

A Long Island Story:

What Happened to the Japanese Cherry Trees at Hofstra?

By Daniel J. Basta

Sometime in the late 1950s or early 1960s Japanese cherry trees had been gifted to Hofstra University. At least that had been the story. In the halcyon summer of 1969 Japanese cherry trees had graced either side of the entrance to the Adams Theatre on what had recently been named South Campus. Adams theatre was one of the most impressive buildings on campus and when in blossom the cherry trees made the entrance even beautiful. But something had changed that by the end of the summer.

It was the summer of 1969 and a heady time to be living in New York and on Long Island. That January the New York Jets had just done the impossible and beat the Baltimore Colts in the Super Bowl. Joe Namath and his teammates were the toast of the town. The Jet's training camp at Hofstra that summer had been visited by everyone who possibility could. Things had also been hopping at all of the campus hangouts and local bars as Long Islander's crowded in to see their Jets.

Towards the middle of August that summer the New York State Thruway had been temporarily closed and it was almost impossible to get off the Island. Over 400,000 flower children and others had jammed into the town of Bethel in the southeastern Catskill Mountains for the historic Woodstock concert, and backed up traffic almost all the way to New York City. A

powerful electric pulse had shot through the City, and of course Long Island, and it resonated and lingered for months.

In Flushing in Queens, Shea Stadium had been rocking all summer as the “Amazing Mets” were on their way to their first World Championship in the 1969 World Series in October. Looking back I don’t think many of us living on Long Island were aware of this amazing “Trifecta,” all within ten months. Maybe we hadn’t thought about it in those terms back then because they had been part of the cacophony of events swirling around us, as the 1960s were coming to a close that made it hard to separate out the Trifecta. Everyone on college campuses in New York and on Long Island had seem to be passionately involved with aspects of other things going on – protesting the war in Vietnam, demonstrations of solidarity following the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy, or confrontations about something. And so, the Trifecta that summer was probably not seen as such by many. The Cherry Trees at Adams hall, however, had borne witness to it all on the Hofstra campus.

It was my senior year at Hofstra University in that heady summer of 1969. I had had a summer job on the campus ground crew at Hofstra. It was a sweet job from 7:00 am to 3:30 pm. And after work we would always make it to Jones Beach ahead of the afternoon traffic. My fraternity brother and sometimes partner in crime that summer, Tony, had somehow gotten me on the ground crew.

These campus summer jobs were generally reserved for students with athletic scholarships. I wasn’t a good enough athlete to make any of the teams – never mind get a scholarship. But even if I had, as an engineering student I had no time to pursue anything but study and work. I only knew of one engineering student who was a varsity athlete and he had taken over six years to eventually graduate. Tony on the other hand was majoring in sculpture. I didn’t even know there was such a major back then. I thought he always had a lot more-free time than me. But now I think he was always working. Tony had tried all sorts of sports at Hofstra including football. I recall he had eventually settled on ‘track and field’ and in the summer of

1969 was mostly a javelin thrower. During the school year Tony and I often worked-out together at the old Hofstra “field house” and so I knew a lot of the guys who would be working on the ground crew that summer. Tony had also been the perennial intermural “hand ball” champion of the University. Even when he was clowning around I couldn’t beat him. Hand ball was a big thing from where Tony had grown up in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn. We were originally both Brooklyn boys.

In the 1960s the Brownsville and Bedford Stuyvesant sections of Brooklyn had been the poster child for “urban blight” and were dangerous places. It was astonishing to me that these war zones could exist in New York City. Parts of these areas looked like bombed out Berlin after World War II. Tony had an Italian father and Jewish mother. I think he had probably spent more time growing up with his mother’s family. He was ultimately a very funny guy and could find fun in most anything. One day he asked me to go with him to his Jewish grandmothers apartment in Brownsville to move furniture or something. She lived in an old walk up apartment and probably had lived there most of her life. Tony loved his grandmother and obviously was pretty close to her and loved to joke and laugh with her. He might have gotten his sense of humor from her. Only now she had been getting senile (the term back then). Tony warned me of that on the way up the stairs but had also said she was even more fun and a riot. He would say, “You got to love my grandma.” I think he used to call her “Booby” and sometimes “Nana.”

