

Christian Paul Gruber
October 21, 1920-August 31, 2003
Years as Faculty Master: 1967-1973

Christian Gruber, the first Faculty Master of Hinman College, was born in October of 1920. He grew up in Canton, Ohio. He was one of four children and had three older sisters. As a result of being the only boy in the family, he was somewhat spoiled (in a good way). When he became older and entered into his professional career, he signed most of his documents C. P. Gruber, though he liked to be called "Pete." The "Pete" came about when one of his sisters suggested to him that "Pete" sounded better than either Christian or his middle name, Paul. Ever since then he liked to be referred to simply as Pete.¹

He received his undergraduate education at the College of Wooster in Ohio, graduating in 1942. It was there that he met his future wife, Marilyn. The two of them would be married in July of 1946 and they would have two children, a son, Christian Jr., and a daughter, Ilse Lynn Gruber. Both of their children would go on to graduate from Harpur College. In 1953, after a long battle writing his thesis, he received his PhD in English from Princeton University. Gruber had always loved theater, but he did not believe that he would be able to gain adequate employment with a PhD in theater, and that really was not an option at Princeton at that time anyway. He took his first job at Grinnell College in Iowa where he taught English. However, as much as he liked teaching, his heart was still into theater. While he was at Grinnell, he was offered a Ford Grant to study theater at the Yale Drama School. Unable to pass up this opportunity, he left his job at Grinnell and moved to New Haven, Connecticut, to study theater. While he was at Yale, he happened to go to an MLA convention in New York City where he ran into some old friends from Princeton, including Bernard Huppe (the man whom which the Bartle Library Special Collections Room is named after). While he was socializing with these old

chums he learned about a small, liberal arts school in the Southern Tier of upstate New York called Harpur College that was in desperate need of instructors— theater instructors at that.²

Pete Gruber came to Binghamton to teach at Harpur College and in particular to teach theater. At the time, Harpur College was still a small liberal arts institution and the administration did not want a large theater department. They thought that if they did not hire a person with professional experience in theater, the department would remain small. They saw Pete Gruber as the perfect person to work in the Theater Department. He had a passion for theater but he was not a professional. Pete Gruber is essentially responsible for starting the Theater Department at Binghamton University. Even though he was officially located in the English Department, he crossed boundaries and was head of both departments for a period of time. As time went on and Harpur College expanded and eventually became part of the SUNY system and became known as SUNY Binghamton, Gruber knew that the Theater Department had to expand too. He realized that professional theater people would have to take over the department and that managing two departments that were growing rapidly was becoming impossible for one man to handle.³

Around this same time, the Colville Report had been released and the move toward collegiate structure and residential colleges at SUNY Binghamton began to happen. Gruber was a huge proponent of the idea. He saw the residential colleges as a way to keep the university small for students and to keep it more personal. Although exactly how he became Faculty Master is unclear, it is known that he was an enthusiastic supporter of the new idea of collegiate structure.⁴

Gruber loved his time as Master of Hinman College. During this time he not only wrote and read the opening speech at the Hinman College inaugural dinner, but also laid the

groundwork for many of Hinman College's traditions. Gruber was the man responsible for hiring Bob Giomi and gave Bob his enthusiastic support when he developed Co-Rec Football, the *Hinman Halitosis*, and the Hinman Little Theater (HLT). Bob would always hold Gruber in high regard and insisted on calling him Dr. Gruber.⁵ Gruber helped the infant HLT members hone their stagecraft and made sure that resources were made available to them. Gruber attended every meeting of the newly formed Hinman College Council (HCC) and gave a report, even if the room was relatively empty. Gruber encouraged faculty-student interaction and sought out dedicated Faculty Fellows for the Hinman Fellows Program and started "Table Talk," an informal discussion between students and faculty over dinner—a tradition that would continue with every other Hinman Faculty Master, though usually these talks would be had over lunch. Gruber was also responsible for helping to spearhead many of Hinman's pioneering efforts including Self-Regulation, Apartment-style living, and a liberal pet policy. Gruber was also sympathetic to many of the radical students and their views during the 1960's. Instead of using violence or disruptive protest, Gruber encouraged these students to seek out other ways to get their views across and even lent them the Hinman copying equipment and mimeograph machines so they could distribute their literature.

