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J.R. Alexander

Editor's Note: The following article on the life of the late J.R. Alexander was written by Dr. James P. Cornette of the English department. Special memorial services for Prof. Alexander were held in Van Meter Auditorium Tuesday morning, February 29 at 9:05 o'clock. See story on first page.

When last Christmas came, the earthly remains of J.R. Alexander had lain in Fairview Cemetery for half a year, but that Christmas as usual brought to his home letters from former students of his who wanted to thank him once more for what he had done for them in years gone by. In half a century the boys and girls of pioneer stock get rather widely scattered, and many of Professor Alexander's former students were too far away to know that death had come to Western's "Grand Old Man." And so they wrote to him as if he were still alive, repeating the message of past years. A paragraph from one of the last letters which Professor Alexander himself was able to read gives in the words of one former student the message which each expressed in his own way.

"You were always so patient, kind, and inspiring. You always stimulated us students to do our best, and we always felt so free and perfectly at ease in your classes. I have often wondered how you did it, and have made an effort to be guided by a certain principle that you practiced, perhaps unconsciously. In class you never stimulated the vanity of superior students nor offended the self-respect of the weaker ones . . . Your keen sense of humor and ready wit smoothed the rugged path for many struggling, discouraged students."

Those letters postmarked months after the funeral service conducted on June 18, 1943, stand as eloquent testimonial to the fact the J.R. Alexander does still live and will through the centuries to come. Scattered all over the world now are thousands of his former students who could say with one who wrote recently from Texas: "He talked of other things (than mathematics) to us and moulded our ideals for noble things . . . Never a lesson do I teach that comments he made and bits of information he gave, do not come to mind." These thousands of students whose lives he became a part are through themselves extending his life into the lives of countless thousands of others, and infinitum.

Unblemished and Unbent

And what a glorious life it was that is being thus extended! What a great personality it is that is being thus raised to the nth power in that earthly immortality! For more than four score years J.R. Alexander maintained the integrity of a great soul. For more than half a century as a mature man he fought the good fight against those ancient enemies of Cyrano de Bergerac: "Hypocrisy, Compromises, Prejudices, dastardly Expedients, and pompous Silliness." And though his battle may have been less spectacular than that of Cyrano, it was in being so even more heroic; and like Cyrano he did what so very few men have ever been able to do: he carried forth from this earthly battlefield his plume, "unblemished and unbent."

Life for J.R. Alexander began on March 1, 1863, near Greencastle, Indiana. His parents had moved there from Cumberland County, Kentucky, just before the Civil War in order to get away from family strife over slavery. His parents were William and Mary Jane Ellington Alexander, both of whom came of early pioneer families. In 1870, when J.R. Alexander was seven years old, the family moved back to Cumberland County, settling on Goose Creek, across the Cumberland River from Burkesville. Here it was that he spent his boyhood. Here on a frontier farm he learned the meaning of hard work and had developed within him the

rugged virtues of pioneer life. Here on the still unspoiled hills and streams of Kentucky he experienced the joys of a healthy boyhood and came to have a deep and abiding love for all natural things. And here in the rough little frontier schoolhouse of Goose Creek he first enjoyed the pleasures that come from learning and knowing, and had born within him an intellectual curiosity that grew stronger with each passing year. By the time he was eighteen years of age and ready to leave Goose Creek, J.R. Alexander already had his life set firmly in the pathways of plain living and high thinking. In these pathways he "marched breast forward" for all of his life's journey.

Entered Glasgow Normal

When at eighteen years of age J.R. Alexander left the Goose Creek schoolhouse, he went to Burkesville College for two winter sessions. Then in the summer and fall of 1882 he taught his first rural school, at Wash's Bottom, near his home. In January, 1883, he entered the Glasgow Normal School, conducted by A.W. Mell and J. Tom Williams at Glasgow, Kentucky. That fall he taught the school at Marrowbone, between Burkesville and Glasgow, and returned to the Glasgow Normal the next January. In the fall of 1884 he taught the Holly Grove school in Cumberland County, and in January, 1885, he came to Bowling Green to enter the school which Mell and Williams had moved there from Glasgow and to which they had given the name "Southern Normal School and Business College." The following summer he received the B.S. degree from this institution and went back to Cumberland County to teach his last rural school. In February, 1866, [sic, 1886] he returned to the Southern Normal as a student teacher. That fall he became a full-time member of the faculty and taught for Mell and Williams for the next two years. Among his students of these years were Cordell Hull, T.C. Cherry, and the late H.H. Cherry.

At the close of the school year in 1888 Mr. Alexander resigned his position with the Southern Normal and went to Clarkesville, Texas, as Superintendent of Schools. In September, 1889, he returned to Kentucky to teach with F.M. Malone in the Glasgow Normal School. On August 28 of the following year he was married to Miss Sarah Williams of Hawesville, Kentucky.

