

Making Herman B Wells

Moral Development and Emotional Trauma in a Boone County Boyhood

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My first encounter with Herman Wells, in April 1977, was a job interview for the position of houseman at the chancellor's residence. I was working my way through college at Indiana University and was responding to a notice posted at the student financial aid office. The receptionist in Owen Hall ushered me into the expansive, high-ceilinged room, painted a pale blue, where the septuagenarian chancellor sat working at a roomy desk. Tall bookcases lined opposite walls; old paintings hung on the wall between. Every available surface was cluttered with *objets d'art* and gewgaws. A bank of open windows let in the spring-time air, faintly perfumed with blossoming trees and flowers.

I strode to greet him, my hand outstretched. Noticing my entrance, Wells struggled to rise from his chair, but he could not quite make it. With a rueful smile, he grabbed my proffered hand and pulled firmly, slowing easing his bulk upright. As he stood before me, a few inches shorter than my six feet, I noticed his large head, with wavy white hair and a small mustache, bright blue eyes beneath bushy eyebrows, an

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almost perfectly round, pregnant belly, and tailor-made clothes. Fixing me with a relaxed and radiant smile, he introduced himself and directed me to sit in the unusual three-cornered chair beside his desk – a Colonial roundabout – providing me with a brief account of its provenance.

Wells proceeded to tell me about the history of the houseman tradition, which dated to the beginning of his IU presidency in 1937, and explained the duties of the position. Prompted by his questions, I told him about my studies in psychology, my employment history, and growing up in Bloomington. He was pleased to know that my father, a public accountant, had obtained his business education at IU in the 1950s. As the interview came to a close, Wells remarked, with a twinkle in his eye, that I would have to pass muster with the house staff, too, in order to gain employment. When I stood up to take my leave, I extended my hand to the seated chancellor. Wells once again grasped it firmly to lever himself out of the chair, all the while telling me how pleased he was to meet me. He never spoke about this small gesture of mutual aid, and it took me a long time to realize that, with this ritual exchange, he was inviting me into the Wells circle. It was also my introduction to what I would later call his total lack of self-consciousness.

That radical un-self-consciousness was part and parcel of Wells's unselfish approach to life and provided the foundation for his extraordinary career of public service. His life spanned nearly the entire twentieth century, from his birth in 1902 to his death in 2000, and he was associated with Indiana University for nearly eighty years, beginning with his first student days in 1921. Joining the faculty in 1930, he was selected as president in 1937, spending decade after decade in faithful, innovative leadership. During his twenty-five years as university executive, he brought IU from its position as a decent, if provincial, institution to the front ranks of American research universities. He oversaw a tremendous expansion of enrollment, recruited a faculty of talent and enthusiasm, and transformed the physical plant into a campus of surpassing beauty and cultural achievement. His accomplishments cannot be easily summarized because he lent a hand to everyone concerned about the university and its academic community, and everything from program development and administrative operations to advocating the interests of IU on the local, state, national, and global levels. He gave unstinting support to Alfred C. Kinsey's right to conduct his research without institutional interference; vigorously encouraged Wilfred C. Bain's efforts to include opera in his quest to improve the School of Music; and found innovative ways to fund the Russian and Eastern European Institute,

under Robert F. Byrnes, as the first among a host of international area studies programs. In 1962, when Wells was promoted to the new post of university chancellor, he served as IU's educational ambassador, long-range planner, and chief fundraiser. His contributions to the welfare of the university were widely known, and he became the acknowledged paterfamilias of the great IU clan. A legend in his own lifetime, his elevation to iconic status caused Wells some private consternation.

