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## UA37/44 Diary to Kelly

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December 8, 1967

Time, of which or of whom I have known so much, will dictate much of what I will be writing for some days now. On January 19, 1968, I am to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of my arrival in Bowling Green. From out of this remote date, then, I will be often talking or writing.

Through most of my long life I have tried to determine just why I came here to school. Rather oddly, I cannot go any farther back than the spring of 1907, when I was attending Clinton College and living with my brother Albert and his wife. I do recall that Mr. Swain, who was the president of the little so-called college, some time before the end of the school term, took me aside and offered me free tuition when and if I would come back to Clinton College, for I had already told him that I would be teaching from July 1 to the end of 1907. I would have a class in eighth-grade arithmetic to teach, and that would pay my tuition. I thanked the gentleman for his offer but told him that I had already planned to go to the Normal at Bowling Green. Just when Mr. Moore, who lived across the street from Clinton College, interviewed me I cannot recall, but it was after word got out that I would be going to Bowling Green. This Mr. Moore, whose daughter, Edna, then a nine-year-old, was to grow up and become Mrs. Elmer Tartar, whose future husband stood up with me at my wedding, September 9, 1913, was a very devout Baptist and was a genuine recruiter. He told me that I should not go to the Normal, for it was a hotbed of infidelity, his very words. I cannot recall what I said; I know that I just kept on planning to follow my own nose. Just how Mr. Moore got his idea about Western, and whether he ever changed his opinion, I still do not know. I am certain that he was never, or certainly not up until that time, in Bowling Green; I even doubt whether he, in 1907, had been east of Tennessee River. But

he spoke as one having authority.

Through the very trying days of my first experience at teaching or keeping school I kept the Normal in view. I doubt whether I taught the children of Oakwood, a one-roomed school not far from Clinton, even one new thing apiece. My main job was keeping the children from injuring each other, with teeth and fingernails, and tub-handles for knucks. Nearly every day I questioned myself over and over about my desire to be a teacher. But, when another day came, I took my dinner basket, with its inevitable fried-egg sandwich among other delectable things, and walked a mile or so across the fields to the shabby little schoolhouse. Some time late in the term Mr. Griffey, the grandfather of Jimmie Bazzell, whom you know, came as a representative of six families and asked me to stay for another year. Each family had promised to board me free for a month. Imagine my getting a chance to board round and not taking it! But I had the Normal in mind and trusted to luck to get another school. By the way, I came here without an actual job in mind, but after I had had to go home sick, my brother wrote me about the principalship of Moscow School, also in Hickman County, for the place was open. I immediately went by train to Columbus and to Moscow to investigate and, jumping out of the frying-pan into the fire, I spent two miserable years in that dying, degenerate little village. But, as old people so often do, I am getting ahead of the hounds.

Anyway, when my Oakwood School closed, with a treat, on December 13, 1907, I bade farewell to the Baker family, with whom I had been boarding, and took off for Fidelity and home for a month before coming to Bowling Green. Fortunately, nobody blocked my way or threatened me with any here or hereafter if I came on, in my headstrong way, to go to school. Some years later a hired man asked me whether I expected to get to heaven any easier by being beducated, but that was not a part of my earliest days away from home on my own.

My old diary for 1908, still intact and readable, says that I came from Murray to Bowling Green on <sup>January</sup> 19, 1908, arriving on the long-famous Ten-Eighteen train. L. L. Hudson, a teacher in Hickman County whom I had met at the annual teachers' institute in Clinton in the late summer of 1907, met the train as a representative of the Normal. He introduced me to a young man from Logan County, Corbett McKenney, who became my roommate and my closest friend; he died, quite young, in late 1912, my first big grief after I left home. We spent our first night in the old Potter House, away down on Main Street, a rather ratty but not disreputable hotel.