While in Clarkesville, Texas, Mr. Alexander had made the acquaintance of a lovable and scholarly old Ulster Irishman, H. McD. Fletcher. In September, 1890, Mr. Fletcher came to Glasgow to help him take charge of the Glasgow Normal. Then in January, 1897, the two came to Bowling Green to manage the Southern Normal, which had been recently given up by Mell and Williams. During the school year 1891-92, Mr. Alexander had charge of the Southern Normal by himself.

In the summer of 1892 Mr. Alexander left Bowling Green for Macon, Mississippi, to become head of the Calhoun Institute located there. He took with him his wife, his baby daughter, who had been born September 16, 1891, and $1500.00 which he had saved, mostly from his earnings as head of the Southern Normal. He planned to stay in Mississippi only a year or two and then, with his $1500.00 doubled or trebled, go on West to practice law. Mr. Alexander did leave Mississippi after only one year, but when he left there in the fall of 1893, while the "Panic of '93" was at its height, he didn't head west. He started by to Kentucky. His wife and daughter were still with him, but the "Panic of '93" had carried down the Calhoun Institute, and along with it had gone all of his $1500.00.

Returned Here in 1894

During the next year Mr. Alexander taught for a while at Cannelton, Indiana. Then in the fall of 1894 he returned to Bowling Green to accept a position teaching in the Southern Normal, which had been taken over in 1892 by the young Cherry brothers, Henry Hardin and Thomas Crittenden. Soon afterwards he purchased and moved into a small cottage just outside town on the Nashville road.

Not very long afterwards tragedy came to the Alexander home. On January 8, 1896, a second daughter was born, and on the tenth day of the next month, Mrs. Alexander died. For several years Mr. Alexander was both father and mother to the two little girls. Then on June 4, 1908, he was married to Miss Annie Allen of Henderson County, who became not only wife for him but mother to the two daughters. In later years the elder of the two daughters, Ruth, became the wife of C.J. Crampton, Houston, Texas, and the younger, Ruby, was married to H.D. Palmore of Frankfort, Kentucky.

When in 1894 J.R. Alexander accepted a position with the Southern Normal and soon afterwards moved into his home on the Nashville road, he had accepted his last position and moved into his last home. For the rest of his life, almost half a century, he taught in the same school and lived in the same house. Both school and house were variously added to and extended until they were hardly recognizable as the originals, but the basic structure of both remained the same.

Flashing-Eyed Young Man

And the man, J.R. Alexander – in the course of that half century he too changed greatly in outward appearance, but inwardly he remained essentially the same. Those students of the earlier years, themselves now gray-headed men and women, remember him as a straight, vigorous, flashing-eyed young man. One of them wrote not long ago: "My first memory of him is as he sat on the platform at chapel. He had long dark hair that curled with a Spencerian flourish at the ends. His eyes were the dwelling place of dreams, and his moustache was long, with flavor of Western deviltry." Changing fashions decreed the removal of the moustache, and the passing years gradually turned the dark hair to snow white, but even to the last his eyes were "the dwelling place of dreams." Students of the later years, themselves still young, remember him as a sturdy, vigorous, twinkling-eyed old man, with long white hair and clean-shaven face. But whether they be of the earlier or later years, whether they be students, relatives, or friends, all those who came to know J.R. Alexander respected and loved him most for the man he was through all the years.

By the time Mr. Alexander returned to the Southern Normal in 1894 and settled down in his home on the Nashville road, he had already attained the mature philosophical perspective from which he was to view human life through all his remaining years. The same clarity of thought and keen insight which made to him a mathematical proposition so clear and simple enabled him also to see through the superficialities of human life down to its intrinsic fundamentals.

Wanted Simple Life

Most men give the best energies of their lives to a feverish seeking after material things: money, houses, and lands. All Mr. Alexander asked for his labor was sufficient economic return to enable him to lead the simple life in which he took such great joy. Breakfast cooking in his kitchen or on a creek bank, the warm earth turning moist furrows in his garden on a fresh spring day, a ride in the buggy behind old Golden to a favorite fishing hole, on a winter evening an open book beside a blazing fire in his own living room with his

loved ones near: in these and similar essentialities of human living he experienced the greatest joy. On a modest salary that would have pinched many men he not only supported himself and his family in comfort, but through the years he almost always had in his home one or more students to whom he was giving board and lodging. Moreover, out of the margin between his simple life and his salary, at Christmas time he played Santa Claus to needy families, his gifts including loads of coal and baskets of groceries, with toys and candy for the children. In the last few years of his life he always had a Christmas tree at his Bear Creek lodge for the folk of the community. Through the years he made innumerable loans to deserving students. And all these things he did so simply, naturally, and unostentatiously that few people except the recipients of his largess ever knew of his good deeds.

Did Not Seek Fame

Next to material wealth, perhaps men in general most hungrily seek for fame, "position," the attainment of some great or small preeminence over their fellows that will give a feeling of importance. Mr. Alexander's keen analysis of human life revealed such desires as silly and vain, worthy of only the stupid and foolish, and he never allowed his breast to harbor them. Men of muddled heads might seek the plaudits of the multitude, but not he; to him the esteem and appreciation of the discerning few were much more desirable because much more intelligent. And he saw through individuals themselves with the same keenness of insight. He despised sham, hypocrisy, pretense, and show because he saw them for the stupid vanities they are: only a fool would either practice or be deceived by them. Few men have ever understood as well as he "How much of what men paint themselves would blister in the light of what they are."

