Dr. Ryland Thomas Brown

By CAROLINE BROWN, Crawfordsville

Doctor Ryland Thomas Brown was one of the outstanding men in his day in Indiana. He was an all-round scientific man, and investigation in the field of science amounted to almost a passion with him. This strain must have come into his mentality through his mother's side, for it was not manifested in former generations of the Brown family.

The mother of Doctor Brown was Hannah John and her father, John John, and mother, Barbara Evans, were both born in Wales where they were married, and emigrated to America in 1746, therefore were pioneers before the Revolutionary war. Hannah was born in Welch Neck, Pennsylvania.

They were remarkable for their difference in stature. Barbara Evans was a tiny creature, being less than five feet in height. John John was almost a giant; he was seven feet tall, and was credited with being the tallest man in Washington's whole army. He was a miller by trade and when the war was declared he at once joined the army, and was appointed by Washington to be his personal miller, among other duties as a soldier. When the war ended there was little or no money to pay off Washington's army, and each man was given a grant of land in the "New Country"—Kentucky and Indiana. He was with Washington at the surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown, and immediately on the disbanding of the army John John went to Welch Neck, Pennsylvania, where his family remained. Very soon he went to Kentucky to select a home under his land grant, and he chose it near the great Ohio river, which furnished a readier escape from hostile savages. There he built a cabin, and there he lived till his death, about 1820.

George Brown, the father of Ryland T. Brown, was born in the royal colony of Virginia, and he was of English blood.
It was supposed that his father and mother lived for a time in Pennsylvania, since at that period Philadelphia seemed the popular port for emigrants from England. This could not be substantiated. The mother of this George Brown was Mary Ball, the daughter of George Washington according to a family tradition. As a mere youth he joined Washington's army and saw action under him, and continued in the service until his time of enlistment was up in 1780, he having enlisted in Captain Jacob Valentine's company in the First Virginia Regiment, commanded by Colonel George Gibson. He was present at the surrender of Cornwallis, and later continued in the service against the Indians, who were English allies, from 1780 to 1790. He too, as the rest of the army, received a grant of land for his services and he located on Cabin Creek in Mason county, Kentucky. Here, he with his wife, Hannah John Brown, set up a home in a new cabin which he built of logs, cut and hewed by himself, and here Ryland Thomas Brown was born, in October 1807. It is hard to realize how great had been the hardships of such a life as it had only been forty-one years since the first white man had come into Kentucky, known to the Indians as the "happy hunting ground", which all tribes had enjoyed in common.

When he was two years old his father moved to Clermont county, Ohio, near the town of New Richmond, and a little later a colony of staid people from Maine moved to the same settlement. Wisely they brought with them a schoolmaster, whose name was Mark P. Stenchfield. As soon as their own homes were built they at once began the erection of a log school house, and school began, which was probably "a loud school", popular at that period, and so called because the children studied aloud so that the hum from them could be heard outside distinctly. Dr. Brown was a slender, feeble boy then and his parents finding him not equal to the tasks of his sturdier brothers, let him go to this school, which was kept winter and summer. He was not much older than four years when he started to school, which seemed to have awakened in him a desire for knowledge, for he developed early into a scholar.
In 1821 with the restlessness of the pioneer soldiery, his father moved to Indiana, and located in the southern part of Rush county, in a section that had been ceded to the government by the Delaware Indians. It was a wild, partly developed country, and Indians still lived in that vicinity, where the woods were primeval and fields had to be literally cut out from the forest. Ryland Brown was only fourteen years old and now he had to exchange his school-life for the hardships of a backwoods life, one which involved manual labor in place of mental application. Fortunate for him were those few years under the "Yankee" schoolmaster, for he was well grounded in the three "R's" if nothing else. In later life he did not seem to read words but grasped the gist of sentences at a glance, for he was an insatiable reader to the end of his life.

