

ONCE UPON A TIME



Hobson in Istanbul at 1967.
(Photo: Gürel Eğecioğlu, RA 64)

Q: Ömer Eğecioğlu, RC 72
A: J. Grady Hobson

Santa Barbara, CA
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Q: You first went to RC in the 1950s. Tell me how that came about.

A: It came about I was teaching my first year out of college in Portland, Oregon in 1952 in a school that I hated. The district was lower middle class, going downhill fast. There were thirty five kids in the classroom and I decided by mid-year that if I finished the year in one piece, I was not going to go back there. I could not transfer to another school in the system. The main office told me that there were no openings. I then called the teacher placement secretary in Oregon State University's School of Education, and she said "How would you like to go overseas?" The thought had never crossed my mind until then. I told her that I would love to. She walked into my classroom about a week later and said that there was an organization called the Near East College Association, which is a grouping of all the American schools in the Middle East. They maintain this one office collectively. They needed a mathematics teacher at the American University of Beirut, and at Robert College of Istanbul. Those were the choices.

J. Grady Hobson

An interview with the legendary math teacher who taught at RC for 20 years

The name Grady Hobson evokes a charismatic figure in the minds of generations of former RC students. Hobson, who taught Math at both campuses for a total of 20 years between 1952-60, 1962-68 and 1971-77, and also served as Housemaster at Theodorus Hall and Hamlin Hall in the 50's is among the most remarkable teachers RC has been fortunate to have. A former student, Ömer Eğecioğlu '72 who has kept in touch with Grady Hobson over the years interviewed him for the RCQ in May 2003.

Q: Did you end up going to Beirut first?

A: I did not know Beirut from Istanbul. They were just names. For the next couple of weeks, I stopped on the way from school every day in the big library in downtown Portland, and really did some digging around to find out about them.

Q: Why did you pick Robert College?

A: What happened was this: the publisher of National Geographic Magazine, was born and raised on the Robert College campus. His father was a professor at Robert College. So that over the years, National Geographic had an awful lot of articles about Turkey. There was one in the library from 1948 about Istanbul. One full page picture, taken at the top of the bowl, looking down over the Rumelihisar to the Bosphorus, and over on the right hand side the buildings of Robert College. I took one look at that and thought "that's where I'm going!" So that's how it all came about.

Q: For the benefit of the later generations of RC students, we are talking about the Bebek Campus, where the Bosphorus University is now, right?

A: Yes, indeed.

Q: Did you visit other schools before coming to Istanbul?

A: No. There was no need. It was that one photograph that did it. It was a spectacular view of the Bosphorus, one of the most beautiful waterways in the world.

Q: How did you become a math teacher?

A: Well, because I was good in math. First I thought I wanted to be an engineer. So that's what I started in college in Corvallis, Oregon.

I was going to be a civil engineer. I did well, I was even on the honors list - but I was bored stiff. So I had to get out of it, and rescue something of the two years that I had already completed. What I could rescue was all those math credits. So I switched to math education.

Q: You said you were not terribly happy with your teaching job in Portland. What did you think of the students in RC?

A: To come from a place where the students were not the least bit interested in education, to Robert College, it was a paradise! Istanbul is one of the most beautiful cities in the world - WAS one of the most beautiful cities in the world. So the place was fascinating. Beautiful college on the hilltop. Great fellow teachers, and these marvellous students! They were the best the whole country could provide - you know that. You were one of them. It was not just brains however, it was also their personality which was so appealing.

Q: Did you travel a lot in Turkey?

A: I have been in every province in the country.



Hobson in Barton Hall in 1977.
(Photo: Gürel Eğecioğlu, RA 64)

Q: That's more than I can say for myself. Let me get back to your first years in RC. You were a housemaster were you not?