I graduated in 1979 with my baccalaureate degree and finished my work as a Wells houseman. The following year, Wells presented me with an inscribed copy of his new autobiography, *Being Lucky*. I remember reading through it with enthusiasm, and marveled at the scope and range of his extraordinary career. I especially enjoyed learning about his parents and his undergraduate days at IU. But I was disappointed. Somehow the narrative did not capture the personality of the man that I had come to know – his remarkable empathy and interpersonal skills, his lack of ego, his sly sense of humor. *Being Lucky* was a recounting, with a few vivid descriptions, of a life of public service by a dignified and humble individual.¹

By many accounts, Wells was a great man, with a great career that transformed one of America's heartland universities into a player in national and global scholarship and service. In seeking to understand such individuals, we often look for great beginnings, or at least for some clue as to what lies in wait for fuller expression. Embarking on my biography of Wells in 1999, I sought to explore how and why an individual comes to embody an institution. My research led naturally into questions relating to his childhood, family environment, and psychosocial development into adulthood. For sources of information and clues to his personal evolution, I drew on my association with Wells as an employee and a member of his elective family, on interviews and consultations with other people who knew and observed Wells, and on the documentary record, which is sparse for his early years. Complicating my interpretive pursuit was Wells's nearly total silence, either orally or in writing, regarding his personal feelings, interpersonal relationships, and emotional trials. Here was a truly public man who maintained a sphinx-like silence about his private life.²

¹Herman B Wells, *Being Lucky: Reminiscences and Reflections* (Bloomington, Ind., 1980).

²For a useful discussion of "greatness" in historical context, see John C. Burnham, "Where Has Greatness Gone?" *Midwest Quarterly* 27 (1985-86), 129-48.

One of the few sources available was *Being Lucky*, which presented a positive version of his early life in accordance with his persona as a public servant. Based upon my personal acquaintance with Wells and my study of individual psychology, I attempted to penetrate beyond the optimistic scrim of his autobiography. I followed my hunches, combined them with information from other sources, and pieced together significant episodes that shed light on the development of this remarkable leader. I chose not to include such materials in my biography, *Herman B Wells: The Promise of the American University*, mainly because of the dearth of verifiable sources.³

What follows is an interpretation of Wells's early life, as he matured from a pre-teen to a young adult. In contrast to the benign and mostly sunny portrait in *Being Lucky*, Wells faced a number of important challenges to his emerging identity and sense of self, which threw him back on his own resources, time and again. During and after these private trials, Wells made some crucial choices that had significant later consequences for his personal development, both as an individual and in relation to others.

Herman learned early on to help with the household chores, which were considerable living on ten acres in rural Jamestown, Indiana. As an only child, he was expected to assist his mother Bernice, a housewife, with the shopping and gardening. His father Granville worked as a banker; his masculine demeanor was reserved and undemonstrative.

In 1914, shortly after the *Indianapolis Daily Times* penetrated the Jamestown-area market, Herman wanted to buy a newspaper route. Realizing that it might conflict with the schedule for the Jamestown Boys Band, for which Herman played alto horn, his father initially said "no." Pestered by his son, Granville eventually relented, figuring that it might provide a good introduction to small-business management. To acquire the necessary capital, Herman went to the bank with "whose workings he was so familiar" because of his father's employment, and obtained a loan of eight dollars.⁴

³James H. Capshew, *Herman B Wells: The Promise of the American University* (Bloomington, Ind., 2012).

⁴Gerald R. Sherratt, "The Long Journey," *The Delta of Sigma Nu Fraternity* (Spring 1962), 141-45, quote p. 142.



Herman Wells with his collie Scottie, 1910s. Wells used this photograph in his autobiography, *Being Lucky*, as part of his depiction of his happy childhood.

Courtesy of the author

Herman faced stiff competition for subscribers. The daily *Times* was a direct competitor with the *Indianapolis News*, both with statewide coverage. The *News*, referred to as “The Great Hoosier Daily,” had the largest circulation of any Indiana newspaper. Since most local residents would take only one daily paper (sometimes in addition to the weekly *Jamestown Press*), Herman had to persuade people to take the *Times*, or, if they already subscribed to the *News*, convince them to switch.

