

A STUDENT

AT

WASHINGTON & LEE UNIVERSITY

50 YEARS AGO

By

Randolph Preston, Sr.

The Washington & Lee Alumni Chapter of Washington, D.C. has sprung into new life under the brilliant leadership of Col. Arthur Clarendon Smith, Jr.

It has been suggested to me, as the Chapters oldest attending graduate, that I give some reminiscences of University life as I knew it at the turn of the present century.

Randolph Preston, Sr., (02)

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Washington & Lee University

From the time (1749) that the Scotch Irish of the Valley founded the original Liberty Hall Academy, the forerunner of Washington & Lee until the present, this school has had a remarkable history.

The Presidency of General Robert E. Lee from 1865 to 1870 gave the then Washington College a position of leadership among the educational institutions of the South which it still maintains.

But as the nineteenth century came to an end, the fortunes of Washington & Lee were at a low ebb. There was no president; one of the law professors, Honorable Henry St. George Tucker, was acting president, until a successor to the late William L. Wilson could be selected. Not a trained educator, Mr. Tucker was doing his best to hold the affairs of the college on an even keel.

The late President Wilson, an eminent statesman from West Virginia, was in poor health throughout his brief term of office and therefore could not reorganize the university and bring it in line with modern educational methods as he otherwise might have done.

His predecessor was General George Washington Custis Lee, son of General Robert E. Lee, who had been president since shortly after his father's death in 1870. General Custis Lee, as he was usually called, had been in increasingly bad health for many years prior to 1900 and was therefore not able to take any active interest in the college. He finally became an invalid and a recluse, who was merely the nominal head of the institution.

The panic of 1893 (often miscalled by the Republicans the Cleveland panic) had caused great financial loss and hardship in the nation, especially in the South, and many families found it impossible to send their sons to college. My recollection is that around 1900, the enrollment of students sank to 200 or less, and cynics were predicting that unless there was something radical done (perhaps heroic is a better word) the old college might have to go out of existence as a number of others were doing. But this was not to be. I am one of those who believes that the spirit of Washington & Lee is invincible and immortal.

In 1901, the late Dr. George H. Denny was elected president over Mr. Tucker and the late Reverend Dr. H. A. White, a professor in the University who had many advocates and admirers as of course did Mr. Tucker. This election caused a furor in the town, since everybody young and old had taken sides.

From time immemorial, the townspeople have considered it their right and bounden duty to tell the Trustees of the University in advance what they ought to do and then to abuse them violently and continuously afterwards, if they didn't do it.

Dr. Denny had been professor of Latin; and was only 30 years old and relatively unknown as compared with the two older and more distinguished candidates. To aggravate the situation he was the son-in-law of Reverend G. B. Strickler, the rector of the Board of Trustees.

It took many years for the prejudices aroused by this election finally to be allayed, if indeed they ever were, but Dr. Denny proved to be a brilliant administrator and a great college President. He increased the number of students to about 616 in 1912 when he resigned to become the head of the University of Alabama. The endowment was also increased by about \$800,000 and the old school was launched on a glorious career of greater usefulness and expansion which has continued to this day under the leadership of President Francis P. Gaines.

But enough of generalities and old tales which probably should not be told.

Our family moved from Charlotte, N. C. to Lexington in 1896 and for a year I went to a preparatory school conducted by the late Colonel Francis H. Smith, Jr., in what was then the old Ann Smith Academy building located across from the present post office. Major Smith, as he was then known, was one of the most high minded, conscientious men I ever knew, a strict disciplinarian, though always fair and a fine teacher. I learned a great deal that year and always had a genuine admiration and affection for the "Major", who went out of his way to be kind to me.

When I entered college in 1897, as stated, there were about 200 students, a fine set of young men, practically all from the South and of Confederate ancestry. For the magic of General Lee's name still had great drawing power. We were all poor, some of us dirt poor. I can't recall the son of a millionaire in the lot; if there had been, the rest of us would have been afraid or suspicious of him or both. There were probably not more than a dozen students who could have been considered well off.

As we were a comparatively small group, and all in the same financial status, with the same social background, we were naturally congenial as we had nothing to fall out and fight about. We were all hot Southerners and Confederates, for the lengthening and depressing shadows of the War between the States still hung over us. If anyone had presumed to doubt the justice of the South's cause or the supreme military genius of General Lee and General Jackson he would certainly have had an argument and probably a fist fight on his hands. So looking back they were above the average men and almost without exception, gentlemen who have had useful and successful lives.

