HIGH SCHOOL DAYS

Helen Brewer

After completing the eighth grade that fall I entered high school on the campus of what was formerly West Kentucky College, which closed its doors in 1909. Two brick buildings, a dormitory and a main building containing classrooms, faced a beautiful tree-lined street, sometimes called College Street, leading to the center of town. These imposing structures, the dormitory with its octagonal corners and veranda, the bell tower on the main building, the two entrances with large double doors, and the wide brick walk, were familiar to hundreds of students who had attended the college. And here in pleasant weather we lined up on the same walkway and marched upstairs to the auditorium, where the principal, Mr. C.T. Cannon, conducted the morning exercises.

The curriculum, modeled after college preparatory schools, offered little flexibility in subject matter: English and Latin, four years; algebra, two years; history, two years or more; plane and solid geometry, and physics, semester courses in geography, physiology, and pedagogy. This last subject was introduced for students planning to teach school.

The preponderance of teachers on the faculty were unmarried women, stern and forbidding. They dressed with little imagination, wearing blouses and long full skirts, an inch or two above the ankle. A glare or a frown controlled the most obstreperous boys. As younger teachers joined the faculty, their classes were more relaxed, but being inexperienced they were never able to achieve the academic excellence of their students as the older members of the faculty.

Much has been forgotten about the day by day class exercises but experienced teachers were unrelenting in their zeal to teach the basics. By the time we had completed the reading of Dicken's **David Copperfield** in Miss Frisbee's freshman English class, for example, we knew the contents from cover to cover. For many students Latin was the "stumbling block" in the curriculum. I recall an incident that occurred in the early fall of my sophomore year. Several classmates and I were sitting under a tree on the campus trying to translate our assignment in **Julius Caesar** before the one o'clock bell rang. Only a few in the class had successfully progressed beyond the opening sentence, familiar to every Latin student: "Omnis Gallia est divisa in tres partes." Suddenly a member produced a Latin "pony," a literal translation of the text. We viewed the windfall with mixed emotions, for we knew the book was forbidden but copied the day's lesson anyway, the English words below the Latin text.

Later as I walked down the long hall and entered the classroom I knew my erudite teacher would list me as a suspect if I began to translate the lesson in well-chosen English words. I envisioned all kinds of things happening to me, expelled from school, deserted by more honorable students, and punished by my parents. Fortunately, the problem solved itself. I was not called on to recite that day, and the "pony" did not appear again.

It was our history instructor, Mrs. Fields, who held our interest in an unique way. Her lectures and discussions were characterized occasionally by a pause in the middle of a sentence. While we waited patiently for her to continue, she would suddenly raise her hand and pointing a finger at the class, exclaim, "The word give me the word!" After another pause a member would timidly suggest a word. I do not remember any expressions, but they were usually terms relating to the lesson, such as "embargo,' "autonomy," "utopia," and "demagogue." The wrong word produced a response from the class, but the correct one brought only smiles. She used the word and continued with the discussion.

During the two years in her classes we were mystified by her facial makeup. On rare occasions she appeared at school in the morning with one rosy cheek and one au naturel. We never ceased to wonder why. Perhaps a poorly lighted room, a cracked mirror, a distraction while applying rouge. We did not solve the mystery, nor did we sleep or daydream in her classes.

Incidents occurred as they inevitably do in schools, such as the one in which the library had to be closed for a brief time - bedbugs. Someone had returned a book with the infestation. There were a few students, usually boys, who could always be counted on to distract other students, much to their delight, and to infuriate the teachers. On one occasion a classmate tossed a roll of toilet tissue down the aisle in study hall and interrupted a contingent of students who broke the silence with laughter as it stopped in front of the teacher's desk.

Sometimes we attended Friday afternoon "concerts," classical records played on a phonograph. Two or three students sat on the stage in the auditorium to operate the machine which was wound by hand. Records by Scotti, Farrar, Caruso, and other operatic stars were available, each one costing from one to two dollars and considered expensive items then. We didn't especially enjoy the sessions, but at least we were not attending classes.

