

A College in a Cornfield

At the Algona session of the Northwest Iowa Conference of the Methodist Church in 1889, a committee was authorized to receive bids and locate an institution of "college grade", although the Conference refused to "sanction the establishment of such a school of high grade unless there be guaranteed a suitable campus, and in securities \$500,000, accredited guarantees to accompany each bid."

The enterprising business men of Sioux City accepted this challenge. A committee, headed by Reverend G. W. Carr, met that fall and negotiated the purchase of part of the property where Morningside College now stands from E. C. Peters. Those were boom days in Sioux City; it was the time of the building of the Combination Bridge, the Union Depot, and the Elevated Railroad. In harmony with the spirit of the times, the local sponsors decided not to establish a college, but a university.

Accordingly, the first catalogue of the University of the Northwest, published in 1890, announced employment of faculties to instruct in the Preparatory Department, the Conservatory of

Music and the Liberal Arts, Commerce, Didactics, Law, and Medical Colleges. Early in the summer the cornerstone of the present Conservatory of Music, then known as the School of Technology, was laid. But it was not ready for occupancy that autumn. Instead the Liberal Arts College opened on September 16th in Grace Church, a small brick structure at the corner of Orleans Avenue and Sioux Trail. McClellan Davis, who became a prominent real estate man in Portland, Oregon, purportedly was the first of some fifty students to register for the fall term. The Law College was established in downtown offices, while the Medical College was located in a residence at 1712 Garretson Avenue.

Described as "an interesting event," the first chapel exercise was "somewhat poorly attended." Two visitors swelled the audience to fifteen! But this was probably not the total enrollment. Students in the nineties suffered from the afflictions of twentieth century collegians, for "doubtless some students were loitering in the vestibule or strolling on the church lawn."

Representatives of the University sought the sponsorship of the Northwest Iowa Conference at its meeting in Spencer in 1890. Accordingly, the Conference authorized Bishop Charles H. Fowler to appoint the presiding elder and two

ministers and two laymen from each district to investigate the University's measure of compliance with the terms laid down at Algona. They were to report the next year. The University of the Northwest was recognized to the extent that the Conference requested Bishop Fowler to appoint Wilmont Whitfield president, R. C. Glass to a professorship, and I. N. Pardee its financial agent.

Again in 1891 the University sought adoption by the Conference, which prompted Dr. Bennett Mitchell to write: "Like the camel of the fable it got its nose into our tent last year, and this year it sought to come in bodily, loaded down with a debt of over \$100,000, while all the real estate to which it had any title was loaded with first and second mortgages calling for amounts far exceeding any reasonable valuation, besides which it had some equities that depended for their value on the sale of lots and other property at fabulous prices. But its name, University of the Northwest, was high sounding and its pretensions were great."

Nevertheless, the Conference gave "its endorsement to the establishment of the University of the Northwest" and resolved: to give the University "earnest support and to promote its highest success and efficiency"; to "encourage young people to attend the institution"; and to "welcome

representatives of the University as well as of Cornell College to the various charges”.

This action was taken with the proviso that certain amendments, suggested by the Conference, be added to the articles of incorporation. It should be noted that the Conference had not yet assumed responsibility for the new institution. Indeed, something of a dilemma must have prevailed. Here was a church body seeking to support a college while the University was seeking a sponsor, but the church was not willing to adopt the college without a dowry.

Perhaps no better insight into conditions at the University in those early days could be obtained than from the following petition presented by twenty-five students to the “various Boards of the University of the Northwest” on June 22, 1892.

We the undersigned students of the U-N-W having an interest in the welfare of the University and wishing to see it prosper desire to make a few statements which we believe should be made for the welfare of the school:

1. During the past year we have had no sidewalks and have been compelled to wade through mud a large portion of the time to reach the University building.

2. Our physical health has been endangered on account of the extreme coldness of the building; in consequence of which classes were dismissed a number of times and on some occasions the whole school was adjourned as the building was too cold for students or instructors.

3. We have no library to aid us in our work.
4. We have but one water-closet for both sexes and that one unfavorably located.
5. We have no cloakrooms.
6. We have no study-room or any convenience for study in the building.
7. We have no apparatus for the teaching of physical sciences.
8. It being necessary frequently to attend night meetings of our societies we have been greatly inconvenienced by having no lights upon the school grounds.

