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Ralph C. Smedley

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Illinois Wesleyan University

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[Wire recording made of a speech by Ralph C. Smedley April 1949 at a Los Angeles alumni meeting. Ralph C. Smedley, founder of Toastmasters International, was a member of the graduating class of 1903. The recording was made by Edward K. Waters '37 and converted to a digital format by Media Preserves, Summer 2009. Attempts were made by archives staff to verify spelling of names but some could not be confirmed. These names and some inaudible words are noted by marking the presumed word in brackets.]

Dr. Hubert Hodgens: [Recording cuts out, begins abruptly] –Nineteen hundred and three, Ralph C. Smedley, founder and educational director of Toastmasters International Incorporated.

[Laughter]

Dr. Hubert Hodgens: Mr. Smedley, it's a pleasure to have you here sir.

[Applause]

Mr. Smedley: Toastmaster and fellow wearers of the green and white, an anniversary occasion like this inevitably brings to mind contrasts and you are seeing some notable contrasts here tonight. For instance, take some of us patriarchs like Dr. Van Pelt [Samuel Van Pelt '75] and Albert Vasey [Albert W. Vasey '97], well, me for instance, and contrast us with this group of new recruits who have come in in these recent years. There's a contrast. When you looked at that picture of the old university building, we didn't call it Hedding Hall fifty years ago, they've gone and put that name on it since and it burned up.

[Laughter]

Mr. Smedley: When I went to enter Wesleyan fifty-one years ago last September, I knew that I was entering one of the smaller colleges of the Midwest and you can underscore the "small." At that time, the campus occupied four city blocks. Over on the south was University Avenue and the old building in front of that and two blocks north was Beecher Street. Over to the east next to the streetcar barns I think was Park Street and two blocks west of that was East Street. Well, that was the extent of it, four blocks. That was about one-fourth, possibly one-fifth of the area of the campus today but that was ample for us in those old days, for that old building housed practically everything except a few backward students who went over to the prep school as well called it and made up some of the things that they lacked in the way of credits, and the Music School which was housed somewhere downtown on Main Street I think. With that exception, the Law School, the College of Letters, the whole business was right there in that old building and Dr. Graham's Factory of Aromas was down here on the left and the—

[Laughter]

Mr. Smedley: College section—the Law School section where they manufactured all kinds of things. But over here on the east—

[Laughter]

Mr. Smedley: I remember how—Jake Lindley [Jacob P. Lindley 1884/85 – 1911/12, 1914/15], wasn't it?—that used to tell them to look in the book and see when they didn't know what they were talking about. Oh, we had some great old times there. We didn't recognize the Law School very much in the College of Letters. They were below us there in the basement. There on the main floor over at the left where the administrative office is, we had two pretty fair sized rooms. I think the two of them put together would have made about two-thirds of the space we have here and the whole work went from there with the exception of the boiler room where the janitor, Woodson, used to complain every morning in the wintertime about having to get up so much steam—you remember him, don't you Albert? No, he wasn't there when you were there. You were there ahead of me. Fred remembers him anyway.

[Laughter]

Mr. Smedley: Well those were good old days. Upstairs was Amy Hall, Amy Chapel. We didn't need a bigger auditorium than that, that took care of everything, even the class of 1903 graduated there with Vice-President Fairbanks delivering the oration. And I will admit that while I had voted for Vice-President Fairbanks and while he came from that birthplace of orators, the state of Indiana, I was horribly disappointed in his speech and I got very little inspiration from it.

[Laughter]

Mr. Smedley: Now the other commencement orators like Bishop Hughes for instance and others that we'd had before him did a lot more for me than the Vice-President of the United States did but he did the best he could on the job.

[Laughter]

Mr. Smedley: I want to suggest to you another contrast in those days—the contrast between the dollar then and now. The dollar in those days had authority. A nickel bought a quarter's worth of what we get today. You could buy an ice cream soda down at [Plano's or Coblance's] or some of those other places for a nickel. It didn't cost so much to take the girls out then but we didn't have so many nickels. I ran across an old notebook the other day in looking up some of the old records and I discovered that my first year at Wesleyan, the academic year of 1898 and '99, cost me exactly \$281, which included my carfare getting there and going back, my room and board and tuition, and such clothing as I had to buy. The second year, '99 into 1900, I was extravagant. I went two dollars and a half over that and spent \$283.50.

[Laughter]

Mr. Smedley: But I had to buy an overcoat that year and—

[Laughter]

Mr. Smedley: That overcoat cost me five dollars down at—was it [Greesheim's] or some other of those places, maybe it was Livingston's—but anyway, that overcoat cost me five dollars and that set me over my limit. But you could go down—remember Fred?—you could go down to [Bud Ellis' Chop House] and get a pretty square meal for fifteen cents, it cost five cents more if you wanted pie, but aside from that you could get it. And my cousin Roscoe and I lived over on East Chestnut Street at 513 East Chestnut, not very far from where ex-governor Fifer and Ex-Vice President Adlai Stevenson lived, but we paid only ten dollars a month between us for the room and it was a pretty good room too. Of course, we had to join the YMCA because there wasn't any bathroom in the house.