A: I was a housemaster from 1954 to 1957 in Theodorus Hall of the academy. From 1957 to 1959, I was the housemaster in Hamlin Hall, the college dorm then. I then went back and lived in Theodorus hall for a year, but not as the housemaster. I was planning to go back to the US in 1959. I had bought an awful lot of things over the years at the Bazaar, because that was our Saturday morning activity: We went to the Bazaar. Week after week after week after week. I ended up with all kinds of stuff. The problem was that the Turkish customs would not clear it. I was trying to leave the country, but I could not take them out. I was told to get an export license, since I was obviously going to sell them in the US! So I applied for an export license. As the summer was progressing, I was trying to get that license. At a party, an official of the lise - by that time RC was a lise, and not orta - said that they could not find a replacement for me. He asked me if I would consider staying for one more year. I told him that I would consider it. He asked me what it would take to make me stay. I told him that I had worked on a missionary salary all those years, and I would like my salary doubled. He told me that he could probably arrange that. Of course that made me feel like a fool, having worked all those years on a small salary. It was the end of my contract, I already had a ticket from Istanbul to California, so I wanted to use it. Then if I was going to be teaching there again, they would have to bring me back. Additionally, a year later, I would like them to fly me back to California. Could this be arranged? He said he could probably arrange that, too. Everything I asked for, he said yes. Of course I told him that in that case I would love to stay for another year. This was the summer of 1959.

Q: Did you stay for more than a year?

A: Not at that time. In 1960, I went back to the US. I decided that I loved being a math teacher, but my masters degree was not in mathematics, it was in counseling. This turned out to be of great use running a dormitory, but in being a counselor, you are working in the negative side, and after a while it can get to you. But my main interest in life was to teach math. Around that time Sputnik happened. The American government panicked, thinking that the science program and the math program in the US schools was not good enough. The Russians had beat us to it. So the National Science Foundation offered fellowships to various programs set

up in the American universities. So I applied. They were terribly sorry, but they were only giving them to teachers active in the US, and so unfortunately I would not qualify since I was teaching in Turkey. I decided to play this game the way they wanted to, and looked for a teaching job in the US from Turkey, without an interview. This was a real stumbling block. All kinds of places I wrote to said that they were terribly sorry, I sounded interesting but they had to talk to me in person. But I was not going to fly all the way from Turkey to the US and back just for a personal interview. Finally I found one place that would hire me without an interview, a city that was growing so fast that only a third of the city streets were paved. They could not build schools fast enough, and they were desperate for teachers, particularly math teachers. They would hire me without any personal interview. They hired me. The city was Tucson, Arizona.

Q: This was 1960?

A: Yes. The summer of 1960. I stayed in Tucson for one year. Being a math teacher inside the US, I now applied again to Stanford, Oregon State, where I had been a student for my undergraduate degree, Arizona State University, and University of Illinois. I was offered a fellowship in all of them except Arizona State. I went to Illinois simply because the reputation was so good and I had already been to the other schools.

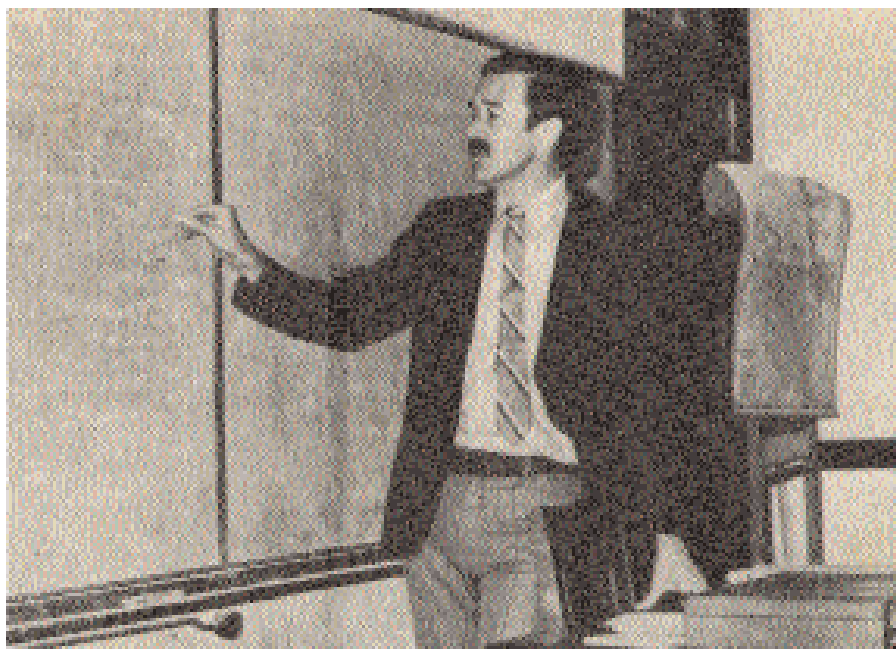
Q: Everyone in RC knows you as Hobson, but you are Grady to some and Jim to others. Tell me about this.