When he was about seventeen years old "land hunters" began to come into that county in search of land fit for settlement, or as a speculation. In these years he had lived here in the midst of the great forest; he had become familiar with every foot of it; he knew its trees by the bark and fruit and foliage, and the wild shrubs as well; and the medicinal value of its plants—which they called weeds—he learned from his mother, who was born a physician, but made a drudge by circumstance; for she had an instinct for healing, and on her fell the highest of human duties, oversight of all sick women and children, as well as the sturdy men who were hurt or laid low by illness; all done without money or price. Here he became so expert a woodsman that when land hunters needed a guide Ryland Brown was recommended for the work and thus his love of out-door life and labor was fostered till he became what now would be called a naturalist. This life suited him physically as well as intellectually, and strengthened his rather frail body and contributed to its development at a crucial time of life.

In 1822 he united with the Baptist church, known as the "Clifty Church", when he was a little over fifteen years old, this was before the "New School" had broken from the Old School Baptists. Alexander Campbell who had emigrated
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from Scotland at the close of his course in the University of
Glasgow was preaching all over Pennsylvania and Virginia,
protesting against all man-made creeds; for he had withdrawn
from the Presbyterian church previous to his arrival in this
country. A copy of Campbell and Walker's debate fell into
his hands by some chance and after reading it he became a
"reformer" and later withdrew from the Baptist church, which
was brought about by the "Flat Rock Association" having
drawn up certain articles of faith which they recommended
for adoption for the churches in their Association. Ryland
Brown, then only nineteen years old, succeeded in having
those articles voted down in the Clifty church, and recom-
mended the adoption of the New Testament "as an exponent
of faith" for that congregation. Three years later this bold
procedure on his part, as one of his brethren said, "caused
him to be selected as the first victim in the state to be sacri-
ficed on this altar of sectarian bigotry". He was arraigned
on the very general charge of being a "Campbellite", and was
excluded from the Baptist church (O. S.).

About a year previous to this expulsion from the church,
his father having died a year before, he was thrown on his
own resources, and he determined to enter the profession
of medicine, and for the following three years he devoted him-
self to acquiring that profession. He entered the Ohio Med-
ical College at Cincinnati, and was graduated in the spring
of 1829. How he accomplished this, having no tangible re-
sources, aside from what he and his mother could make by
sheer hard labor and determination to accomplish this object,
is not within the knowledge of his descendants. At that period
farming furnished a mere living; there was very little "cash
in hand", barter and exchange was the common method of
financial transactions, and when the corn and wheat were
traded for absolute necessities there was little left in the
purse.

After his graduation he spent the greater part of the sum-
mer in hunting a suitable location in which to practice his pro-
fection, meanwhile accepting such practice as offered at his
home near Rushville, since he was looking forward to mar-
riage in the autumn of that same year. This young girl's name was Mary Reeder (she was only nineteen when she married the young doctor). She was born in a little settlement east of Cincinnati and both her father and mother were of Revolutionary stock, her grandfather was the pioneer who was killed on the site of the fountain in that city while hoeing in his cornfield. His name was Van Cleve, and he was born in New York state of Holland Dutch parents, early emigrants to the New World. Another ancestor of hers was Count Francis Gerneaux, a Huguenot driven from France during that period of persecution which began on that memorable Eve of St. Bartholomew. He retired to the Channel Islands later to England and ultimately came to the province of New York, where he helped to found New Rochelle.

At the time of her marriage to Doctor Brown her cousin, Milton Wright—the father of the Wright brothers—recalls her as a tall, graceful young woman, with beautiful blue eyes, brown hair slightly curling, and a simple charming manner which "attracted all the boys like bees to honey". Her character was as beautiful as her person could have been. They were married in October following Doctor Brown's graduation from the medical college. She became the most devoted of wives, and much of his success was owing to her utter abnegation of self for his advancement.

They, as all pioneers of that day did, lived in a cabin near a little stream, which was essential to housekeeping in that day. There they remained until the summer of 1832 when they removed to Connersville where the Doctor established a practice, and aside from professional work he continued to preach the gospel as interpreted by Alexander Campbell, and was successful in both lines of work, and established many churches in what was known as the White Water country. In Connersville he preached in the courthouse, where he held a protracted meeting, with the assistance of John O'Kane, which proved so successful that the outcome was the founding of the Christian church in Connersville. The strenuous labor of following two callings undermined his health and for a time he quit medicine, and devoted himself
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to preaching, and he was appointed in June, 1842, at a state meeting held in Connersville, “to labor in word and doctrine for the churches in Indiana”. But this proved too strenuous an undertaking, for it brought on hemorrhage of the lungs and he retired from this work in order to regain his health.

