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# UA1F A Mascot for the Western Hilltoppers

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## WKU Archives UA1F Vertical File

Travelstead, Chester. "A Mascot for the Western Hilltoppers," memoir, nd

I grew up on a college campus. My mother taught music in Bowling Green, Kentucky, at a school first known as Western Kentucky State Normal School, later as a teachers college, and since about mid-century as Western Kentucky University; and until I graduated from high school, our small family lived in school-owned houses located on the Western campus -- very early in an abandoned wooden gymnasium, next in a small frame house in Cherryton Village (named after President H. H. Cherry), and later in the "Rock House," scene of some stories yet to be told in this series.

In the early 1920's, all the school's athletic teams were coached by Mr. Ed. Diddle. During his first years at Western, this most extraordinary man, known by most as "Uncle Ed," coached football, basketball (both men's and women's teams), baseball, track, and tennis, with the help of only a few student assistants -- one for each sport. There were no paid assistant coaches -- just some unwanted volunteers from the community who from time to time came to team practices and presumed to "advise" Mr. Diddle on various aspects of coaching.

Ed Diddle was kind and patient man -- usually quite calm and quiet -- but occasionally in his excitement and boyish enthusiasm while trying to make a point with those around him, whether athletes or not, he would come out with some unpredictable but quite quotable expressions ( "Diddleisms" some called them) such as "be sportsmanship, boys, be sportsmanship."

On one afternoon early in the fall of 1923 ( I remember the year because I was soon to be twelve years old) when I was watching the football team practice, Mr. Diddle came over to the sideline and asked me how old I was. Quite surprised by this sudden question, I told him I was twelve, even though my twelfth birthday was almost two weeks away.

"Hmm," he paused slightly, then continued. "How would you like to be the mascot for this football team?" Before he was quite finished, he was turning around to talk to the team's quarterback, Arnold "Winky" Winkenhoffer.

Not at all sure he was really talking to me, I said, "What is a mascot?"

He then told me, but only in bits and pieces, while he was telling the quarterback what play to call next. Just be here when I need you, he drawled; keep the water bucket filled; remind Paul Taylor (everyone called him "Horsemeat" Taylor) to wear his helmet, and be ready to call a doctor when someone gets hurt.

That was about it. In today's terms, it was not a very good job description, but I understood well enough to know I wanted to be the team's mascot and work for this man I admired and respected. To be his helper would be just great, I thought. Of course, I knew I was not to be paid for being the mascot, but that fact did not dampen my enthusiasm at all. We never had much money in our family when I was growing up. My mother a teacher; but I was taught early in life by her that if you never do any more than what you are paid for, you'll never be paid for more than you do. I had not forgotten that advice, so I didn't even mention money to Mr. Diddle.

I thanked him but said I would have to ask my mother -- especially since he had suggested I might get to take an out-of-town trip with the team, "if you don't get too big for your britches," he had added, knowing full well that I understood what he meant. He also understood why it was necessary to get permission from my mother. Her reputation as a strict disciplinarian was well known on campus. Some of her friends thought she was too strict with her two sons.

When I asked her that night if I could be the team mascot under Mr. Diddle, she agreed but reminded me that I would still have to cut the firewood for our heating stove every afternoon after school, help wash and dry the dishes after supper, and prepare my lessons for the next day before going to bed each night. I readily agreed, because I had been doing all these things, with some time to spare.

The next afternoon I told Mr. Diddle I could be the mascot if he still wanted me. He assured me with a slight nod and a gentle grunt that he did, and I immediately ran out onto the practice field and told "Horsemeat Taylor" that the coach said for him to put on his helmet, which he did with a frown and a short word of protest I had never heard before. I learned later that "Horsemeat" though it was "sissy" to wear a helmet. He boasted he was tough enough to play bareheaded, and he usually did.

The first and only trip I took that fall with the football team was from Bowling Green to Evansville, Indiana, where the Western Hilltoppers were scheduled to play the Evansville College Purples. The trip was to be made by train, even though the straight-line distance between these two towns was only eight-five or ninety miles. Since we had to go by way of Hopkinsville, Kentucky, however, the distance we actually traveled might have been as much as one hundred and forty miles. In any case, it was scheduled as an overnight train trip.

When we arrived at the Bowling Green train depot, Mr. Diddle purchased tickets for himself and members of the Western team, but none for me. "It would not be illegal if I bought a ticket for you with school money," he said. (I was sure he meant "legal" instead of "illegal" but I did not answer, except to say "oh!")

