

Carroll College—The First Half-Century and the Second?

In 1904, John Patrick Carroll, a forty year old former president of what is now Loras College, became the second bishop of Helena. His spiritual burdens were far lighter than those of his predecessor, John Baptist Brondel, due to the establishment of the diocese of Great Falls in eastern Montana that same year. But if anyone expected the newly-minted prelate “to rest on his laurels,” and any man who does so is wearing them in the wrong place, he was disappointed. Bishop Carroll, a Western counterpart of “that consecrated blizzard from St. Paul”—Archbishop John Ireland—electrified the clergy and faithful of his spiritual jurisdiction with the dramatic announcement that he would build a new and imposing cathedral, patterned after Vienna’s famed Votive Church, and that he intended to found a diocesan college. And the closely related themes of the “cathedral and the college” dominated his episcopate.

The cathedral remains a cultural, artistic, and aesthetic achievement which has continually inspired the large numbers of Catholics in Montana and has reminded them of their prominent role in the history of the state’s growth and development.

But the college, founded in 1909, had begun to pay appreciable educational dividends long before the cathedral’s formal consecration in 1924. And Carroll knew it. He took visible pleasure in its very existence in Helena and its continuing achievements. On one occasion he was seen pacing up and down Benton Avenue, admiring the lone building that stood atop the stark, rocky eminence known as Capitol Hill. Father Jeremiah Lehane, a

Latin instructor, and Father John Delane, who taught chemistry at the time and recently told me this story, were on the grounds. Father Lehane, observing the bishop, pointed to the building and remarked to Father Delane, with greater accuracy than he perhaps realized, “There’s Jack’s Castle!” And it was, beyond doubt, Jack Carroll’s “castle.”

He laid the cornerstone of what was to be known for the next twenty-three years as Mount Saint Charles College, on September 27, 1909 in the presence of President William Howard Taft, and who could ever forget those 350 pounds of executive Republican majesty! The new college’s goal, Carroll briefly stated, was “...to give the young men of Montana a thorough, liberal education which will fit them for leadership in any vocation they may choose....” And note well Carroll’s unabashed call for Catholic intellectual excellence in his emphasis on the word “leadership.”

Carroll died in 1925, and in God’s grace his zeal and interest in the college were implemented in the career of that great, warm-hearted, good humored member of the Congregation of Holy Cross, the third bishop of Helena, now sadly forgotten—George J. Finnigan. Carroll dreamed great dreams; Finnigan fostered and nourished them. To Mount Saint Charles College he brought a sense of the great traditions of the University of Notre Dame. A letter written by him to one of his seminarians and a future president of the college, R. Vincent Kavanagh, indicated the level of his interest in the college’s future and the nature of the sacrifices he was willing to make in its behalf. On August 7, 1928, he wrote Kavanagh: “This is to acknowledge your good letter of July 25th. I was away at the

time it came, canvassing for students. The results will have to (be) reckoned later on. I trust that there will be a real increase. The fathers have done more than their share and God will reward. Father (Thomas B.) Killila and I did some 1000 miles by car and 1200 miles by train....” Finally, the fact that our alma mater bears its present title is explained by Finnigan’s sense of history. In one of the last acts of his administration, he renamed the institution Carroll College in honor of its illustrious founder.

In slightly more than a generation after its beginning, the college established an enviable reputation. Numbers of native clergy received their philosophical training in the college. One Rhodes Scholar was a Mount Saint Charles man. Orators from the institution have begun the process of practically monopolizing the Montana Intercollegiate Trophy now in the college’s permanent possession, and the athletic teams inspired by those great Notre Dame men, Wilbur Eaton and Bill Jones, has begun the “tradition of champions.” Doctors, dentists, priests, lawyers, engineers, high school and university professors, and two United States congressmen were among your predecessors in the alumni. And never forget that this record of excellence frequently originated in a student body that occasionally was smaller than today’s faculty of sixty-one members.

Those of you who have sat in my classes know that I am no devotee of Thomas Carlyle’s “great man” theory of history. Carroll College’s achievements—early and late—can never be explained entirely in terms of Carroll’s Vision and Finnigan’s zeal. The implementation of great dreams and goals in the demanding, difficult world of academic

administration, with its largely intangible rewards was the unsung accomplishment of a dedicated group of presidents. When Finnigan died in 1932, the college was in the administration of its fifth president, the great and gifted Monsignor Norbert C. Hoff. Fathers Stephen Sullivan, John McMullen, Peter Macdonald, and John Tracy had preceded him.

