: Okay, so you started in the high school program.

RK: That's right.

AB: Okay, with the Irish Christian Brothers?

RK: Irish? Say take that easy now, Irish Christian Brothers.

AB: What were they like as educators?

RK: They were terrific, they really were, ah they had of course a President, who was Brother Sterling and he was a big man. I guess he weighed about 300 lbs. Everybody seemed to be frightened of him because he had hams for hands, you know and ah, but I didn't find him that way, his heart was as big as his body, it was just fantastic. I had some very good friends out there.

AB: Oh yes.

RK: I had a couple ones that didn't like me but ah, as a rule all the brothers were good.

AB: What were the, ah, academics like at school, when you were in high school?

RK: Well we didn't have that many students at that time. And, ah, well I guess there was some that were compulsory, like Latin which I despised, and ah, that's the way it is, but ah, they were good, they were thorough, and you had to come up with your know how or else. There is, they were very quick with their hands, they were very quick with the chalk, they were quick with ah, oh God a number of things because they have a deck. I took Engineering; eventually I was good at that.

AB: So you finished High School and went on to the College?

RK: That's right.

AB: How did the courses change then?

RK: Well they changed but that's how... well, badly. As I said I took Engineering, Mathematics was my forte and... And of course I was a character you see at College and I had lots of fun when as I think I mentioned that while I was there I got Brother

Connors to start a ball club against Bloomfield High, that's my High school, and St. Patrick's and there is Halifax County Academy and we won the league. But I didn't get along with a couple of the brothers there and eventually I made up my mind that I should leave and the reason for that was so when I, as I told you, I had taken this trip to Boston and wanted to get their permission and the President or Vice-President at the time, they weren't there. So I got a hold of Brother Connors and I told him my situation as students were coming into school and he said, "Yeah, I'll forward what you're telling me." And I said, "great". But anyway while I was away one of my buddies wrote me, he said, "Bob, I think you got problems when you come back." So I thought he was kidding. I was gone three weeks and when I did come back, I met the president who wasn't Brother Sterling at the time but I won't mention his name, he said, "Ah, Bob, when did you get back?" I said, "well I got back 3 weeks ago. He said, "Did you get my permission?" I said, "well", he said, "Did you get my permission? No. Did you get the Vice President permission?" I said, " No, you were both away". "You didn't get our permission, no". So they told me to leave. So after a while my Mother went and plead the case, which was the worse thing she could have done. And they got me to come back with the borders every afternoon for study periods, weekends for study periods, so my morale broke down.

So one day I went to work and I said I am not going down there to the study period and then I started thinking maybe I should and when a certain person came up stairs and said, "Bob, they're waiting for you down there." downstairs. So I left my books out in the hallway and I went down and I said, "God no", I said, "I gotta face my Mother". So I went back in and got my book and ah, they were hidden. So I went to work and grabbed a hold of someone and that was it. So I said the best thing I could do is leave. And that wasn't the worse thing in my life. I guess I picked up things after that, it was just going up the ladder, and it was fun.

AB: So, what was the discipline like from the Brothers?

RK: Really was, they were disciplinarians believe me. Yeah, ah, you had to study; it's not like today if you don't study, fine, get out. That's the way it is now, I think it is. Yeah, but I think I don't know if any of the Brothers are still alive. There possibly could be one Brother Leonard because he wasn't much older than we were when I went to school but the rest of them. There is two Brothers there and I said ah, to my buddies, there is three of us always together, and ah, I said to them, " You know the two of them just don't fit in here", they're both friends of mine and they said, " Ah, God, you're crazy Bob". I said, "No, I don't think I am". Eventually both (the Brothers), got out and got married. These two fellows, they were just different you know. But was, as they say, "the best years of your lives are right in school". As my brother would say, "You can stay in school, but not in the same room".

AB: What were the rules placed on you?

RK: Well, they were really tough and but yet a lot of them had hearts as big as all out doors and the rules weren't all that tough. I used to be able to play handball with the best of them and some of the Brothers. There was Brother Dumar who was

exceptionally good, there was Brother Carrie, they were exceptionally good and ah, of course I was ambidextrous so I could use either hand to play against them. And they were good, made me a little better too, the only way you can get better is by playing against somebody better than yourself.

AB: What were the recreational activities like at the school, what were they?

RK: Well recreation, well they had, they were big in hockey at that time, they were big in football, and of course then we had track day for all the schools, all the colleges, down at Dal. But ah, they had some good hockey teams and in fact there are still a few of the boys that are still alive and they had a good football team and I thought they had a pretty good baseball team for one season, but ah that was it.

AB: Did a lot of the students play on the teams.

RK: Oh yes, yes they were all students. There were a few Americans at []. We used to play English rugby and then they switched over to Canadian football, and to play Canadian football you had to know the rules or else you'd get battered and I got battered. If you don't know the rules of any game, you can't play it well. You got to have good coaches and a lot of the coaches, they didn't know any more than you did you see. Today is different, they pay coaches and they can pick out, I guess the better athletes.

AB: So, what other things went on besides sports?

RK: Well they had their Math classes and of course, being the religion that I was, I told then I was the only decent Irish man that they had in the whole school. But ah, I used to get off at twelve, of course they had their religious period from twelve to twelve-thirty everyday and that was it, we got along.

AB: So you are not Roman Catholic?

RK: No I am Jewish.

AB: Oh I see.

RK: Imagine Boston, Boston Braves, looking for a Jewish ball player at St. Mary's College. I was the only Jew there, that's right they were looking for Jewish ball players, yeah.

