

THE SECURITY OF THE WILL

Speech before Graduating Class of 1947, Oklahoma A. and M. College
June 2, 1947

Dr. Bennett, members of the Class of 1947, parents and friends, and oldtimers like myself:—

It is great to be able to be here with you – one of the largest graduating classes in the history of our College. When I attended A. and M. – in the spring quarter of my Freshman year, at least – the entire student body was less than three times the size of this one class alone.

It suddenly dawned on me, as I began trying to get some thoughts together for this talk, that I couldn't remember a line from any commencement speech I ever heard.

Now, I never sat as you are sitting today to receive a degree from A. and M. Mine came by mail, a year after I had left the campus, by dint of special work by me, and even more special dispensation by a long suffering faculty.

Even so, though I did not enjoy graduating formally with my class, I will wager that I heard as many commencement addresses in my day as anybody here, with the possible exception of Dr. Bennett. My father is a minister. All through my youth I heard three or four commencement and baccalaureate addresses every spring. Then, I became a reporter of sorts at Pawhuska, when I was 17 or 18, and until I left Oklahoma, at 25, "covering" commencement addresses was a regular job every spring.

But for all that, when I sat down to write a speech myself I couldn't remember a line out of any of them! Then in light of my own experience, could anything be more futile than undertaking to say something that you will, or even SHOULD remember here this morning?

The great temptation to me is to bore you by looking back, rather than to bore you by looking forward.

I came to this campus in 1925 at the age of 18. I left it after a couple of years, and worked a year on the Okemah Daily Leader, owned by Ray Fields and Glen Strong. Then, unforgivable sin, I attended the University of Oklahoma two years. I returned here in 1930, not only to work with Randle Perdue in the College information office, but also to attempt to acquire enough hours for the degree that still wasn't in sight.

I left Stillwater in 1932 to join The Associated Press in Ohio. Except for an afternoon while on a honeymoon trip in 1933 I have not been here since.

So it is a temptation to look back, rather than to look forward with you. Yet, there is one great restraining factor. That is the memory of the consummate boredom with which we used to suffer through the windy recollections of graduates who came to us in the late 20's and early 30's, as I am coming to you now.

But you should be willing to indulge me at least one or two references. I need to bring them up, I think, to give you an even greater appreciation of just what has happened on this campus under Dr. Henry G. Bennett, one of the truly great educators of our time.

I would hardly have known the place, had I been set down here by surprise.

Only the other day, I read of the latest building program. It made me feel like a has-been sure enough.

Why, I remember my freshman quarter there were only about 1800 students.

And that reminds me: Do you ever have a water shortage? That freshman year was marked by the spring of the great drought. Maybe I should say GREATEST drought. Anyway, you could turn the hydrants on only half an hour or so during the day, and then what you got was

a red clay-like mixture that left you streaked and not too happy after a tub. I remember at the Kappa Sig house we would have every available bucket ready when the time came.

On the whole, nobody ever had more fun in college than we did in those days, nor, I think, did ALL of us fail to learn. SOME of us did fail, just as some do today, and I suspect in about the same proportions. Some like myself were more interested in outside work and activities than in classes. My own primary weakness was the Daily O'Collegian.

But even that interest was rivaled by my respect and affection for such patient instructors as Ed Hadley, Miss Mabel Caldwell, and her dear old father; Professor Sanborn; Professor Williams, and many others, including one who in time came to be my roommate – Harry Anderson.

I said the Daily O'Collegian was my primary interest. I forgot Crowder Allen's restaurant and "The Gateway."

I have often, wondered and seriously, if college men and women do not pick up about as much useful learning in such delightful off-campus hangouts as they do anywhere else. I think I did, loafing over a coke or something; eating chili at Crowder Allen's restaurant at 2 a.m., after helping get the O'Collegian ready for the press; dancing the Charleston – yep, the Charleston! (You never heard of it) – between 7 and 7:30 at some girls' dormitory, or sorority house

All of these were, and I am sure are, a worthwhile part of college life, scarcely less than the books we studied. Nor is it so far a cry from the all-around life that Oklahoma A. and M. College provides to the life you shall be entering so soon now.

And wherever you go, you will be proud – increasingly proud – of the State you and I call home.

In this after-college life, we hear a lot about financial security, a steady job – any steady job.

Here in bustling Oklahoma, with its wonderful air of building and of doing, and looking ahead, I am moved to say a word in behalf of another kind of security.

I want to say something about what someone has called the security of the will.

By this I mean that sense of inner security which comes with the development of a will to cope with the hazards life brings; the confidence to dare the adventures and opportunities life offers.

To begin, let it be said that nothing is so futile as the thought of what might have been. No time is so poorly spent as that given over to reviewing a past to which there could be no returning.

Even now, graduating from college, none of you can say that all of your life lies ahead. Even now each of you can recall with regret steps which you would like to have a chance to take over again, or change.