We realize the critical condition the financial affairs of the University are in and heartily sympathize with those in authority; but on the other hand we believe that for a school to prosper it must compare favorably with schools in competition with it.

We are satisfied with the present corps of instructors but they and their students have been laboring under great disadvantages.

We do not ask for a new building or buildings but we do believe that the present quarters should be properly arranged for the accommodation of those who may wish to attend and if we are given some assurance that these things will be remedied you will find us voluntary agents working in the interests of the University; but and if we are not given such assurance we cannot conscientiously ask our friends to attend next year or return ourselves.

It was the panic of the years 1893 and 1894 which brought matters to a climax. The boom of previous years collapsed and land values dropped in this area, while corn fell to eight cents a bushel. Foreclosures and sheriff sales became the order of

the day. The University of the Northwest borrowed as long as it could, but its credit was soon gone. Meanwhile, the foundations of the present Main Building had been laid, but there was no money to build the superstructure and weeds began to grow within the basement walls. Inevitably the campus and University properties were placed in the sheriff's hands.

The Conference of the Methodist Church met again on September 26, 1894, and decided it was "important that an educational institution be maintained at Morningside, Sioux City, Iowa, under the control and management of the Conference." The church authorities agreed further that it seemed unlikely that the University of the Northwest could fulfill this purpose. Accordingly, the Committee on Education was instructed to consider the feasibility of appointing a conference commission "with full power and authority to establish a college."

Subsequently, the commission met in the parsonage of the First Methodist Episcopal Church in Sioux City and organized itself into a Board of Trustees. Thereupon, they proceeded to incorporate Morningside College. G. W. Carr was elected president both of the trustees and the College at a salary of \$1200 per year plus traveling expenses. "The President was instructed to pur-

chase a suitable book for the permanent record of the business of the Board." An Executive Committee was appointed and empowered to negotiate for the purchase of property if deemed advisable by the members.

The first annual meeting of the Board of Trustees was held at Morningside on June 11, 1895. At that time A. M. Jackson proposed that the University property be purchased on convenient terms of a small cash payment and the remainder over a period of several years. President G. W. Carr, P. A. Sawyer, A. M. Jackson, and the treasurer, H. L. Warner, were designated as a purchasing committee and instructed to negotiate for other necessary property on similar terms.

Subsequently, it was found that the campus of sixteen and one-half acres could be purchased together with all improvements for \$25,250. The terms called for a payment of \$4000 on September 11, 1895, and a second payment of \$3750 one year later. The balance was to be paid in three subsequent installments with interest at six per cent. The records state that it was "found needful to borrow \$2500 from Rev. J. B. Trimble to make the first payment last September."

Whereas, it had been declared at Fort Dodge in 1891 that "the Northwest Iowa Conference will become one of the patronizing Conferences of

the University of the Northwest" by reason of action taken there, the twenty-fourth annual session at Webster City in 1895 declared that Morningside College, "beautifully and healthfully located, and purchased for much less than the finished building cost," was now the Conference's "own child and trust."

The Board of Trustees voted to confer appropriate degrees upon Edwin Lawrence Benedict and F. H. Plondke at its June meeting in 1895. Recommended for graduation by Dean Schotts upon completion of the classical and scientific courses, respectively, they were probably the first alumni of Morningside College. They had received most of their training in the University of the Northwest and Morningside thus presents the paradox of having conferred degrees before opening for its first academic year which did not occur until September 11, 1895. At that time 196 students registered and were taught by "instructors of marked ability and experience" who did "most excellent and thorough work." Moreover, they were "all earnest Christians". During the year a revival in Grace Methodist Church "brought all the unsaved students, but four or five into the kingdom of God." Ten young people were graduated in June, 1896, seven in didactics and three from the regular college classes.

The first year's work at the college was carried on though "freighted with burdens," which were "cheerfully borne" by trustees, faculty, and students. Nevertheless, success attended the work in all departments, due in no small measure to "the homelike character and high moral tone" which pervaded the institution. During the year 253 students had registered. Commercial, shorthand, and typewriting courses had been added and plans were under way "to bring the department of vocal and instrumental music to Morningside". In 1897 the trustees authorized the faculty to issue charters for the Othonian, Philomathian, and Zetaethian literary societies.