Early the next morning we walked up to the Normal and enrolled. I went into great detail about all this in my diary, with a list of my courses and the teachers. President Cherry was then only forty-three years old, but he seemed to us like one of the old-time heroes. He roused us on that very first morning and somehow made us feel that we had done the very best thing we could have done by coming to Bowling Green.

In looking back at it all, I somehow wish I could have had some sort of clairvoyance then, for it might have enabled me to guess who of the students and of the faculty would ultimately become great influences in my own life and in the life of the school. I am afraid that I was too poor a judge of human nature then to have made any very wise judgments. Flashy ease of manner, well-fitting clothes, and even plenty of good looks would have made me judge a fellow far above his ability to last. Sometimes I have found myself lamenting the tremendous loss of those early years. Dropouts there were, though the word had not yet appeared in school jargon. A very large percentage of the 500 or so students that I met in my first few weeks and came to know by name ever became more than names. It is true that a few of those very-earliest ones did marvelous things with themselves and

helped form the very core of what Western was ultimately to mean.

In age I was a mere child, for I had not long before my coming here celebrated my nineteenth birthday. Only a very few of the students had ever seen the inside of a high school; many of them had taught for several years and had spent their other months trying to acquire some book-learning. Some were bordering on middle age. Every class was crowded, for the teachers were scarce, and every available space was occupied. Not to be in class at least five hours every day would have branded teacher and student as being lacking in earnestness. In some ways we students were slightly comic. Because we had had such meager chances for education, we were slightly ashamed of ourselves, but outwardly we put on a very bold front, sometimes a very laughable one. A few of those early fellows never got over this but showed an unnecessary arrogance or boldness to the end of the chapter. Maybe too much was made of the poor backgrounds of most of us. Our worst fault was in not having a regular course of study, a growing up a little less spotted. Even our teachers would have profited greatly if some of them had had the daily grind of a regular course of study. Some of them never became a real part of <sup>the</sup> college, because they were too individualistic, too proud of having lifted themselves bodily from where they were to even the doubtful eminence of where they had landed. This had a very bad effect on some of the boys who should have gone much farther than they ever did. I have seen students leave school almost wholly because of the general hostility to regularized education that they found in many classes. Some of the hard names called such teachers as Macon Leiper resulted from his trying to teach systematically and thoroughly and not take out in enthusiasm his devotion to learning. In trying to be fair to all the teachers who put up with me--and I with them--, I find it hard to think well of far more than half of the number I ultimately had here. Some few taught even better than they

knew, but others mechanically kept school, and are, to many people, just memories of dull moments and uninspired classrooms. Our very best five or six, out of the lot that taught while I was a student, from January, 1918, to January, 1912, could rank with the best anywhere. If I were called on to make out such a list, it would be easy to name them; they wear well; they became a part of some great students; they were as nearly divinely called as anybody whom I have known. Some two of the five or six left the schoolroom for various reasons and thus lost their one great chance; others stayed until retirement, here or elsewhere.

Back to those early students: who could have dreamed that a stammering, rather ordinary fellow like Herman Donovan would rise, and justly so, to be the president of Eastern and then of the University of Kentucky? And a quiet, angular Tom Napier went on to become one of the bedrocks in education in Alabama! And crude, awkward Pat Smith, never to be very polished or easy of manner, became a successful and well-to-do commercial artist and one of the most persistent well-wishers among our old-timers, as his many services to Western will show. Into that first term I spent here came Finley Grise, certainly not a very prepossessing-looking fellow, tall, angular, crippled, shy. Away teaching at the time but soon to come back was Alfred Crabb, probably the queerest of the lot, but life certainly did not and cannot get him down. And, like the writer of HEBREWS, I could go on and on with a roll of heroes, men, and women, too, who somehow did great things because of their start here. It warms my heart to remember that such people have been, and that I knew them when they seemed very ordinary or even below average in general appearance. There were no giants in those days, but some very ordinary mortals and even a few pigmies managed to fill some important positions in the world that grew up after 1908.