

## EARLY COLLEGE SILHOUETTES<sup>1</sup>

Kindly turn back with me to the fall of 1872 and imagine a callow youth of seventeen receiving his first impressions of college life from the crude beginnings of what is now, in attendance, the fourth college in the United States—the University of Minnesota.

The “school,” as it was then spoken of by both faculty and students, was little more than a high school or preparatory academy with only two hundred students. The administration offices, classrooms, chapel, and dormitories were centered in the “Old Main,” which was the chief building on the campus. It was an imposing structure of native blue limestone, three stories in height, with a high basement and heavy wooden cornices. It was built by the state on the present site of Shevlin Hall as the home of the new university in 1853–54, but was disused and neglected during the great depression of 1857 and the period of the Civil War. It then presented an unfinished and uncouth front to University Avenue and was entered by a flight of iron steps on the southeast corner. The chapel was on the upper floor at the rear overlooking the Mississippi River gorge through five or six windows. It was a bleak room entered at the side, with the faculty rostrum—a low semi-circular dais, requiring only five or six chairs for the entire faculty—at the east end.

In the fall of 1869, William Watts Folwell came from the faculty of Hobart College at Geneva, New York, enthusiastic over his Herculean task of building up from modest beginnings the democratic college of the new commonwealth of Minnesota. Within five years, that is, by the second commencement in 1874, he had managed to obtain

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Leonard, the author of this account of early conditions in the University of Minnesota, was graduated from that institution in 1876. *Ed.*

a legislative appropriation to build on the Old Main a cupola and an addition at the front which enlarged it by a third, thus making available a bigger chapel and more classrooms. He also had gained respect for the school, which was attracting an increasing attendance from the young people of Minneapolis and St. Paul. But most of these students did not intend to graduate from so unimportant a place; those who did go through the whole course were usually from outside the cities. Indeed the local high schools ignored the university as of little account until Dr. Folwell obtained the enactment of his high school law, which has since been copied throughout the Union. This provided that such schools as came up to certain standards of excellence should receive state aid. They became direct feeders to the university, for their graduates could enter the university without examination. The new chapel occupied the second and third floors of the addition to the Old Main. It held some seven hundred persons and was large enough for most convocations and even for commencement exercises.

President Folwell, the energetic captain of this budding college, when he came to Minnesota was, as is told in detail in his *Autobiography*, a somewhat experienced teacher and an observing scholar who had spent a year or more abroad and had attained in the Civil War the brevet rank of lieutenant colonel of United States Volunteers. The men of his corps, although of course unarmed, were occasionally under fire when building pontoon bridges and other structures. He was ever industrious and efficient, giving attention to many details that seemed beneath the notice of a college president. For instance one morning in chapel he requested the students who had removed (not stolen) the red lanterns which the contractors had placed along the excavation for the new basement to please return them at once to avoid the expense of a new set on the part of the university. They were not returned. The students believed it all a

prank of mischievous town boys and let it go at that. Dr. Folwell's military brusqueness impressed the students, but his broad scholarship was more noteworthy, making it possible for him to fill in without notice during any professor's absence. Thus one day, after he had heard translations from a text he had not seen in years, he gave Professor Brooks's Greek class a delightful account of his year's wanderings in Greece.

The president knew the full name of every student and he always addressed them by their two given names—Henry Clay, Julius Elliott, William Edwin, and the like. Although his parents were Methodists, his fealty during his long life was to the Episcopalian communion. It was characteristic of him, as he argued in his youth with his devoted mother, to choose an orderly and conservative doctrinal basis for his belief and necessarily to include in it the Apostolic succession.

The chapel exercises in the early days of the university were held before the classes began each morning at eight o'clock. They were compulsory for all and consisted of a reading from the Bible and a prayer. Services were conducted in routine by members of the faculty, many of whom had been or were clergymen. When the president appeared, we knew the service would be brief. A short Scripture lesson would be followed invariably by the shortest prayer in the Collect, that of St. Chrysostom. This he would repeat rapidly, keeping his eyes open to all that might be going on in the chapel, and the "Amen" would often be followed immediately by "So-and-So will report to me in my office at once after chapel." One morning the whole assembly awaited in solemn silence while a student went to the president's house for a black tie which Dr. Folwell had forgotten to put on as usual.