The stout twelve-year-old turned out to be a natural salesman. He touted the *Times* so enthusiastically that he built up his route to more

than one hundred customers. The money he earned went into the toy bank bought by his parents shortly after his birth for his college fund. His success as a carrier was proudly noted by his parents, and was soon incorporated into family lore.⁵

Herman enjoyed accompanying his father on occasional visits to the Jamestown bank, meeting his father's coworkers, and puttering around with simple jobs. As Herman grew and spent more time out of the household orbit, Granville took a real interest in teaching him about his work in banking and fiduciary management. When Herman was thirteen, Granville started giving his son more responsibility. During school holidays, he learned to operate the bank's mechanical Burroughs Posting Machine, devised to automate bookkeeping procedures. The bulky piece of equipment was designed for a standing adult, so Herman had to perch upon a wooden box to reach the keyboard. He was justifiably proud of his newfound skill, which was a real contribution to the bank's operation, and pleased that he made his father proud. His father boasted later that Herman "was practically raised in a bank."⁶

During adolescence, Herman's body grew taller and rounder. Not fond of sports, he kept busy with school and work and other interests such as the civic band. His mother suffered a serious attack of tuberculosis, a dread disease at the time, but she recovered with no lasting effects. Family concern was heightened because both Bernice and Granville had a brother and a sister who died of the disease. This picture of Herman's pre-teen years comports with *Being Lucky's* idealized account of his formation in small-town Indiana.

Granville, who had turned 40 in 1914, had achieved a measure of professional success and financial stability, and he was universally admired for his contributions to the local community. He had a dignified public persona, but at home, he was often bedeviled by personal demons and suffered greatly from melancholy moods. Herman later recalled:

He was cordial and courteous to every person with whom he came into contact, and yet there was about him a reticence and reserve that appeared to be a part of his general seriousness.

⁵Ibid. In *Being Lucky*, 15, Wells referred to the newspaper as the *Indianapolis Times*, although the name varied.

⁶Sherratt, "The Long Journey," 142.

People tended to be in awe of him, and the expression of their affection was restrained by deep respect.

But Granville's punctiliousness had evolved into a consuming introspection, and he ceaselessly worried about his responsibilities. A perfectionist, he felt depressed when he was unable to meet his own high standards.⁷

In August 1914, things had gotten so bad that something needed to be done to alleviate Granville's nervous exhaustion. On the morning of August 26, Granville got on the train to Martinsville, Indiana, to stay for a few days at the Martinsville Sanitarium. The facility was perhaps the most famous among those that touted the healing properties of the artesian wells that dotted the area. His departure only added to the serious worries that plagued his mother, Jane Wells. Her headaches and depression had become unbearable, but she continued her daily routines despite numbing anguish. One evening, she prepared dinner, perhaps including some of her famous home-baked bread, and sat down to eat with her husband Isaac and visiting grandson Wayne Gill, Herman's seven-year-old cousin.

After the meal, Isaac and Wayne left the room while Jane cleared away the plates and put everything in order. Then she left the house, went to a nearby outbuilding, and fashioned a leather noose made of a harness line. Attaching the other end of the leather line to a rafter, she climbed a stepladder, put the noose around her neck, and swung off. Less than a half-hour passed before Isaac and Wayne discovered her lifeless body.

In a brief article, the *Jamestown Press* reported that "Ill Health and Worry Caused Derangement Which Resulted in Death of Well Known Woman." The Lebanon newspapers speculated that "her sudden and rash deed" was due to worry about her son's health, noting that Granville had left earlier that day for treatment at the Martinsville Sanitarium. In her fifty-eight years, Jane Wells had buried a son and a daughter, both victims of tuberculosis. In addition to Granville, she left Earl, then a bachelor; daughter Roxie Revercomb; and three grandsons – Wayne Gill, Gene Revercomb, and Herman Wells.⁸

⁷Wells, *Being Lucky*, 21.

⁸*Jamestown Press*, August 28, 1914; *Lebanon Pioneer*, August 27, 1914; *Lebanon Reporter*, August 27, 1914.

The three young cousins were close companions during summer visits to their grandparents' farm. Herman had recently turned twelve years old when his grandmother died. Remembering her as a warm person, Herman later marveled about the fact that she had made biscuits daily and bread regularly to please his grandfather, who heaped scorn on "punk," his term for commercial bread.⁹ Due to his advancing years, Isaac eventually lived for a time with Granville and Bernice. He was a fun-loving raconteur who relished cigars and whiskey. Isaac spoke his mind and could be sarcastic when confronted with small-mindedness. Herman adored him and took delight in his contrary ways.¹⁰

Although the documentary record is thin, one can surmise that the death of Jane Wells generated significant changes in Herman's family environment. It weighed heavily on Granville's mind, deepening his natural reserve and heightening his propensity to depression. Socially stigmatized, suicide was often viewed as a constitutional condition that ran in families. One can easily infer that Granville considered this possibility and that Herman, young as he was, might have gotten some inkling of this likely family taint. Perhaps Herman pondered the starkly different approaches to life represented by Jane and Isaac Wells.

