

A Sturdy Sapling

1865-1882

The logic of events proved that Elder Bowman was truly a seer when he chose the site of Cornell College. The fact that it was close to the old military road from Dubuque to Iowa City had little effect on its growth, but in 1859 the Chicago & North Western Railroad reached Mount Vernon and a year later, Cedar Rapids. Soon it was a link in a great transcontinental railway. Thus the college had the advantage of being in one of the lively currents of migration and trade flowing across the country.

The records reveal that the completion of the railroad to Cedar Rapids was celebrated by a big free excursion. Hundreds who had never before seen a train rode that day in boxcars and on flatcars while "a cornet band from Chicago furnished music."

In 1865 William Fletcher King, after serving two years as acting president, was elected president of Cornell College. The trustees made a fortunate choice. Professor William H. Norton, son of one of those trustees, said at the fiftieth anniversary:

In direct consequence of this wise choice Cornell has had the inestimable privilege — privilege accorded to no

other college in our country — of a continuous administration for forty-one years. . . . This college in contrast to many another does not owe the height of its towers to any munificent gifts from state or private individual. . . . W. W. Cornell and his brother left the school which perpetuates their memories little but a good name and a few books; and no donation was received of more than twenty-five thousand dollars until more than forty years of its history had passed. It is to the skill and the patience of its builder rather than to any unlimited funds at his disposal that Cornell owes whatever excellence it has attained. As a direct result of a wise and long administration the college has enjoyed peace and the steady growth which peace promotes.

Dr. King, builder of the young college, was aided by a number of faithful, zealous, and scholarly teachers. Among the outstanding men and women added to the faculty during its first quarter-century were eight who served the college for thirty years or more. Three of these were alumni and one an alumna of the college. Their special contributions to Cornell are best summed up in the citations written for Founders and Builders Day by Mary Parsons, librarian and college archivist:

Hamline H. Freer. Graduated in 1869 . . . called to a place on the faculty in 1870, he built his life into the structure of the college. In 1872 he was made Principal of the Normal Department, one of the first schools of education in the state. . . . In 1887 he was made Professor of Economics and Education. In 1902 he became Dean of the College. . . . To thousands of Cornellians all over the world, Dean Freer with his wise and kindly outlook

and his genial wit has been an incarnation of Cornell College.

James Elliott Harlan. Enrolled as a student in 1863, he volunteered and served in the Civil War and was graduated with the class of 1869. . . . Called to the newly endowed Alumni Chair of Mathematics in 1873, . . . within two years the young professor was carrying also many executive duties to relieve President King. . . . In 1881 he was made Vice-President and in 1883 became a member of the Executive Committee. In 1908, the logical successor to President King, he was elected to the presidency. He resigned that office in 1914, but continued as chairman of the Executive Committee to administer the finances of the college until 1927. . . . Few men have given themselves so fully to any institution. To Cornell Dr. Harlan devoted all his powers; the college absorbed all his interests. It was his life.

William Harmon Norton, influential teacher, creative scholar, successful writer, far-seeing planner, gentleman. For sixty-seven years he lived his life against a background of Cornell College as student, instructor, revered Professor of Geology, member of the Board of Trustees, and its Executive Committee, and secretary of the board. He devoted to the college his affection, his varied power, his recognitions in the world of science, his business acumen, and the richness of his feeling for the beautiful. He enhanced the cultural tradition of Cornell with inspiring instruction in advance of his time. He shared generously the music which he learned to love, the famed perfection of his garden, and the ripened wisdom of his later years.

Mary Burr Norton, avid and lifelong student, teacher and generous hostess. She began continuous service for her alma mater immediately following her graduation in 1877. Each advancement in academic work was preceded by a period of intensive preparation. In 1905 in recogni-

tion of her abilities, she was made Professor of Mathematics — a rare thing at that time for a woman — which position she held until her retirement in 1919. As a teacher she gave herself unsparingly to the needs of her students.