But this much is sure:

For most of you, this day marks the beginning of that part of your lives which comes to be dominated as much by the problem of earning a living as by any other thing.

I suppose most of you already know the lines of work you hope to get into. Some of you are going back to farms and ranches. Some of you are going into business, some will teach. And so on – –

I want to emphasize the wisdom, to me the supreme wisdom, of doing your level best to pick now that work you most want to do in all the world. There never will be a better time. Some of you will fumble around with half a dozen things before you finally fall into your right

niche. A good percentage of you never will. But you won't have a better opportunity than now to make a choice.

My observation is that many a young person is torn pretty much between two things:

FIRST, doing the work he wants to do on any terms he can get;

SECOND, taking a job which offers immediate financial security.

I want to cast a vote in favor of doing the work you love, even at the expense of the immediate security. A lot of you would find it difficult to follow this advice. Many of you are older, I believe 374 are veterans, and some of you have started already on families. It may not be so easy for you to decide.

But even you who have pressing obligations should do everything you can to get yourself now into the vocation that most appeals to you.

There is plenty of precedent for a man with family responsibilities insisting on doing the work he loves. All of us have seen them around us – and I know of no better example than the Henry Fords.

On the other side, all of us also have seen older people working just to pay the bills while ever longing for a field they somehow never got into.

Everybody is familiar with the story of Mrs. Ford's devotion to her husband's work; how she helped him with his experiments over the kitchen sink; how everything they could get hold of was plowed back into the effort to realize a dream.

The alternative might have been the immediate security of a better paying job that would have consumed Henry Ford's time and talents and strength – consumed them so completely that there would not have been enough energy and imagination left for the work that made him the great industrialist of our time.

All over the country today, graduating classes are listening to commencement addresses – at least they are sitting in front of commencement speakers!

My guess is that most of the graduating classes elsewhere are hearing that they are entering the after-college world at a momentous point, and that the atomic bomb will get ‘em if they don’t watch.

This probably is the thing to be telling you, too, because there is no more certain truth.

But, I am perverse enough to insist that young men and young women coming out of colleges today will ride out the troubles of the atomic age, just as surely as others have ridden out problems in the past, which, though not as great, and as terrifying as the bomb, still were terrifying enough in their time.

My class, for example, was graduated into the Great Depression.

And later classes were graduated into first the threat and then the actuality of World War II.

There is some talk in Washington now of planning a second national capital, yes – and a sort of substitute national government – so the nation would have something to fall back upon, should an atomic bomb wipe out Washington.

One proposal, for example, is to move the capital out this way some place – or at least be prepared to do so. Possibly something like that will, in time, be undertaken.

This trend of thought merely is an indication of the way minds run in these times.

And yet, as I have said, I don’t see how any one could be too pessimistic about the future, considering the new blood coming, as you are, into the game today.

About your own class, I believe there is something special.

This is no hokum spieled by an old grad in the balmy pleasure of coming back. I can attest to the truth of what I am saying by personal observations. Take it from me, there isn't anything else anywhere to excel the heritage that is yours.

You come from a stock that mixed self-confidence and a love of adventure with a willingness for, and an aptitude for, hard work. That is what made Oklahoma. Your inheritance comes from fathers and mothers and their fathers and mothers, who possessed the security of the will. They had the iron determination to work and dig against odds for what they wanted here, instead of accepting the seemingly greater security of an easier existence somewhere else.

I have seen and worked with young men and women from every state, including Oklahoma, in all parts of our country. As I have said, there is just something about you Oklahomans. You pitch into a job with an obvious conviction that you can do it as well or better than anyone else, and WILL.

Right now, on The Associated Press staff at Washington, we have a number of Oklahomans. We have so many, in fact, that once in filling a vacancy I decided that I should not even consider an Oklahoma applicant among the several men proposed for transfer from other bureaus. I passed over the Oklahoman in favor of a man from Kansas City.

The day this man arrived in Washington, I said, "Edson," – his by-line, Arthur L. Edson, is familiar to many of you now – I said, "Edson, how did you get started in this business?"

Edson replied, "Well, the first job I had was on a paper at Shawnee, Oklahoma....."

Edson, although a native of Missouri, had got his newspaper start in Oklahoma, and had later moved to Kansas City. So, despite me, another Oklahoma-trained newspaperman was added to the Washington AP staff.

All this is not to belittle the product of any other state.

I maintain, and I think the evidence is supporting, that the qualities inborn in you Oklahomans, plus living in a state where so much of looking ahead and so little of looking back are unsurpassed.

They make for a gift of courage, the kind of courage it takes to force yourself to do the thing you really want to do, and love to do, even at a risk – as against doing a thing for which you have neither liking nor aptitude, because it offers immediate security.

It was this kind of courage, the realization of this security of the will, that marked the Oklahomans who made the run, who conquered the plains, who drilled the oil, who built the cities, and who – determined that their children's schools should be second to none – conceived Oklahoma A. and M. College.

God bless you all.

(End)