The senior professor of those days was the head of the department of Greek, the Reverend Jabez Brooks, who was president of Hamline University in its early days in Red

Wing, a graduate of the great Methodist school in Middletown, Connecticut, and a devout follower of John Wesley. His chapel exercises were never brief. His students had a wholesome awe of his clear blue eyes and his dry satirical humor, but they found him ever appreciative of honest class work. When he told an anecdote, it usually had a heavy classical flavor. One of his stories told of a man who found himself in a strange church early Sunday morning before the service began and was hesitating about where to seat himself, when the sexton accosted him, pointing down the long aisle: "Why not take any seat that suits you?" "Pew-door [*pudor is the Latin word for modesty*] prevents," answered the stranger.

Versal J. Walker of the Latin department was a much beloved and devoted teacher who was very efficient in bringing out and developing the characters of his students as well as in grounding them in Latin. No one thought of trifling in his classroom, where there was iron discipline and no humor except his own. A student was stumbling over the meaning of the adverb "apte." "Can anyone else put your hat on rightly for you?" shouted the professor. "No! Well, you put it on 'apte.'" His rather sudden death in May of 1876 was the first break in the faculty and was a memorable college event. A stately service was attended by the professors and students, and a memorial window was subscribed for. Professor Walker's tombstone was one of the few left in position when the East Side Cemetery was converted into a city park, and it is still to be seen just off Broadway in northeast Minneapolis.

Professor Edwin J. Thompson of mathematics was a popular, rather easy-going man whose students did not necessarily have their work driven in to stay. The professor of English, after the first ponderous Donaldson, was Moses P. Marston, a calm, scholarly man from Vermont, who earnestly strove to make his students appreciate and grow fond of their native English literature. His was no easy task,

for his work then included elocution, the training of speakers, and the arranging of debates. Early in the history of the university, even up into the eighties, there existed two rival literary and debating societies, the Philomathian and the Delta Sigma. What these two Greek letters signified I never knew, although I belonged to that band. Professor Marston was ever ready to assist with advice and training in the preparation of our programs. These societies served a very useful purpose in teaching us to talk when upon our feet.

The university has been coeducational from the very beginning, and in its first years almost as many women as men were registered.

Dr. Folwell never approved of the location of the university in a large city and he advanced definite plans for its removal to a magnificent tract in the region of upper Lake Minnetonka, where noble buildings would have had an ample setting near water vistas and where city life could be kept at a distance. He did not get support sufficient to carry out this plan. Indeed, the original charter located the university in Minneapolis, the capitol in St. Paul, and the state prison in Stillwater. As Alexander Ramsey said at the first university commencement, "They tried to send all the rascals to Stillwater from the very beginning."

There were no streetcars in Minneapolis until 1874 and these did not at first go as far as the university. It was therefore necessary for students from the west side to go on foot or by private conveyance to reach the campus, two and a half miles over the stone arch and Nicollet Island bridges. Some of us who lived south of Nicollet found it shorter, although contrary to the admonitions of our parents, to walk over the mill platform at the foot of Cataract Street, now Sixth Avenue South, and across a narrow foot bridge built for the convenience of east side workmen just at the crest of the Falls of St. Anthony. Crossing this temporary, swaying structure, two and a half feet wide, was

extremely risky on a frosty morning. Later the cantilever bridge at Tenth Avenue South still further shortened the walk, for we could then skirt along the river on lower Main Street, a way long since abandoned, and come out at the back of the old campus. The shortening of the trip was a very important matter in our freshman and sophomore years, when we had to report for drill, which was then compulsory, at half past seven. Not seldom did we westerners arrive with frosted ears, noses, and fingers, and the fact that no time was allowed for thawing out our members did not teach us to love military drill.

Members of the small faculty of the early days of the university were anchored by their families to homes about the east side and they could not change their place of residence often, since salaries were never munificent. Soon assistants and instructors became necessary and changes were more frequent.

By the time of the burning of the Old Main in 1907, there were several other buildings on the campus—Pillsbury Hall, Mechanic Arts, the old Law Building, and the old Library Building. Folwell Hall, the Physics Building, the Armory, and others were erected some years before the present group of fine structures began to adorn the greater and newer campus.

The first commencement, on June 19, 1873, was held in the Academy of Music at Hennepin and Washington avenues. There were only two graduates, Warren C. Eustis and Henry M. Williamson. Following the exercises, a dinner was given by the city of Minneapolis at the Nicollet House; it was attended by the governor and other prominent men of the state, and it was marked by many witty speeches. Other features of this first commencement were the stirring music of the Fort Snelling band and a "president's levee" at Dr. Folwell's residence near the university. Commencements were held for a time thereafter in the chapel of the Old Main and later in the new Armory.

