At DePauw Fifty Years Ago

HOMER EILER

On September 1, 1889, I entered DePauw University, enrolling as a Freshman, under the principalship of Dr. Thomas J. Bassett, a gentleman well-beloved by the entire student body and faculty. At the beginning of that fall semester, DePauw was without a President. Dr. Alexander Martin was temporarily in charge of the institution. I remember this well because of what happened soon after my entrance. At the time of the fall Methodist Conference, Dr. John P. D. John was elected President, and, as word came to the Campus that he was to arrive on an afternoon train, the student body, en masse, were at the depot to meet him, with all the pent-up welcoming enthusiasm possible to a student body of that day.

The one item that has forever fixed this event in my memory, was the preparations to escort the new President to the campus. A rope some hundred feet or more in length was attached to a carriage carrying the official welcoming party made up of Dr. Martin, Dr. John B. DeMotte, and Dr. Philip E. Baker. I believe that the venerable Bishop Thomas Bowman, and possibly others, also sat in the carriage with the new President. The student body grasped the rope and drew the party to Meharry Hall where a preliminary oration and an informal induction into the new office was held. I can yet, after half a century, behold the scene, hear the shouting of class yells and recall the general pandemonium that attended this scene. Later came the extraordinary, prepared-for, official induction into office. The old fashioned stage was filled to capacity with faculty, dignitaries of Methodism, and the state and city officials who attended. In my judgment formed at that time, and after fifty years unchanged, DePauw can date her rebirth and rise to a place of leadership among the universities of standing as beginning with the inauguration of that leader par excellence, Dr. John P. D. John.

I remember him, as well as if yesterday because of many peculiar and incidental personal traits marking this wonderful man. If he had any hairs on his head, I believe they could have been counted. This, with his exceeding high forehead and well rounded face, presented a picture never to be
erased from memory. Unfortunately, the twitchings of his facial muscles added a mark to aid the memory. All these physical peculiarities, however, were overshadowed by his knowledge and gifted insight into several phases of learning, and the fact that he was approachable by the greenest of "preps" or the most "noble" of seniors. I wonder how many remember the lecture, to my mind, his greatest, "Did God Make man or man make God?" This became a subject of nation-wide interest.

DePauw has added to her laurels in all the fifty years since because of the Presidency of Dr. John, and, not to speak critically, subsequent presidents have had to go far to surpass the ideal standards of University leadership set by the leader who served DePauw as President from 1889 to 1895.

As I look back upon my days in college, there are many faculty members connected with old DePauw whose lives and outstanding personalities are ever present to my memory. I feel that the first was the officially designated Chancellor, Bishop Thomas Bowman. Extremely small in stature, he ripened at the age of about ninety years, at which time he had as keen an intellect as hosts of men of much younger years. His was a welcome figure at devotionals, and at many social gatherings.

Another man of prestige was Dr. John Clarke Ridpath, an ever welcome visitor to the DePauw campus. He and Dr. Bassett are easily remembered because of their similarity in physique, and their long beards, so uncommon in this day. One associates with Dr. Bassett several of his colleagues—Dr. Wilbur A. Ayers, Dr. Harry L. Beals, Dr. John B. DeMotte, along with a Miss Dixon and others who brought a great reputation to the Preparatory Department because of their chosen work as teachers.

My memory likewise takes me back to the humor of student life at DePauw and the delight of the students in playing pranks—pranks from which no occasion or person was ever immune. More especially do I recall a story concerning the beloved Dr. John B. DeMotte that relates to his freshman days. As the story goes, it was the occasion of a morning chapel exercise, and a noted Bishop was presiding. Previously, the ingenious young DeMotte had hollowed out a space in the Bible and filled it with mice. When the Bishop opened the Bible for the reading, away the mice scampered
over the pulpit and stage. One can easily imagine the hilarity that ensued. Needless to say, the devotional exercises were considerably devoid of devotion on that occasion.

Another alumnus of DePauw, prominent during my years at that institution and well deserving of mention, was the esteemed Albert J. Beveridge, who, during his lifetime, gained great honor and prestige both for himself and his Alma Mater. In 1889, talk was still prevalent of the laurels he had won for himself and for DePauw in debate and oratory in competition with men of other institutions as well as in national contests.

Nothing is of more vivid memory than the recollection of my associates in the Theological Club. In the absence of historical record, the names of several remain with me, not only because of their fellowship in student days, but also because of their particular prominence in later years. One such of these was Dr. Lemuel H. Murlin, a man of many notable achievements. At one time he was the President of Boston University, later (1925-1928) serving as the President of DePauw, his Alma Mater. Then there was a Mr. Cook and a Mr. Bennett, of whom I have but hazy memories, who became prominent missionaries in the Orient. There were also two Japanese students, Masuco and Takasugi, who gained considerable honor because of their proficiency in mathematics and physics.

There was another outstanding student of my day in DePauw with whom I have kept in touch during all the fifty years since, because of her self-sacrifice in devoting her life to foreign missionary work in India. I refer to Miss Lillie Dexter Green, who prepared for that special work and was sent to Delhi, India, where she has labored continuously since in missionary work. In recent years, she has had charge of the Methodist College work in the city of Delhi, where she still remains, zealous as ever in her missionary calling.

From a religious point of view, old DePauw reflected both the name and the spirit of Old Asbury University, continuing like its predecessor the practice of its founder's precepts. Religion pervaded the atmosphere everywhere. The daily chapel exercise was a fixed institution, and merits or de-merits were a recognized practice. Weekly prayer meetings were of a voluntary nature, but well attended. I speak
of this item because I remember so well the revival interest started in one of the meetings, which I attended. This revival interest soon spread through the entire student body, until Meharry Hall was filled nightly, and the record reveals that never in the history of the institution was there such a genuine, old-fashioned revival as during that winter of 1889-1890. I have no doubt that scores of alumni still living today trace their religious birth to the revival of that year.

While reminiscing about chapel exercises, I recall that it was compulsory to attend the Sunday afternoon devotions in Meharry Hall. Of course, this was irksome to many young students, who even in that day preferred their Sunday afternoons free for recreation and do-as-you-like amusements. Gossip connected with this Sunday afternoon compulsory attendance relates that one exceptionally bold student expressed himself in verse that soon became a classic among the student body. One reason for the distaste of students for chapel was the long-winded discourses and lectures on religious subjects by Bishops, Doctors of Divinity and Doctors of Law, that were not interesting to the general student body. What brought forth the wonderful string of verses by Mr. M. D. Fulkerson of the class of 1893, was a particular lecture with the subject: “Does Supernatural Inspiration Imply Infallibility?”

The years have sped on swiftly and the importance of the events of that now distant day when I was a student have been overshadowed by the magnitude of subsequent events. The conditions of a half century ago live again only in one’s of memory.