A: My father's first name was Grady. So that's what he was always called. It is the name of a county in South Georgia where his father was born. Grady and Grady Jr? It is not good in the family to have a father and son have the same name. It's confusing. So they called me Jim, being James Grady. I did not mind it then, I don't mind it now. But I hate James. This has it's own complications. Outside of Selma, my hometown in California, I am Grady. But in Selma around family I am still Jim.

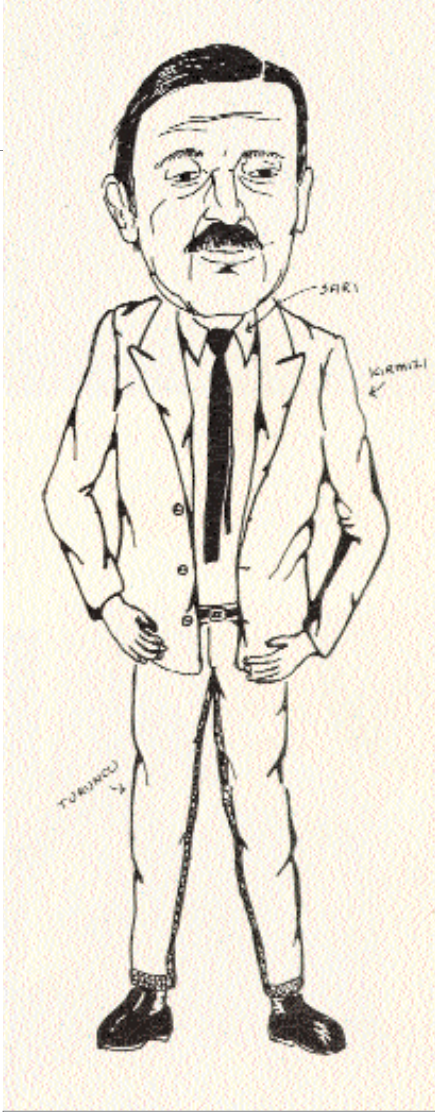
Q: The Class of '72 was amused by your colorful outfits, as reflected in the yearbook (see next page). Any comments?

A: I did not realize that they were. That must have been from my three years in Verde Valley School in Arizona before coming back to RC in 1971. Sedona, where Verde Valley School is, is a very colorful place. I probably picked those colorful clothes there. I still like wearing colorful clothes. Recently, I went to the sixtieth anniversary of my high school graduation. I went in yellow: yellow slacks, yellow shirt, yellow jacket.

Q: I remember you playing the Rachmaninov preludes for piano one after the other in the early 70's. Have you always been interested in music?



Hobson teaching at RC.



Drawing by Şevket Günter '73 from the RC 72 yearbook.

