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## UA3/3/1 Ode to a Half Century

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## AN ODE TO A HALF CENTURY

Fifty years compose a massive accumulation of time, days and months of sessions and seasons. In that time one has wound the hall clock 18,250 times. Two hundred feet of rain have fallen, and any fellow of normal tendencies to hunger has eaten his weight 370 times. If he lives in a two story house he has climbed his own stairs to a distance of 252 miles. If on this campus he has been specially migratory he has climbed steps enough to give him voting rights on the moon. These cheerful data are used to suggest that fifty years ago may be considered as considerably ante yesterday.

A half century ago Grise and Canon and Wilson were here -- yes, and Bert Smith and H. M. Yarbrough too, and Charles Taylor and C. A. Loudermilk only a little later. I was the senior of the group, and yet anyone who knew me then would have doubted if I was senior to anything. But, on the other hand, all of us resembled very closely what we are now. Our ways about the same, and our means still limited. We have more stalk and less sap perhaps, more flower and less foliage. Perhaps we are a trifle sedater and have our vision fixed on less distant horizons than the, but our thumbprints, literal and metaphoric, are the same.

To use statistics to describe Finley Grise is to paint the portrait of Henry Clay with materials otherwise used on roofs. I could find out the dates but I used up my allowance of statistics in the first paragraph. Grise is no statistical matter. What have the years to do with him? They come and go and leave him unbowed and unblemished. I have known him for a full, and I mean full, half century, and I know of no original statistic of him that has been omitted, misplaced, replaced, or malplaced. He was, he is, and he will be. What have height and weight to do with him? How tall was Julius Caesar, and what did he weigh avoirdupois? Was he blond

or pigeon toed? How trivial it is to think of such matters in Caesarian terms. Grise goes his ways serenely, and under becoming discipline, though at times his atoms have been known to separate surprisingly and with observable fallout. There was an imperious flavor about him fifty years ago. It is there now. There was a touch of the pontifical in him then. It is there now. But would you expect one in whose mind moves emperors and pontiffs to have the bearing of a county agricultural agent or to manifest the easy democracy of the principal of a consolidated school? If you have been called to dwell with Vergil we will not expect that ordination to be specially obvious when he is advising an upstate sophomore that she is about to fail in Speech XII. There are some, but not too many men alive who remember when he became a dean. The spointer of flesh which he was then has added perhaps a bit of stateliness but the mansion remains the same. He has grown into a family composed of one wife ordained and set apart for him, and two each of all the kinds of children there are. They have served to anchor his faith to reality, but they have not revised him much, merely deepened the shine in his eyes, and softened the set of his jaws. He has lived fifty good years on this campus and the classic ingredient in him has worked its contagion in uncounted lives. The justice in him has spread the feeling for justice among those whom he has so justly conneeled. The wisdom in him has left an example of the rightness of wisdom in a world of men.

Forty nine years ago this summer I stayed at the same place with Ernest Canon. Somewhere I have a picture of a group of immortals made then. He was never the fellow to push his way into the front row when a picture was being made. There he stands, shouldered aside a bit by his cousin C. T., pushed over a little this way by D. Y. Dunn, a little that way by various others who yielded the front row only under compulsion, on his face a little wistful smile, half deprecatory, half that of one who has discovered that he lives in a humorous but lovable world. I have never

seen Canon without that same smile. It is a part of him in all his visible moments. There may, and probably does, develop a bit of contention as to whether the student sitting across the table from him is entitled to 120 hours of credit as the student undyingly believes, or 119 as Canon's records indicate. That wistful smile never fades, and in the end the student says, "Make it 119". But then Canon says, "I see here something I had overlooked. We will make it 119-1/2 hours". There is no insincerity in that smile, he is as gentle as it is gentle, as unpretentious as it is unpretentious. If you don't know him well that smile might mislead you. "Ah, a timid man," you might say, "one who yearns for a cloistered life, a timid fellow in an arrogant world, a field daisy shouldered aside by sunflowers." Gentle and quiet and modest, yes. But not timid. One who smiles, yes, but not one who surrenders; a bit unworldly in a world whose best thoughts have been unworldly. But one who never flinches when meeting the world. One who recognizes its problems as his problems, to be met on even and fair terms, one who has the strength and purpose and continuity never to yield his strength and purpose and continuity. His home is the home of a fine wife and has been the home of a fine daughter. That gentle, wistful, whimsical smile has become a part of them. It has become a part of this college. I think its influence may outlast those majestic pillars out front.