As we walked toward the train which had just pulled in, he said he would take care of me somehow. Don't worry; everything will work all right, he assured me. I was certainly glad my mother didn't know I was getting on a passenger train to take a trip without a ticket. I decided right then never to tell her, but she found later, any way.

Soon after we boarded the Pullman car of the long train, I learned what Mr. Diddle had in mind for me. The players took their assigned sleeping berths -- the lower ones for "Horsemeat" Taylor" and the other heavy tackles and ends, and the uppers for the lighter backfield players.

Me? Well, the coach said he had just the place for me: on the floor underneath one of the lower berths! "Get under there quick, he whispered, as the conductor opened the door to our car. And immediately I scooted under the berth, stomach down and lay there quietly while the conductor collected tickets, counted passengers, and talked briefly with Mr. Diddle about the next day's football game before going on to the next car.

A few minutes later when I slid out into the dimly-lit aisleway, I suddenly felt a big foot planted on the center of my back. The heavy pressure was unbearable, and I screamed with pain. The weight was removed as I turned over I could see "Horsemeat Taylor" towering over me, his football helmet firmly fastened under his chin, heavy socks on his feet, and absolutely naked everywhere else.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Chester. I didn't know you were down there. I must have been having a nightmare. Coach Diddle was hollering at me about my helmet." The giant's words were jumbled together. He seemed only half awake.

Not taking any more chances on being stepped on, I slid back under the berth for protection -- and hopefully for some sleep. It was then far past my bedtime.

During my lifetime, I've slept on all kinds of beds, cots, sleeping bags, worn-out mattresses, hammocks, and even wooden benches, but never before or after that night trip to Evansville underneath the lower berth have I been so uncomfortable. The distance from the floor to the bottom of the lower berth could not have been more than eight inches, if that much. I'm sure of that because when I wanted to turn over on my back, I had to slide out into the aisle on my stomach, turn over, and then re-turn slowly on my back. Even this change, which I made several times during the night, did not bring much relief, since then my face was practically touching the berth above me.

Furthermore, the hot-water radiators for that Pullman ran along the lower sides of the car just above the floor, and the heat from them caused me to perspire constantly. Needless to say, I slept very little.

What a night! Why had I ever agreed to be a mascot anyway? If I could have turned around at any time and gone home to my little army cot, I certainly would have done it, but there was no turning back. I had to see it through.

When we crossed the Ohio River at Henderson, Kentucky about daybreak the next morning and stooped on a siding in the railroad yards at Evansville, I came out from my hiding place and walked quietly up and down the aisle while the players still slept. Several times I dodged the conductor by ducking into the small toilet at the end of the car. Once I had to jump into one of the lower berths on top of a player and hold the curtains shut while someone came down the aisle. I think it was the brakeman.

I remember very little of what happened at Evansville the next day, except that Western won the football game. Mr. Diddle was very happy about that. I believe he shouted, "That's grateful" when the final whistle blew. I do recall eating a heavy breakfast and a very light lunch with the team; and I helped Mr. Diddle and the players during the game by keeping track of the helmets and the one spare football we brought and carrying the bucket of water and gourd dipper out on the field during timeouts. Contrary to modern-day football, there was very little substitution of players, since nearly all of them played both on offense and defense.

All I could think about during the entire day was that awful train ride I still had to take back to Bowling Green that night. Very little else was on mind. But I got an unexpected break. Fortunately -- or perhaps I should say unfortunately -- one of the players broke his leg in the last quarter of the game and was sent to a local hospital, where he had to stay for several days. I was sorry for him, because I knew he was in much pain, but I was certainly glad to be able to sleep in his berth in the Pullman on the return trip. Oh, how soft and comfortable that berth was. I slept soundly while dreaming about caves, furnaces, and concrete pavements. Once during a nightmare, I was sure a big circus elephant was standing on my back.

My mother and brother met us when we returned to Bowling Green the following morning; and when they asked me if I had had a good time on the trip, I didn't tell them the whole story. I just said, "Yes, it was great -- no problems at all." I didn't see any need to bother them with where and how I had slept on the train. Besides, I thought my brother might make the next trip with the team, and I didn't want to deprive him of some of the experiences I had had. If he didn't know about what happened to me, he would probably make a trip, and then I could laugh at him when he returned.