

8-1-1950

Through Depression and War

Kenneth F. Milsap

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest>

Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Milsap, Kenneth F. "Through Depression and War." *The Palimpsest* 31 (1950), 308-318.

Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol31/iss8/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the State Historical Society of Iowa at Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Palimpsest by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

Through Depression and War

The students, alumni, and friends of Parsons College who observed the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of their school in 1925 could look back with pride to a half century of real accomplishment against almost insuperable odds. Surely the next quarter century (1925-1950) would find progress smoother. A note of optimism and good will prevailed throughout the anniversary services.

Unfortunately the third quarter century of Parsons' history was equally difficult. The sudden death of President McDonald on July 9, 1927, ended a very successful administration. Not only had the physical plant been enlarged but a number of separate departments had been added — education, history, social science, chemistry, philosophy, physics, and business administration. McDonald's successor, Dr. Clarence W. Greene, became president in June, 1929, on the eve of the most withering depression in American history. With income from endowment shrinking to the vanishing point and student enrollment plummeting from 512 in 1925 to 287 a decade later, the plight of Parsons was indeed desperate.

President Greene met these financial problems with courage and success. Furthermore, while

many colleges were losing their accredited rating, the academic standards at Parsons were maintained. The key to his success may be found in the high objectives outlined in his inaugural address — every member of the faculty had to be a mature scholar and a master teacher; each teacher had to be active in the practice of Christianity; the student body must be earnest and purposeful; and the patrons of the school must provide full support. After ten years of service, a tenure longer than any of his predecessors, President Greene submitted his resignation to the Board on March 14, 1938.

Dr. Fred J. Hinkhouse, Dean of the College from 1935 until March, 1941, also provided important contributions in maintaining the strength of Parsons' academic program. A graduate of the college in 1916, Dr. Hinkhouse was professor of history from 1924 until his resignation in 1946.

Dr. Donald L. Hibbard, a businessman and insurance executive, succeeded Greene as president. During his two-year tenure only minor changes occurred. One major disaster took place, however, when a fire swept Ballard Hall in December, 1939, gutting the building. By the spring of 1940 loyal friends were renovating and refurnishing Ballard Hall.

Dr. Herbert C. Mayer succeeded Dr. Hibbard as president of Parsons College in February, 1941. A native of Chicago, Mayer had been educated at

Oberlin College, Boston University, and Harvard. From 1920 to 1929 he had taught education at Boston University, but had been employed previously as a personnel training director for Curtis Wright Flying Service, developing the first standard training course for civilian pilots and mechanics. Mayer resigned as educational executive of the Council for Democracy in order to come to Parsons.

The induction of the thirteenth president of Parsons College occurred on October 13, 1941, in Barhydt Chapel. In his inaugural, Mayer discussed the problem of educating free men and the adjustments that should be made in the liberal arts college program. The "Parsons Progress Fund," the objective of which was to insure the future growth and development of the school, was officially launched at Mayer's inauguration. John E. Hunt of Fairfield spearheaded the drive which sought to raise \$100,000 — \$50,000 for library purposes, \$25,000 for repair and improvement of dormitories, and \$25,000 for a scholarship fund.

Although Parsons did not have any military or naval training units stationed on the campus during World War II, the college introduced courses to prepare students for service with the armed forces. Military photography, radio communications, meteorology, and additional courses in mathematics, business, and administration were added for the men. Courses included for the

women were: introduction to nursing, hospital aid, and essentials of home economics. In addition, Parsons adopted a six-day week so that better work programs could be arranged by students employed on part-time defense jobs or on farms. The 1942 spring vacation was eliminated so that men who had enlisted in the Naval Reserve Corps could report for the next training school on May 22. The college also cooperated with the Navy Department in working out details of the V-1 plan by which freshmen and sophomores were prepared for officer training. By 1943 Parsons College had adopted three steps urged by the military — a year-round schedule; streamlined courses to fit service needs; and the admission of qualified high school students for college work before graduation. As a result of this accelerated program, the first mid-year graduation in the history of the school occurred on January 27, 1943.

