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UA37/44 Diary to Kelly

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August 1, 1969

Ten years ago this week I was being drenched with tears or near-tears by many old-timers, who constantly swore that Western would never be the same again without me. I got somewhat tired of hearing all this, because I did not believe it, no matter how sincere my admirers were. And, over and over again, I said that there was no especial reason why it should remain as it had been in my time. Ten years later I still think as I did then. What a tragic thing it would have been if the college, no matter how fine a thing it was or was supposed to be, had decided that enough was enough. According to a good many people who have attended big-name colleges, this sort of thing actually often happened in these same colleges; no new things arose; no changes were made in the curriculum for generations. And, so I was told, the same professors used the same mildewed notes over and over, as if education were a thing to be achieved and then kept as it was.

In the years when it may have seemed that we did not change, back in my younger days as a student and as a teacher, I can call up dozens of remarkable changes, most of them good ones, too. The outlook of the Western Kentucky State Normal School in 1908 was as far from what it was in 1959 as the intervening fifty-one years would indicate. From a rather hide-bound old-line college, with few avenues of escape except some well-guarded ones, we had come to a rather wide array of courses and purposes. Some of our people had not adapted themselves to the ever-changing new ideas and seemed to go right on believing that 19-anything was just like 1908, the blessed year when so many of us got our start here. As the head of a department I had to struggle, always unsuccessfully, with some of my inherited teachers to convince them to remember that we were not back in ancient times.

The type of textbooks in use when I first came here underwent tremendous changes as the years passed. If some of them were brought out now and used, they would provoke more merriment than the latest comedy. The stiff, unnatural dignity of some of the English textbooks created, and rightly so, a good deal of opposition to the unnatural ways they approached the study of literature and language. They were not all bad, but they were the products of a time when college education was regarded as an adventure restricted to high-class and moneyed people only. The books on rhetoric especially amuse me when I look at them. They seemed to treat language as if it were a precious possession, somewhat like the best silverware and china, which were brought out only for high-class company. Callow youths, whose voices had barely changed, were expected to thrill to great poetry when they probably did not know a subject from a predicate. The descriptive adjective was then in its heyday, just as was flowery oratory, and just as was elocution. Anyone who talked and wrote somewhat naturally was suspected of being a boor, incapable of culture. In classes the average student kept mum about the unnaturalness of it all, but in our dormitories or out on the campus there was a lot of comic mimicry of the most elegant and unnatural of our teachers. One of my roommates used to see through the white-wash of much of college life and convulse us with his imitations, always highly exaggerated, of some of our teachers, especially the ones who seemed most fond of themselves. And the "teachers' pets" who tried to walk and look and act like their gods and goddesses got a good many dressings-down, though not always benefited by the wit and coarse satire of their fellow-students. It was a great experience to watch the growth from an almost wholly unnatural system of manners to another type that had to battle to exist. Oratory and elocution did not give up easily.