

IN HIS OWN WORDS: “THE GENESIS OF THE COLLEGE”

An Address by President J. T. Roberts (1921)

Because of my close connection with the Genesis of Indiana Central, it will be difficult to speak of it without some personal mention. But I believe there is a proverb or it may be a new beatitude, which says, “Blessed is he that bloweth his own horn.”

Eighteen years ago, the church¹ in this state was divided in sentiment as to the advisability of establishing another church school. Hartsville College, Green Hill, Roanoke, and North Manchester schools had gone down. Also many of the educators and other leaders in the denomination were opposed to increasing the number of our educational institutions and were urging the policy of better equipping and endowing what we had, which was a good sane doctrine.

To clearly show the need of a new institution and overcome the opposition was no small problem. So necessarily those who were actively interested in establishing a college in the state had to pass through the fires of criticism and meet opposition that was not easily overcome.

After an unsuccessful effort to secure the college building and grounds located at Muncie, Indiana, (which are now part of the state Normal)² those interested began an investigation for a new location. Mr. William M. Elder, a real estate dealer, having a farm here where we finally located the college, became interested in the college possibility and made a proposition to certain representatives of the church which was accepted, as far as could be accepted without conference action.

It was our privilege to present to the next session of the White River Conference a resolution favorable to the launching of a college enterprise at our present site on the condition that one other conference join us in the effort. Another member of the conference offered an amendment making the number of cooperating conferences three instead of two. Had the amendment carried, there doubtless would have been no college. The original resolution was passed by the conference.

The Indiana conference that met soon afterward, voted down a resolution to cooperate with the new enterprise. The conference at that time was cooperating with Westfield College³, and being under certain obligations to Westfield, felt the conference could not honorably withdraw at that time. But the conference at its session one year following voted cooperation.

The test was to come at the St. Joseph Conference, which in a nominal way was cooperating with Otterbein University; within its territory were Green Hill, North Manchester, and Roanoke schools which had gone out. And a number of the members of the conference had sacrificed greatly for some of these schools, and it felt keenly the load they had been carrying. Many of them were unwilling to get under the responsibility of another school project.

It was here that the speaker made the speech of his life. The speech was illuminating, eloquent, forceful, convincing, earnest, and very highly explosive. When the vote was taken, altho[ugh] it was a painfully small majority, the resolution had carried, to the joy of its friends. The speaker had taken a seat and was wiping the perspiration from his brow, when a member of the conference came up and shook hands and declared a miracle had been performed, for the vote to carry.

In a short time Mr. Elder came round with a big smile of approbation and invited us out to lunch with him (and when we lunched with him, we always got all we could eat, and he paid the bills). While we were feeding a mammoth appetite, Mr. Elder said to us, “Now Roberts, I want you to make a selection of one of the best lots in University Heights, and I will make you a deed for it.”

It almost gave us palpitation of the heart, for up to that time we had given back to the church what little we had received above a mere living, and we could sing with the other preachers “no foot of land do I possess, no cottage in this wilderness,” but this gift spoiled our song and put our feet on the highway to financial prosperity.

It may banish from your mind the thought, that you may think me egotistical for reference to my speech, as being the speech of my life, when I explain that never before, and never since, have I received \$300 remuneration for a single address. I may have been underpaid sometimes, but I really think I was overpaid for that speech.

Official action had been taken by the required number of conferences, trustees were elected, and arrangements made according to the contract with Mr. Elder to sell 446 lots, which were the number in the new University Heights addition. The church employed an agent, who was sent out to sell lots. Other agents later were brought into the field, to assist in the sale of lots.

When a little more than half the lots were sold, and the enterprise seemed sufficiently certain of consummation, a contract for a building was given, which was to cost \$40,000. This, with ten acres of campus ground was to be William Elder's gift to the church from the proceeds of lots sold. As the building was being erected, a committee was appointed by the trustees to secure a president, and assist in securing a faculty. A number of persons in the educational work of the church were consulted, and solicited; some thought if it were a year later they might consider the matter. Others, when finding out conditions; that we had a building unfurnished, and had no money and some debt, were not anxious for the job.

We had come up to within about three months from when the trustees wanted the school to begin. There was a meeting of the trustees when by a unanimous vote, your speaker was asked to serve as the president. Our duties were multitudinous. One hundred lots yet to sell, a debt of \$2,000 the trustees owed for lots that had been sold—all the rooms of the college building to be decorated; the basement then a mud hole to have a cement floor. The beautiful lawn in front of the college, with its nice shade trees, under which the college boys and girls now study together Greek and Latin and other important subjects, was then a depression in the ground requiring a few hundred wagon loads of dirt to lift it above the adjoining grounds, all equipment, furniture, and library was to be selected; and money secured to pay for all this. These items mentioned constituted some of the duties of the president.