Seeing human life and men so clearly, and believing so deeply in the dignity of man as he is – and not as he might paint himself – Mr. Alexander had a sense of justice tempered with tenderness and compassion for human error that characterized his relationships with all people throughout his long life. It would be a harder search than that of Diogenes to find a man ever unjustly treated by him. Consonant with his sense of justice in earthly things was his conviction in the justice of things eternal. In the deepest and truest sense, he was profoundly and innately religious man, an dhad little patience for the spurious dogma and practices that in the world so often pass for religion. In his deeper moments he was a true mystic, as evidenced by this quotation from his own address at the memorial service held for H.H. Cherry on November 16, 1937: "There are in every human life subtle, unexplained, and probably unexplainable mysteries that lie outside, or near, the limits of all human ken. The effort to explore one's own inner life, or an attempt to probe the inner life of another, resolves itself into the mere chasing of phantoms, vaguely silhouetted on the extreme margin of our consciousness; shadows indistinctly seen and felt."

Frequently Paradoxical

One is impressed with the truth of Mr. Alexander's statement in attempting to evaluate his own life. In so many places it eludes one's grasp; so frequently it is paradoxical. Some of those who knew him best insist that he was at heart a poet. If to be "dowered with love of live, the hate of hate, the scorn of scorn" is to be a poet, then undoubtedly these friends are right. Of all Mr. Alexander's friends now left alive, probably T.C. Cherry knew him longest and best. By request, Mr. Cherry wrote me just the other day a letter in which he gave a brief evaluation of the life of J.R. Alexander. The letter is so fine a tribute of one great soul to another that it justifies full quotation:

Bowling Green, Kentucky
February 8, 1944

Dear Cornette,

After many years of association with J.R. Alexander I have concluded that his life was gloriously paradoxical. Here are some of the paradoxes that have impressed me:

1. In mind and character he had the steadfastness of the mountains of his native county, yet the culture of a Victorian.

2. He was rugged in manners and dress, but refined and elevated in thought.

3. He was dogmatic in his beliefs, but ardent in his defense of the rights of others.

4. He was unconsciously a rugged individualist, yet heroically advocated the rights of society over the conduct of all men.

A true friend, J.R. Alexander was even more sincere in deeds than in spoken words. He harmonized the seeming contradictions in his character by serene living. Best of all, he was a great soul, void of shams, and always true to his inner lights.

Nature broke her mould after she made him.

His friend,
T.C. Cherry

With a standard of values at variance with that of the world, Mr. Alexander lived confidently and serenely by his own standard, and by his own life demonstrated that his standard was right and that of the world wrong. Few men ever got as much joy from life as he did, and few ever gave as much joy to others as he gave. There are still alive in the world hundreds of Mr. Alexander's former students who can say the same thing one of their number recently wrote: "Whatever I have amounted to in life has been due much to the help and inspiration of I received from him while at Western."

Last Fishing Trip Recalled

Late one afternoon of the last autumn he lived, Mr. Alexander and I were returning from a fishing trip, his last one. His eyesight was failing, his muscular coordination was becoming poor, and from time to time his body was tortured with pain from the malady that was soon to take him away. The trip had been a success, but a success tinged with disappointment because of his impaired faculties. As night came on, we were following a road that wound through hills on which for fifty years he had loved to watch the pulse beat of the changing seasons. The day had been one of those perfect blue gems that are set only in a Kentucky October, and now the horizontal rays from the disappearing sun were touching the tops of the surrounding wooded hills with one last flush of hectic brilliance before the dusk, already gathering in the valley below, crept up to enshroud them in darkness. "You know," he said, turning his gaze toward the hills that he knew were so glorious, but of which his failing eyes registered only a faintly colored outline, "you know, Nature is pretty wise – and kind. Gradually, one by one, she takes away those things that made life dear to us, until in the end it isn't so hard to go, after all." And before another autumn came, Nature had released

his great soul from the pain-wracked body, leaving behind his thousands of "little, nameless unremembered acts of kindness and of love," and leaving behind a life that now goes onward through the lives of all who knew and loved him.

Additional information regarding J.R. Alexander:

UA36I/2, Box 2, Folder 2, James Alexander 1914-1944

UA96 Southern Normal School Records

Park City Daily News

"James Alexander Succumbs at His Residence Here," June 17, 1943.

"J.R. Alexander Will Probated," June 28, 1943.

Crabb, A.L. "Letter to the Editor," re: the Alexander home, December 26, 1961.

"Rites Are Conducted for Kentucky Teacher," nd.

"Rites Held For J.R. Alexander," June, 18, 1943

"Western's "Grand Old Man" Dead, June 18, 1943.