Seven College Generations

Commencement

12 June 1933

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I wish, in the first place, to thank you, Mr. President, and you, members of the graduating class, for the very high honor bestowed when you asked me to be the speaker on this occasion. Thankfulness has, however, given me no cause for rejoicing for I appreciate the responsibilities I have to meet when I address you; exceptional responsibilities when our centennial adds so much to the interest and I hope enthusiasm of this gathering. Today we cannot live solely in the present. The forest trail, the covered wagon, the log hut, the axe and flintlock, the wonderful adventure of the conquest of the wilderness in far off Michigan, the courage, endurance, and, best of all, the foresight, the vision; these will be with us as we meet in this lovely building, the spiritual foundation stone of which was laid one hundred years ago.

There seems to be some expectation among my friends that I would review, at least in part, the early history of our college. The subject is fascinating but it has already been covered by more competent hands than mine, and our promised history, soon to be published, will give you all a much desired opportunity. Yet I would be failing to meet my own inclinations and interests, and I think yours also, if I did not give our own college a leading place in my address. I came here as a freshman in 1905. My preparation had been studying in Universities and teaching in High Schools. I was very interested in the small college idea which in theory appealed to me. I "joined up" and worked hard for four years. Now there are times when we say to a student "This course must be repeated". Such seems to have been my fate. Each time I have reached the senior year, now for the 7th time, I have been told to start all over again. I well remember the day, it will be 28 years ago next September, when I came here to look over the ground and find a place where I could settle my family. I was shown by Dr. Sloan through the cot...
building, Bowen Hall, an new structure in which we took much pride. Near it were the men's and the women's dormitories. Kalamazoo Hall, which stood across Asylum (now Michigan) Avenue, had, even then been abandoned for class purposes. It was a modest outfit. The city was pretty and thriving but modest might also describe its architecture. I looked about me with an interest that would have been greatly enhanced had I foreseen that this city would be a permanent home for me and mine; - a home that I have learned to love.

Two weeks later I was introduced to my fellow workers on the faculty. Some of my audience will remember them. Dr. Slocum - simple, kindly, and thoroughly in earnest. He had come to the presidency 15 years before when things had been going badly. Under his leadership our financial position had been strengthened, our standards of work raised, Bowen Hall had been built. His first graduating class, that of 1893, numbered two, and at that time there were 55 in the college but 176 in the preparatory department and music school. When I came the total number was about the same but the proportions had changed. There were 191 collegiate and 41 "prep". Three years later the preparatory department was abandoned and we were a pure college. Who else was there? Proceeding Dr. Slocum by a year there came to us a young man, Stillman George Jenks, still I am happy to say a resident of our city. A Michigan man, a graduate of our State University, he understood the local situation well and the characteristics of the students. With faithfulness, industry and sound common sense he gave us 20 years of most valuable service. In 1893 another young man joined the faculty. Clark Benedict Williams, from Princeton University, later a student in Goetgen and Leipzig, he brought with him experience from the old eastern college and from foreign lands. It would be hard to overestimate the beneficent influence that man had on our college during the 29 years he was with us. He was a remarkably successful teacher and interested in every phase of education. He had a dominating influence with both faculty and students. An influence perhaps hard to explain for he was unobtrusive and not a good platform speaker. It was his breadth of
view, his wide sympathies, his devotion to thorough knowledge and true culture, his rare ability to see through a problem and to state the question clearly to others, his courage and patience that gave him leadership. I hope his connection with our athletics may not be forgotten. In those times athletics were new in our colleges and much that was irregular and disreputable were common in their methods. Faculties were inexperienced as the problems were new and often made things worse or were frankly opposed to the whole business. Williams for many years, under great discouragement, was almost alone in upholding athletics in our college and struggling to develop a better sporting spirit in our students and between competing teams. Most fittingly has our men's residence been named after him.