Granville was able to maintain his stoic and competent public persona, but remained withdrawn and morose at home. Herman had to grow up quickly to cope with his father's mood disorder. His mother Bernice relied increasingly on her son as a confidant and ally in managing Granville, and he willingly did all he could do to please his parents. Herman pleased his father immensely by continuing to assist at the Jamestown bank. He was a quick study, with a knack for facts and figures. Small-town banks were a vital institution in the economic life of rural America. They provided an array of financial services to both individual customers and commercial clients, and local bankers often dealt with matters of fiduciary delicacy and legal substance. In addition to his cashier duties at the bank, Granville—who had read law—was admitted to the Boone County bar, which made him a more valuable employee, especially in the transaction of contracts and trusts. Young Herman took

⁹Besides recounting her baking skills, Wells only said this about his grandmother: "Because she died when I was still young, I have little memory of my grandmother Jane Emmert Wells except to be conscious of the fact she was a dutiful and hardworking wife." Wells, *Being Lucky*, 8.

¹⁰Later Wells took automobile trips with his grandfather to visit distant relatives in Kentucky, calling it "a rare privilege." Isaac died in 1934, at age 83. *Ibid.*

it all in, from the technical details of banking operations to the human issues of economic health and community development.

For Herman, keeping busy with productive work acquired a new urgency after his grandmother's suicide and with his father's deepening depression. He adapted to the uncomfortable situation, knowing that he was highly valued by his parents. He worked harder—on his newspaper route, at the bank, on schoolwork—and was able to keep anxiety at bay. As Herman matured, he was faced with an essential tension between love for his father and the fear of being too much like him. He developed heightened sensitivity to the feelings of others and learned to guard the expression of his emotions.

At the end of the summer of 1917, mumps, a common contagious viral disease that infects the salivary glands, visited the Wells household. Both fifteen-year-old Herman and his mother came down with it. A few months before, the family had moved from the village of Jamestown to the county seat of Lebanon when his father had taken up duties as deputy treasurer of Boone County. Both Granville and Bernice were cognizant of the advantages of the larger city, including an excellent high school. Herman's entrance to Lebanon High School as a sophomore was delayed for several weeks as he battled mumps and a troublesome complication that affected some adolescent boys. In medical terminology, Wells suffered from orchitis, an infection of the testes. Orchitis was a painful condition, with scrotal swelling and extreme sensitivity to movement and touch. It often impaired fertility, and, in some cases, led to sterility.¹¹

Wells's parents worried about their son's future, and no doubt wondered whether he could have children. Although no contemporary records have come to light, we know that Herman had ample time to contemplate his future as he slowly recuperated. Most young men of his age had begun thinking about romance and interpersonal relationships. What would he find in high school, once he recovered enough to actually start attending?

¹¹Wells suffered from groin pain for many years. In January 1937, a prostatic examination was conducted on Wells by W. F. Martin, M.D., at the Battle Creek Sanitarium, who reported, "He had mumps and orchitis with partial atrophy of the right testicle which has remained very sensitive and any pressure or manipulation causes pain." The doctor advised removal if the pain "annoys him seriously and continues," adding, "I am sure it is non-functioning and of no value." Battle Creek Sanitarium to Herman B Wells, January 6, 1937, File: Health, box 2, collection 75, Indiana University Archives, Bloomington, Indiana. See also Capshew, *Herman B Wells*, chaps. 12, 18.

With no access to Wells's thoughts, we can observe his behavior and look for clues to see how he dealt with the consequences of this physiological anomaly. Although on the large side, Herman was an attractive individual, well-groomed, courteous, and with a pleasant smile. Socially adept, he made friends easily. He was able to translate the knowledge gained working in his father's bank to business affairs at school, and he served his class as treasurer for the yearbook, newspaper, theatrical productions, and fund-raising schemes.