Although at times Gruber, like many of his peers at SUNY Binghamton, got the reputation of being a stodgy professor and bookish-academic type, he did know how to have fun. A series of joke letters sent between him and Kenneth W. Anderson, the Faculty Master of Newing College, shows exactly how fun and funny Gruber could be. The following letter, printed in the newly created *Hinman Halitosis*, was sent from Anderson to Gruber.

From time to time, the Lake Lieberman Gazette has reported sightings of an unidentified creature from the Hinman swamp* cavorting in the waters of Lake Lieberman and fraternizing with our Loch Lieberness monster. These reports have not alarmed us until

* Today the "swamp" is called the Bingham University Nature Preserve.

recently when we learned from highly reliable sources that the swamp creature is, in fact, a huge and undoubtedly tainted, tuna. Its continued presence thus threatens to contaminate the pure waters of the lake and to sully the character of our monster.

We, therefore, feel compelled to insist that Hinman College make arrangements to confine its mercuric and unholy mackerel to the borders of the Hinman swamp. For its part, Newing College is prepared to take all appropriate measures to preserve the integrity of its territorial waters, and prevent further encroachments by your aggressive and tainted tuna. These measures could include a call-up of the Newing Navy,[†] in which enlistments are at an all-time peak, and an appeal to our environmental specialists, Drs. Battin, Cooper and McDuffie.[‡]

It is our fervent hope that you will heed our demand, so that such further drastic measures will not be necessary.⁶

Gruber followed up with this response to his Newing counterpart's claim:

This is truly an outrageous and unjust claim. Due to the fact that we house our tuna in a swamp untouched by the hands of industry, there is no possible way our tuna could be contaminated with mercury. Our pure tuna, we are confident, would undergo any physical examination by Drs. Battin, Cooper and McDuffie[§], and pass with flying colors. Furthermore, it is this editorial staff's opinion, that the Loch Lieberness monster is in fact luring our beauty to his already polluted lake to try to place the blame of pollution on an innocent body. It has been brought to our attention that because of the unclean and unhealthy practices of the horrible monster, he has not only polluted the Newing Lake, but his bad breath has also polluted the air—and on a windy day we at Hinman are suffering the consequences as we cough our way from building to building.

If anyone has any ideas of retaliation to this Monster-Tuna-Rumor, please contact Dr. Gruber, Mr. Giomi, or your Council Reps of the "Tuna,"⁷

Not to miss out on the fun, University President Bruce Dearing sent in his own letter with his views on the Monster-Tuna controversy.

Dear Ken and Pete:

[†] Newing Navy is Newing's version of Dorm Wars.

[‡] At the time Newing College had pioneered a course in environmental studies and had faculty associated with the program linked to the college. Hinman had done the same thing with a popular program in urban studies.

[§] Bruce McDuffie was a Chemistry professor at SUNY Binghamton at the time. In 1970, he gained world-wide fame for his discovery of mercury in canned tuna fish and his work led the FDA and other health and environmental organizations to radically change the recommended amounts of fish and other seafood people should consume. The *Halitosis* article is good-naturedly poking fun not just at Hinman and Newing Colleges, but also at Dr. McDuffie who helped to put SUNY Binghamton on the map.

I am writing to express the increasingly anxious concern I have felt in following the developing controversy attendant upon presumed fraternization between tainted tuna from Hinman Swamp and the Loch Lieberness monster.

Not only do I quail at the prospect of mobilization of the vast forces represented by the Newing Navy, but as one who participated actively in earlier alarms and excursions in Hinman Swamp, I should greatly regret to hear it echo to the tread of resolute marchers. Further, I am sure you can appreciate the fellow feeling any administrative officer must perforce exhibit toward other monsters of the deep and denizens of the fens.

However, I must confess to some ambivalence. Surely one cannot contemplate with equanimity a blighted romance between these two doubtless lonely and withdrawn creatures, if they are genuinely attracted to one another. I beg you to recall our common commitment to self-actualization and self-fulfillment, as well as to collegeia [sic] solutions I preference to recourse to outside authority.

