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Samuel Van Pelt

Samuel Van Pelt 1875
Illinois Wesleyan University

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Illinois Wesleyan University

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[Wire recording made of a speech by Dr. Samuel Van Pelt April 1949 at a Los Angeles alumni meeting. Dr. Van Pelt was 95 years old at the time. He died Nov. 1953. 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 Hodgins: [Recording starts abruptly, inaudible]—from 1932 to 1936. A couple of my star performers around here, I see Johnny Janca [John Janca '40] up here and Dale Volle ['39] and some more of them, but it's a pleasure to be here tonight and to have a chance to meet and visit with you. I hope I'm a friend of Wesleyan—that's a good definition. Now we're going to have the privilege now of seeing some pictures on the screen here depicting Wesleyan as it was and giving us a little background for the remainder of the program. May we have those pictures please at this time? [recording skips]...Illinois Wesleyan and of course we go back first of all to the oldest living alumnus of Illinois Wesleyan, Dr. Samuel Van Pelt. He has the distinction of holding the Ferguson Cane which is the mark of distinction for the oldest living alumnus, and Dr. Van Pelt, we're delighted to have you with us tonight—the class of '75. Dr. Van Pelt, will you say a few words?

[Applause]

Dr. Samuel Van Pelt: Fraternal greetings to this company of alumni, I don't know many of you, but you are Wesleyans and I love Wesleyan and so I'm sure that my greeting is genuinely fraternal, and when I recall that there have been seventy-four classes graduated from Illinois Wesleyan since my class, I can also claim the position not only of fraternal but perhaps paternal.

[Laughter]

Dr. Van Pelt: And yet I would wish it to be without any of the implications of our present-day political idea of paternalism.

[Laughter and applause]

Dr. Van Pelt: Your committee suggested to me that I make some allusion to the early days. The first twenty years of the history of Wesleyan University was full of discouragement and hardship, sacrifice, and heroism, and yet in those days, there were men and women—there were men who graduated from that institution who made their mark in the world and I'm told, and I think it's historic, that there were one or two suspensions of operation in the life of the university during that first twenty years, and at the close of the second, if there was a second suspension of operations, Oliver S. Munsell [1857/58 – 1872/73] and his brother Charles W. Munsell, undertook to reopen, reestablish, and to promote the interests of the institution. Take this as a circumstance how those twenty years—at one time there was a debt of \$4,200 on which they were paying twenty percent interest—that's simply a sample of the hardships of those early

years. In the '70s, two things were of special interest. In the year '70, that was the year for the admittance of women to the privileges of the institution and in the same year or a little later—however, I'd like to say this, that just the other day in the *Reader's Digest* was an allusion to a girl who had given the opinion when she said, "I like a coeducational institution better than an educational."

[Laughter]

Dr. Van Pelt: That occurred in last month's or one of the recent copies of the *Digest*. In the '70s also there was a very notable contest in oration. One of our Wesleyan men took first place in the state contest, in which there were nine institutions, among them such as Northwestern University, and he took first place, and then he took first place in the interstate, five states including Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, and two others. An institution must be known precisely by its product and from Wesleyan, even in those earlier hard years, there were lawyers and editors, preachers, judges, legislators, and before the '70s began, there were—there was one, perhaps two governors, state governors, and one or two bishops in that early period. I remember Joe Fifer [Joseph Wilson Fifer '68] very well, state Governor of Illinois. I remember also J.C. Hartzell [Joseph Crane Hartzell '68], one of our early bishops. And the men of the faculty may very well be mentioned. There was Munsell [Oliver S. Munsell 1857/58 – 1872/73], Jaques [J.R. Jaques 1865/66 – 1875/76], De Motte [Harvey Clelland De Motte 1860/61 – 1884/85, 1898/99 – 1903/04], Potter [Bradford S. Potter 1866/67 – 1874/75, 1883/84 – 1892/93], Powell [J.W. Powell 1865/66 – 1867/68]—the Colorado explorer you've read about—and Judge Reeves [Owen Thornton Reeves 1873/74 – 1911/12], in charge of the Law Department—I do believe it's Taylor and Moss, and Wait—and these men remind of me of such men as [Brown and Thompson and Wallen] of Boston University. And now about the class of '75—there were seventeen, among them lawyers—soon to be lawyers, teachers, preachers, and there were four that perhaps deserve some special mention. One was Tom Coultas who won this oratorical decision for both the State and the Interstate and Bosworth—Richard Bosworth who became a very prominent minister in the east particularly in the Congregational Church and for a while Associate Minister of the great Plymouth Congregational Church—Beecher's church. And then there was Tom Sterling who went to South Dakota and had a part in framing the state's constitution and situating the admittance of the state into the Union and later became United States Senator for I think some thirteen years. He was a member of our class of '75. And then I can't go farther without mentioning the fourth, who carries the Ferguson Cane. If you live long enough you may become somewhat distinguished.