From his own knowledge as a physician he knew that outdoor work would be the best means of restoring him to health, and accordingly he worked for a year in a sawmill, all the time in the open air; under this heroic treatment his lungs were healed, and all symptoms of consumption overcome. (Before this, however, he had been working in a “daguerreotype gallery”, and thought the ether used in developing pictures had much benefited him.)

About this time there was a furore among people of wandering habits (who always desire to be at the “opening up” of new territory) because of the richness, the fertility and the opportunities of the “Wabash country”, and there was a great hegira.

Dr. Brown had much of the roving pioneer spirit, and he at once decided that that was the “land of opportunity” both for himself and his family of six children, the youngest a babe a few months old.

The fertility of the country was unquestioned, but there was said to be a fearful form of “fever and ague” which was a terrible scourge at times to the new settlers.

Roads in this part of Indiana were negligible, impassable at certain seasons. Apparently, without much consideration of the subject, the Doctor prepared a “big covered wagon” for the journey, and stowed his children under cover upon miscellaneous household goods of absolute necessity; one of the utensils was a “Dutch oven” still in the possession of a member of the family.

The “rush”, for several years, to this Wabash country had been unprecedented in pioneer history, in its day comparable to the Klondyke hegira, nearly three-quarters of a century later.

He started on this journey in the spring of 1844, and the journey could not but have been disagreeable, if like ordinary weather of that season, and the uncomfortable manner of
locomotion. The date on which he reached "Wabash town" is not known. On his arrival there the doctor immediately procured a log house, and at once set up what "lares and penates" they had. He soon formed a partnership with another physician who had lived in that town for some years, a Doctor Ford, who proved to be a good friend, and who at once provided him with a few patients. Nor was it long before he had them in his own family; some of the children suffered with light form of malaria. But his poor wife was attacked with the worst form of "chills", the kind known as "tertian ague", which greatly prostrated her. The small children were cared for by the oldest son and daughter, as the others were too young to be of use. They had taken with them a negro child that had been brought by the underground railroad from the Carolinas by Abolitionists, to be parceled out to white families, and Doctor Brown selected her, unfortunately, for she proved the most mischievous, disobedient; untrustworthy child, adding much to the cares of the mother of an already large family.

While they lived in the Wabash country she gave the Doctor ample proof of her power to invent and carry out mischief. One day as he was returning from a call in the country, when he was crossing the bridge over the river he noticed on the opposite bank three children attempting to ford the stream, as he thought. On closer inspection he recognized two of his own children, and the black one as his ward, Milly. He paced his horse to the place of crossing in time to save them from drowning. On asking Milly why she attempted so dangerous a thing, she replied, "Ize a-crossin' the riveh Jerden wiv 'em".

The fever did not abate along the Wabash river, and the Doctor was called early one morning to the country to attend on new patients, victims of the prevailing malaria, a journey that took most of the day to accomplish, and did not reach home till some time after dinner. He found his wife in bed after a terrible chill which left her very much prostrated. Desperate, he hitched the horses to his wagon, brought it to the door and picked her up bodily, feather bed and all, and placed her in the wagon bed, crowded the children into it,
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with a few necessities, and set off for Lafayette without any previous plans as to where he might locate, after a stay of six weeks in the Wabash country.

He had not been able to collect any money due him and his funds were negligible. He was an ardent Mason and on making known his plight to his Masonic brothers in Lafayette they gave him assistance. One man—a trustee of Wabash College—Doctor Deming, was especially helpful and a friendship grew between these two that lasted through life. The family remained through the night in Lafayette and next morning set out for Crawfordsville, which was no inconsiderable journey, taking all things into account. Roads then were mere tracks, hub-deep with mud, helped out with "corduroy", that is, rails laid cross-wise over the worst mud-holes. But finally they reached the town, with a seriously sick wife, six children and no prospective roof to cover their heads, and thirty-five cents in hand!

Here again the Masons helped him, and found him a little house to live in, on Washington street, and he invested his entire funds in a broom to clean up that house. His eldest son, aged fifteen, and daughter, aged thirteen, constituted the domestic staff, and soon the house was made livable. The kindness of the pioneers was then finely illustrated to "the strangers within their gates", as was the general practice toward newcomers.

