

History Fall 07-08

I started talking about ONU's history, linking its past to present campus issues, because a president asked me to talk during opening activities, and I needed a framework for what I chose to say. I found ONU's history a good framework because, despite external and internal pressures that have threatened its very existence several times, Ohio Northern University kept rising from its ashes, sometimes literally. My point over the years has been that ONU's struggles of today pale in comparison to those of the past. It was through those past struggles, however, that the University grew and developed into a strong institution.

One strength of Ohio Northern has been the continuity of some of its administrators as well as of its faculty. Henry Solomon Lehr served as president (and faculty member) from 1871 until 1900, almost 30 years. Within that period of time he formulated and established the University we know today. Lehr's imprint still remains. A major gift of Lehr's was his ability to choose talented people to teach and work in his University. Since Lehr, the on-going success of ONU has always been its people: the students, the faculty and staff. In short, ONU's strength is the people who have led it through its evolution. One of those individuals was Albert Edwin Smith.

This third president of Ohio Northern University was born to Edwin Hugo and Mary Ann (Lindsey) Smith in New Richmond, Ohio in 1860. Albert Smith attended public schools in New Richmond. He graduated from Clermont Academy in 1882. Five years later he earned his B.A. from Ohio Wesleyan where he later earned both an M.A. and a Ph.D. (1897). In 1887 he joined the Central Ohio conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church and during the following 18 years he served as pastor at York, Celina, Toledo, Defiance and finally, Marion.

In 1898, at the Central Ohio Methodist Episcopal annual conference, a committee composed of Dr. Leroy A. Belt and Dr. Henry C. Jameson among others proposed in conjunction with Dr. Henry Solomon Lehr that the Conference purchase Ohio Normal University from its four owners: Lehr, Park, Maglott and Darst. The proposal carried the conference, but there were thirteen votes opposing the purchase, one of those negative votes was cast by Dr. Albert Edwin Smith.

In his later years Dr. Smith talked about the purchase (\$24,000) and the settlement which involved an exchange of farms and a series of controversies, and which, according to him,

resulted in the failure of the Conference to provide much more than good resolutions for the support of ONU. Smith noted that seven years after the purchase agreement, he as president of ONU, had finished paying the last \$7,000 of the debt.

What made up the physical assets of ONU at the time of its purchase was the original building raised by public subscription (the village of Ada and Lehr and his partners), a two-story frame building to the south of it and a two-story frame structure on College Avenue. The University was on an acre and a half of land. According to Smith, by 1899 the buildings were worn out and the equipment of the pharmacy department, chemistry and physics, commercial and stenographic departments was all owned by the professors who taught the subjects. The student fees for these areas went to these professors.

For two years following the sale, Lehr ran the University. In 1900 Dr. Smith became a member of the Board of Trustees of the University and, along with other Board members, elected Dr. Jameson as president. Jameson, however, declined the position so Dr. Belt was chosen to assume the presidency in his place. Although Belt's tenure was short, both Dukes Memorial and Brown Building were built during his time as president. In 1905 Dr. Belt stepped down from his post due to ill health; Dr. Smith was named president by ONU's Board of Trustees.

Smith, as Wilfrid Binkley tells us, "was a pulpit orator and a man of decisive opinions. He had an impressive personal appearance," similar to William Jennings Bryan who had given the commencement address to the graduating class of 1895. (Smith once received a standing ovation at a city railway station from a crowd that mistook him for Bryan.) Smith had very clear ideas about Christian education and discipline. A collection of some of his baccalaureate sermons, published by G.P. Putnam's Sons in 1930 reflect his personal focus: "If you have not the spirit of conquest, you are doomed. To hold your own, simply to hide in some snug and secure place, will spell your eternal defeat and put you among the conquered instead of among the conquerors." That then was the approach he took to his 25 year tenure as president at Ohio Northern University. Finding no hymnals in chapel at his first service, he purchased them, guaranteeing the purchase with his own funds. No flag pole? He bought a 90 foot steel pole and erected it at the front of campus. The military companies were marching through puddles? He had the campus leveled. He purchased a \$3,500 organ for chapel services in Brown and had "Methodist mourners benches" constructed for revivals (at which attendance was voluntary). One day he announced in chapel that "the fraternities go out or I do." The students cheered the announcement hoping the latter might occur. He "issued a stern prohibition under penalty against men visiting women in their rooms" in the rooming houses, but to no immediate avail.