The small faculty of 1873, consisting of eight professors and four assistants, most enterprisingly combined the work of many modern chairs. Professor Gabriel Campbell, who was later to finish a long and honorable career as professor of philosophy at Dartmouth College, was not only "professor of mental and moral philosophy," but instructor in the natural sciences and in French. Arthur Beardsley appeared in 1871 to teach civil engineering and industrial mechanics. These combinations were made necessary by meager salaries and were a part of the infant history of the university. The first woman on the faculty was Miss Helen Sutherland, assistant professor of Latin and preceptress, who was for many years a beloved figure on the campus and the forerunner of Maria Sanford, Ada Comstock, and many others.

There were no sports on the campus and college life did not exist outside the classrooms in the early days, each student going to his home or rooming house like a child after school was out. I cannot chronicle the beginnings of football, basketball, and other college sports, for they came after my day, about in the eighties. Our only common recreations were afforded by the debating societies already mentioned and by class exhibitions and literary and oratorical programs. The latter made so much trouble that they were forbidden after a second attempt in 1877. The business of attending the university in the seventies was a serious occupation admitting of little amusement or frivolity. No one then attended for the social life. The first fraternity, Chi Psi, was founded in 1874.

Dr. Folwell's sixteen years of arduous pioneering laid well the foundation for later time. His foresight and able planning made the career of his successor, Dr. Cyrus Northrop, who superintended the amazing expansion of the university, much easier than it otherwise could have been. The college in America is rare that has been privileged to keep, after his resignation as president, so broad a scholar and so industrious a student as Dr. Folwell. He was for years

on the faculty, he wrote four classic volumes of the *History of Minnesota* after his eightieth year, and he only put aside his self-appointed tasks, as bright and untiring as ever, at ninety-six years. His brief and modest *Autobiography*, dictated to his daughter as one of his last acts, only hints at a few of the many activities of his busy and varied life in the city, state, and nation.

For the years 1871 to 1873 inclusive, the university published, instead of an annual catalogue, an *Almanac* "computed especially for Minnesota." Its issues are full of curious and useful information, as almanacs should be; they contain material on politics and national affairs, the exact dates of important events of Minnesota history, and finally lists of faculty members and of the courses offered by the university. The first published roll of students, issued for the year 1874-75, contains the names of 217 students. The majority were enrolled in the scientific, not the classical or the modern departments, foreshadowing the lessening study of the classics so notable of late years. A few students were then taking civil engineering, and one was studying elementary agriculture. He attended classes in a lone building at the east end of the campus. Classes in agriculture were later transferred to the highly successful school of agriculture in St. Paul with its hundreds of students.

One day in 1875 our studies were interrupted by the burning of the farmhouse down on the east campus, long since sold. The volunteer fire department of the east side had to make a long trek to reach the fire. While waiting for the department, a little group of scared boys stood gaping at the fast-spreading flames some two hundred yards away. Suddenly one of the seniors shouted, "Boys, it behooves us to do something," and we stampeded to form a bucket corps at the farm well.

For the convenience of those who drove over from the west side, the university maintained a row of horse sheds east of the Old Main about where the old Library stands.



There were not enough sheds for all occasions and Andrew R. Cass, the janitor at Main, later of Brainerd, had to settle many disputes over the division of space.

It was part of the training even of the classical men to take an actual hand in surveying, using chain, pins, and compass. In that exercise I recall making a map of the original campus of thirteen and a fraction acres, a fine irregular tract of rolling land covered originally with burr oaks. Contrast that with the two hundred or more acres of the present campus.

In 1876 a special university bulletin was issued, containing the following announcement: "University of Minnesota; Faculty of fifteen; tuition free to all; new buildings completed. The University possesses an experimental farm, a general library of 10,000 volumes, a museum, a chemical laboratory, and a supply of physical apparatus, engineering instruments etc. etc."

President Folwell was from his very first day in the university personally concerned with building up the library. The fine new Library Building contains an appreciation of his long service, a room of his own, which he used up to the very last. It is a remarkable fact that when his end came in 1929, he had lived through the entire life of the institution, seeing its five presidents come and go. Only two had died in all the years. Most state institutions have advanced with many instead of few presidents. Minnesota has been favored by having but five men, all of exceptional merit, to guide her for sixty-six years. In these years the senior classes have increased from two in 1873 to the scores and hundreds, until the university has now a body of some twenty thousand alumni scattered over the face of the earth.

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