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The First Quarter Century

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The First Quarter Century

The first structure on the Parsons campus, the stately two-story brick home of Bernhart Henn, was known for many years as the "Mansion." In this building Parsons College was officially opened on September 8, 1875. The two east rooms served both as a chapel and as study and recitation rooms. The ceremonies were opened with prayer and the reading of Scripture, followed by a few brief addresses. The three members of the faculty — the Reverend Alexander G. Wilson, the Reverend Albert McCalla, and the Reverend John Armstrong — were present, and the Board of Trustees was represented by the Reverend Willis G. Craig, William Elliott, and Judge Charles Negus, the latter administering the oath of office to the faculty. This was followed by an examination of prospective students.

The enrollment at the end of the first day was thirty-four; by the end of the first week it had increased to forty-three; eventually it totaled sixty-three for the year. Of the thirty-four students present on the first day, five were to become Parsons College alumni. R. B. Loudon was the first student to pay tuition.

Parsons College consisted of two divisions in

1875 — a three-year preparatory or academical department, and a four-year collegiate department. Of the thirty-four students who applied for admission to the school on the opening day, all but one were assigned to the preparatory department.

In the college department students had a choice of two regular courses of study — classical or scientific. An A. B. degree was to be granted in the classical section, an S. B. degree in the scientific. The only difference between the two courses, however, was that Greek was the language required for the classical section while German was stipulated for those in the scientific division.

All students were required to take courses in Biblical instruction, English, mathematics, Latin, natural science, physics, political science, and mental science, the latter including philosophy and psychology. Students could also enroll within the collegiate department for "Partial Courses," taking only those subjects for which they were prepared. After passing the required examinations, these students were entitled to a certificate for the courses taken, but not a diploma. The college authorities stated that students must take sufficient courses to "prevent idleness" and must attend religious exercises. A normal course was also provided, but instruction in the "Theory and Practice of Teaching" was given only to seniors.

Electives for juniors and seniors were not offered until 1878. In the classical course, the elec-

tives consisted of additional work in Latin, Greek, French, and German; later, Hebrew and special laboratory work in science were provided. The first electives in the scientific course consisted of studies in Latin, French, and mineralogy, with English and special laboratory work added later.

In 1879 the Board of Trustees provided for a chair of Greek language, a lecturer in the history of philosophy, and an instructor in logic. In September of the same year a department of music was opened. The chair of physics and natural science was divided in 1882: the physics section consisting of natural philosophy, chemistry, astronomy, and allied sciences; while the chair of natural science offered courses in physiology, geology, botany, zoology, and related sciences. It was not until 1883 that biology was offered in the science curriculum at Parsons. In the 1884-1885 catalogue, the natural sciences included biology, physical geography, botany, zoology, and geology. The physical sciences offered courses in astronomy, elementary philosophy, chemistry, physics, and qualitative analysis.

These courses were taught by a faculty consisting of college men who devoted their entire efforts to the school in order to make the first year of Parsons College a successful one. The Reverend Alexander G. Wilson, Rector of the Academical Department, was a graduate of Jefferson College (now Washington and Jefferson) at Washington,

Pennsylvania, and the Theological Seminary of the Northwest at Chicago. Not only had Wilson won distinction as a minister, but he was recognized as a capable educator.

The Reverend Albert McCalla, a graduate of Monmouth College and Union Theological Seminary, taught all of the science courses. If McCalla had a weakness, it was that his teaching methods did not fit into the accepted pattern of that time. He was so imbued with his subject material that he could not stay within the confines of the textbook.

Professor John Armstrong taught the Bible courses, English, and Biblical history. While perhaps not of the most scholarly turn of mind, he exhibited an interest in the students and as a result stimulated hard work on their part. Armstrong, who possessed independent sources of income, was not paid any regular salary and accepted an instructorship only because the teaching had to be performed and money was not readily available to employ an additional professor.

These three men continued to represent the entire faculty until 1876 when it became apparent that the teaching staff would have to be enlarged. At the June meeting, the Board of Trustees decided to employ C. L. Stevens as a "tutor" in natural science at a salary of \$850 a year. Stevens, who was to graduate from Lafayette College as an analytical chemist, taught not only natural science classes, but also any other studies the faculty

might decide were necessary. Although the course of study at Parsons was originally almost wholly classical, within the first year the faculty realized that courses in science were necessary. The employment of Stevens was the first indication that science was to be considered essential in college training. Provision was also made to employ a student, Henri G. Behoteguy, as tutor in French, and Dr. R. J. Mohr, a local physician, as a lecturer in physiology.