Football was the main sport, and since its inception in 1913 at the school, formidable teams trained by outstanding coaches won repeated victories not only on the football field behind the buildings but also away from home. Games were played on Saturday afternoon and even then cheering crowds of students and townspeople filled the bleachers and gave their wholehearted support to the players. Our brother James won the coveted "M," the school letter, as a tackle on the team. (Later Bill captained the 1925 Cardinals, and in the final game played on Thanksgiving Day against Tilghman High in Paducah, Mayfield won by a score of 3 to 2).

In the spring of my freshman year I joined the tennis club, but shortly thereafter gave up the game. The long walk most of the time from our home on West Broadway to school may have discouraged me from taking additional exercise. Few students rode to school except those who lived in the county and they came in a horse-drawn buggy and later in a Model-T Ford.

During this time there was an ever-present fear that the United States would become embroiled in World War I, but for us it existed only in the background, adult talk. With the Declaration of War against Germany on April 6, 1917, however, we soon began to feel its effects on our lives. Like other young men in Mayfield and Graves County who served their country, Bradley joined the army in April, 1918 and left for Wright-Patterson Air Force Base near Dayton, Ohio. In the meantime we were bombarded with propaganda that the German "Huns" were a depraved people and that the country was honeycombed with the Kaiser's secret agents. So effective was this drive against the enemy that state laws were passed forbidding the teaching of German in schools and colleges.

Thus German in our high school was dropped from the curriculum. We were considered unpatriotic if we listened to German music or read books about Germany, and one German American in Mayfield was ostracized for no other reason than his German ancestry. Wheatless and meatless days were established along with the reduction of the use of sugar and gasoline. Goods were scarce as non-essential manufacturing plants were closed to conserve coal.

Added to the effects of the war on the old and the young alike was the hard winter on 1917-18. It was bitter cold and as I recall snow stayed on the ground from Thanksgiving until March. With only fireplaces to heat our home, we spent most of the time trying to keep warm in the kitchen and family room. Schools were closed for weeks and education was non-existent. The fall of 1918 introduced "Spanish influenza," which swept the country. Thousands died including soldiers at Camp Taylor near Louisville and at other army camps around the country. Several members of the family were sick, and our mother who had been the subject of asthmatic attacks for several years showed signs of weakness as they grew more frequent. Finally after a severe attack she died on March 4, 1919, of pneumonia. At the time we were informed that the type of medicine she needed came from Germany and of course it was not available.

There is no way to describe the grief that comes to a family when a parent dies, especially the mother who has given so unselfishly of her time to the upbringing of her children. To those of us who were still at home, the stress of war, the hardships of cold weather, and the death had left us bewildered and unable to understand the series of events which had engulfed our lives.

Preparation for the end of school began a short time later. Graduation exercises were simple affairs. Since caps and gowns were not worn in high schools, it was time for seniors to buy new clothes, for boys a new suit and for girls two new dresses. Mine were made by a seamstress in Mayfield, a beige crepe and a white net with a shawl collar.

Crowds were never large at these exercises, for few people attended other than members of the family and close friends. The Reverend Meyers, minister of the First Methodist Church, delivered the sermon at the Bac-

calaureate Service and diplomas were awarded during the Commencement Exercises at the First Christian Church. In my class were twenty-two seniors, fourteen girls and eight boys: Grace Beasley, James Fuller, Virginia Griffin, Gus Randolph, Marian Hale, Aline Tripp, Mai Saxon, James Wheeler, Thomas Hamilton, Mary McClendon, Mamie Breckenridge, Earl Smith, Catherine Evens, Zelpha Foster, Clifton Jones, Nina MacDerment, Raymond Holbrook, Rebecca Griffith, R.E. Green, Ruth Adams, and Bessie Wagner.

Several reasons can be cited for the small graduating classes at that time - the war, the economy, little variety in courses offered, and the need for young people to help at home. Education was not the main concern of many people who spent each working day eking out a living. A few affluent parents sent their teenagers to prepartory schools in Central Kentucky or to other sections of the country. Sometimes mild derision was leveled at those of who stayed in school for more than one or two years, but with the help and encouragement of our parents we prevailed. Thus passed four years of my youth in the classrooms of a college building, where I received a formal education and on the campus, where I matured in the association with friends and classmates.