He punished a Sunday ballplayer and suspended 19 students who held dances off campus. Smith saw himself as a fiery St. Paul enforcing Methodist discipline in his school.

That said, Smith was committed to the promise of the young. In another sermon he told his audience that "youth is imagination, typified by Aladdin and his lamp; youth is dreamland, Joseph of the multicolored coat who saw all his family bowing to him in a dream; youth is courage, demonstrated by Jonathan, David, Alexander, Frederick the Great," who all achieved great deeds as young men.

Binkley tells us that early in Smith's presidency the Board hired Dr. A.A Thomas to solicit funds for a building honoring Lehr, the current Lehr Memorial which sits on the site of the original ONU building built by the subscriptions of Ada townspeople and Lehr and the other owners. One day an ONU alumnus and congressman took Dr. Thomas to meet President Theodore Roosevelt. Thomas, of course, wanted to invite the president to speak at the next ONU commencement. His effort was not successful, but another alumnus, Dr. John Wesley Hill, was a frequent visitor to President William Howard Taft and he persuaded Taft to speak at the June 3, 1910, Commencement, the fortieth of the University. ONU graduates may not have remembered what Taft said that day, but they did remember receiving their diplomas from the hand of the U.S. president.

President Smith recognized the value gained for the University from re-associating it more closely with the founder, Lehr, who returned to Ada and retained his ties to the University until his death. Lehr's graduates populated statehouses and legislatures, churches and major businesses, schools and Universities. Lehr's reputation as an innovative and very successful educational leader was known throughout the U.S. He had close ties to leaders in the U.S. Congress and among businessmen and clergy. Smith was not intimidated or jealous of that reputation, but understanding the role he himself had to play in the development of the University, traded on Lehr's reputation to help ONU. In the introduction to Smith's baccalaureate sermons, Ohio Governor Myers Y. Cooper wrote:

"The Ohio Northern University is one of the outstanding educational institutions of Ohio. For twenty-five years Doctor Albert Edwin Smith, now President Emeritus, has been its guiding spirit and star.

It was founded sixty years ago by a wonderful man, a born teacher, a progressive scholar and a lover of the common people.

He determined to establish an institution where blue-jeans should be as welcome as broadcloth, where the spirit of democracy should be regnant, and where the money, self-earned, of the poor boy and girl should go farther in securing the blessings of an education than elsewhere.

Through these long years, the Halls of this University were crowded to the door, and out of them went some of the most earnest and successful men of the land to the high places of State, Church, Bar, School-room, and in every walk of life..."

Governor Cooper continues:

"Dr. Albert Edwin Smith in 1905, then in the full strength of his manhood, undertook the administration and guidance of the institution.

Under his able hand and dauntless spirit, the University has come to larger life and usefulness, with a magnificent campus, beautiful buildings, greatly enlarged Faculty, endowment and equipment, making possible a fine type of scholastic and spiritual training."