[Laughter]

Mr. Smedley: So we had to go downtown for our showers, but those were happy days anyway. There was another contrast I think you won't mind if I mention it and that you—we would survive without that beautiful athletic field, the bleachers, grandstand and all that kind of—we played football back in the old days—you remember, Fred?—that old reclaimed cow pasture out north of the—

[Laughter]

Mr Smedley: Out north of the building and there was a brick building on it. I don't know whether it was an ex-warehouse or stable or just what it is, but you could get in there and change your clothes at any rate. I don't recall any lockers. But I want to tell you that there was one occasion when we had a football game there that [inaudible]. Now we didn't have any big ten or big four or any other kind of conference in those days. The ball games hadn't been thought out, we didn't have any money. I don't know how they paid traveling expenses but we had occasionally—we always had a game with Illinois State Normal. Occasionally we got Bradley Polytechnic over—now that's Bradley University I believe but needless to say it was Bradley Polytechnic...[inaudible]...There were a lot of other contrasts. I'm not going to try to tell you about all of them because we mustn't drum that five minutes too far, you know.

[Laughter, cuts out]

Mr. Smedley: And that is the faculty of Illinois Wesleyan. If I were proposing a toast this evening, I should ask you to join me in a toast to the faculty and when I mention faculty, you'd be thinking of modern names, of the names of those of your day. I would be thinking of men like Professor Ferguson [Wilbert Ferguson 1895/96 – 1943/44] and Graham [Robert Orlando Graham 1888/89 – 1910/11] and R.B. Steele [Robert Benson Steele 1891/92 – 1901/02] and Calvin Green [Calvin Weininger Green 1889/90 – 1901/02] and Professor Lackland [Melvin Porter Lackland 1893/94 – 1899/1900]. Oh my—say, you children don't know what you missed.

[Laughter]

Mr. Smedley: It was credibly reported, vigorously reported, that Professor Lackland had—he was the teacher of mathematics—and it was said that in all of his textbooks, he had at proper intervals his notations tell the joke for instance in trigonometry—be sure to mention the joke about the cosign of Noah’s Ark at this point—and he had a wonderful collection of good old faithful stories and he livened up his classes to beat the band. I don’t know that he ever told the story of the girl in coeducational school who was in the class where shortly after the school had started the [Pregman] girls were asked to write some explanation of why they came to college, and among the papers that came in expressing lofty ideas for careers and activities, one girl turned in the paper on which she had written, “I came to college to be wed but I ain’t yet.”

[Laughter]

Mr. Smedley: I don’t remember whether Professor Lackland told that story or not but if you knew it, I’ll bet you a dollar he told it.

[Laughter]

Mr. Smedley: But to people like Ferguson and Graham and Lackland and Green and Steele and all the rest of those folks who gave so much of inspiration, who worked so hard to open our minds and to instill some hopes of improvement into us in our callow youth, I say to them and to the faculty of Illinois Wesleyan in your day for the things that they did to you, there should be great honor paid and I’d like to take this occasion to speak in behalf of one man who most of you don’t know—that was Dr. E.M. Smith [Dr. Edgar Moncena Smith 1898/99 – 1904/05] who came to Wesleyan as President the same year that I came as a callow freshman and who was one of the finest men I think that I’ve ever known in the teaching profession. Now those were days of austerity and hard-not so he didn’t have to pay twenty percent on the loan then I suppose but we had plenty to go against. Dr. Smith, in addition to being President, had his classroom and gave his courses and it was my privilege to take some of those courses under him and I look back from this distance with gratitude to him for the inspiration and the uplift that he gave to us in those classes there as we went in to study logic and Bible and philosophy and the various things which he taught. And so, will you join me in a toast of grateful remembrance for the people who, as your teachers in Wesleyan in your day, putting in their names in place of the ones that I’ve mentioned, who did so much to give you the start and to give you the opportunity to go out into life and be better citizens and better people and do more for yourselves and for other people because of what they did for you. And let’s keep the banner of Wesleyan waving at the same high pitch, at the same high point and even higher as the years go on in honor of what it did for us and what it’s going to do for the generations yet to come.

[Applause]

[Cuts out]

Dr. Hubert Hodgens: —see how he—well you can't say he just happened to be—but how he became the founder of Toastmasters International. And what a spot he has me on tonight. [laughs]

[Laughter]

Dr. Hubert Hodgens: Now you mentioned a couple of gentlemen of your vintage sir in Wesleyan, will you present them to us, the ones who are here tonight...

Mr. Smedley: Oh, yes.

Dr. Hubert Hodgens: Yes, please.

Mr. Smedley: This is Fred Hammond [Alfred S. Hammond '03], one of the only classmates I believe tonight and—[Recording cuts out, ends abruptly]