

QUARTER CENTENNIAL.

NORTON'S LETTER.

DEAR OLD FRIENDS:

To my home on the summits of these Santa Cruz hills, by the Pacific, has come an invitation to write a few words upon the days when we dwelt and worked together. I was not exactly a beginner with the Normal University. I entered in the autumn of 1858, and found myself decidedly a junior, compared with a group, grave and reverend, of the real pioneers. John Hull, Joseph Howell, Enoch Gastman, Hayes, Ridlon, Augusta Peterson, Sally Dunn, Fannie Washburne, Edward Philbrook, whose hair parted in the middle, these were in the front rank of years and honors. We who entered in those September days of 1858, felt small and insignificant beside them. We were daily convened in the upper story of Major's Hall. I suppose that these younger generations of Normalites are not aware that such a building ever existed. The walls of the old house were rickety, and iron girders, with huge S's at the ends, held in place the brick masonry. Our assembling room was the third story. In the second story were recitation rooms, rather dark, and ill-adapted to our needs. Grocery and hardware stores occupied the first floor. The building was heated by a coal stove in each room, and as Illinois coal is gaseous and explosive, the stove doors were frequently blown open, with loud sounds and clouds of yellow smoke. C. E. Hovey was principal in those days, but Ira Moore was the one most directly in charge. Dr. Willard, looking very pale and frail, soon began to open his wonderful budget of philological knowledge. Hewett came within a month after my arrival, I think. He was a small man with a big head, in those days. He had very demonstrative boot heels, and especially hated cats, and went to sleep in Baptist meetings. He used to give us prodigious lessons in history and geography. He couldn't draw maps, but made us draw very nice ones. I remember his geography lessons, even unto this day. The names of the branches of the Amazon, the forms and heights of the Andean and Himalayan plateaus—these are mine yet, and will be to all eternity. My history work has not staid with me so well.

There was once a slight unpleasantness between my class and their teacher as to how General Greene got away from Cornwallis. It was quite a double-and-twisted business anyhow, and we inwardly vowed that we wouldn't learn it. The teacher gave us hard words and low marks, but our obstinate stupidity won the day. I am still densely ignorant as to whether it was the Chickahominy or the Nile that rose and fell in such a miraculous fashion, for the discomfiture of the British. Come to think of it, may be it wasn't Greene and Cornwallis, after all. It tires me to recall the matter. At any rate, somebody got away from some other fellow, and we wouldn't and didn't learn the particulars, and Professor Hewett considered us, very justly, a pack of ninnies.

We were called section "C" for awhile. There was a section B, including Burnham, Edward Waite, Fanny Grennel, Peleg R. Walker and others; a class which had entered some months before us, but they were soon incorporated with us. Gove, from Boston, John T. Curtis, Sophie Crist, C. J. Gill, Harvey Dutton, Moses Morgan—these stand out very conspicuously upon the tablet of memory as entering when I did. I had a peculiar psychological experience with Gove. It was a case of hate, at first sight. He was very slim in those days, had a big nose, and used to laugh at people who made mistakes. I regarded him for some time with a silent, unspeakable hatred. Well, time mended all that. After these twenty-four years, I send love to Gove, whom I hated; to Dutton, whom I quarreled with; to Joseph Howell and Augusta Peterson, whom I respected and yet felt it my duty to regard with a certain dislike, because they were Philadelphians. From their heights of spirit-life may a benediction be wafted down, even to us, who struggled hard to make the name of Simeon Wright immortal!

There were two literary societies in those days. It is strange, but true, that the members used to quarrel. We had contest meetings, joint debates, and various occasions of conflict. After our removal into the "new building," we impoverished ourselves and incurred heavy debts, in order to buy better furniture and more books than the people of the other Society. On the door of the Wrightonian Hall was a motto, painted in blue and gold, "Sapere Aude." It was the occasion, to the Philadelphians, of many irreverent and disrespectful puns. As a loyal Wrightonian, I trust that this motto has disappeared, and that the Brussels carpet, gay with yellow roses, which reduced us all to bankruptcy who were concerned in purchasing it, has been replaced by the bounty of a younger and wealthier generation.

In 1858, Bloomington had a population of some 7,000 people. In winter, its streets were a sea of mud. "Come over here," once shouted Professor Wilbur, the geologist, to Uncle Sim Wright, across the street. "I can't," was the answer; between thee and me there



is a great gulf fixed." Teams were daily mired down in the principal streets. There was a place called Pone Hollow, allusions to which were particularly in order, if any one would be called facetious. The crossings there were particularly dreadful when the long rains drenched the prairies.

