

College Oratory in the Nineties

Probably the most spectacular and exciting activity of the college campus today is football, with packed stadiums, marching bands, acrobatic cheer leaders, and the array of players, coaches, trainers, and water boys. But football has not always been king. Time was when the most popular activity was not based upon brawn but upon oral ability. The campus hero of 1890 (which incidentally was the school year when the Iowa intercollegiate athletic association was organized) was the lad who represented his college in the annual oratorical contest sponsored by the Iowa Collegiate Oratorical Association.

Much time and effort were devoted in the various colleges to the discovery of an orator most likely to bring home victory. The eager student frequently launched his oratorical career as a freshman and, undaunted by defeat, continued competing during his three remaining years for the much-heralded honor of being the school's foremost orator. Many a would-be speaker, defeated in one contest, started immediately preparing for the following year. Usually in the fall the campus literary societies held elimination contests

to discover their most eligible candidates for campus-wide competition.

As February approached, oratory received an increasing amount of attention. Once the local representative was selected, the campus forgot local differences and united in enthusiastic support of the chosen orator. The coach worked diligently with his charge, even prescribing in some cases training rules. The local town editor, the "alums", and even the townspeople added their encouragement and advice. No doubt a few bets were placed concerning the chances of the local Demosthenes against the neighboring Aeschines. When the time came for the State contest, large numbers of enthusiastic fans followed their representative to the place of meeting. On some occasions special trains were scheduled to take care of this following.

What types of subjects did these orators choose? In contrast to the modern college forensic speaker who delights in discussing personal, social, and political problems, the orator of the nineties preferred the more abstract and philosophical questions. Eulogies were not uncommon. Religious topics were also popular, especially with those from the church schools. Emphasis was placed more on an essay style than on oral style, for only the eight best orations, selected

on "the merits of thought and composition", were permitted to enter the State finals.

The 1890 contest of the Iowa Collegiate Oratorical Association, the sixteenth meeting of the organization, was held at Iowa Wesleyan College (then Iowa Wesleyan University) at Mount Pleasant, on February 26th and 27th. Ten days before the contest, as prescribed by the constitution, George D. Perkins, editor of the *Sioux City Journal*, Spencer Smith, lawyer and publisher of Council Bluffs, and J. H. Wilkerson of Mount Ayr, ranked the orations on "thought and composition". On this basis the eight finalists were determined.

Not among the eight was C. S. Rogers, the Iowa Wesleyan representative, who placed tenth. The local fans were bitterly disappointed, for they had been confident that Rogers could win the State contest. In fact, according to the *Iowa Wesleyan*, the college magazine, the Wesleyan orator in anticipation of the State meet had been "sent" to Chicago for ten days of "elocutionary" training. In spite of the disappointment, the local community prepared to make the representatives of the other Iowa colleges welcome.

The president of the Association arrived on Tuesday, February 25th, to make preliminary plans. All member schools were represented at

the annual business meeting the following day. Delegations were sent by Western, Tabor, Iowa, the Agricultural College at Ames, Upper Iowa, Drake, the State University, Coe, Cornell, Parsons, Lenox, Simpson, Des Moines, Central, and Penn. The business meeting became most exciting when the eligibility of the Coe orator was challenged because his oration exceeded the 2,000 word limit set by the constitution. The Coe delegates attempted to explain this oversight by saying that they had not received a copy of the constitution and therefore were unaware of this requirement.

The delegates failed to sustain their argument, however, and the Coe speaker was scratched from the list of finalists. This decision caused great rejoicing at neighboring Fairfield for the Parsons contestant, who had been ranked ninth on composition, now became eligible.

On the night before the contest, the visitors were honored at a banquet, arranged by the entertaining school. The banqueters were entertained until 1:00 A. M. by a program which included toasts upon "I. W. U. at Home", "Are Contests Beneficial", "The Successful Orator", "The Unsuccessful Orator", "Our Orations", "What If We Should Win", and "Orators of the Past". Although the evidence is not available it is prob-

ably safe to assume that the coaches, under pressure, relaxed training rules to permit their charges to remain for this program.

The much anticipated contest was held the following evening, February 27, 1890, in Saunders Hall, the local "opera house". The *Iowa Wesleyan* reports that "long before eight o'clock every seat had been taken and by the time the curtain rose there was not even standing room left." The program was as follows:

Music	
Invocation	Dr. T. J. McFarland, President of Iowa Wesleyan University
Music	Iowa Wesleyan Band
"Individualism in Society"	M. H. Lyon, State University
"A Moral Crisis"	C. H. Bandy, Parsons College
Vocal Solo	Mrs. H. M. Irwin, Fairfield
"An Unsolved Problem"	J. A. Shelton, Iowa Agri- cultural College
"Sacrifice as Necessary Factor of Progress"	W. J. Barrett, Iowa College
Violin Solo	Hans Albert, Mount Pleasant
"The Sovereignty of Public Opinion"	J. H. Bloodgood, Upper Iowa University

"The Philosophy of Jewish History"	J. W. Hays, Cornell College
Vocal Solo	Clara McFarland, Mount Pleasant
"Knox the Reformer"	E. J. Burkett, Tabor College
"The Emancipating Spirit of the Present"	A. N. McKay, Des Moines College
Music	Parsons College Quartette

At the conclusion of the program the judges of delivery — Professor F. T. Wild of Nevada, Hon. Charles Beardsley of Burlington, and Professor F. A. Jackson of Mount Pleasant — withdrew to make their decisions. Their ratings, plus those of the three who had judged on "thought and content", would determine the winner. The Mount Pleasant *Journal* reports that while waiting, the college students gave college yells with "all sorts of frills and flourishes." No doubt the Parsons group, estimated by the *Journal* at one hundred and fifty, was responsible for much of the excitement.

The judges declared M. H. Lyon of the State University the winner, with W. J. Barrett of Iowa College, second, and A. N. McKay of Des Moines College, third. In the words of the Association's constitution the "first prize" was "the honor of representing the State as her orator and

her delegate to the Inter-State Convention", the organization responsible for the famous Inter-State Oratorical Contest, in which many State winners competed. In addition the Association appropriated fifty dollars to the winner to be used "in training for the Inter-State Contest". The "second prize" was "the honor of representing the State as chairman of the delegation". The "third prize" was the "honor of representing the State as the third delegate". Of course the Association paid the expenses of all the delegates.

The *Iowa Wesleyan* thought that Simpson College was also a victor because the Association decided to meet in Indianola the following year. Tabor College, however, got the president and Upper Iowa University the secretary and treasurer. The State University, however, really celebrated. Some 400 students — out of the total of about 700 — met the Burlington train at noon on February 28th, with a band, horns, and whistles. The orator and the other delegates were placed in a sleigh and escorted to Lyon's home in triumph.

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