With us at that time was G. A. Williams, tall and handsome with white hair and moustache, a splendid example of the old school of classical training; teaching what he believed to be the best part of any education, Greek language and literature. Then there was Dr. McDow, of the English department and an excellent teacher, but continually in trouble over that most thankless job - the student's chapel orations, somehow he had acquired the nickname of "Pat" though he was a full-blooded Scotch Gael. I remember noting at my first faculty meeting a tall, silent, ministerial looking individual - for he was ministerial looking in those days - whom I was introduced as our Professor of Psychology, Dr. Stetson. His name carries so much with it to you and to myself that I need say no more. Others were there whose connection with the college was more transitory, too only will I mention, they cannot be passed over. Miss Fulton, resident in Ladies Hall, who left us a year later to become Dean of Women in the University of S. Dakota, and Mrs. Wheaton, remembered by many generations of girls with respect and love.
Yes, I am proud that I was one of that old faculty. We had poor equipment, meager salaries, a small library; the equipment of my department luckily small, for it was quite out of date. The men's dormitory was as it had been when built 37 years earlier and almost without modern conveniences. Baseball was played where the diamond is now but the rest of the athletic field was partly peat-bog and partly dump. For football we used a field where the Woodward Avenue School now stands. Beyond Ladies Hall the campus was a dense wood, good for botanizing and picnicking. Beyond that were open fields. The business side of our college was managed by the President, who also taught one class, and had occasionally the assistance of a student as stenographer. A business-manager, called a "steward", a business man of the town, came up for a few days at the beginning of each term and occasionally at other times. We also had one janitor. An efficiency expert would have found much to criticize but somehow things got done.

President Slocum deserves to be remembered with honor for what he did for this college in the last century. But unfortunately he was a 19th century man and we were moving into the 20th. Also his health was failing. Attendance dropped, by 1910 it had fallen to 160. An effort to increase our endowment dragged. Discouragement appeared and morale was lowered. In 1911 Dr. Slocum resigned and Dr. Stetson became acting president.

Then all hands went to work. The effort to raise a definite sum for additional endowment was renewed and soon succeeded. During the summer a committee composed of Professors Williams, Bailey and Bacon thoroughly revised the curriculum and more than brought it up to date. I say more than because our plan was then unusual, but since has — in principle — been widely adopted. Our library, under the personal supervision of Dr. Stetson, began an orderly and successful growth.

The Athletic field was put in order and, for the first time, we had a Physical Director permanently on our faculty. I was asked to take
charge of the Men's Dormitory, a most hopeless looking job, but some things were possible and were done. There were many minor changes, perhaps the most interesting was the establishment of the Open Forum. Every Tuesday the hour after chapel was free from classes and an assembly of the whole college was held at which Dr. Stetson presided. This hour was used for various purposes but frequently for the free discussion of college affairs. It was not a meeting to do business, no motions were made nor votes taken. The effect of this on the weakened morale of the college was excellent. For about two years it functioned well, then became less important and died out when the world war forced a change in all the methods of the college. It was not revived and tho so effective for a time was probably really a expedient.

During the next year, 1912, the land across Michigan Avenue was sold and the proceeds used to build the gymnasium - since enlarged and improved - and also to completely remodel and modernize the interior of the men's dormitory. Thus the buildings remained till the advent of Dr. Hoben ten years later.

The next few years are remembered by me with great satisfaction. The college grew steadily, conditions were bettered, each year something was accomplished or with students pull us together. The temptation is strong to give details especially to mention by name those who so loyally took part in the good work but I must refrain. By 1916 the students numbered over 250 - then the war came.

The war upset everything. Students left to join the army. Faculty were all at war work, which they had never anticipated doing and took much time and thought. In the Autumn of 1918 the Students Army Training Corps was established, our men were in uniform and orders as to details of college work and life came from the War Department. Hardly had we, with much effort, adjusted ourselves to these conditions than the armistice came. Soon after the S.A.T.C. was disbanded. Some of the men who had enlisted solely for military training
left us, but our own students came drifting back, some from the camps, some from the front. For a time it looked as if the new methods, taught us by the army would be retained but gradually we made up our minds that our own ways were best. Even the returning soldiers adjusted themselves to college life with little difficulty and seemed unchanged by their experiences. In a very few years, as far as college life was concerned, the effects of the war had passed.

Forward we went again but soon the time came when our leader and our friend, Dr. Stetson, resigned and President Hohen took his place. I am again tempted to speak in detail of our progress, of my fellow workers, of new methods and new departments, of growth in numbers and increase in resources. But it all seems very recent to me and to many of you it would not be new and time will not permit. As for the new campus with its many beautiful buildings, the result of our President’s vision and tireless energy I feel like using the famous quotation “Si momenta requiris circumspice.”