Fraternities

There were about nine Greek letter fraternities at Washington & Lee in 1900; no fraternity houses, the meetings usually being held over some store. The fraternity spirit was strong, but not bitter and no sharp or permanent division existed between the Frats (Greek) and non frats (Barbarians) such as has proved a curse to other institutions.

Of course, we had a lot of college politics, (is there any place where there is no politics?) and the fraternities were very active as groups in seeking offices and preferment for their respective members.

My first lessons in the dark and devious arts of politics were in the campaign to elect a fellow Phi Kappa Psi brother, Lister Witherspoon of Kentucky as president of the final ball, then considered the highest college honor. My recollection is he was first defeated and the next year elected, but I learned a lot about politics in the process.

Literary Societies

In 1900, there were two literary societies, Washington and Graham Lee, the latter of which I became a member. Both had had long and useful parts in college life but were poorly attended except by students who, like myself, expected to become lawyers. The average number at regular meetings was less than ten.

Literary or debating societies in colleges have an important place and it is unfortunate that they seem to be now somewhat in the discard. The old fashioned spread eagle oratory is no longer in style, but any business man will tell you that nothing makes for business advancement as much as the ability to speak in public clearly and forcefully, and training in this can best be gotten in the college debating societies.

Y. M. C. A.

The students had come from Christian homes and took a good deal of interest in the Y. M. C. A. which had more influence for good than appeared on the surface. Some of its leaders had great weight with the other students because of their clean and consistent Christian lives. On the whole, Washington and Lee was then an essentially old fashioned Christian college and I trust it will always continue to be.

Athletics

College athletics in 1900 was not the highly organized and popular business it is today. A few games of baseball and football were played each year with other colleges (usually in Virginia). I do not recall that there were any paid coaches, and no such thing had ever been heard of as inducing athletes to come to Washington and Lee by bonuses of "financial aid" for their education.

The fact that inter-collegiate games were permitted at all was quite an advance from the days in the 70's, when the rugged old Rector of the University, the late Judge William McLaughlin, said tartly to a student committee who asked that the baseball team be allowed to play in another town; "So, you think it will help you in your education and also the college for you to go knocking a baseball all over the lot in other towns, do you. Well, I don't and you will never do it as long as I am alive."

Amusements

Amusements were few -- four or five dances during the year, with girls coming from out of town; two billiards and pool halls conducted by Squire William E. Granger and John LaRue, both located near what is now the Dutch Inn, H. O. Dold's store, and a few Saturday night poker games at which beer was the principal beverage and you about have it.

These were the places of the amusement, but there was another vastly wider and more exciting field of entertainment for the students and that was calling on and making love to the Lexington girls. This was what made their lives not only tolerable, but at times thrilling. A popular belle would often have twenty or more student callers in one night. This was made possible by the "running system", I think it was called, whereby it was a point of honor for a student or group who had called together to leave immediately upon the arrival of the next caller. Many is the heartache and argument this running system caused and I am wondering if it is still the practice.

I then thought and still think, that Paradise cannot afford a much more beautiful sight. But under all conditions, the historic Washington and Lee campus is to me the most beautiful one in America and I have had the opportunity of visiting practically all the leading universities in the country.

The line of stately buildings, impressive in their simplicity and permanency, which face the front campus are just as they were in 1900 except for the new Tucker Hall which, however, is in perfect accord with the older ones. It is a picture which represents what the South has always stood for.

I doubt if there ever was a student at the college who did not always afterwards carry in his mind and heart that picture or ever failed to pray that it would never be changed.

Relations with V. M. I.

It is inevitable that with two colleges of the same size, located on adjoining campuses, there should be rivalry and at times tension and bad feeling between their respective student bodies. When I was at Washington and Lee, the relationship between the schools was much better than it had previously been, but one fight between the "rats" and the "minks" broke out about 1900 on the short street separating the campuses. Nobody was hurt.

I remember attending an indignation meeting of our students in Graham Lee Hall at which fire eating speeches were made and resolutions demanding V. M. I. apologize were adopted, etc., but nothing came of it except, I believe, the intercollegiate games were suspended for a short period.

This kind of outbreak or blood letting had happened before and I suppose has happened since.

Some of the Professors

There is much truth in the old oft quoted saying that a real university can be where a student is sitting on one end of a log in the woods with a great professor on the other end. In 1990, the college had about twenty professors and associate professors, many of them outstanding men.

The especial value of the instruction we received lay in the fact that it was personal. Every teacher knew not only the name of every student but knew about him and thus was in a better position to instruct him.