Together and in perfect accord, these two walked unswervingly toward their envisioned goal of an ever better Cornell. They planned wisely and sacrificially to make the vision real and gave generously to establish it on a sure foundation.

Four who came from other institutions and built their lives into the young college were:

Harriette J. Cooke, instructor and preceptress, 1857–1890; professor of history and German, 1871–1886; and of history and science of government, 1886–1890, was the first woman professor to win equal recognition and status with men. At the close of her teaching career at Cornell, she studied social work in London and at the age of sixty-three established the Medical Mission in Boston's crowded and needy North End, where she led an active life for another fourteen years.

Sylvester N. Williams, graduate of Cornell University, who as professor of civil engineering from 1873 to 1913 established a department which for twenty years rivaled that of the State University and with its famous motto: "Accuracy, Efficiency, Dispatch" sent out dozens of young engineers to build railroads and irrigation systems in the West and to staff community projects in engineering.

Hugh Boyd, graduate of Ohio University, professor of Greek and Latin, 1871-1881, of Latin, 1881-1906, a classical scholar who taught the ancient languages as living languages by a method completely individual.

Alonzo Collin, graduate of Wesleyan University, professor of mathematics and natural science, 1860-1868, of natural sciences, 1868-1881, of physics and chemistry, 1882-1899, of physics, 1899-1906, son of "Squire" Collin, faithful trustee and treasurer of the college.

At Cornell, following the lapse in the number of men students during the Civil War, the enrollment in 1866 had jumped to 516. This was due partly to a decision of the trustees to raise a fund for the education of disabled soldiers and orphans of soldiers. Some men home on furlough suggested that Iowa officers and soldiers in the field would probably be glad to contribute to such a fund. Early in 1865 Dr. King traveled to Savannah, Georgia. Joining General Sherman's army on its march northward, he presented this cause to eighteen Iowa regiments. He returned home in May with subscriptions, which, when collected, amounted to fourteen thousand dollars. This fund, invested in government bonds, helped many boys and girls through college. In 1868-1869, for instance, twenty-seven students were drawing some assistance from the fund.

During these years Cornell began to take on the

full stature of a college. In 1868 the primary department was discontinued. The college preparatory courses, however, later known as the Academy, continued for a number of years; and among the students so prepared were many outstanding students and graduates of the college.

Among the few extra-curricular activities of those early years one was highly significant — the literary societies. They were begun, according to an early catalog, “to promote correctness of thought, extent of information, and improvement in speaking.” The Amphictyon Society, organized in 1853, was the first. The Club (or Klub), active from 1854 to 1859, though short-lived, left a record of lively intellectual activity mingled with wit and fun. The first society for young ladies, the Philomathean, was organized in 1857. When the first annual, called the *Sibylline*, was published in 1888, there were six societies. Later two more were organized, making four each for men and women. They shared four rooms on the top floor of Main Hall, the men meeting on Friday evenings, the women on Saturday evenings. The carved bulletin boards, which once framed their program announcements, still hang on the walls of the first-floor corridor. In those meetings many young people gained their first experience in parliamentary procedure, public speaking, debate, and dramatics. Society “publics” were the social events of each term, and around the societies the

social life of the students centered for nearly seventy-five years.

For a time the literary societies took charge of the college paper, the *Collegian*, founded in 1869, and its competitor of eleven months (1879-1880), the *Graphic*. Each society also collected a library, and these collections of books for several decades provided practically the only literature available to the students — volumes by such authors as Dickens, Thackeray, Carlyle, Tennyson, Longfellow, Emerson, Hawthorne. The college library, housed at this period on the second floor of "Old Sem," numbered about four thousand volumes, but it was far richer in government documents and in books of religion, philosophy, and mathematics than in literature. Thus, until a course in English literature was added to the curriculum in 1875, the literary societies provided the major stimulus and opportunity for reading in the field of belles lettres, for creative writing, and for the speech arts.

