July 14, 1967

The Alumni Days, yesterday and today, impressed me deeply; I do not know when I have ever had more rewarding experiences. I enjoyed seeing again old-timers and got a big thrill out of seeing many of the newer generations, too. In fact, I felt that the warmth of the youngsters toward the teacher of their parents was "something special," in the words of a common slang phrase of some years ago. Over the whole meeting there seemed to hover a feeling of gladness in having been a part of something great, something that was small and great fifty years ago and big and great now. I felt that your remarks on Friday evening were to the point; you did well to refer the visitors to the published brochure on the future plans of the university, for only a careful and rather long time of study can actually reveal the significance and the reach of the plans. And you did equally well to emphasize the carrying over into the big university some of the better qualities of the smaller college. It was a disappointment that I did not feel like being on hand last year; maybe the strange joy of my being there this year helped correct some of the disappointment of 1966.

When I was a little boy, I resented hearing parents saying, no matter how they meant it, that they hated to see their children grow up. My earliest memory of my resentment occurred when Mother said she hated to see her baby grow up (I was the baby). I said, "But, Mammy, if I don't grow up, I'll be an idiot." You see, in my home it was possible to see the unfortunates that did not grow up, for they came to Father for treatment; nearly always they were brought, pathetic, child-minded creatures who never grew up and never would. Of course, they were loved, often receiving double their share of care and affection. Though, some of my brothers and sisters would see the funny side of these grown-ups so far as years were concerned but babies in mind; in our neighborhood the sayings of some of these unfortunates went round
and round, even being written down and sent to relatives far away. Occa-

sionally some remarkably true statements came from the mouths of these

babes and sucklings, truths that we, the ones with normal mentality

wish we could have said or could have dared to say. But, when we had

had our amusement, the pall of darness dropped, for we could not keep

ourselves from seeing the tragedy of never growing up. Of course,

there were many degrees of abnormality, from helpless idiocy to the

low mentalitv of a high-class moron. Even now, more than sixty years

since I lived in my father's house, I can recall the varying feelings

I would have when I saw these subnormal people. Only one such person

whom I knew as a child was actually sent away to an institution. And

he had the double tragedy of being subnormal and illegitimate.

Well, this is a strange, morbid way to contemplate normal, regular

growth, maybe. It has in it, though, a sort of "Take warning and
govern yourself accordingly," so often appended to old-fashioned stories.

A happy-moron attitude toward any phase of life has produced tragedies

innumerable in my long life of observation. The tragedies did not oc-
cur on the moronic or lower mental levels but among normal, teachable,

respectable people. Some person got to a certain level, got proud of

himself, and then ceased to grow; he arrived at advanced senility in some

ways just when he should have been bouncing and bounding with life. He

had arrived at graduation and literally threw away his books, for keeps.

He had moved into a new house and was getting it paid for. He had

invested in some sound business and did not need to worry especially

about the future. Sometimes he had done none of these but had arrived at

great satisfaction because he was of a great family. He literally sat
down in the midst of his glory and let the world slip away, actually be-

lieving that he had arrived. The decay of so-called First Families

has been to me one of the supreme tragedies of America as a whole and

especially of our edge of the South. Women talk about ancestry more

than men, I suppose, but both men and women, in far too large numbers,
feel lifted up and made equal to the whole world if they can find an ancestor or two who did great things, forgetting how in this evaluation of their chances of being great they are forever overlooking the less-famous ancestors who did nothing.