In Crawfordsville Doctor Brown's fortunes slowly mended and he acquired ultimately a living practice. In those days a doctor in small towns must be also a surgeon-of sorts. He was required to set bones, and pull teeth with a terrible machine called "turn-key" clamped to the jaw.

Then it was a creed with doctors never to refuse a call. One night very late when he was comfortably in bed, Dr. Brown was roused by a man who told him that a neighbor of his would die if he did not soon get treatment from him. The Doctor rose and dressed, and wound his legs in long strips of green baize from toe to thigh, saddled his horse and set off, over roads deep with mud, varied with puddles, on a ten-mile ride. When he reached the patient's home he found
him better, and the man feebly asked him, "You won't charge me nothin' for this trip, will you, Doc?"

The Doctor replied that he would, and the patient said, "Well then, you've got to give me some medicine!"

The Doctor accommodated him and gave him an old-fashioned remedy used in what they called then "cramp colic", which made him retch during what was left of the night. Meantime the Doctor was plodding home, finishing his twenty-mile ride by daylight. Later his patient met him and told him he'd "never had anything that had done him as much good."

During those distressful six weeks in the Wabash country he had had a unique case of surgery. One day a young man called on him in great trouble, for the girl he loved would not marry him because he had one leg that was bowed, while the other was straight. He asked the doctor if he could straighten it, and he replied that he could if he would undergo an operation. The youth consented; for the girl promised to marry him if he could get it straightened. The doctor calculated to a nicety the size of the wedge that would be necessary to cut out of the bone to straighten the curve, and the youth submitted to the operation, which was a success in every way—but one. The girl married another man while the bone was knitting! The doctor had a keen sense of humor, and he never failed to laugh when he recalled that incident.

In those days doctors were not collectors of fees—in money at least—they were mostly paid in apples, potatoes and "firewood", which were not "first choice" at that; they served, however, in the domestic department.

This move to Crawfordsville was a fortunate one, for he gradually built up a practice, and ultimately bought him a home, on the outer bounds of the town at that time. He had about an acre and a half of ground, and he kept a cow, and since his practice had grown and roads had not improved, was obliged to have four horses.

His mind and body were so active that he never could find time to waste. He began to use the Wabash College library, with an object in view; he kept faithfully reading for four
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years when he attained it and was given the degree of Master of Arts in 1850, under Dr. White, the president of Wabash College. Meantime he not only practiced medicine but did field work in geology, there being a famous crinoid bed located about a mile north of the town, on the bank of the creek, which was one of the two most famous beds in the United States. He delved there very possibly, with Professor Hovey, who taught geology in the college. Sometimes he found complete specimens, body and tentacles attached to the bluish stone of the shale bed. He acquired his knowledge of geology by reading on this subject and applying it in a practical way. His mind was avid for all kinds of knowledge. In 1854 he was appointed state geologist by Governor Joseph S. Wright, the Democratic governor, although he was a “Whig” and the only one in his family.

It was during the sitting of the Democratic convention that nominated Polk for President that the first message ever sent by electricity was sent which considered it as a fraud. Doctor Brown’s brother William was an active campaigner for Polk, and came out strongly in the rural district opposing the use of electricity, inspired thereto because Morse was seeking help from the government to carry out his designs. William Brown declared passionately that if it were run through their fields on wires it would kill all their horses and cattle, it would burn down their houses, barns, and rail fences, and was so convincing that he defeated the opposing candidate for governor of Indiana, no less person than General Wallace’s father, [?] and helped set Polk in the White House. Ultimately he became Assistant Secretary of State.

Doctor Ryland Brown was accredited with opening the first coal mine in Indiana. This has since been disputed, but it is known that the United States Government sent him to Newfoundland to learn the method of mining it used there.

During his tenure of office he toured nearly the whole state on foot, and he located the “Glacial Drift” (boulders) from Evansville to the northeast corner of the state, and thoroughly informed himself of the various kinds of soil, rich black loam of the central prairies, silicate deposits of the extreme south
used in making glass, clays adapted for both fine and coarse pottery, besides fields on which magnificent corn and wheat were grown, he even located peat beds.