And now I look back with thankfulness and forward with trust and confidence. It has taken hard work, there have been disappointments, delays, sometimes mistakes as in any undertaking; but in the long run - success and again success. True we are now riding out a storm, a storm of hurricane proportions; the ship is going at half speed and shipping heavy seas and we are suffering the inevitable discomfort; but our ship is sound and seaworthy and knowing what storms were met and weathered in the earlier part of our voyage, we can say, - “She has thrashed through worse.”

What seems to be the great change in the college of today compared with that of say twenty years ago? If described by one word I would say “complexity”. In a student body of about 250 each knew the other and were known to the faculty. A faculty of 15 that met weekly instead of 30 that meet
every two weeks could better pull together for a common purpose. We were in one building and making contacts frequently. Far less was going on, there was some leisure. The city was smaller and life more simple. When there was a college function, most of us were there. We had only a small group of alumni but we had frequent contacts with them. It was easy to have a college function with many trustees and alumni present. We knew what was going on and did not depend on the Index or the Gazette for college news.

I sometimes wonder what is meant by a small college. In those days we talked of the best college in the world that contained 350 as a maximum number of students, now we talk of 300. Milton, in I have heard a college with 1500 students which contains his famous ideal university limits the number to 150. At Cambridge, I was told, the colleges average 170 in numbers, but then they are part of the large university. Such numbers, though they might be socially advantageous, would be unsuited to our conditions. We need more students and especially more faculty. We need stronger departments. Take the subject of Biology, which in the seven generations has grown so large and complex, that many branches such as genetics and bacteriology have become sciences in themselves, and need specialists to teach them properly. Some years ago I was one of a group of two English and three American botanists who discussed the minimum number of trained instructors desirable in any college for adequate undergraduate work, the feeling was that seven biologists were necessary. Please don't take this as a practical suggestion, at least we will not get them next year, no more than I expect to see the ground broken this summer for the new building to hold the Biological and earth sciences, comparable with that which contains the physical sciences, and which is always in my dreams. I only give this to you as something to be aware of, a condition that will become more obvious as the science progresses and that must affect many other departments besides my own. In the meantime we get on with some success though I do not quite know how we do it.
I have sometimes asked myself at what point the change came from the old college to the new. Of course it was gradual, but if I had to name a number I would say that 250 students and 20 on the staff represented about the maximum for the simple small college under conditions that have obtained in Kalamazoo. Another great change has been the increase in the business or organization needed to effectually maintain the college. It is due to the desire for efficiency, the desire for mechanization, and the increase of cooperation in some things and competition in others between colleges. I use business in a wide sense and include almost all work done other than teaching. Such work was very subordinate in the old days, now it appears as a large part of college life involving several officials and secretaries and part time of many instructors and students. This is keeping with a general movement in colleges and in business. But the question has been asked if this prominence given to machinery, this emphasis on business values in our daily life may not be influencing the atmosphere of our colleges and the ideals of the students. It all makes for efficiency but there is an immediate efficiency and an ultimate efficiency, and they may sometimes be incompatible.

Twenty years ago the graduate schools had a small part in the thoughts of the college and the requirements for entrance to professional schools and for teachers certificates were less elaborate. Standardizing agencies were less fussy and the college was left with greater freedom of action. Much of this change is certainly an advance. Nothing should give us more satisfaction than the knowledge of the exceptional number of students that this college has sent to the graduate schools and their success in many of our most distinguished universities. Still it is vitally necessary that the college should have a life of its own and a purpose above the preparation for any school.