After doing what we had come to do at grandma’s, she insisted that we stay for soup – her homemade Matza Ball soup. Tony tried to avoid it with a series of jokes about how Jewish grandmothers didn’t know how to cook. But Jewish grandmothers have a way with their grandsons. Soon we were sitting across from each other at her little kitchen table and grandma placed old and worn soup bowls filled to the top with floating matza balls before us. The gilding or scenes painted on the bowls had just about worn away. Grandma was tiny and standing behind Tony with her hands folded across her spotted apron saying, “ Eat, Eat.” I had started to dip the large soup spoon into the soup and instantly knew something was not right. I looked at

Tony and didn't say a word as I tried to control my expression, after all it was his loving grandmother's soup, and I took a spoon full.

I must have still given a "tell" when I swallowed the soup. Tony then crinkled his eyebrows a little as he raised the big soup spoon to his mouth. In went the soup spoon and out of his mouth came the soup! It was a funny scene. Tony was nothing if not animated, "Nana, Nana, what are you doing trying to poison us," as he spat out the soup? "It's dishwater, have you been making the soup with dishwater again?" I was still trying to eat the soup when Tony had practically leaped across the table and pushed my bowl aside: "Don't eat this my grandmother is trying to kill us, she's crazy!" None of this seemed to register on grandma who simply repeated, "Eat, Eat." She had that foggy look in her eyes. Tony was funny and tender with her as he moved her towards the sink and cleared the table. He told her we weren't really hungry and had to get back to school and we would soon be back for her matza ball soup, but only when she didn't make it with the dishwater. That was my buddy Tony and knowing a little of his background is important, to understand what happened to the cherry trees at Adams Theatre.

Most days during the school year Tony and I would walk past the Adams Theatre and the Cherry Trees on the way to and from classes or our campus work jobs. Somehow we had both become "departmental assistants." I was the Engineering Program's assistant and Tony had been the same for the Art Program. I worked in Adams Hall, the engineering building at the time, and mostly in the basement working on labs and laboratory equipment. Tony worked across the way in the basement of the Art Building. I never actually knew what he did but he always carried a wad of keys on his belt and looked busy. Even so, I always thought he was working some angle or con (Just Saying!). We would often rendezvous between the buildings to shoot the breeze about just anything. But sometimes we would give each other tours of our buildings. After about 5:00 pm the buildings were generally empty. The Art building had a lot more locked doors than the engineering building, but Tony of course had all the keys. The Art building also had a vault of sorts and Tony loved taking him there to show me what folks were working on. All joking aside he was serious about his art. When I took him into the engineering labs he would say it was oh so technical it hurt his eyes and gave him a headache.

It was during one of our rendezvous between the buildings towards the end of the spring semester when we were talking about summer jobs that a job on the Hofstra ground crew had come up. Tony and I always had to work to pay for school. When the semester ended our jobs as departmental assistants would also end and I hadn't lined up anything yet for the summer. The ground crew job would be steady work for the whole summer and some of the guys we knew were going to do it. Tony gave me his mischievous look and said he could fix it, besides we were already Hofstra employees and that should count for something. It would be a blast he said with the guys we knew and he and I could be partners. My thoughts were, "What was not to like," and as we walked back to our cars past the Japanese Cherry trees I said, "I am in!"

Every morning we would arrive at the maintenance buildings towards the back of South Campus to get our work assignments for the day. I had, of course, seen these building many times before but had never known what they were. That summer there were probably 20 to 30 students on the ground crew to augment the regular employees. The supervisor who assigned jobs was a quiet man named Myron. To us, he looked like a farmer, dressed like a farmer and talked like a farmer, just like the farmers out east on Long Island. Myron was also in charge of moving all of the furniture and other sundry things around campus and inside of buildings. He would always assign the football players, especially the linemen, to the moving crew. They would tool around campus on large box trucks and we would hitch rides with them when trying to dodge Myron. After work assignments Myron would drive his Hofstra blue jeep, with the tall radio antenna with the red flag, around periodically checking we were all doing what we had been assigned.

