

IN May of 1901, after I had completed all the requirements except my oral examination, for my doctor's degree at the Johns Hopkins, I received a letter from Professor George Lefevre, of the University of Missouri. We had taught together at the Marine Biological Laboratory before he went to Missouri in the fall of '99, and now he was writing me about an instructor being added to his staff. He invited me to visit Columbia at the University's expense, so that I might be looked over and look the place over for myself. With my Van Dyke beard and pince-nez, I thought I should make a good impression and hoped that I should like the University of Missouri as much as I liked Lefevre.

The Wabash branch from Centralia to Columbia, even then, was something to discourage a newcomer. George had warned me of this and written that the country about Columbia was not like that surrounding Centralia. So I took the branch in stride and watched the landscape change from prairie to hills. We call them "hills," but as one of my friends used to say, "These are not hills. A hill is a place you go up and come down. These are places where you go down and come up."

George met me on the station platform, which was crowded with people, mostly colored, who were there to see the train come in. We drove in a hack over the



*Dr. Curtis as a green Ph.D. in 1901. Drawn by Charles Schwartz from a photograph.*

By DR. W. C. CURTIS

## **a damned-Yankee in Little Dixie**

dusty, unpaved streets, where I saw stepping stones for the first time; and, after circling the campus we reached his home on Ninth Street across from the present law building.

At dinner that night I was thrilled to meet Professor Frank Thilly, who had translated the edition of Paulsen's, "History of Philosophy," which I had devoured at Williams College and read again and again.

The next morning I was introduced to President Jesse and to Walter Williams, then a Curator of the University and later to become the organizing spirit of the Missouri School of Journalism and its first dean. As I conferred with the President and Mr. Williams, at length and in the absence of Professor Lefevre, I realized that they were making me do most of the talking. After they had continued this quizzing for a good hour, asking me about my work and interests, President Jesse said to me, in the somewhat pompous manner he assumed on occasion, "Of course, Doctah Curtis, suh, we do not expect to judge of your scholastic attainments on the basis of this brief interview. We have that information from other sources." Then came my introduction to the Williams humor, "Yes, Dr. Curtis," said Mr. Williams, "President Jesse

merely wanted to hear you talk for an hour and to entertain you at his house for dinner to inspect your table manners." At the dinner Mr. Williams made it again evident that he could poke fun at a President even in the presence of a prospective instructor.

It was the drought year of 1901 and although it was May the Missouri campus was parched brown. As we sat at the table the President looked out upon the quadrangle and sighed. He said he had recently visited the University of Illinois where watering had kept the grass fresh and green.

He exclaimed, "What wouldn't I give if we only had a green campus at the Univahsity of Missouri as they have at Illinois." Whereupon, Mr. Williams remarked, "But President Jesse, you should remember that what the University lacks in its campus is made up for by its president."

My conversation and table manners having passed muster, I was told before I left Columbia that my appointment could be made at the next Board meeting, and I agreed to accept.

Better than the formalities with President Jesse and Mr. Williams, were my meetings with certain

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members of the faculty. George Lefevre was a princely entertainer. I stayed at his home for three days during which there was a round of lunches, dinners and evening gatherings. The reception I received was most cordial because I was Lefevre's guest. I said for years afterward that never did I have so many good times packed into so few days. Later, I found that there was more to all this entertainment than appeared on the surface.

When there was an appointment to be made, President Jesse combed the country for possible candidates, who were then brought to Columbia for interviews, even at the instructor level. An important, though unofficial, part of such an interview was the entertainment of the candidate by members of the faculty. Evening dinners would be followed by hours beside "the Anheuser-Busch," reminiscent of the Germany most of our faculty members had known. There is nothing like loosening up his reflexes to tell you what a fellow is really like. Before an appointment was offered, Mr. Williams would contact his trusted faculty members, "Well, what did you fellows think of him?" If they turned thumbs down, there was little chance that the candidate would be offered an appointment. It seemed that Mr. Williams, rather than President Jesse, gave the final word.

This system of widespread search, interviews on campus, entertainment at the president's table and in the houses of faculty members resulted, during my early years at the University of Missouri, in a remarkable faculty. If you don't believe it, call the roll and see what those men did and where they went before they were through. Unfortunately for Missouri most of them left us for better positions elsewhere. They were so good we could not keep them. But as we said through the years of my generation, "We want men so good we are likely to lose them, although we always hope to keep such faculty members." No less important was the imprint of this system upon the faculty members involved; it gave us a sense of partnership and responsibility in building a faculty of which the University could be proud.

How I enjoyed that trip to Columbia, my first journey at public expense, especially the trip back east. I sat with my feet on the opposite seat of my Pullman section, getting my money's worth and knowing that I was to teach during the coming year in what seemed to me an institution on its way up. More than that, jobs were scarce in those years and I knew I was lucky to be appointed an instructor at \$1,000, with the assurance of advancement in due course to an assistant professor, if I made good.

When my fond mother heard that I was going to Missouri, she protested, "No, positively, no. I cannot

give my consent to Winnie's going to such a place as Missouri." From this it may be inferred that my mother still thought of me at times as a little boy despite my twenty-five years, and that the impression that Jesse James had created for Missouri was still vivid with many of her generation. But as it turned out, the next fifteen years were glorious ones for the University of Missouri and for me as a member of its faculty.

But it did not seem to me that the town in that early day had kept pace with its University, and I felt that the "natives" took themselves more seriously than I thought justifiable. I had not realized that back of "Little Dixie," the name still used for the string of river counties including Boone, was the tradition, shown in the statement usually made soon after the introduction to the stranger, "Where are you from, Suh? I'm a Missourian, but my father came from Kentucky, and my grandfather, suh, was a Virginian."

I heard the state called Mother of the West. I was told stories of the Santa Fe Trail, the Pony Express, General Gentry's Missourians in the Seminole War, and the pivotal position of Missouri in the Civil War.—"Do you know, sir, that Missouri sent more men into the Union army than Massachusetts? We sent plenty into the Confederate States army also." I was introduced to the folk painting of the artist Bingham, who had been a protege of a leading Columbia family. It was often remarked that Missouri was rated the sixth richest state in the nation. Those Missourians were pretty good and they knew it. "Missouri raises the best mules in the United States," exclaimed a member of the Legislature who decried the appointment of a Yankee to the University faculty. "Why can't she raise University professors?"

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The foregoing article is from the autobiographical notes of Dr. Curtis; it appeared originally as the first of twelve installments in the Columbia Missourian which were later printed in a brochure, copyright 1957 by Winton C. Curtis. The article is reprinted in the *Alumnus* by special permission of Dr. Curtis, who is dean emeritus of the College of Arts and Science, and professor emeritus of zoology. Dr. Curtis makes his home in Columbia, where he continues his writing and various hobbies, and from where he embarks on long motor trips each summer.

## Recognition for Nance

Gordon E. Nance, professor of agricultural economics at the University since his retirement in 1956 from the Extension Service, recently received a certificate of recognition from Epsilon Sigma Phi, national honorary extension fraternity. The presentation was made at the fraternity's banquet in connection with meetings of the Association of Land Grant Colleges and Universities in Denver.

Nance spent thirty-six years in extension services of Kentucky and Missouri.