It was fortunate for us that our university was not created overnight by a rich commonwealth or the endowment guaranteed by some fabulously rich man. We knew what it was to be on small rations, we knew the pangs of being like Cinderella among her ashes in the kitchen, we may have felt inside that we were basically great and worthy but had to face hostility for decades from the counterparts of the wicked sisters of Cinderella. And, the queer part of it, we must now recognize that becoming bigger and richer and more respectable, as the world views us, we have acquired also a new set of enemies, just as a provincial basketball team is brought face to face with the teams of the big colleges and universities and must learn to compete with new and maybe better trained opponents. When Western was just "The Normal," it had to compete, for a long time, with standardized high schools, with some fairly well-established private schools, with recognized universities. But most of our competition was with the dying private schools, which had done much good for the state but had largely outlived their usefulness and their financial support. It was the private school that I had to fight in order to enter here in 1908; I had been enrolled in one and had a chance to reenter, with assurance of getting free tuition if I would teach one class in the eighth grade. Somehow, and I have never been able to know how this happened, I did not want to stay in the school, even though it was a bright spot in my early life away from home. I was warned by well-wishers of the private school that I would be going into a very bad world if I came here; the warners had never been here and actually knew nothing about the school. I am sure that some of them prayed for the stubborn young fellow—ignorant, penniless, untraveled, unknown—
who would turn his back on a long-established—and respected so-called college to enter a new state school that had had no time to establish itself in the affections of many people, even with its own inheritance from a private school, with no religious bias, as was Western as the heir of the Southern Normal School. It has been very illuminating to think back over this half century and more and see how the year-old infant of 1907 somehow had within it some very virile strength, something that could keep it alive and growing, through wars and jealousies and lawsuits from older established schools. And these memories are largely responsible for my feeling that we are now bigger than a sand-lot team of boys who had to meet only somewhat similar sand-lot fellows from dressier residential areas on the more aristocratic side of the tracks. We are on the respectable side of the tracks now and are met by teams from similar areas, not merely in a small area but from the whole country. The struggle, basically, is the same; the methods of keeping up the fight have to be adapted to our bigger stature, our bigger name, our bigger clientele.

As I see it, our rivals now are such universities as Southern Illinois University, certainly a big, growing institution, with several sub-stations in the whole state. In the last ten years, as you know, it has become highly respected for its graduate work in many fields. And it has had a history, before its becoming a university, almost like that of Western. Maybe I am a little too fond of Western, but I honestly believe that it already is ahead of the four new state universities of Tennessee; I know a great many of the teachers in these schools and know how they respect our school as it was and as it is coming to be. The two ex-teachers colleges of Indiana are in our class but, if I can judge, are no more regarded than we. I see no reason for us to fear the state universities that came into being by the Land Grant Act of over a century ago; in Ulysses's words about his son: "They work their work, I mine." But it will not do to
be a lure to forget the former hostility of our own state university in the earlier days. Not all the former opposition is dead, and some of it is not even sleeping. But, with the combined support of our four new universities and their clientele, I do not fear much for our becoming in our state another California, bossed from the top and made into a group of subordinate institutions that are told what to do and what not to do. The establishment of Murray, Morehead, Western, and Eastern as universities, I predict, will be ranked, in future histories of education in Kentucky, as probably more significant than the passage, in 1906, of the act that created Western and Eastern.

Like you, I believe that just about all of our students are teachable, that it is our province to find out how it is to be done. Sometimes a resistance to knowledge is a mere phase of adolescence, whetted, too often, by adults that did not acquire the education that they have long felt they needed but refused to take measures to acquire. Sometimes I think that the determination of freshmen to defy being taught is only a portion of the growing boy's feeling that he is now above being advised by his parents and that the world will at once recognize his superior intelligence and gladly give him a job. Some of the best comments on the value of schooling have been given me by boys who frittered away a semester or two in college, left school to find work, and then came back chastened, even admitting their boyish silliness and making desperate efforts to catch up with the fellows they used to scorn for being square. I recall two boys, in fairly recent years, who deliberately came into my office when they had been pretty badly spanked by the world and admitted they were ready to show me that they had learned their lesson. And they convinced me, even though I was somewhat skeptical about their reformation. I am glad that I knew such boys; there must be many of them; and college must never get so large or so self-important that it cannot devote some attention to the adolescent who "gets religion" so far as his future is concerned.