Never since apostolic times, were things had more in common than in the beginning of the school year. There being but two homes in University Heights, we had to move into the college building. And at the big table we made, we fed faculty and students. Mrs. Roberts was chief cook and dish washer; although she had some small children to care for; yet the duties that had come to her not being quite enough to employ all her time, she took up and completed a business course; for at that time were had a business course as our name was Indiana Central University. We felt we had to have all the departments belonging to an institution of that kind; since it has taken the common place of a college, not so much is required.

A short time after the school had opened, Bishop E. B. Kephart, who was here in the state giving assistance in the work of the college, was taken suddenly ill, and without having time to say good bye to his friends went up to his crowning.

A short time after his death, it occurred to us that we could lay some little tribute of honor to the good Bishop, and help at the same time the college in which he was interested, and for which he rendered his last earthly service.

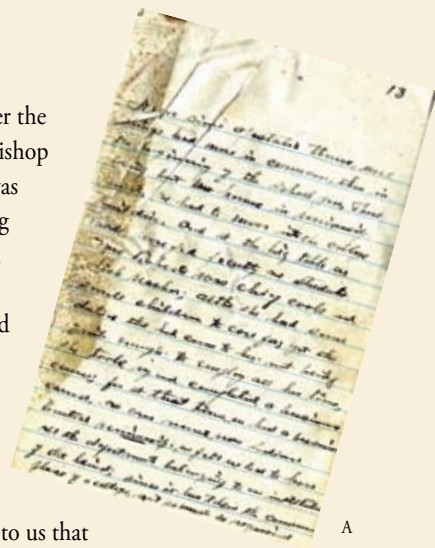
We decided to make the auditorium (then unfurnished) of the college building memorial to the Bishop. This we did by placing the name of the donors to this fund on small plates to be fastened on the chairs that were into go into this room. These gifts ranged from \$10 to \$300. This brought in several thousand dollars, which aided greatly in the improvement in and about the building, and in paying for furniture and equipment.

Although the school was greatly handicapped in the beginning because of a lack of many of the conveniences found in our older institutions of learning. Yet the church shared its loyalty by furnishing 76 students the first term, 95 the second, and 126 the third.

During the first three years, \$1,800 was spent on improvements in and about the buildings, and for furthering and equipment and library, besides the regular running expenses of the college. We quote from our last report to the Board of Trustees related to the finances, "If the supporters of the institution were to stop now, or the institution should run within its means from now on, our real debt unprovided for would be \$8,000."

While you have your prophets⁴ speak for the school tonight, when your speaker stood before the first graduating class in June 1908, of which your honored president was a member. We prophesied to these that they were the first fruits of thousands who would follow them. Having as we do the best location for a college there is in the denomination; and the best territory there is from sea to sea; and the great wealth that is being accumulated by our people; and the splendid crop of boys and girls now growing in the expanding territory of the school. Indiana Central will, within another sixteen years under proper direction, outrank anything in the denomination.

If a person never accomplished anything in his life, but to help make possible an institution that will do the good Indiana Central is destined to do, it could not help but add a little golden to the sunset and make the dying bed easier.



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J. T. Roberts—“The Genesis of the College”

A (p. 18) Scanned image of portion of the text from page 13 of J. T. Roberts’s 1921 address on the “Genesis of the College.” Text used with permission of the Frederick D. Hill Archives of the University of Indianapolis.

NOTES

“‘*The Genesis of the College*’—*In His Own Words*” by *J. T. Roberts*

- ¹ At the time that Roberts addressed the University, virtually all members of the student body remained members of the United Brethren in Christ denomination. In this case, therefore, the word “church” refers to the denomination.
- ² Formerly known as the normal college [for teacher-training] in the state of Indiana, today we know this institution at Ball State University.
- ³ Westfield College was located in the town of Westfield, Illinois. This institution was closed shortly before Indiana Central University began.
- ⁴ J. T. Roberts is referring to the practice of having the senior class at Indiana Central University offer a “prophecy” in the Oracle yearbook (see excerpt on page 17 above). These statements provide one of the clearest indicators available of the students’ perspective about vocation exploration and formation from the earliest period of the University’s history.