The place to be filled in the future by the small college in our
scheme of education is much discussed and proposals have not been wanting
that would essentially change its nature, but I do not think we are likely to
see its function altered for many years to come. It is however getting
more difficult for any college to maintain an individuality and I believe
in the college as I do in the individual, which shows character. The interchange
with schools both above and below, the demand for standardization, the increase
of travel, the newspaper and the radio, the intercollegiate cooperative and
competitive contacts, all good in themselves, mixed character of faculties,
and the initiativeness of students all tend to destroy local characteristics.
Within the college coordination of functions is most desirable, and here, it
seems to me, very little progress has been made. Of all our problems this is
the most difficult. Flexner has well said that a college should be an organism
and not an executive aggregation. When he uses the word organism he is speaking
of something constantly changing yet very permanent; its permanence and
wonderful efficiency secured by the coordination of its various parts for a
common purpose. Among the many and various things we do in college (and they
should be many and varied) are coordinated? Have we not some very
doubtful customs and traditions, some being parasites from without, injurious
to the body; some vestigial, unsuited to present conditions; some worked for
lack of adjustment to the work of the whole. Machinery alone will not unify
a college for a college is a thinking machine and we must first have a coordina-
tion of ideas, of different ideas, and herein lies the great problem for the faculty
for without this a definite leadership of the body politic will fail.

And what of the students, how much have they changed in a quarter cen-
tury? The answer is very much and not at all. What we call "human nature" has
not changed but the old earth we live on changes and will always change.
The college is considered to be an educational institution and a proper question would be "Are you today better educated than your parents were likely to be at the same age?" We are still too near for a clear view and should leave it to the future to judge, yet I will give my own belief and say that you are. You have today opportunities that did not exist for your parents, a greater range of ideas has been presented to you, a wider horizon.

That comes from a greatly perfected school system is understood by all. But schooling is only a part of your experience and the opportunities outside school and college have perhaps been even more changed and extended. Take the movies.

I wonder if anything, since the invention of printing with movable types, has added so much for good or evil to popular, world-wide education. If you think this an exaggeration note these figures from the report of the Royal Empire Society. In Britain in the year 1932, £42,000,000 was paid for 960,000,000 admissions; and the estimate in the same report for the whole world is a weekly average of 250,000,000 admissions, or 13 billion for the year. The movies are much criticised and rightly so. We can hear and see much that is silly, vulgar and sensational; but is this not also true of the printed page? Step into the nearest drug-store and judge whether all the magazines there for sale or all the books in the rental library are likely to carry with them messages of sweetness and light.

You have the radio. Could we have experienced without its help and that of its predecessor, the Victrola, the rapid growth of interest in good and great music. You belong to a generation that knows, enjoys and performs music as no previous generation in America could. We have just passed through a presidential election in which the radio played a great part; most of us could listen as our leaders spoke to us and the whole campaign was largely freed from...
the clap-trap that used to be poured on us from the platforms at political gatherings. You have moved about a good deal and that ought to and sometimes has added materially to your knowledge. We used to have students who, till they came to college, had hardly been outside their own counties. The automobile has changed all that. Foreign travel, in the days of our prosperity, became unprecedented in quantity, and there are many other agencies that have brought distant parts of our own country, and foreign countries, nearer to us. I could name other conditions, mostly related to scientific discoveries, that have given you the chance of being better informed than the students of past generations. But this very richness carries dangers with it and a constant temptation to dissipation of effort and thought; and knowledge as such is not the end save as it contributes to requirement of culture.

What a wonderful world we live in, a world, that, using the results of scientific progress has got together and with strange results. We are still reaping the aftermath of a world war and are now entangled in a world depression. Some of us seem to be losing our nerve. It is reported that the students of the social sciences at the University of Maine voted on the question "Is the decline of our western civilization probable?" And decided by a two to one vote that there was no hope for us. The reasons for this dismal prophecy being; - over population, war, political corruption, moral decadence and irreligion, over-mechanization. You will remember in Bret Harte's poem Truthful James finds his partner "spread very loose on the strand, with a peaceful little smile on his features," swindled by the disguised but hard headed Indian whom he had meant to victimize; and Truthful James asks the pertinent question:—

"Is our civilization a failure?  
Or is the Caucasian played out?"
This seems to be the question that the students of the social sciences in Maine have decided in the affirmative. So that settles that. Now the college Index has told us that "If the College students, after studying the situation, decide something by a majority vote, it is unfortunate for those who, born too long ago, have not kept up with the times." I seem to be one of these unfortunates. I am afraid I have no longer the mental activity needed to keep pace with the fluctuating student votes. And besides, in spite of majorities, I am not convinced that our civilization is a failure and I do not think the Caucasian is played out. And "Do you think the great Foresters plan was settled for him in town meeting?"