However, it was in the presidency of Hoff's successor, the great Monsignor Emmet J. Riley, that the college was to experience its most crucial and trying years. Riley was Carroll's first alumnus to serve as president, and he and the Carroll tradition were synonymous. During his administration the worst effects of the Great Depression were felt, and when they began to diminish, disastrous earthquakes hit Helena in 1935. But Carroll, under Riley's leadership, survived. An almost pathetic letter written by him one year to the day before the first of the earthquakes occurred reveals the nature of the stringent financial problems facing him. "Dear Mr. Batzer:" he wrote on October 18, 1934, "I would like to buy some crude oil to be used as a... preservative on an outdoor hardball court. How much would you charge a gallon? I think I would need about a barrel. May I hear from you soon."

When World War II began, the threat of the college's closure became a serious possibility. In departing Helena to seek the establishment of a Navy training program at the school during the conflict, Riley, asking their earnest prayers, candidly informed his faculty that the college's future was at stake. He succeeded. Nothing more need be said but to add

that Riley's tombstone in the priests' plot of St. Patrick's Cemetery in Butte, Montana, is not his monument. Carroll College, flourishing today, is.

There are those who have wistfully observed that Riley might have shown foresight in erecting a building or two. The fact of the matter is that he preserved what became his responsibility in 1934, and on that foundation his successors were able to build significant additions. Without it, their labors would have been in vain.

Finally, this brief account on the history of Carroll College would be tragically two-dimensional if it failed to pay tribute to Carroll's faculty. From the beginning the college has succeeded in bringing together dedicated priests, laymen and laywomen who, in productive cooperation, often carrying fantastic academic loads, have guided the educational progress of Carroll men and, since the fitful fifties and in partial consequence of the Nineteenth Amendment, women. No complete list of all the well-known "worthies" who have labored on "The Rock" could be made or mentioned here tonight. In any event, older alumni will remember Father Thomas B. Killila--Dante scholar and professor of English and German; J. Alphonse Rooney--mathematician par excellence; James W. McCormick--the historian who could and did teach every course in the department. And bridging the gap between the ancient and modern eras in Carroll's history are names such as these: Bishop Bernard Topel--a nationally recognized mathematician; Monsignor R. Vincent Kavanagh--authority in sixteenth and seventeenth century English literature and just about any other subject that needed teaching; and Monsignor John J. O'Connor--Carroll's "Mr.

Chips” and a great priest whose wit and wisdom enlivened the dismal science of economics and the complicated one of sociology and made them things of joy for his students. Last but not least there was Dr. Edward W. Neuman—“Doc” Neuman—whose inspired teaching of chemistry in part explains the stature of many of you from the medical and dental professions here today.

In the last generation and a half, large numbers of collegiate and university histories have appeared. They run the gamut from coldly detached compilations of statistics to meaningless anecdotal compilations. The history of Carroll’s first half-century could be one of the most meaningful in print, combining lessons in survival with those to be learned from the lives of men who dreamed great dreams and could inspire others to bring them to realization.

As a historian, a caretaker in the haunted house of the past, I wonder what Carroll’s reaction would be today if he were to stroll down Benton Avenue and see not one lone building atop Capitol Hill, but seven, housing and educating a student body in excess of 1,000. It makes for interesting speculation, the kind in which eccentric historians like to engage.

As for our alma mater, I earnestly hope that one of my successors in the Department of History in the year 2009 A.D. will be able to say that in its second half-century, Carroll continued to train strong minds, inspire great hearts, instill true faith, and prepare ready hands for the doing of “God’s work here on earth”, so they all might

experience the joys of the world to come. In the final analysis, the realization of this hope will depend in good measure on you if Carroll, the most important private Catholic college between St. Thomas in St. Paul and Gonzaga in Spokane, is to survive. Your acquainting good potential students in the Portland area with the values of a Carroll education, and your generous response to requests for gifts to your alma mater, will be indispensable.

Let me conclude with the immortal words from Virgil's epic poem, *Aeneid*, also paraphrased by that great, awe inspiring Roman orator and politician, Marcus T. Cicero: "Forsan et haec olim meminisse juvabit." Very loosely translated from the original Latin, this memorable quote means: "Fondly remember your alma mater, the education she gave you, her trials and great traditions, and her unwritten history."