Many educational experts hold to the theory (and I am convinced they are right), that the best place for the average boy to get a college education is at an institution with an enrollment of a thousand or less. The record of accomplishment of Washington and Lee graduates, through its long history, is striking proof of this.

I will only mention a few of the professors whom I knew best, though there were others equally deserving of praise. President Denny has already been referred to.

Reverend James A. Quarles, an elderly Presbyterian minister, was professor of mental and moral philosophy and a common sense philosopher. His homely and realistic approach to his highly abstract branch of learning made him popular with his students, and I personally learned much in his classes.

He was very unconventional and shocked the pious Presbyterians by riding his bicycle everywhere in totally non-clerical garb, with his pants often rolled up to his knees, but little he cared. God bless him.

Dr. Addison Hogue, who married Miss Emily Smith, my mother's sister, was professor of Greek. He was a man of vast learning and an elder in the Presbyterian church, who, more than any other man I ever knew, lived meticulously by the rigid Calvinistic code. He carried this into the grading of students, often not passing them because, according to his system, they had failed by the fraction of a point to reach the required 75 percent. This made him unpopular and he was the butt of much ridicule. His nickname was Judas, why I could never understand, for I never knew anyone who loved his Savior more passionately or served Him more faithfully.

He had had the spelling of his name changed from Hoge to Hogue, which caused the campus wits to chant, "Hog by name and Hog by nature, changed to Hogue by act of Legislature." He bore these jibes with dignity and Christian resignation, but I know they hurt him. He was a good man and helped many young students, myself included, who revere his memory.

Dr. William Spencer Currell (old Jingles) was professor of English, a charming South Carolinian, a fine teacher and gifted speaker, with a keen, and at times, caustic wit.

He married the beautiful Miss Sarah Carrington, a granddaughter of Governor McDowell of Lexington, and they had seven girls but no son, which caused Colonel J. D. H. Ross, a famous Lexingtonian of the time, to quip that

every day was a gala day in the Currell home. Dr. Currell afterwards became President of the University of South Carolina.

Dr. Edwin Fay (Patsy), was a professor of Latin and a gifted linguist. He was an old bachelor, when he came to Lexington, a book worm, and set in his ways.

It was a campus joke that upon arriving he told his landlady that his digestion was very poor, and he would have to request that his food be prepared exactly at the temperature of his lips, whereupon some local wag suggested that the only way this could be accomplished would be for him to go out before each meal and kiss the cook.

However, love overtook Dr. Fay late in life and he married a Miss Hemphill, the charming daughter of Rev. Dr. Charles R. Hemphill, a distinguished Presbyterian minister of Louisville, Kentucky, was much improved by matrimony as all of us are, and had a very happy life.

Dr. La Conte Stevens, a kindly and courteous bachelor, was professor of physics. While my education was unfortunately veered away from the sciences, which has been a life long regret, I used to talk with him (Sissy Stevens was his nick name) and he gave me some insight into what science was doing and would do for the world. For this I have always been grateful. He afterwards married Miss Virginia Letcher, the accomplished daughter of Governor John Letcher of Virginia.

David Carlisle Humphreys (old Davy) was professor of Engineering, universally respected and beloved, his students swore by him and in turn he took the greatest interest in them and pride in their careers after leaving college.

Professor Humphrey was a native of Augusta County and knew more about the history of the Valley and about Washington and Lee and its graduates than any other man on the faculty.

Dr. H. Parker Willis, professor of Economics, was probably the most brilliant man on the faculty, a tireless student, overflowing with nervous energy and ever on the quest for new ideas and viewpoints, he was an inspiration to his students.

He later went to Washington where he made a national reputation as an Economist.

Dr. Willis married Miss Rosa Brooke, daughter of the famous John Mercer Brooke of the V. M. I.

Professor Alexander L. Nelson (old Alec as he was known to several generations of W. & L. men), was professor of mathematics and a great teacher with an unusual gift of clear statement. He was very kind to me, and I reverence his memory.

On one occasion when I continued to be too dumb to understand his explanation of some problem in trigonometry, he said with some impatience; "Mr. Preston, you are just like the other members of your family for whom I have had to torture my conscience to pass in intermediate mathematics so they could get their A. B. degrees. None of you have any sense at all about mathematics."

The professor was entirely correct but he tortured his conscience one more time and let me barely squeak through intermediate math. God rest him too.