During the 25 years of his presidency, Smith was at the center of several crises. In 1913, following action he'd taken against a fraternity, students signed a petition to the Board of Trustees asking them to remove him as president and posted signs all over Ada announcing Smith's resignation. The day after the students' meeting, Smith walked into chapel, prayed for the welfare of the school and told the students that if he was wrong in what he'd done, he'd abide by the decision. If he was not wrong, he warned them, the results for those that were wrong would be interesting. Day after day metropolitan newspaper reporters were in ONU's chapel to report the controversy to their readers. While the students were in an uproar, Ada businessmen signed a petition asking the Board of Trustees to investigate fraternity and sorority conditions. Finally at their June Board Meeting the ONU trustees took action. They dismissed 2 faculty members (one a minister) and 4 students, three of whom were seniors and one of whom was editor of the student paper, *The Northern Light*, which ended that paper's publication. Binkley tells us that a year after their dismissal, the three seniors received their diplomas. Three of the dismissed students were ministers or went into the ministry, "one entered public school service and successively moved from superintendent of a village school to county superintendent of schools to a respected and able member of the State Legislature."

A greater crisis occurred the following fall. That fall, the Administration Building, now Hill, which had been built in 1879, caught fire. The University library books were being stored on the first floor of the building because of the pending construction of Lehr Memorial on the demolished original building. About a third of the books were saved by students forming a human line and passing the books to safety. Heat from the fire also ignited the nearby Brown Auditorium building where chapel was held; Smith's \$3,500 pipe organ was ruined. The military companies had 3,000 cartridges stored in Brown and all gradually exploded. The grand piano, the records of the literary societies, everything went up in the flames of the administration building. After the fire, the only buildings which remained available for classes were the frame building housing pharmacy classes and labs and Dukes Building. President Smith called a meeting of the faculty in Professor Axline's home, which was across from the ruined administration building. At the meeting the faculty determined (along with the urging by Senator Willis) that classes would continue to be held at the University without interruption. Three Ada churches opened their doors for classes as well as did the southside elementary school (temporarily closed), professors' and citizens' homes, the fraternity houses and the village morgue. Dr. Dante Pigorsi told alumni at a dinner in 1957 that "no students left because of the inconvenience." (Ohio Northern Alumnus, Volume XVIII, No. 2, p.4)

No leader, no faculty member, no staff member is without flaw. Some of ONU's most famous graduates and leaders have held views that many of us would find anathema today, notably the anti-immigration sentiment in the U.S. which permeated Ohio as well in the 1920s. In looking at ONU's history (and its present?), we go beyond that. Perfection is not an attribute of our heroes. Great things occur through flawed subjects.

So, as Binkley tells us, the strong-minded anti-dancing, anti-fraternity, strict Methodist discipline of President Smith was a part of his twenty-five years tenure as president, but Smith was also the man who literally helped the University rise from the ashes of the Hill/Brown fire and faced down the pressures from all sides that threatened the University. He repaired Brown and Hill, built Lehr Memorial, built Presser Hall and Taft Gymnasium, Huber Law Building and purchased much of west campus. He led the University through the decline of male students during World War I. He raised the first endowment of the University, \$312,000 by 1927. Smith also gave special attention to the academic program of ONU. As he notes in his personal summary of his 25 years as president: "our (academic) work is standard, our name is respected, our diplomas have a genuine value, not so twenty-five years ago. Then our liberal arts courses were little more than high school requirements. No preparatory standing was necessary or

demanded. One could study law, pharmacy, or engineering without previous literary foundations. All this has been remedied."

In 1929-30 as Smith is ending his tenure as president, he tells the graduating seniors that "youth is in demand in the pulpit, in business, in education." In his last baccalaureate sermon he tells the graduates that he is "satisfied Christ would never have attempted to win the world with a band of old men." To Smith, youth embodies strength, ambition, optimism and enthusiasm. As he prepares to leave the campus he tells them: "I am laying down the burdens, the responsibilities of a lifetime. It is my great joy to know that young life under more splendid conditions for human endeavor will carry on the work I have tried to do. I have not completed the job, much still remains to make Ohio Northern University the great institution God designed it to be."

I'm not Smith, but as I look out at the auditorium today, I see young administrators, young faculty, young staff who will with their seasoned colleagues continue this year and into the future this work of taking the University forward to its next level.

As Smith said in ending his last baccalaureate sermon:

"Carry on!"