To cover special financial demands created by World War II, a "President's Emergency Fund" was authorized by the Board of Trustees and a \$25,000 gift was received from Hubert E. Howard to start the fund.

The details of a "Six-Year Plan" for Parsons were presented at the Founder's Day dinner held on the Fairfield campus in 1944. The plan contemplated a student body of 500, to be admitted on a territorial basis. The curriculum was to be revised so that elementary and secondary teachers

could be trained. The program also proposed the enlargement of the faculty and the adoption of a tenure and retirement system. The plan called for an addition to the library, a student center, new dormitories, a college infirmary, a field house, a new social science building, and the restoration of Ewing Hall. An increase of the endowment fund to \$1,500,000 was visualized and the Parsons National Alumni Council was formed.

One month before the announcement of the Six-Year Plan the Board of Trustees elected Professor Edward H. Bonsall, Jr., to the newly created post of vice-president. Bonsall, who had served for three years as Dean of Student Personnel, was placed in charge of student admissions and public relations. Later, in 1945, Franklin R. Hoff was appointed to the post of assistant to the president to help coordinate all college contacts with the public. Both these positions it was felt would promote the Six-Year Plan.

With the death of Dean Charles Carter in 1944, the students, faculty, alumni, and friends of the college established the Carter Memorial Fund for a Student Union. No concerted financial drive was inaugurated, but contributions from alumni and friends totaled more than \$12,000 by 1950. The Fund is being held intact pending the further consideration of a plan for its use in the establishment of a suitable memorial.

The return of many veterans and their wives to

the campus in 1945 and 1946 created an acute housing shortage at Parsons. In December, 1945, the college applied to the Federal Housing Authority for temporary housing, and fifty prefabricated family units and fifteen standard trailers were allotted. Later, dormitory housing for twenty-four single men was provided. During the winter of 1945-1946 the college purchased the Bradshaw property on Kirkwood Street and remodeled it to accommodate thirty men and one faculty family. The Parsons College Auxiliary aided by locating rooms for sixty-eight students in private homes.

Despite the hardships imposed by World War II, academic standards were improved and the curriculum was strengthened so that there was a full acceptance of credits by the State Board of Educational Examiners. An important addition to the curriculum was made in the spring of 1946: the Board set up the Parsons College Small Business Bureau. Dr. Tom E. Shearer was named director of the new bureau which aimed to coordinate college training with actual business operations. The fiscal affairs of the college operated within a budget which facilitated the retirement of loans and the prompt payment of accounts and salaries. During the period from 1941 to 1947 approximately \$250,000 in gifts was secured.

President Herbert C. Mayer resigned on December 3, 1946. Two weeks later the Trustees

appointed Dr. Tom E. Shearer executive vice-president of the school. Shearer was named acting president in 1947 and president of Parsons in 1948.

Dr. Shearer continued to develop the Six-Year Plan. In his Founder's Day report on February 24, 1948, he noted that Ballard Hall lounge had been completely redecorated and refurnished by the College Auxiliary of Fairfield. The library also had been remodeled and the number of volumes increased. The Presbyterian Restoration Fund provided for the repainting of Foster Hall and the remodeling of Fairfield Hall to provide more office space. The McKenzie Memorial Library, a new science library named in honor of Professor R. Monroe McKenzie, who taught physics and chemistry from 1903 to 1942, had been provided in Foster Hall. Three temporary men's dormitories were built during the summer of 1947 to house seventy-five men. The Board of Trustees had retired some of the outstanding bonds and the 1947 Fairfield Fund brought the college approximately \$17,000. In concluding his report, President Shearer called for higher faculty salaries, a new heating plant, and construction of the Carter Memorial Student Center.