The dear old Dean, Harry Campbell, a very pleasant and learned scientist and a delightful gentleman, when I was unable to understand some theory in his biology class, similarly animaverted on 'me and my folks' but by way of salve, added that they had however attained some distinction as politicians and preachers.

The relationship between students and teachers in those days was delightfully personal and informal.

Dr. James Lewis Howe has been a public benefactor lending a hand to all good causes. All honor to him.

No student at Washington and Lee ever failed to love John L. Campbell, Sr., the treasurer, one of the sweetest spirits and most courteous, helpful gentlemen who ever lived; nor Miss Annie Jo White, who gave her life to the college and helping "her" students.

The Law School

The Washington and Lee Law School was founded by the late Federal Judge John W. Brockenbrough of Lexington, believed to have been the man who persuaded General Robert E. Lee to accept the presidency of the college. It's most famous teacher was former Congressman John Randolph Tucker, one of the most learned Constitutional lawyers the South ever produced. But for an unfortunate incident he would probably have been attorney general under Grover Cleveland.

After Mr. Tucker's death prior to 1900, John W. Davis (who died in New York in April, 1955), had completed several years of service as law teacher in his stead. He had just embarked on his brilliant legal career, which carried him to the top of his profession, being often called the greatest lawyer of his generation in America.

In 1900, when I entered the law school, it had three professors, a two year course and about 50 students. The Dean was Honorable Henry St. George Tucker (old Harry), a learned and charming gentleman of the old school. The son of John Randolph Tucker, he had previously represented the Lexington District in Congress (the old tenth, I believe), as his father had before him.

Subsequently, after the death of Representative Hal Flood, he was returned to his old seat in Congress and remained there until his death, for he was universally beloved by the people of his district.

Mr. Tucker had studied constitutional law throughout his life and understood and believed in its fundamental principles. In his lectures on this branch of jurisprudence, he had the happy faculty of giving color and interest to the dry as dust profundities of the law, by the use of a good story or a homely illustration drawn from his experiences in political life. He thus drove home his points in a way which would not be forgotten.

His favorite saying was the "proof of the pudding is the chawing of the bag", a reference to the old custom of preparing a pudding in a cloth bag. Like the other professors, "Old Harry" was universally popular with the students.

Judge Martin P. Burks (Daddy Burks), was essentially a man of law. He ate, slept and dreamed of law and was a walking encyclopedia of Virginia law and decisions.

His method of teaching was in the form of a pleasant personal discussion, with many questions and answers tossed back and forth between teacher and student and it proved very effective.

At the time Judge Burks was clerk of the Court of Appeals of Virginia and was said to have written, or at least revised, many of its important decisions. Subsequently, he became a member of that court and had a distinguished career on the bench. He was universally beloved. I never heard anyone criticize him and don't believe he ever had a personal enemy.

The third, and youngest member of the law faculty was William Reynolds Vance, a brilliant young Kentuckian, who subsequently became a professor at Yale, where he made a national reputation. He was one of the greatest contemporary authorities on the law of insurance and author of several standard works on the subject.

Reynolds Vance was a man of prodigious energy (I never knew a harder worker) and vast learning. His method of instruction, like that of Judge Burks, was by question and answer, though Vance prepared himself carefully and was more formal. He had the ability to show up, politely, a student's ignorance and faulty reasoning better than any other teacher I ever saw.

One of his finest qualities was loyalty to his friends. John W. Davis, his roommate at college, and his hero in Vance's eyes, could do no wrong.

During the past 50 years at the bar, I have been interested in legal education and it is my opinion (for whatever it may be worth) no law students received finer training in the fundamentals of the law at the beginning of the present century than did those then attending Washington and Lee.

My reason for saying this is that we were fortunate in having as teachers, three great-souled men, who in addition to their regular duties, made it a point to encourage every one of us to come to their offices after class at any time, day or night, and talk over our problems. This personal attention is something rarely found in law schools and proved of invaluable assistance.

Conclusion

We now come to the conclusion of this talk about my recollections of Lexington and Washington and Lee in 1900.

In a few years, all of us here present will have passed into the shadows. But Lexington and Washington and Lee will continue to stand out on high through the succeeding generations as mighty beacons shedding the pure light of Christian morality, religious and political freedom on the pathway of the young men who will come to this historic place for instruction and guidance.

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These are the fundamental principles upon which our country was founded and has grown great, and they must always be taught and adhered to, else America will surely perish.

Randolph Preston, Sr.

Washington, D. C.
2844 Wisconsin Avenue
November 30, 1955