[Laughter]

Dr. Van Pelt: I wish to mention one or two sentiments concerning the later period and the present order of things. From print and correspondence and occasional interviews, I have come to think very well of the present staff of the university and I think well of the student body, not only in enrollment but in their enthusiasms and their activities and the modern development and learning in the principles of campus self-government, which is a very notable thing at our university there. I think well of the present campus plan,

which will amount to a good deal in a course of time, and I think the planners' ideal of the east campus being reserved for academic purposes exclusively and the west being campus for women, the social building and the dormitory, and there will no doubt be sometime a very fine women's gymnasium and so on on the west side. On the south side, between the library and the conservatory, I think there is room enough for a very fine auditorium and chapel, which now they're talking will be one of the developments before long. I think there will be some buildings—pictures of which you saw a moment ago—are very well placed in view of this panel ideal campus plan and...teachers of the architecture and I'm very much displeased with some of the latest sketches proposed for the proposed new buildings, the administration building and the Shaw building and so on. I think the architecture is not at all satisfactory; not simply a matter of lack of funds but a lack of principle reverence to architectural skills. Of the Van Pelt alumni, there are three still living—my sister, now 85, and a brother, 87, and the oldest, 96. I have a nephew who came to be very distinguished indeed in his public work in the East. Some of you may remember [Bartolo] was a graduate of Wesleyan and he came to be pastor of the principle Methodist Church in the New York neighborhood and spent 35 years as pastor of that church and for many years he had a men's bible class of 2,400 and a women's bible class of between 8- and 900. In Southern California—you know how we have seen alumni in Southern California—are two men of particular distinction that ought to be mentioned on an occasion like this. One of them is a pastor of one of the leading churches on the Pacific coast. I hear him over the air every Saturday night, some of you here—sorry he can't be here tonight. And his discourses, if I've heard them, have given me a reason to believe, reason to know why, his church is so successful and that his dozen years of an unfinished pastorate have been so crucial and so beneficial to the community. And the other man who gives distinction to this Southern California group of alumni—preacher, administrator, and founder. As administrator, his official functions and councils have influenced more or less nine million constituents and as many million of adherents all over the world, and as founder, while he was pastor of the Church of Urbana, Illinois, the seat of the state university, he fought through and established an institution which came to be and now is the annex to whom many public institutions, state institutions, particularly educational—has an annex relationship [for who the purpose is] primarily so that now that institution is serving nearly 100 groups of students all over the United States and another 100,000 students are constantly influenced by this organization and doubtless the organization will continue after we have all passed by. And with this, Mr. Chairman... I will close. That's all.

[Applause]

Dr. Van Pelt: I think you will be glad to see the—this instrument which gives me so much distinction—holding the Ferguson Cane from Illinois Wesleyan University.

[Applause and cuts out]

Dr. Hubert Hodgens: Marvelous to have someone who represents this long span of time and who has tied together so beautifully the old days with observations on Illinois Wesleyan at the present time. And he has also practically introduced our next speaker, for

which I'm grateful. It isn't often that a mere minister has the opportunity of telling a bishop what to do.

[Laughter]

Dr. Hubert Hodgins: I'm reveling in this tonight. [Laughs]

[Laughter]