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Ogden College for Young Men

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In 1873, Robert W. Ogden achieved his life's dream: he died rich. Although the genial Warren County farmer, businessman and horse breeder was fond of boasting that he had "never rubbed against a college wall," he surprised the citizens of Bowling Green by bequeathing most of his $100,000 estate (equivalent to more than $1.6 million in 2006) for the establishment of a school to provide free education to the county's young men.

At that time the Southern Normal School (the ancestor school of Western) was still seven years in the future; not even a public high school existed in Bowling Green. Imagine the excitement then, on Monday, September 3, 1877, when about one hundred boys, some in their finest suits and others in everyday work clothes, arrived on foot or horseback to be sorted into Ogden College's first classes.

Ogden's campus consisted of a large converted private residence and barn on some eight acres at Fourteenth and State streets, the present location of Western's Kelly Thompson Science Complex. Due to youth or lack of training, most students were not ready for college-level work and were quickly assigned to Ogden's preparatory department. Better-qualified boys, however, embarked upon a classical course of study leading to the bachelor of arts degree. Bachelor of science and bachelor of philosophy degrees were offered a few years later.

Ogden's moral curriculum was as stringent as its academic program. The college demanded that students be "regular and punctual in attendance, gentlemanly in deportment and diligent in study." Faculty meeting minutes recorded various sanctions, including detention and suspension, imposed for poor academic work, rudeness, cheating, lighting firecrackers, "placing a vile smelling chemical" in a classroom, drinking home brew on campus, and "general bad behavior."

Most students, however, found less disreputable ways to enliven their college experience. With the encouragement of the newly formed Ogden Alumni Association, sports teams began to compete in the 1890s. The Ogden Literary Society sponsored exercises in elocution, composition and debate. Beginning in 1885, aspiring orators competed for the Ogden Medal and the Robinson Medal, the latter named for an early benefactor. Other clubs organized around serious and not-so-serious pursuits. In the Dramatic Club's annual plays, students acted in both male and female roles. Alongside the Bible Class and Glee Club were the Smokers' Club, Loafers' Club and Porch Club. The password of the Normal Visiting Club—"soup"—demonstrated the low esteem in which some Ogden boys held the Western Kentucky State Normal School and the meager boarding-house fare of its less well-off students. By contrast, the Ogden boys schemed to impress the residents of Potter College, a young ladies' school established nearby in 1889. To the exasperation of Potter's administrators—but to the delight of the girls—they would creep onto the grounds after dark to deliver "midnight serenades."

Ogden's faculty usually comprised fewer than six men, but they earned the reverence of their students. William F. Perry's combination of fatherly authority and concern made him one of Ogden's best-loved professors; the Confederate general and

veteran of Gettysburg, who taught English and history from 1883 to 1900, would not hesitate to "knobble" wayward students by resting his thumb on their heads and sharply bringing down his knuckles. Perry's close rival for students' affection was Major William A. Obenchain, also a Confederate veteran, who taught mathematics and served as president for much of his thirty-eight-year tenure. Unfailingly dignified, the Major did not need to practice corporal punishment; a stern look, a tapping of his foot, or the observation "That is very bad form" was sufficient to humble all transgressors.

Limited by the income from its endowment, Ogden College routinely struggled to maintain both enrollment (which peaked at 162 in 1918) and facilities, but its base of loyalty only grew over the years. Students were proud that their training gained them advanced standing in major universities, and that graduates went on to distinguished careers in law, military and public service, banking, education and business. When C. Perry Snell, a former student who had become a successful Florida real estate developer, pledged $20,000 for a new building contingent on matching funds, alumni and friends raised some $32,000 in response and Snell Hall was dedicated in November 1924.

By the mid-1920s, however, Ogden was at a crossroads. Unable to obtain accreditation and facing competition from Western, which had secured the authority to grant four-year degrees in 1922, the trustees looked for a way to keep their school's mission alive. Approved on November 19, 1927 and effective on January 1, 1928, the merger with Western gave each institution fresh opportunities. Western leased the Ogden campus and created the Ogden Department of Science (now the Ogden College of Science and Engineering). Ogden's endowment was in turn devoted to increasing the number of scholarships for Western students and perpetuating the Ogden, Robinson and Trustees' Awards, the latter given for outstanding four-year grade point averages.

Ogden College reunions, or "rallies," as they were called, lasted through 1978, when twenty former students once more gave the traditional "Ogden yell." The school's resources were small, remembered one graduate, but "the service rendered was great."

Today, the "Ogden men" are gone but the stories of their vitality and school spirit attest, as one alumnus remembered, to the power of education "to relieve life of its commonplaceness."

Sources:

Jesse B. Johnson & Lowell H. Harrison, "Ogden College: A Brief History," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, vol. 68, no. 3 (July 1970): 189-220.

Ogden College Collection, Western Kentucky University Archives.

Ogden College Vertical File, Western Kentucky University Archives.