The war, we have been told, settled nothing. I do not see it that way myself but we are still too near to see clearly or to judge what its results and its lessons were. And which would be better, - a war that settled nothing or a war that settled everything and left us to stagnate. And our depression? We suffer much and serious inconvenience. How the richest country in the world and one that above all others honored business success should get into the present mess seems incomprehensible. But here again, are not questions being asked now that had to be faced and often should have been faced long ago. If our nation has lost in a world of men some of the over-confidence of youth, what of it? We are grown men, and must play the man, helping the good wherever found and facing the evil we must meet with stout hearts bent on combating it.

This world has seen hard times before, wars as devastating, famines more acute, pestilence spreading unchecked, social revolutions and what not. But we progress; for centuries we have been moving on the whole towards better civilizations. But by what rough, slow, tortuous trails we advance. I do not wonder our youth gets impatient, and forgets that "Time's dial plate marks centuries with the minute finger."
We pray for peace and prosperity. When this graduating class entered college we thought we had them. But what did that period bring us? Can we look on those years with inward satisfaction and happiness? Or will a sonnet written by the English poet Wordsworth describe them?

"O Friend, I know not which way I must look;  
For comfort, being, as I am, oppressed.  
To think that now our life is only drear  
For show; mean handwork of craftsman, cook.  
Or groom! We must run glittering like a brook  
In open sunshine, or we are unblest;  
The wealthiest men among us is the best;  
No grandeur nor in nature or in look  
Delights us. Rags, sycophancy, expense  
This is idleness; and these we adore;  
Plain living and high thinking are no more;  
The homely beauty of the good old cause  
Is gone; our peace, our fearful innocence,  
And pure relights breathing household laws."

Does not that tell us what we saw so much of in the days of our prosperity? Is it for that you wish prosperity to return. Was the life of what has been called our best society worthy of the imitation of college students?

No! and again no! But Wordsworth was as a young man. He looked at the glittering brook rather than the still waters that flow deep. In the half century of life that was before him, the great history of England and the great men that were to be his contemporaries show that, even as he wrote, high thinking and religion breathing household laws were there. And with us too they are present, here and now, and beneath the noise and glitter we can find and live with a sound and sober society where manners, virtue, freedom and inward happiness will find a home. "Seek and ye shall find."

Lowell, referring to his three nephews killed in the civil war, wrote:

"Tears may be ours, but proud, for those who win  
Death's royal purple in the foemen's lines,  
Peace too brings tears, and end the battles din  
The wiser ear some text of God defines,  
For the sheathed blade may rust with darker sin."

Peace and prosperity, may we have them! Yet should the sword be drawn
loved and law-loving men will grip the hilt with no uncertain hand. But

what if the sheathed blade rust in the scabbard. Are we free from that danger?

That of a country that leads the world in murders, in kidnappings and in divorce?

That seems to have a powerless police force and to have lost faith in its courts of justice. That sees selfishness and pettiness rise among its legislators.

That may be losing all faith in the honesty of its financial leaders. We see

soon as God's word is publicly rejected, and that God is no more. All this; but hope lies in the fact that we do see it. We no longer swagger that our national civilization is the envy of other men so boast. No longer

do peace and prosperity lull us to sleep. For fighting if you will understand aright is your main business on this earth; whether it be against corruption in high places, or injustice, or misrule, or cant, or ignorance, or perchance sloth, or selfishness, or cowardliness in your hearts.

For

the day of the Lord is at hand;
It's storms roll up the sky;
The nations lie starving on heaps of gold;
(If that any less true today than when it was written 74 years ago?)
(All dreamers toss and sigh;
The night is darkest before the morn;
When the pain is sorest the child is born,
And the day of the Lord at hand.

Gather you, gather you, angels of God -
Freedom and Mercy and Truth;
Come! for the earth is grown coward and old,
Come down, and renew us her youth.
Vision, Self-Sacrifice, Daring and Love,
Haste to the battle-field, stomp from above,
To the Day of the Lord at hand.

Who would sit down and sigh for a lost age of gold,
While the Lord of all ages is here?
True hearts will leap up at the trumpet of God,
And those who can suffer can dare,
Each old age of gold was an iron age too,
And the needlest of saints may find stern work to do,
In the Day of the Lord at hand.

Men and women of our centennial class: To the old, stern wars of peace I whisper you! I tell you be of good courage.