Although Wells was voted "Funniest" and "Best All-Around Boy" by his senior class peers, he did have to dodge cruel jabs at his size and weight. In *The Cedars*, the yearbook of Lebanon High School, many jokes were made at his expense. The caption of his senior picture mixed satire with praise: "Herman is known to the Hall of Fame for three paramount reasons: first his minute size; second, his business head and pecuniary wisdom; and third, his musical ability." The joke pages contained a classified ad: "Be an Athlete – reduce your weight by my new method of reduction. Prof. H.B. Wells, Suite 706, Trust Co. Bldg., Chicago, Ill." His smiling face was the object of good-natured ribbing: "School Flower Garden – Smiles – Herman Wells" and "The Ideal L.H.S. Boy – one with – Mouth Like Herman Wells." In the yearbook, the name of every senior had a zany limerick attached to it, save one that needed no further identification:

Words would we waste if we told you this name;
It must be the 'Fat Boy' who out of Dickens came;
Like a cherub his smiles,
All the money beguiles,
And a blessing it is, since he buys eats with same.

The yearbook also included an exaggerated drawing of an obese weightlifter with a sash across the chest reading "Herman the Fat Boy." One final example of the textual teasing appeared in the want ads section: "Wanted – someone to love a fat man – Herman Wells." Wells left no record of his reaction to the persistent teasing. Perhaps it was balanced out by his popularity, which was based on a genuine respect for the young man and his many accomplishments.¹²

¹²Lebanon High School, *The Cedars*, 1920, pp. 20, 93, 101, 109, 113, 119.

There is no evidence that Wells ever had a date, a romance, or any erotic attachment in his three years of high school. Many years later, Wells explained that he had simply been too busy: “With my studies, extracurricular activities, and several hours of outside work, I had little time for dating, dances, or social functions other than those held at school.” As he looked back much later, he saw that he made a successful transition to permanent bachelorhood. In high school, he learned how to balance his perceived unsuitability for intimacy with a need for affiliation and attachment. He became a friend to all, and a useful one to boot. Always smiling, he reaped praise and goodwill and was valued for his financial skills and business sense.¹³

Herman’s parents, both former elementary school teachers, expected him to go to college. His father had attended the Normal School in Terre Haute for a time but did not finish. In high school, Herman had picked up the idea of going to business school, a recent addition to the university curriculum, and decided to attend the University of Illinois, home of the outstanding business school in the Midwest.

Wells spent the summer after his high school graduation running a small bank in Whitestown, a village of less than five hundred located ten miles southeast of Lebanon. The bank had been formed in competition with an established local bank in an era when few rules governed bank charters and when Indiana averaged more than ten banks to a county – nearly 1,100 banks across the state serving ninety-two counties. With agricultural mechanization and farm consolidation leading to heavy loan demands on banks, and with high commodity prices fueling continued growth, the summer of 1920 was a boom time for Indiana farmers and bankers. Wells, just eighteen, was able to save a substantial amount of money for college. He knew that although his parents were supportive of college, they had slim means to help with expenses.¹⁴

In September, Wells went to Champaign and was directly admitted into the business school. Together with a friend from Lebanon, he found a room in a private residence, where he was treated like a family member. “Even so,” Wells reported, “I was wretchedly homesick.” He did

¹³Wells, *Being Lucky*, 18.

¹⁴After World War I, rural areas that depended on agriculture saw a drop in the price of farmland and farm products, reversing an earlier inflationary trend caused by the worldwide shortage of food during the war. The recession started in 1921 and continued throughout the decade, with disastrous consequences for farm families and rural economies. *Ibid.*, 48-50.

well academically but found the campus “large, impersonal, and a little stifling.” At times, he sat through classes of five hundred fellow students, and he later admitted that “psychologically, I was never quite at home there.”¹⁵