During 1948 progress was made in expanding the physical plant by the construction of a new \$60,000 heating plant. The school's finances were also strengthened. Hubert E. Howard, a gradu-

ate of Parsons in 1909 and a former member of the Board of Trustees, had suggested in 1944 that more outside support would be received if the Fairfield community would actively assist the college. Subsequently, business firms contributed money or real estate yearly to the "Fairfield Fund." In 1948, as the fund approached \$15,000, Howard proposed to match whatever sum was raised, which eventually totaled \$25,060. In addition, Mrs. Emma A. Davies of Fairfield gave the college her interest in a farm, the sale of which added \$15,000 more to the fund. Mrs. Edith Foster Chamberlin offered to donate \$4,000 to the college library in 1948 if the New York Alumni chapter would raise an additional \$1,000. This condition was met within twenty-four hours. Mrs. Chamberlin's offer was repeated in 1949, and again the condition was met and the gift completed.

In spite of the progress made in developing the Six-Year Plan, Parsons was dropped from the North Central Association accredited list July 1, 1948. First accredited by the Association in 1913, Parsons had remained in good standing until 1943 when, on the basis of a low standing in the 1939-1940 Finance Study, a special report on finances was requested. In addition, another special report on the library was desired. A survey was ordered in 1946 and as a result Parsons was dropped from the accredited list.

Immediately following the Association's action in 1948, President Shearer and the Board of Trustees developed a special two-year rehabilitation plan, involving an expenditure of more than \$300,000 beyond the regular operating budget. A drive for "reaccreditation" funds was launched to cover these expenditures. Once again Hubert E. Howard helped the school by giving \$50,000 in 1950, bringing his total contributions to Parsons to more than \$135,000 since 1942.

Examiners from the North Central Association visited the campus in January, 1950. They found the school finances had been strengthened; a new heating plant constructed; the library remodeled and many volumes added. Furthermore, housing units for faculty and students had been improved; classrooms and laboratories were rebuilt; a student health program had been provided; a new student personnel plan instituted; and a modernized curriculum was in process of being formulated. In spite of a favorable recommendation by the examiners, the board of review failed to reinstate Parsons. The college filed an appeal, and oral arguments were presented by President Shearer and Walter E. Williams of the Board of Trustees. Additional briefs were submitted in June, 1950, and the board of review finally recommended that Parsons be restored to the accredited list on July 1, 1950. This action represented a personal victory for President Shearer, the members of the

Board of Trustees, and the loyal alumni of the school who had contributed heavily to improve the finances of the institution.

As Parsons College enters its 76th year in 1950 a new era of service looms before it. The physical equipment will be enlarged in 1950 by the construction of a new swimming pool adjoining Trustee Gymnasium. The land has been deeded by the college to the city of Fairfield which will build and operate a \$60,000 pool as a municipal enterprise. The location of the pool on the campus marks the first step in a long-range program to make the college area a community-college recreation center.

The fall of 1950 will see Parsons College instituting a new curriculum that will strengthen its academic program. As a result, work toward a degree can be carried on in four divisions: humanities, practical arts, science, and social science. Every student must complete a minimum number of hours in each division regardless of his major field of interest. New students enrolling at Parsons can now major in one of the following fields: music, business administration, physical education, English, social science, science, and foreign languages.

There is much in the past history of Parsons to justify its continued growth in the future. Great progress has been made since 1875 when thirty-odd students gathered in one building to open the new school. While 1950 marks the end of the Six-

Year Plan, much construction is still anticipated. In reporting to the Board of Trustees in June, 1950, President Shearer declared: "Probably at no time since the founding of the college has the future held more promise, or the problems loomed larger. . . . Parsons College, on her 75th anniversary, stands at the beginning of a period of great promise. The need for this college and the educational opportunities she offers is very great indeed. But, if the college is to fulfill her true destiny, she must be strong financially and academically." All Iowans join the students, alumni, and friends of Parsons in wishing the school pleasant sailing during the next quarter century.