AB: So were there many people there that were not Roman Catholic?

RK: Well, there weren't too many people, maybe half a dozen.

AB: So how did you come to go there?

RK: Well how I came to go there surprisingly, my brother went to another high school, I won't mention the name but, and he was athletically inclined too. He went out for their soccer team and the last day they let him go and a friend of his came up to him and he says "Herm, the reason you were let go, it wasn't up to your ability, it was up to your religion". So right then and there I said, well I can go anywhere. So I thought about St. Mary's, it didn't matter to me, they were good to me.

- AB: What role did religion play for your school when you were there?
- RK: What role?
- AB: Yes.
- RK: Oh I don't know, I...
- AB: Besides the half-hour religion class everyday.
- RK: Well I took all the different classes, and oh God, we had a Brother Cowerie and Cowerie was the professor of Engineering and he used to talk out of the side of his mouth and I was up there at his desk and he'd be writing things and we'd be talking and he would turn around and he says, " Now repeat what I said", well I, I didn't know what he said so I would duck the chalk and then everything else came after me. But as I say you had to take it that way, but they really didn't mean it, they just wanted you to study. Yeah of course at that time, of course it was all men.
- AB: That's right, yes.
- RK: It was well, St. Mary's College was where St.Pats is now.
- AB: So your fellow students, you say they were boarders when you were there?
- RK: Well all of them were boarders, yeah.
- AB: Where did they come from?
- RK: Some came from the States, some came from Cape Breton, some came from Newfoundland. Yeah, but ah, no I don't know how many boys they had, I guess they had about 35-40 boarders.
- AB: Out of a total population?
- RK: Well there weren't that many at that time, I don't remember how many, there weren't that many students.
- AB: And were the family backgrounds of the students... (Phone rings)
- RK: Excuse me, ok. We'd call each other twice a day he hasn't been too well, so...
- AB: Oh. Let's see we were talking about where the family backgrounds of the students.
- RK: Well I don't know, they were all I guess in the middle brackets, same as myself, and there was one fellow that, he had a problem as far as TB was concerned. You possibly wouldn't know that because he just died years ago, he worked for the Casket down in Antigonish, and anyways I went to work and I brought him, he was laid up all winter, and I brought him his home work every night. Went over as far as Mathematics because as I say I was pretty good at Mathematics, but he got through, he got through pretty good [] pretty good at numbers.
- AB: Ah that's good, are there any events that took place when you were there, that stand out in your mind?

- RK: Oh not really. I guess that if they'd won the championship in hockey or football, which wasn't too often in football, but in hockey, ah they proclaimed a half holiday. But not when we won the baseball, 'cause as they say there's two of them that did not care too much for hockey and we didn't have that, we didn't even have our picture taken, that's why there is no records of it. I did have a scrapbook but that went by the board somewhere along the line.
- AB: Are there any personalities among the Brothers that stand out in your mind, any stories you can remember?
- RK: Oh gosh yes, I can tell you stories about almost every one of them. There's Brother Murphy, I wanted to wear my hat the days [] He was a personal friend of mine, a fellow named Pat Felvick, he used to go to work and do my arm up in a sling so I wouldn't have to do any writing. Until my Mother came up one day and I forget, I had forgotten to take up a check because we used to pay medicals, every three months our tuition. Brother Murphy said, "Mrs. Kaplan, how is Bob these days?", she says "well what is wrong with him?", he said, "Oh, he's told me about his arm you know". Holy smokes, did I catch hell. I didn't do any writing for about three weeks, but ah, as I say this Brother Connors who was head of the ah, well, he became head of the baseball and we got along very well. He was the coach and I can remember we were in one of the games before playoffs, they had a fellow by the name Brad MacQuillian, with third base, anyway he made an error and he starts laughing after he made the error and that was the last time he played. Yeah they took him off the ball and never went back. But ah we had a couple of good, pretty good ball players but mostly all these fellows have passed on. I guess as I say I'm seventy-eight, believe it or not but I think young and people don't take me for my age, but ah I don't act my age either.
- AB: Any other stories you can remember?
- RK: Well there's all kinds of stories, ah I can remember, sure. We were in a spelling B and I was in the Spelling B with the late Jack Finley, who was the son of Doctor Finley, and anyways we wound up in a tie, so there was the, well it's like a playoff and remember missing out on the word, "phlegm" and I didn't put the 'g' in, so of course Jack won the Spelling B. Brother Murphy came over to me and says, "Bob, thank God", I asked "Why?" He said, "Did you know what the prize was?" I says, "No", and he said "Prayer beads". And that's true. There is ah God, they were as I said on the whole, they were a great bunch. And there was the time of course, our clock up in the hall was, wasn't working and I say to Brother, "well time to shut the store today", quarter after three it was but I said, "I think it's three-thirty", we'd be out practicing while the rest were still in school. And they say what a charter I was.
- AB: Well that's about all I wanted to cover, unless you wanted to add anything else.
- RK: Is that all? Okay well I could talk for, I can tell you stories for ages I guess, but anyways I never regretted going to St. Mary's. Oh I used to pitch for them and played second base for then and I was batting 397, which wasn't too bad. And I was ambidextrous but I never pitched in the school league, I used to pitch in just, ah one

grade against the other, I used to pitch with my left hand sometimes. But ah, anyways you can't, there are so many things that you will remember and that is just one of them.

AB: Oh great.

RK: Okay.