In 1864 President King had bought the land adjoining the college campus on the west and with it the handsome house built by William Hamilton, an early trustee. For those pioneer days it was a mansion, and its grounds were tastefully laid out with gardens and shrubbery. To this home the young president brought his bride, Margaret McKell King, in August, 1865. Together they made their home a kind of hospice where the doors were always open to visiting trustees, lecturers,

and all friends of the college. At the death of William Fletcher King the house became the property of the college, the home of each successive president, and is now known as the White House.

In 1873 a third college building was erected southeast of Main to serve as a men's dormitory. It was known at first as the Cornell Boarding Association (C. B. A.) but later as South Hall, and has served varied purposes during the growth of the college, sheltering successively classes in music, engineering, education, and English, besides the Academy.

When in 1873 Dr. King was absent for a year because of ill health, Dr. Hugh Boyd became acting president. One day he declared a holiday and led a group of students in planting three hundred hard maple saplings on the front campus. Today they are the pride and glory of the campus, especially in October when they become a mass of scarlet and gold.

In 1874 Dr. King returned to find that the trustees had voted to start the erection of a chapel building. Since no funds were available, the president began seeking subscriptions and after much effort secured the promise of fifteen thousand dollars. The cornerstone was laid during the commencement of 1876. A year later the building was far enough along so that the lower story was opened for use, but bills for material and labor exceeded the funds collected, and the treasury was

overdrawn. Because of a financial depression, student attendance had fallen off, and the annual deficit was growing. It even became necessary to mortgage the college property, and the trustees at a special meeting proposed to dismiss two or three professors and let the rest of the faculty "carry each one-fifth more work at one-fourth less salary." The faculty agreed to donate a part of their salaries, but urged strongly that any dismissals would merely advertise the financial difficulties and make them worse. So the disastrous step was not taken. President King and each of the faculty continued for three years to pay a percentage of their salaries to meet the interest on the college debts. By 1880 times were better, and a special fund was raised to complete the Chapel. It was dedicated at the Commencement of 1882 amid general rejoicing. The address was given by the president of Garrett Biblical Institute and his subject was "The Problem of Evil."

"Considering the evil days from which we had just emerged, the theme was not inappropriate," remarked Dr. W. H. Norton in his reminiscences of that period, and continued, "Whatever noble structures . . . may come to crown this hill before the twentieth century is done, the Chapel will still be worthy of their company and will still speak of the large place held by God's worship in the college life. Indeed, I trust that far beyond the century's end the Chapel bells will still ring out their

hourly octave appeal: *God-watch-eth-ov-er-dear-Cor-nell.*"

The records show that the bells and the clock to which they belong were manufactured at the Seth Thomas works "for the new Chapel at Cornell College, 1882, and warranted to keep very accurate time."

The dedication of the new Chapel was part of the celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary. The guest of honor was Elder Bowman, who came from California where he had lived since 1864, helping to build churches and schools and to meet needs wherever he found them. Ready to greet him were three of the early faculty — Dr. David H. Wheeler, who had come from editorial duties in New York City; Dr. Stephen N. Fellows from the State University of Iowa; and Professor Harriette J. Cooke, still preceptress and professor of history and German at Cornell. Another old friend, Dr. Alpha J. Kynett, a trustee of long standing and for many years secretary of the Methodist Board of Church Extension, had come from Philadelphia for the ceremonies.

Hundreds of alumni, old students, and town folk listened with delight to the reminiscences of these old-timers in the auditorium of the new Chapel. Its great west window was the gift of Elder Bowman in commemoration of his wife, Margaret J. Bowman, and four sons, two of whom had died in Mount Vernon before the family

moved to California. An inscription in the window seems a fitting comment on the career of Elder Bowman and the college he founded: "The workman fails, but the work goes on."

MARJORIE MEDARY