Comparatively few rules were established in the early days. Then, as now, Morningside believed in "the principle that self-control constitutes the central power in human character." Since the College was co-educational from the beginning, care was taken to avoid "improprieties" in general deportment between sexes. Profanity, obscenity, gambling, and use of liquor were prohibited because they interfered with the highest mental and moral development. Military drill was required one and one-half hours per week, of all male students, except the disabled. "No system of physical exercise" could be compared with it for "preservation and development

of the body." Moreover, it could be taken "out of doors or in the chapel room!"

Dr. Whitfield, who resigned as president of the University in 1892, was succeeded by Dr. William Brush, formerly president of Upper Iowa University and later the president of Dakota Wesleyan. He was followed by the Reverend G. W. Carr in 1894, who served for three years. Upon conclusion of his term the trustees decided to secure a younger man with experience in school administration. Thereupon, Dr. Robert B. Smylie stated: "I know the man we seek. He is Dr. Wilson Seeley Lewis of Epworth." A committee of trustees was appointed "to consult" with the Seminary principal.

The story of his visit to Sioux City and the interview with the committee as related by his daughter, Miss Ida Belle Lewis, is full of humor and pathos. "He had heard about Morningside only vaguely," she wrote, but he "decided to go out and investigate. As was his custom, he made the trip sitting up in the red plush seat of the day coach to save the price of a Pullman ticket. The train rattled along through the night, stopping at every town. Peanut shells, oil lamps, fretful children, and stale air made sleep possible only in snatches. He reached Sioux City the next morning about ten o'clock, and registered in a hotel.

He inquired the way to Morningside College. Nobody knew what he meant. He explained that Morningside College was the new name for the University of the Northwest. Laughter greeted his request. With a loud guffaw directions were given.

“He reached the suburb of Morningside and walked to the college. He found it set in a cornfield, for the campus was planted to corn. ‘A college!’ he ejaculated to himself. ‘A college in a cornfield!’

“The situation was clear enough, and his soul revolted from the irony of it all. Then the thought came, ‘What if God should call you to this college? Would you be willing to come and build a college here?’

“He knelt down there in the cornfield and asked to be forgiven for his false pride. He promised the Lord that he would respond to the call of building a college even here, should that call come.

“He consulted his friends who had urged him to go into college work. They were not certain that this was his special task, but assured him of their support if he decided to go.

“On September 19, 1897, Dr. Lewis met the committee.

“‘What is there to build on?’ he queried.

“‘Nothing. Absolutely nothing but opportu-

nity,' Dr. Smylie honestly answered. 'We believe that Northwest Iowa holds a great future. But today there is no support for the college. Indeed, except for the trustees, and perhaps one or two other men, everybody is hostile who is not indifferent.'

" 'Nothing is there except a hole in the ground,' remarked another committee member.

" 'Do you want a college or an academy?'

" 'A college,' was the unanimous decision.

" 'Are you ready to pay for a college? Failure cannot be endured again.'

" 'We will pay for a college. The people are poor, but the acres are broad.'

"The trustees met the issue. They built upon the wide territory of which Sioux City was the center, which had no college. They believed in their own young people, who could not go long distances to college, but who would respond eagerly to a college in their midst. They did not fear the struggle; it was for God and man.

"Dr. Lewis remembered his hour in the campus cornfield. He knew that God's hand had been in the work of these men."

And so he promised to come. The record says: "After free consultation with Dr. Lewis, the committee agreed to recommend to the trustees, and support his election to the presidency of Morn-

ingside College, his term to begin at the close of the present year on the following terms:

“That no teacher be employed who is not, in the judgment of the trustees, a practical Christian.

“That no person be employed in any department of the institution as teacher unless approved by the president.

“That daily class recitations in the study of the English Bible and sacred music shall be conducted throughout the school year, and Professor Barbour shall have charge of the musical department.

“That the salary of Dr. Lewis be \$2000 per annum, and in addition, one scholarship.”

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