Typical assignments included: the grass cutting teams, hole diggers, watering crew, Stadium cleaners, and other such jobs. Tony had right away endeared himself to Myron as sort of an unsolicited advisor. Like I said, he was a funny guy and entertained us in those early morning briefings in the big Maintenance Shed. Tony had somehow convinced Myron that he and I had to work together to supervisor each other to do a good job. We never got placed on

the grass cutting team, because Tony had explained to Myron that the lawn mowers frighten him and the loud noise gave him headaches. The other guys would roll their eyes and try not to laugh. Mostly we got assigned to the watering detail because Tony had explained how much he liked to see things grow, it soothed him and said we were good at watering. I didn't know that turning on sprinklers was a special talent. Myron must have initially liked Tony. No one else really talked to him. To make it even better we were almost always assigned to the new North Campus where the Student Union and new dormitories were located. We would lug our hoses and sprinklers over to North Campus, set them up turn them on and then disappear. We were the envy of our buddies for a while, because all the lovely co-aids in summer school lived in the dorms and hung out around the Student Union and cafeteria. It was all going so well until we let our guard down and hadn't see Myron drive up and come in for a cup of coffee. He had parked the Hofstra blue jeep where we couldn't see it or the antenna and red flag.

That was how Myron caught us and we soon found ourselves doing one of the worse and dirtiest jobs for several days. At the far end behind the athletic fields on South Campus where the Jets practiced was a giant "mountain" of dirt. Tony and I were assigned to shove the mountain through sifting screens and then into a pile for use around campus. It was hot and dirty work. When Myron came to check on us, Tony had tried to explain to him the shovels weren't the right shoves for the job and too heavy; he was getting a sun burn and that he thought he might be allergic to the dark wet soil. Myron looked at us from his Hofstra blue jeep - two very fit and reasonably muscular young "so-called athletes" - and with a smile on his face simply had said "shovel" and drove away. You can't fool a country boy twice!

But the dirt mountain was a good spot to watch the Jets practice. We would climb to the top of our dirt mountain and have a ring side seat up close and personal with the Jets as they practiced. When we saw Myron coming we would run down into the hole on the other side and starting shoveling. It was a special summer with the Jets on campus. Since we were always around campus starting @ 7:00 am and they were always around we actually got to "so-call" know many players and coaches, mostly talking about the weather, the condition of the fields,

or how hard the Astroturf was in the Stadium. Hofstra had the only Astroturf Stadium on Long Island at the time and it was a big draw. We would have to sweep it, as well as periodically clean the stands.

Two former Hofstra players had been on the Super Bowl Team and I think that had helped create for a while an usual bond between the team and the University. My favorite players to talk to were Joe Namath, of course, Matt Snell, Emerson Boozer, and John Schmitt who had gone to Hofstra. John Schmitt was the starting center for the Jets for many years. All the Jet players were easy to talk to and often reached out to say hi or ask how you were doing. But my personal favorite was Weeb Ewbank the head Coach. He was always the first person from the Jets at the Field House every morning. On about a half dozen occasions I had bunked into him before anyone else had showed up and we would have about minute or two conversation standing in the sun before he went into the building. He always asked about the weather and what my job was going to be for the day. He seemed more like a grandfather figure than an NFL Head Coach of elite athletes. One player we all gave a wide berth to was Johnny Sample, a defensive back, known to have an attitude. He seemed to us to be as advertised.

The fateful day for the Japanese cherry trees had begun like every other day, getting assignments from Myron in the large Maintenance Shed at the back of South Campus. Tony and I had been on good behavior and were finally off of Myron's black list. There was a lot going on this day and Myron had gotten a request to trim the Japanese Cherry Trees at the Adams Theatre. All of the regular crew had already been assigned when Myron had then asked, "Does anyone here know how to trim trees, cherry trees?" No one moved or uttered a word. We were all sitting on equipment, old discarded chairs, or boxes and purposely staring at the ground or the roof, when Tony, sensing an opportunity, jumped up waving his hand, "Oh, oh, Myron me and Dan do! We have a lot of experience and we know those trees!" Myron had hesitated a moment and then he had said, "Well okay, I guess you and Basta can check-out some pruning tools and get over there." I had been pulling on the leg on Tony's shorts to stop him, but he was on a roll. As I had looked around I could see in the eyes and smirks of the other guys, "Oh this is going to

be good!” Walking by those trees didn’t mean we had even known they were Japanese cherry trees. Tony hadn’t even known what pruning tools were. Cutting grass on neighborhood lawns and taking off a few branches when I was in high school didn’t mean I knew a thing about pruning. When I reminded Tony that he had lived in an apartment in Brooklyn his whole life and knew nothing about trees he had said, “Hey, I am a sculptor and an artist, don’t worry it’s gonna be great!” When we were leaving the maintenance shed our buddies heckled us: “Those poor trees,” “Don’t hurt yourself falling out of trees!” (*Left is a young Japanese cherry tree.*) By then they had figured out how Tony was always conning Myron. Fortunately they were young trees and no climbing would be necessary, but I could image Tony falling off the ladder. The day was shaping up as one of those hot, humid, and scorching days on Long Island towards the end of summer.