On Indiana's southern hills looming above the Ohio river a colony of Swiss planted great vineyards and made wine from them. There were still great forests in the state at that time, 1854, with a wonderful variety of trees. The Indiana hickory, strong as steel, furnished the farmer and the wagon-maker material for the heavy wagons used in labor. The Indiana walnut, with its towering trunks, was put to the uses of rail-making by the pioneers to enclose their fields, for fuel for their home fires, also for building their cabins. Now among manufacturers of furniture Indiana walnut takes the highest place, because of its satiny texture in the finished article, but the trees of great girth have become so rare that its price has become almost prohibitive. All these trees came under Doctor Brown's inspection at this time, not in the line of duty especially, but because he loved nature.

The chair of Natural Sciences in Northwestern Christian University (now Butler) being vacant Doctor Brown was selected to fill it, consequently in August, 1858, he removed to Indianapolis, and at the opening of the term in September began his duties, teaching geology, chemistry, and physiology. He instructed by lectures, experiments, and quizzes, which searched to the very bottom of the student's knowledge, nor could they deceive him with trumped-up excuses for failures in class and brusquely exposed the fallacies. He could always make his lectures heard because of his own enthusiasm for his subject. When it became known that he was a good chemist he was called upon in cases of murder, by poisoning, to examine the stomachs of the victims, and in two heinous cases—if no more—the verdict of guilty was rendered.

For many years Doctor Brown occupied this position and made the study of Natural Sciences popular. He was succeeded by the son of Ovid Butler, formerly a student under him. During the Civil War he occupied himself in the practice of medicine and preaching, and in chemical investigations for others, and lecturing.
Doctor Brown was intensely loyal during the Civil War, and as a personal friend of Governor Morton upheld him in his efforts to keep the state loyal, threatened as she was by the Knights of the Golden Circle and the irregular Confederate cavalry under John Morgan, who really succeeded in raiding the southern counties of the state, but hard pressed by Morton’s troops galloping behind, were driven out of the state.

The university was then outside the city limits, and, with the exception of half a dozen houses there was a great common east of Doctor Brown’s house, and a camp for the training of raw recruits was established there. Since he kept cows it became a habit of his to carry a great bucket of butter-milk, fresh from the churn, down to a tree on the northern bounds of this camp, and to dispense it with tin dippers. This soon became known among the soldiers, and as soon as they saw him post himself they gathered round him like a lot of school boys. He was known among them as “the butter-milk man”. Not only that, but they would come to him in sickness for treatment, which was “given without money and without price”. One young sick boy was taken into his home and nursed by his wife till he recovered.

He was always an Abolitionist, and, while in Crawfordsville, had been a worker for the “Underground Railroad”, and as the war proceeded he looked forward to the destruction of slavery as one of its results. And when Lincoln set the slaves free no one rejoiced more fervently than he that this stain on the honor of our country was forever washed out.

A few years after the war closed Doctor Brown was appointed a lecturer on chemistry in the Medical Department of the State University, which was located in Indianapolis, and continued in it for some time. He is still remembered on account of his unique illustration of certain points in his lectures. No child was fonder of candy than Doctor Brown and a class of his students at the close of the term presented him with a “candy cane” of red and white stripes, the diameter being nearly two inches, and its length that of an ordinary cane. The presentation speech created much hilarity, and the
Doctor accepted it in like manner. This cane weighed seven pounds.

In 1871 Doctor Brown was appointed by President Garfield Chief Chemist of the United States. Accustomed to an active life the close confinement in an office wearied him, and finally became so irksome that he resigned, and was succeeded by his former pupil at Northwestern University, Professor Harvey Wiley, who remained there many years with honor and success.

Doctor Brown returned to his home in Indianapolis and took up again his former avocations, medicine, preaching and writing. He never accepted a call to a church which required him to take up residence where it was located, as far as is known. He preached “by appointment” in two small towns, not far from Indianapolis, on alternate Sundays, but never took upon himself the responsibilities of a resident pastor. One of these towns was Zionsville, and one cloudy winter day when he was preaching there, in the midst of the sermon he stopped abruptly and said conversationally, “Why its snowing!” and proceeded without a pause, unconscious that he had spoken, he was very absent-minded.