A: I took piano lessons for a long time as a child. Then I did not play for a long time, since there seemed to be other social things more important when I was growing up. When I came out to RC in 1952, the rule was that the music teacher for the academy had to be an organist. That was a requirement. RC had the only pipe organ, not just in Turkey but in the whole of middle east. Not only did the music teacher had to be a good organist, but he had to know the mechanics so that he could keep the organ in good mechanical order. And that was Claren Summer. He could also play the piano. We played pieces for two pianos. So I got interested in the piano again. When I came back to RC in 1971, I remember that there was the music building on the new RC campus in Arnavutköy, and the music teacher was Jean Strommer, who had majored in piano performance. She was in fact working on her PhD in piano performance. We got together the first year I was back in 1971, and we played music for two pianos. I found that this was something I enjoyed more than solo playing. We prepared

a program and gave a recital at the end of the year. We did this again the following year. I loved it more than anything I have ever done on the piano solo.

Q: You taught in NYC in the 80's. Which school in NY did you teach?

A: It is called the Trinity school. The oldest private school in the US. I went there after teaching two years in San Antonio during 1977-1979. I taught at the Trinity school in New York City for twelve years, until my retirement in 1991. That was also a lovely teaching experience for me. Trinity school had some of the best brains that the city of New York could provide. The school was founded by the Trinity Church at the end of Wall Street. It was in fact founded in that church building. Like RC, it had great faculty, fun people to work with.

I knew I did not like NYC, from all the years of flying back and forth between Istanbul and California. I'd stop in NY for three days, and race around going to movies, plays, and concerts. And I would ask myself each time why in the world anyone would want to live there. It was great for three days, but twelve months out of the year? They are out of their minds. But through Neil Bull, who was then in Princeton working for a teacher placement agency, I somehow ended up with a Trinity School job for a single year. One year in NYC? I thought that would be fine. I ended up staying there for 12 years until I retired in 1991.

Q: So, there was a good reason why people lived in NYC?

A: Right. Good reason indeed! I'd be there now if I had not retired. You need a reasonable amount of money for fun and games on that island, so retirement is not perfect for it.

Q: How many years total were you at RC?

A: $8 + 6 + 6 = 20$ years over a 25 year period.

Q: If you had to do it again, would you do the same things again?

A: Oh, yes. For someone coming out of a little burgh of 3,000 people in the middle of nowhere in California, I ended up living in all of these marvellous places, best of all Istanbul. I loved every one of the places I lived in my life, except maybe one: Urbana, IL. But the University was worth it. I was never sorry that I went there. The education was great.

Q: Where do you make your home now?

A: I live in Selma, California, but I go to Tucson for about five months in November to avoid the fog in the San Joaquin valley. In the summer, Portland is an option.

Q: You were back in Istanbul as a tourist also, were you not?

A: I have been back once, in 1989. The board of Trustees of Trinity school paid my way for a summer vacation. I spent a month in Turkey. It was also the RC 64 class' twenty fifth reunion that year, and I was able to attend.

Q: Any last thoughts?

A: Istanbul was the best place I have ever lived. It was the love of my life, and I wanted to live there till the end of my days. But it has gotten bigger and bigger, and I am not sure how good a city it is at present. On the other hand, in the whole history of my family as far back as anyone knows on both sides, I have already lived five years longer than anybody else. Istanbul or Selma, that's not bad.

Q: And with all those smokes and martinis?

A: They say that a martini a day is good for you. I live by that. It is overdoing it that is no good. But it is true that I should have quit smoking a long time ago.

Q: Last question: why do you think that RC students were so impressed by your presence there?

A: I do not know. I am sure it had something to do with teaching. I could stand up there in front of a class and look out at 35 faces and say to myself "you make my life." I was impressed with their presence, their energy, and good cheer. I wanted them to enjoy mathematics as much as I did.

Ömer Eğecioğlu RC 72, graduated from the Math Dept of ODTU and obtained his doctorate from UCSD in Math/ Computer Sciences. He is a professor at University of California, Computer Department, in Santa Barbara. Married to pianist Zeynep Üçbaşaran, they have a five year old daughter, Alisa. The family will spend the next year in Istanbul, as Ömer will be a visiting professor at Sabancı University.

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