"The gunpowder plot" was enacted in Major's Hall. Gove had organized a band of nocturnal serenaders, called the "Squallers." They used to go about with an awfully discordant orchestra of willow whistles. To blow these beneath the lattice of a slumbering maiden, was to induce in her spasms of palpitating fear and agony. The Squallers were wont to meet in Mr. Hovey's office, not to rehearse, but to form their plans. One of the boys had observed this, and longed to know what it all meant. He took into his confidence one Burnham, who wickedly betrayed him to the Squallers. Their plans were duly laid. Hidden in a box in the room, the inquiring youth heard the particulars of a plot which caused his "knotty and combined locks to part, and each particular hair to stand on end"—no less a scheme than the blowing up of the old building with gunpowder, in order to expedite the construction of the new one! The very box in which the spy was secreted was selected as the receptacle for this terrible explosive, and was turned over, rolling out upon the floor this inquiring youth. The tableau was unutterable; the muttered threats were dreadful. At last, after binding himself with more horrible oaths than Morgan, the anti-Mason, ever dreamed of, and making a liberal contribution for the purchase of gunpowder, he was allowed to go home, where he doubtless passed the night in dreadful expectancy, and came to school next morning, only to find an audible smile on every face. Well, he treated the crowd to apples, and we unanimously agreed not to tell his father of his misadventure; in pursuance of which pledge, his name appeareth not in these pages.

We were shabbily dressed in those days. I think my pantaloons were generally too short, and my coats seemed to have been made for some other person. We were very poor, but very plucky. We boarded ourselves, mainly on corn mush, washed the floors and built the fires at the Normal Hall, worked hard, lived hard, and were poorly provided with all things; our parents were sad-faced, struggling pioneers of the prairies; but we were cheery, resolute and happy in our life and our work. To the toiling youth of frontier homes, thirsting for knowledge, the Illinois Normal University opened the gateways of a new life. We loved it, rejoiced in it, and were thoroughly loyal to its name and fame.

The school saw but little of its principal in those years. Two miles to the northward, across the sodden prairies, in the rainy autumn of 1858, were clay pits, heaps of brickbats, half-complete foundations for a stately structure, yet in embryo. The construction fund was exhausted, the State heavily in debt, business everywhere

distressed and languishing; truly a somber prospect for the completion of a building; demanding, on the basis existing before the war, a hundred thousand dollars. It would be as easy to-day to raise a million. To secure these needed funds was the task which Charles E. Hovey set before himself. It was a labor for Hercules. His own fortune was pledged over and over. Had his plans failed, he would have been weighted for life with hopeless bankruptcy. This enormous task he undertook and carried through. He had a place on the programme of the school's daily work, but his classes generally wrought out their own salvation. But in the winter of 1860-1 the building was completed; the Legislature assembled; Governor Dick Yates delivered the dedicatory address; the State assumed the liabilities of the Board of Regents, and the enormous burden of debt rolled off the shoulders which had borne it so bravely. A new generation has arisen since those days, mainly ignorant of these events, and yet enjoying the fruits of those labors. It is for them that I make the record. We of the pioneering days, need no reminder of the grand work which could hardly have been performed by another than General Charles E. Hovey.

We were free in our conduct, to a singular extent. No school rules rested upon us. Our hours and methods were wholly our own. We lived as we pleased, formed our friendships and associations, made our calls, and managed our affairs, entirely at our own choice and pleasure. Very few schools were ever so slightly governed. I do not believe that our successors of to-day can be journeying under any similar slackness of rein. Nevertheless, the record of those years was a thoroughly Spartan one. We were from Puritan households, disciplined in self-restraint. Industry and poverty were our safeguards.

A magnificent park, stately buildings, a beautiful and prosperous city, methods well-ordered, and politics established, splendid museums and laboratories, a wealthier and more cultured generation of students—these are the pleasant things that greet the view as you gather to the silver wedding of our Alma Mater. It is not true that the former days were better than these, but we who saw the working out of the beginnings, had also our joys, struggles, and coronations; and we received a training which, if less orderly and exhaustive than that rendered now, nevertheless gave us some measure of fitness for our life-work.

From my home and class-room by the Pacific, I send hearty greeting to the teachers and pupils who worked in Major's Hall together. God bless and speed you all, dear old friends and comrades, and grant you such length of days that, in the seventh year of the twentieth Christian century, a few of us, if old, yet vigorous, if with snow on the head, yet with fire at the heart, may gather to our Alma Mater's golden wedding.

H. B. NORTON.

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