Should this controversy continue to escalate, be assured that full resources are available to assist in its resolution. I can supply either a large oblong table or a small round table for appropriate negotiations, should the need arise.⁸

The Controversy of the Hinman Tuna- Newing Monster fraternizations continued. Even the Newing Faculty Fellows got involved in the controversy.

In our capacity as a triumvirate of environmental specialties affiliated with Newing College, we are becoming increasingly concerned about the cavortions [sic] of the Hinman Swamp Tuna in the majestic placidity of Lake Lieberman. This problem is compounded by our wish to preserve the Victorian chastity of the odd but still endemic Loch Lieberness Monster. TO this end we are examining the feasibility of various alternatives to achieve, if not copulatory [sic], at least reproductive isolation between these organisms.

The initiation of this examination would not be possible, had it not been for recent observations by reliable sources pertaining to the mechanism by which the Tuna transports itself to Lake Lieberman. Fin prints have been noticed around the periphery of the swamp for some time, but, recently, the Tuna was observed climbing to the top of a nearby hill, exuding droplets of mercury from its ventral side, and rolling downhill on quicksilver ball bearings to the lake basin. There are several possibilities by which this behavior might be controlled:

1. Grease the periphery of the swamp so the Tuna can't climb out of it.
2. Grease the downhill route to Lake Lieberman in hopes that the Tuna will crash into a tree.
3. Place a low-level radiation source along the downhill path of the Tuna in hopes of reproductive sterilization.

It has been a mystery for some time as to how the Tuna returns to the swamp after its evening of fun and frolic in Lake Lieberman. However, the recent information indicates that it uses the shuttle bus service (when available). If this information is substantiated and verified, corrective actions will have to be directed within the Lake itself (since the Tuna might at times utilize the mechanism to get to the Lake as from it!) Various possibilities include:

1. Periodic spraying of the lake with spermicidal gels.
2. Placing a chastity belt on the Loch Lieberness Monster.
3. Construction of a perch for the Monster.
4. The purchase of heavy-duty fishing tackle for use by campus security.

If any of these alternatives proves to be feasible, financing should be undertaken by the College in the Woods, since this whole situation has undoubtedly been provoked by their draining of a goodly portion of the swamp.⁹

The controversy of the affair between the Hinman Tainted Tuna and the Loch Lieberness Monster continued unabated until Hinman Master Gruber decided to end it once and for all.

Ever since the master of Newing College broke open the case of the “tainted” tuna, University Presidents, ecologists, chemists, biologists, and hordes of gossip mongers have busied themselves with the relationship of the Lake Liberman Monster and the Hinman Tuna.

I have not wanted to enter this public debate, for I consider it an outrageous invasion (the word is not too strong) of their privacy. A tender, loving inter-mural relationship has been distorted into libidinous “cavortions” [sic]. The whole panoply of all-out war, including nuclear devices to induce sterilization, and offers of negotiation tables of various shapes and sizes have been introduced and now pollute the atmosphere of our hitherto peaceful valley. All this to end an innocent couple’s coupling.

However, it is not important what I want or what they think should be done. Anderson, Dearing, Cooper, Battin, and McDuffie: their feelings are no more relevant to the life style and relationship of Manny and Tina (for so they call each other) than what Merrill, Lynch, Pierce, Fenner, and Smith think about Richard and Elizabeth, Antony and Cleopatra, or David and Julie, for that matter.

The tragic consequences of asserting a misplaced sense of relevance by word and deed has often been recorded. We are, alas, perilously close to transposing the masters of Newing and Hinman into old Capulet and Montague, President Dearing into a minor renaissance prince, and poor Manny and Tina into lovers, star-crossed and cut off in their prime.

So I beg all of you, before some angry Tybalt corties [sic] out from the Broome Closet on his way to the Pub and accosts a long-haired Lehmanite Mercutio dashing up the

stairs to the reserve desk, to permit this odd but attractive couple to work out their own destiny. Let us not interfere. Let these lovers leap to their hearts' delight under the smooth waters of Lake Lieberman or the swamp. Let us not muddy their waters. If their amorous exertions do so, let us quietly turn our eyes away to the rolling, muddy ripples of the Susquehanna and meditate on the universal presence of muddy waters.