He continued to preach to the end of his life, and his last sermon was delivered on the Easter Sunday before he died, and was remarkable for its beauty of diction and fervent expression of his Christian faith.

Always bitterly opposed to drunkenness, he never used whiskey nor brandy in his practice, and when Prohibition became a political issue, for the first time, he affiliated with that party. He regarded drunkenness from a scientific standpoint as well as from a moral—ruin to both the physical and moral man. He wrote and lectured constantly on that subject, and by many people he was considered fanatical. However he was consistent in his belief, and among his five sons there was not a drunkard.

Doctor Brown was preeminently a horticulturalist, and wherever he made his home he planted fruit trees and grapevines, and had a flourishing kitchen-garden, in which he took as much pride as a landscape gardener could at his highest achievements. The results of his labor justifies his pride for
his gardens supplied his table with "vitamines", and the like, till frost bit the last tomato vine.

He was no less familiar with the trees and shrubs of Indiana than with his kitchen garden, he knew the names of all and their peculiar uses, as well as he knew his kitchen garden. When the Centennial Exposition was held in Philadelphia he was the head of that department in which the different varieties of wood were exhibited, indigenous to the United States. He was always an early riser, and one morning went out to the Exposition Grounds at seven o'clock. He was soon joined by a stranger who conversed with him very intelligently about the uses of the various kinds of wood on exhibition. The man was interested more in hickory than in the other woods and wanted to know what uses it could be put to.

Doctor Brown named a long list of uses, and handed him a piece of hickory and asked him to break it, which he was unable to do. The man then introduced himself as Dom Pedro, the Emperor of Brazil, and declared that he would like to introduce hickory into his own dominion. He came back many times at an early hour, always alone, and Doctor Brown gave him much information, and they became quite friendly.

Doctor Brown never lacked for occupation. In 1872 he wrote and published a concise Physiology for schools and it was used extensively in the public schools of Indiana. Aside from that he wrote and published many pamphlets on scientific and religious themes. He was engaged by the Indianapolis school board to deliver a series of lectures to the teachers in the higher grades. He spoke simply and clearly, elaborating his chosen theme in an original and entertaining manner, suited to his auditors, not familiar with the subject.

The last months of his life he was employed in an editorial capacity on an agricultural paper and wrote on scientific subjects apropos to farming, more especially grains and fruits for which he had always a deep interest, and a profound knowledge.

No man ever led a fuller life than Doctor Brown, and he furnished proof that work will not kill a man. He was not a big muscular man, but one of medium height and slight
physique, with tremendous nervous force. His hair and beard were red in youth but by the time he reached forty years they were white. His eyes were blue and keen, his complexion very fair, but withal he was a homely man. He was frank to brusqueness in expressing his opinions, though he was not ill-tempered nor unkindly, nor was he diffusely affectionate. It may truly be said of him that he was far above the average man both morally and intellectually. He was a purist in morals and hated the vulgar word and deed.

In 1890 the last week in April he was stricken with the "grip" at the age of eighty-three years, and died the third day of May. During this time he watched his own case as if he were a patient, and came to the conclusion that grip, for the most part affected the nervous system, and, that if he recovered, he would treat it from that standpoint.

Shortly after his death, Doctor Fletcher, the medical head of the Indiana Insane Hospital, pronounced a eulogy upon Doctor Brown, who had formerly been his preceptor, and in the course of his remarks he made the statement that he had heard Doctor Brown give, as his belief, that diseases were transmitted by germs, and that a time would come when this theory would be accepted throughout the medical profession as the truth. And further, that this theory had been advanced by Doctor Brown some years before a German scientist announced publicly that this new germ theory had been thoroughly proven to be a fact.

One of his fellow-professors in the University said of him, "His mind was of the highest order—clear, logical, comprehensive, and of an eminently practical cast. He was naturally a naturalist, possessing superior faculties, combined with extraordinary powers of analysis and classification. * * * His scholarship partakes largely of his mind. * * * In his department of Natural Science he seems almost omnicient."

He began preaching in the church of his choice—the Christian Church, as founded by Alexander Campbell—when he was nineteen years old and his last sermon was delivered at the age of eighty-three. His religion had no trace of hysteria, either in deed or discourse and he was a consistent christian to the day of his death, and it may be well said of him he "was a workman that needeth not to be ashamed."