At midyear, Wells was invited to pledge a fraternity, but he had already decided to leave Illinois and transfer to Indiana. His father opposed the move, citing the strength of the business school at Illinois and his son’s promising start. Wells countered that he expected to live and work in Indiana, that many of his friends were already at IU, and that his IU associations would prove valuable to his future. But the IU School of Commerce and Finance was still a fledgling operation, having started in the fall of 1920. Wells finally convinced his father—another step toward forming an independent life.¹⁶

The decision to try Indiana was shaped by his homesickness at Illinois and his determination not to drop out and disappoint his parents. Dealing with the homesickness caused him to look elsewhere for comfort; a return to Lebanon would have been unthinkable. At Indiana, Wells found a “wonderfully stimulating, exciting spirit” pervading the verdant woodland campus. The student body was about half the size of Illinois’s 5,000, and the Bloomington environment was more intimate. The place held “great charm and appeal” for Wells, and he immersed himself with gusto in undergraduate life.¹⁷

In 1922, at the end of his sophomore year (his first in Bloomington), Wells was offered a permanent job at the Whitestown bank that had employed him previously. The pay was generous—\$200 a month, even more than the going rate for college graduates. Wells was sorely tempted. It would mean giving up his vague and unformed academic ambitions in favor of a respectable entry-level job in his chosen field. His personal finances were tight, and a year-old nationwide recession showed no signs of letting up. Although he had been captivated by Indiana’s spirit of place, he was willing to forego additional experiences in Bloomington for financial stability.

Not surprisingly, his father was opposed to Herman taking the job, probably worried that once his son got away from college, he would find

¹⁵Ibid., 29-31.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid., 31, 33. See also Capshew, *Herman B Wells*, chap. 1.

it difficult to return. For his part, Wells understood that taking the job would mean an open break with his father. He remained the dutiful son, acceded to his father's wish, and stayed in school.

With his direction set, at least for the next two years, Wells immersed himself in college life – attending classes and studying, living and having fun at the Sigma Nu chapter house, hanging out at the Book Nook eatery, and, on Sunday, going to the First Methodist Church. He continued to exercise his talent for making and keeping friends. He also developed his skills in economics and business, in the classroom and beyond. He became a moneylender to his friends, charging them a small amount of interest for temporary loans. According to one of his fraternity friends, Wells bought a big armoire for his room at the chapter house and did a brisk business storing tuxedos under lock and key. When a brother came to claim his formal wear before a dance, Wells extracted payment.¹⁸

He served as Sigma Nu treasurer as well as Union Board treasurer, and was elected Eminent Commander of his fraternity for his senior year to oversee fundraising efforts for chapter house renovations. Thus he continued a pattern begun in high school, serving the needs of the group through exercising his financial acumen. And he continued another pattern – eschewing romantic or erotic relationships in favor of platonic friendships.

Wells did fall in love, as he reported later, but with a place, not a person. He was fascinated by the university and loved its verdant setting, the community it attracted, and the spirit of the place. He summarized his encounter with the *genius loci* of Indiana: “Those years revealed a hitherto unimagined world to a small-town boy.” Through his undergraduate experience, Wells entered into a fellowship beyond his family of origin. He felt a sense of belonging to the university, whose ideals and traditions captivated his interest. *Alma mater* promised to be an inexhaustible resource and an endless source of delight, independent of but approved by his parents.¹⁹

Those college days became a touchstone for Wells's future. In the midst of navigating the difficult circumstances of his youth, the under-

¹⁸James Elliott, interview with author, June 2, 2005.

¹⁹Wells, *Being Lucky*, 42; James H. Capshew, “Encounter with Genius Loci: Herman Wells at/and/of Indiana University,” *Perspectives in the History of Higher Education* 26 (2011), 193-222.

graduate Wells felt at home and glimpsed a vision of academic community at Indiana. Collegiate life provided a universe of possibilities to him, as well as a nurturing context to expand his interpersonal skills and social abilities in a unique direction.

