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## UA37/44 Diary to Kelly

Gordon Wilson

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December 15, 1967

A number of us boys who stayed so long at old Cherry Hall got into the habit of meeting for a while in some room after supper and holding what would now be called a bull session. Every subject known or even heard of was discussed. My roommate, Corbett McKenney, got to calling the group the Cherry Hall School of Philosophy, in imitation of Emerson's famous Concord School of Philosophy. I wish I had some careful notes or a transcription of some of our meetings. Frankly, the only meeting I recall was concerned with the double moral standard. I rather staunchly defended a single standard, with plenty of ribbing. Some of the boys who laughed at the very idea of a boy's remaining moral ultimately quit talking and afterwards agreed that they had merely been arguing. But one boy, the most mature-looking young one in the group, stoutly maintained that he did not believe in any such nonsense, that a boy could do as he pleased, but that a girl should remain pure. I opposed him pretty strongly. When we started to go back to our rooms, he rose, in the attitude of a country preacher and said, "We will now be dismissed by Brother Wilson." A few fellows giggled, but most of them frowned, and one boy, much older than the rest of us, stayed to tell me personally that his twenty years or more of life beyond what we had lived convinced him that there was just one standard, which anyone violated at his own peril. As long as that man lived, he periodically sent word to me that he remembered me. Once, ages after that night, I was speaking at Columbia or Campbellsville or Liberty and met a very charming young married woman and her husband. She told me that she had known me always and had wanted to see me; she was the daughter of that oldish fellow of away back in 1908 or 1909. Another tragic sequel, which

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apparently had no actual connection with that night, happened some three years later. The sneering boy, who had secured a certificate to teach and was doing well, so far as my friend McKenney knew, was attending the annual teachers institute in Russellville along with McKenney and the others. One afternoon, after the program was over, he disappeared. He had gone to a deserted stone quarry near town and drowned himself; to this day I have never heard any suggestion about this tragedy. As I said, he was well-dressed, handsome, easy of manner, a good student, and reputedly a good teacher. He couldn't have been more than twenty-five and maybe was a year or two younger. Whether he had gone bad, as used to be the common comment when someone took his own life, or had lost his mind I do not know. Somehow that death saddened me, for I really liked the boy, Leslie Bodine, by name.

Corbett McKenney, whom I have mentioned as my roommate, was a very fine young fellow. Like the rest of us, he had to teach in the fall to get enough money to come to school from late January until summer. He impressed Mr. W. J. Craig so much that McKenney was told that he would be employed to help teach chemistry and physics when he had acquired some more education. He was teaching at a place called Spa, in Logan County, in the summer and fall of 1912; I had been his guest one day at the annual teachers institute and had been asked by Mr. Craig, the conductor of the institute, to speak on "The Economic and Aesthetic Values of Birds." Uncle Billy, in his tongue-tied or lisping way seemed to say the economic and aesthetic values of girls; this brought down a big laugh, and I had a very attentive audience when I spoke, explaining that I knew more about birds than about girls. In October or early November of 1912, McKenney became seriously ill, developing what was then called locked bowels. He died just before Thanksgiving Day that year, only twenty-six years old. With him went just about all

my pleasantest memories of the early years here. I had visited him in his home twice, he had come to Calloway County to visit me at Christmas, 1910 or 1911, and we had walked over most of the wild areas of the Coon Range in Logan and Todd Counties or had ridden plow horses or mules still farther. It was he who introduced me to the famous Cliffs of Todd County and to Diamond Springs, in Logan County. Here is a very strange coincidence: on my very first visit to see him, we got off the little train called, for fun, the Wooden Axle, right where, two years ago were found some of the belongings of Mr. Harper, the Lewisburg banker who, with his daughter, met death at the hands of some unknown murderers. Every place around McKenny's former home seems a part of me yet; when I drive down that way, I always look out toward the place where his house stood and see the big, big trees that he and his brothers set out more than a half century ago. I have never had the nerve to visit the place since his death. Not long after that tragedy his family moved away, I went to Indiana University, and I have never seen the family as a whole since 1912. But the children of his sister, Mrs. Ulie Hinton, several of whom attended college here, call me Uncle Gordon to this day. Several years ago, when I gave the commencement address at Hughes-Kirk, I had dinner with the Hintons and reviewed, at long range, some of the events of the early days of this century. Mrs. Hinton lovingly has preserved every letter that I wrote to Corbett, her brother, and even the little address book, such as nearly all of us used to carry around, with corny or smart-alec sayings and our actual postoffice or street addresses. The Cherry Hall School of Philosophy still lives on, somewhat dimmed, in my memory; I sometimes wonder what ever became of the other members, for very few of them stayed around long enough to get any kind of diploma or certificate.