And what shall we say of A. Gordon Wilson? Yes, what indeed!

What manner of man is he? What paths has he trod on this campus in his well nigh half a century? What redundancy of echoes has he raised in these rooms and halls? What encyclopedic fragments have dropped from his lips wherever he stopped or whenever he stopped or whenever he kept going? Encyclopedic is right. There is nothing knowable in which he does not share. His articulacy is blood kin to the Oxford Dictionary, his audibility the equal of the village band in a rendition of Stars and Stripes Forever. It is history, or botany, or ornithology, or herpetology, or literature he knows it, data and dynasty, chapter and verse. If it is green and

growing, or if it is a vivid reminiscence and testimonial of life long dead his identification and interpretation are with authority. If it is a poem or a story A. Gordon Wilson has read it, he can sing it, or quote it, or pronounce verdicts upon it. He can direct it to its appointed shelf in the libraries of time. If it belongs in that curious category we call folklore it is a part of his lore. He is a devoted family man. His wife fits into all of his fields and phases, though doubtless at times she wishes that his experiness was less unlimited. When you see a special gleam in his eyes he is giving thought to his fine children and grandchildren. Yes, A. Gordon Wilson is the nearest approach to secular omniscience that ever added a cerebral wrinkle to a Hilltop brain.

And these three --- Grise and Canon and Wilson are old timers who are about to become all timers. They emerged in the school's paleozoic period. They had to do with the shaping of Western's social plains and cultural mountains. Their voices are a part of the echoing mass of the school's ongoing.

Henry Yarbrough and Bert Smith are of their era. Charles Taylor, C. A. Loudermilk and Nell Gooche Travelstead came in on the fringe of the era. Their voices are in that chorus, and their thoughts in that creation. Their examples and instruction have enriched and brightened a great many thousand lives. Four other gentlemen belong in this statement: Dr. Lee Francis Jones, Dr. W. M. Pearce, Dr. H. V. McChesney and Dr. M. E. Shell. They did not arrive quite early enough to write their names into the college's charter. But they made the best time they could, and once here they labored with industry and wisdom. They belong in the Western tradition.

Continuity is a word with the most admirable of meanings. I will illustrate. There are in and about Nashville no fewer than fifteen homes, all old and fine, the youngest about 110 years old, that have never been out of the families of the builders. They are not for sale. They are lived in by the great, great grandchildren of the man and wife who bilt them. The families and the homes live on together. There is in that lasting quality a certain beauty, a certain stateliness. The love for a home outlasts a transient emergency. It rises above gross profit. It moves on from the material into the realm of the spiritual. There is also about these who have made this college their home so long something most appealing and reassuring. The outside world has had its temptations to offer, more money, more glamour, but they didn't yield. They stayed on at home. No school anywhere has been made great by teachers who remained two or four or even eight years. The sooner the poor teacher goes the better. The longer the good one stays the better. Consider the influence upon this college if Mr. Alexander, Mr. Clagett, Miss Ragland and Mr. Craig. The teachers who love their college and its work with a passion, who find the proper identity between students and subject matter, between college and community and who stay on session after session, year after year, watching the sun drop lower in the western sky -- those are the ones who give to colleges the enduring flavor of immortality.

Yes, this college has been and is home for those with such continuity. Perhaps they will go out and sit on the porch awhile now, but it is still home.