Peace

Christian P. Gruber
Master of Hinman College and
late Chairman of the Friar
Lawrence Fan Club¹⁰

This humorous interlude is just one example of Gruber's sense of humor. Although never having quite the same reputation of being a fun-loving, easy-going sort like future Faculty Masters would, he did know how to have fun, and he absolutely loved it when the residents of his residential college got excited in some good-natured controversy like the Tainted Tuna-Loch Lieberness Monster story illustrates. Gruber was constantly dedicated to his students, and especially encouraged them to laugh.

Between the 1971 and 1972 academic year, Gruber took a sabbatical leave and Richard Dekmejian became acting Faculty Master of Hinman College for the year. When Gruber returned from sabbatical, he was offered a job as in the SUNY Binghamton administration as Assistant to the President. For the rest of his career at Binghamton, Gruber was the assistant to President Clifford Clark. He never forgot his ties to Hinman however, and would occasionally return to see how the college was doing. Gruber finally retired in 1983 after a thirty-year career at Binghamton. For the next twenty years, he and his wife Marilyn would enjoy the benefits and luxuries of retirement. He passed away in 2003 at the age of 83.¹¹ In honor of all that he did for the Binghamton University Theater Department, one of the studio theaters in the Fine Arts Building is now called the Gruber Theater in his honor.

Along with Bob Giomi, Christian Paul Gruber stands out as perhaps the most influential person in the early history of Hinman College. Not only did he spearhead the pioneering efforts and innovations for which Hinman College is famous, but he also helped to establish the traditions that Hinman is most famous for. The Hinman College Council, Co-Rec Football, and the Hinman Little Theater (and by extension the Hinman Production Company), the trifecta of Hinman College, all owe their existence to Pete Gruber. While he was most certainly soft-spoken and perhaps not as visible with students as future Faculty Masters, Pete Gruber deserves a place of honor among the early figures of Hinman history for all of his efforts and for laying a solid foundation for all future generations to build upon.

In May of 1971, the portrait of Harvey D. Hinman that now graces the Hinman College Faculty Master's office was presented to Hinman by George Hinman, Harvey's son. At a large dedication ceremony George Hinman spoke about his father and his vision for what Harpur College and by extension, SUNY Binghamton and Hinman College could offer to the young student. In the May 6, 1971, issue of the *Hinman Halitosis*, Gruber wrote a long essay on the dinner and gave some biographical information on Harvey D. Hinman. He ended his essay with this all-important paragraph on the history of the Mastership of Hinman College:

The portrait photograph, which was displayed in the Western bay of the Hinman Dining Hall, was taken of Mr. Hinman when he was in his mid-eighties. The twinkle in his eye reflects a strong vitality. As I said at the conclusion of the Convocation, when I look up from my desk and exchange glances with Mr. Hinman, I seem always to get the feeling that he's just said, "Well, Master of Hinman College, what the hell are you doing to make this college a better place to live and learn?"¹²

If there ever was a truer, more lasting legacy that Christian P. Gruber left to Hinman College, that is it. Every Faculty Master since those early days has asked themselves that very same question and has striven to make Hinman College a better place to live and learn, first by their words, but gradually by their deeds.

¹ Marilyn Gruber, telephone conversation with author, April 30, 2007.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Bob Giomi, telephone conversation with author, November 29, 2006.

⁶ Kenneth W. Anderson, letter to C.P. Gruber, printed in the *Hinman Halitosis* Vol. I, No. 10, March 11, 1971.

⁷ C.P. Gruber, "Outrageous Rumor," *Hinman Halitosis* Vol. I, No. 10, March 11, 1971.

⁸ Bruce Dearing, "'Tainted Tuna' Controversy Hits Higher Administration," *Hinman Halitosis* Vol. I, No. 12, March 25, 1971.

⁹ D.C. Cooper, W.T. Battin, B. McDuffie, "Perils of the Precocious Hinman Tuna!" *Hinman Halitosis* Vol. I, No. 14, April 15, 1971.

¹⁰ Christian P. Gruber, "Our Master Plan," *Hinman Halitosis* Vol. I, No. 15, April 22, 1971.

¹¹ Marilyn Gruber, telephone conversation with author, April 30, 2007.

¹² C.P. Gruber, "What's In A Name?" *Hinman Halitosis* Vol. I, No. 17, May 6, 1971.