Administrative problems also confronted the new school. The question of having a president at the head of the college was raised in 1877. Since it did not appear quite proper to have the Rector of the Preparatory Department serving in that capacity, Professor John Armstrong was selected as the first president, but the Board asked Rector Wilson to preside at all faculty meetings and to take charge of the college in the absence of the president. When Armstrong accepted the appointment, Wilson presented his resignation but magnanimously consented to remain for a short period of time, staying on for two years.

Meanwhile, Parsons was experiencing financial difficulties. The college deficit reached \$2,000 in 1878, and the Board decided that either salaries or the staff would have to be reduced. The latter course was adopted, and C. L. Stevens of the natural science division was released. President Armstrong regretted the loss of Stevens, since he

had been a valuable addition to the teaching staff. However, either course of action outlined by the Board could invite educational disaster, since the reducing of salaries would compel instructors to leave, while releasing a competent man would undermine the stability of the entire faculty. In June, 1879, the Board, in attempting to make amends for its action of the previous year, commended the faculty which "with a decreased teaching force has conducted an increased number of classes and recitations." At the same meeting, the Board recommended the Reverend J. Rogers Wilson of Erie, Pennsylvania, for the new chair of Greek, at a salary of \$1,000 per year. In addition, James Young, of Keokuk, was appointed a lecturer on the history of philosophy, and the Reverend J. M. Howell, of Fairfield, was to give instruction in logic.

After serving only two years as president of Parsons College, Armstrong died on August 12, 1879, and was buried on the campus. A fortnight later the Reverend Erastus Judd Gillett was named president for a one-year term. Gillett, then living in retirement at Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, had served as a member of the faculty and later as Dean of the Medical College at Keokuk. He accepted the one-year appointment without salary and proved to be a highly satisfactory educational administrator.

The committee to nominate a new president pre-

sented the name of the Reverend Thomas D. Ewing. A graduate of Washington and Jefferson College and the Western Seminary, Ewing had been pastor of a Presbyterian Church in Pennsylvania for sixteen years, and was destined to serve as president of Parsons and as pastor of the Fairfield Presbyterian Church for the next five years. It then became necessary for Dr. Ewing to give all of his time to the administrative duties of Parsons College.

The first formal inauguration of a president of Parsons College was that of Dr. Ewing on September 14, 1880. Under Ewing's presidency, Parsons College was to witness the issuing of the first number of the student publication, *The Portfolio*, the beginning of the Young Men's Christian Association, the building of an addition on the west side of the chapel, and the division of the department of physics and natural science.

In 1883 Parsons College decided to conform with the practice of other colleges by offering a Master of Arts or a Master of Science degree. These degrees were offered, upon application, to graduates of three years standing who were engaged in "literary, scientific, or professional pursuits" and who were deemed worthy by the faculty. It soon became evident that this system of granting advanced degrees was being abused. Diplomas could be procured at a minimum of cost and effort to the recipient. In 1895 the conditions

under which such degrees were granted were changed by limiting the number to be conferred and by requiring additional reading and study under the direction of the faculty, some of which had to be done in residence by the student. This system continued until 1906 when the conferring of advanced degrees was eliminated.

After nine years of association with Parsons College, President Ewing resigned in June of 1889 and became pastor of the Presbyterian Church at Corning, Iowa. The Reverend Ambrose C. Smith, fifth president of Parsons, was the fourth successive president to study at Washington and Jefferson College, graduating in 1861. He served as pastor of the South Presbyterian Church of Galena from 1866 to 1889, when he was called to Parsons. In his inaugural address, Smith declared the threefold aim of Parsons College was "To give scholarship; to give broad, practical training; to give Christian culture." Under his administration Ankeny Hall was completed, and Alumni Field readied for athletic engagements.

In 1896 President Smith resigned because of ill health. His successor, the Reverend Daniel Edward Jenkins, was but thirty years old when selected president of Parsons in July, 1896. Born in Wales, Jenkins had spent his boyhood and youth in America. He received his A. B. degree from the University of Melbourne, Australia, and studied theology in Melbourne and at Princeton Seminary,

where he graduated in 1891. His first and only pastorate was at New London, Pennsylvania.

President Jenkins' administration at Parsons (1896-1900) marks a period of transition during which old methods and philosophies were giving way to the new. A curriculum committee of 1897 suggested eight changes, all originally proposed by the faculty, and each designed to bring the college closer to the accepted educational policy of the day. More elective courses were introduced in most departments and sociology was added and first taught by President Jenkins in addition to a long list of other subjects. The Board also allowed the employment of a special instructor in English and history for subjects formerly not taught by a trained specialist. As a result of these changes, friction increased and in 1900 President Jenkins resigned, subsequently to become president of the new University of Omaha. Parsons entered the new century under a new president.