In his autobiography, Wells vividly sketched the intellectual atmosphere at IU in the 1920s. He noted some of the figures who had provided him with literary sustenance, including novelists Willa Cather, Carl Van Vechten, Edith Wharton, Zona Gale, and Sherwood Anderson. These authors and others, in his words, “opened new vistas of the human condition and revealed Huneker’s ‘pathos of distance.’”²⁰ James Huneker was a journalist and critic who reviewed music, art, and drama. The title phrase of his book *The Pathos of Distance: A Book of a Thousand and One Moments* (1913) was borrowed from Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophical writings, relating to the differences between self and other that provide a basis for critical judgment. Huneker simplified the concept to apply to aesthetics: “Distance lends pathos, bathes in rosy enchantments the simplest events of a mean past; is the painter, in a word, who with skillful, consoling touches disguises all that was sordid in our youth.”²¹ In Nietzsche’s ethics of virtue, however, the term can also refer not only to critical judgments about the external world but also to the process of human improvement through self-fashioning. Taken in this way, it offers a tool for identifying, refining, and integrating disparate parts of the self through self-discipline and self-understanding. The task is difficult and never ending.²² This self-fashioning allows the individual “to develop a signature, an individuality, by working with, reshaping, and exploring the possibilities contained in and presented by raw materials that we did not choose.”²³

Wells, like everyone else, did not choose the circumstances of his birth, nor the contingencies that both blessed and assailed his biological family. But once he found himself at Indiana, he discovered resources that would aid his moral, emotional, and cognitive development. The

²⁰Wells, *Being Lucky*, 42.

²¹James Huneker, *The Pathos of Distance: A Book of a Thousand and One Moments* (New York, 1913), 332.

²²Nietzsche referred to the method of “transforming the self into a work of art, of giving style to one’s own existence.” Marinus Schoeman, “Generosity as a Central Virtue in Nietzsche’s Ethics,” *South African Journal of Philosophy* 26 no. 1 (2007), 17-30, quote p. 20.

²³Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1993), 62.

campus milieu, oriented as it was toward intellectual discovery and mastery, was conducive to this development, as was the structure of extracurricular activities, which rewarded social experimentation and exacted relatively low costs.

After graduation in 1924 he went home to Boone County, returning to work at his father's bank and living with his parents for two more years. In 1926 he left home again, this time for good, to pursue a master's degree in economics at IU. It would take another four years before he got his foot on the academic ladder, as an instructor in economics at the university. As he progressed administratively, to dean in 1935 and acting president in 1937, he proved to be a talented executive as well as a discerning ally and exponent of Indiana's *genius loci*.

As president of Indiana University from 1937 to 1962, Wells embodied the caring heart of a great institution. He rejoiced in the development of scholarship, both by students and faculty, and was always looking for ways that the university could serve the needs of the state and the nation. On the other hand, he was often the chief official mourner when a member of the IU family passed away. The collective grief of World War II was personalized by the death of politician Wendell Willkie in October 1944 and of journalist Ernie Pyle six months later. Striking closer to home was the demise of Wells's closest friend and sole confidant, IU vice president and treasurer Ward Biddle, in May 1946. Biddle had mentored Wells for over twenty years. Two years later, in early March 1948, the president was on a mission to restore the German education system when news came that writer Ross Lockridge Jr. had committed suicide in Bloomington, just two months after the publication of his brilliant novel *Raintree County*. The season of death was not over yet for Wells, however. On March 20, 1948, his father Granville swallowed poison in an attempt to take his own life. He died later that day in the hospital, aged 73.

In taking on his adult role as university leader and the head of the great Indiana University clan, Wells redeemed his father's parental deficiencies. He chose to accentuate the man's many positive qualities—his civic-mindedness, his deep sense of honesty and fairness, his chosen role as a trustworthy fiduciary—and to emulate them. The negative attributes – the self-centeredness of Granville's black moods, his inability to engage on the domestic front, his suicidal end—Wells took care to mitigate or avoid in his own life.

The two great stresses—one social and one physiological—of his childhood did not cripple Wells, but made him stronger as he navigated to adulthood. Looking for love and approval outside of his nuclear family led him to enlarge his talent for friendship. Able to smile and keep moving through his own psychological storms, he discovered acceptance, joy, and solace in friends and colleagues. Whatever residue of youthful disappointment and hurt remained, Wells transformed it through a private alchemy. The affable and charming educator learned to adapt, doing the best with what he had, in the place he was, and found his vocation in serving others.