As we left the Maintenance Shed Tony and I had made our way to the Adam’s Theatre quadrangle careful to walk in the shade, even going out of our way to hug the partly shaded buildings. Most of the quadrangle was still in early morning shade especially the front of the theatre. The cherry blossoms were long gone and the young trees just looked like any other tree. I remember telling Tony there was only one thing I had been told about trimming anything - “Do no harm!” Tony laughed and had said “Baron,” my fraternity nick name, stop worrying I’m a sculptor!!! He eyed up the Cherry Trees like he was looking at blocks of granite for some inspiration, some creative clue to reveal the inner image hiding within them. All I saw was some unruly looking small trees in need of a haircut. “Do no harm!”

Tony took the trees to the left of the entrance and I took those on the right. I didn’t want to watch what he was doing or be party to it. I could tell he was in some strange zone because I could hear him talking to the trees. Soon he came over to my side and stood on the ledge of the

flat blocks framing the broad entrance to the Theatre. Tony then burst out, “Baron, what are you doing? You haven’t done anything yet!” Actually I had thought I was done. Do no harm kept resonating in my head. Tony then jumped off the blocks and had said we have to balance each side. I went across the stairs to the side Tony had been working and yes they didn’t match. Tony had macerated the poor trees. I went back to my side and he was doing the same to my side. It got worse.

Tony would periodically stand in front of the Theatre and take in his handy work. When co-eds walked by and paused for even a second, Tony told them he was creating a living art piece for the Theatre. He would then see something he had to fix and chop some more. Then do the same to the other side. He kept saying, “Balance and symmetry, balance and symmetry!” After a few iterations of this and his creative juices the Cherry Trees no longer resembled trees. When he was finally happy they looked to me like the stems of what use to be bushes – it was bad! It was like looking at an abstract painting of something and not being able to figure out what it was.

Then here came the Hofstra blue jeep through the quadrangle. Myron pulled up directly in front of the Theatre and stopped. I have never see another human being that angry! I thought his head was going to explode off his shoulders. His face had turn so red I thought his white hair would catch fire as well as his ball cap. He had completely lost his normally calm manner. He was gestating and almost speaking in tongues. Apparently, it was the President of the University who had asked him to prune the Japanese cherry trees! What was he going to tell him now? Tony, of course, was indignant and tried to explain to Myron what a magnificent and artful job he had done and how it was also great for the trees. Those two didn’t even speak the same language. Myron was having none of it and still steaming had told us to pack up and get the hell back to Maintenance Shed.

Walking back lugging our stuff Tony said, “Did you see Myron’s face, I think he lost it, you think he’s going to have a heart attack!” We thought we were done and that he would fire us, or at least punish us by putting us back on the dirt mountain to shovel in the hot sun. As Tony mulled

our defense he concluded, it was Myron's fault for giving us the job in the first place. He then happily declared: "You see he can't fire us." "We had just been following his orders and doing our very best, so we can't be fired!"

Next morning in the Maintenance Shed all our buddies had a field day poking fun at us. "What did you guys do the Cherry Trees, we heard you killed them. Better you than me. We can't wait to see what Myron does to you now" and on and on. Myron had come in as usual and in a very serious, flat and matter of fact way assigned jobs to everyone but Tony and me. As guys had left we got the looks, you guys are dead sorry to see you go.

Myron then had looked at Tony and me and said, "You two come with me and get in the jeep" – the Hofstra blue jeep with antenna and red flag. Of course Tony asked Myron where we were going. Myron stared ahead said nothing and soon we were across Hempstead Turnpike which divided the campus to north and south. We drove pass the Dormitories and Student Union and just kept going. We were headed out on the runways of the former U.S Air Force Base, named Michell field. This former big airbase was at that time only starting to be redeveloped on the fringes. At one time it had been the most important U.S. Air Force base on Long Island. We got to the very middle of the field and runways. From there the buildings on the fringes looked about an inch tall and no trees could be seen anywhere. It almost seemed that we could see the curve of earth. Myron then had said, "Get out! You two are banned from South Campus! Your job until further notice is to weed between the cracks in the runway." He then just drove off leaving Tony and me to weed the cracks in the runways and get the heat treatment.

Tony had started putting two and two together and concluded that we were getting a Japanese torture treatment because the Cherry trees were Japanese. We were out there by ourselves in the broiling heat for the better part of a week. Myron would come by to be sure we had water. I think he probably enjoyed seeing us suffer as well. We would pretend to weed and told him it would take a thousand years to weed all the cracks. Myron had just said, "weed" and drove off. It was hard to tell if we had weeded or not. It was so hot out there on the concrete

runways that even the weeds couldn't take it. Tony had said it was African "hot." We had towels wrapped around our heads and torsos and must have looked like prisoners in a Gulag or Bedouin herdsmen. However, we hadn't been done yet with our shenanigans, the "Calvary" was on the way !

Our buddies had found out that Tony and I were banned to North Campus in the middle of the runways to weed. They figured we needed help. Besides it was a chance to get another one over on Myron and maybe get some "rays." Sunning ourselves on the job was always a priority. One of the guys had a Volkswagen camper, after all it was 1969. He parked his camper by a side gate on the western end of South Campus with a cooler full of beer, and beach chairs. At an appropriate time, he and a few others would sneak away from their jobs, get the camper and cruise through a remote gate on the western end of North Campus (Now a dormitory area named the Netherlands.) to us. Myron rarely used those gates. Back then there were no cell phones, and our coordination was by way of mouth and passing signals among the crew, everybody had to dodge Myron, but the calvary always came over the hill to the rescue.

When they got to us our buddies would set-up the camper, take out lawn chairs, some lunch, turn on the tunes ,and pull out the cooler full of beer. One guy would set up a chair on the roof of the camper and keep watch for Myron. Sometimes the lookout on the roof had an umbrella to shade himself and his beer. You could see for miles from the top of the camper. We would hang out and always be in stitches laughing about our good fortune. Until at some point, the lookout on the roof would spy the red flag on the horizon coming our way. "It's Myron, take-off it!!"

In under a minute the chairs and beer were thrown into the camper and the camper was off at high speed and gone from sight. Soon Myron in the Hofstra blue jeep with the antenna and red flag would arrive. He would drive up, stop and watch Tony and I pretending to weed. Tony would go into his act about how he was suffering from heat stroke and how difficult it was to get the weeds out from between the cracks. Listening to Tony describe how in-human it was,

Myron always cracked a little smile. Maybe he was beginning to enjoy Tony's creative whimpering. Apparently the University President had not been happy about the massacred prized Japanese cherry trees.

Myron never caught the calvary ! The summer was coming to an end and ultimately Myron must have thought he had punished us enough. We finally had left the runways and returned to the Maintenance Shed, acting appropriately sullen with our buddies in the Calvary! No one else had ever weeded the runaways. I don't think those runways had probably ever been weeded. And then there were the cherry trees, I am sure in the spring people wondered what had happened to the cherry blossoms.

I soon graduated and I never knew if the Japanese cherry trees ever came back. I know they are not there today, but it has been 50 years. Right after Hofstra I had went on to do what young Long Island Engineers did in those days, work in Aerospace on Grumman air planes. As for Tony, I guess he was more serious about his art than I had thought that summer. He went on to get his Doctorate and had a long and fulfilling career teaching art in College. I am sure his former students could tell some funny tales about him.

Today, I live in Washington DC and enjoy the Japanese cheery trees blossoms around the Tidal Basin each year. But every time I look at them I can't help thinking back to the massacre of the Japanese cherry trees at the Adams Theatre at Hofstra in that long ago and crazy summer of 1969 on Long Island.

About the Author: Daniel J. Basta is a product of Long Island culture and it's schools and Universities. He grew up in Nassau County and graduated from: Sewanhaka High School in Floral Park, State University of New York at Farmingdale, Hofstra University in Hempstead, and State University of New York at Stony Brook. After leaving Long Island he had a long and successful career in environmental engineering, research and management in Academia and within the

Federal Government. He retired in 2016 as a senior official In the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration. He still considers himself a Long Islander.