

## OFF TO COLLEGE

1907

"Abilene, Abilene, all off for Abilene!" I had been sleeping on the train that September morning in 1907, but I came up with a bounce when the porter called Abilene. Abilene had been my destination for months and even years. I had come to attend Simmons College.

"Hotel, Commercial Hotel," a porter called, and my father and I had hardly left the train steps when he seized our bags and headed straight across the street, proceeded down the sidewalk of North First Street a few steps, and climbed the stairway to an unpretentious lobby. We followed after him, and a sleepy clerk registered us and sent us to our room. The hour was approaching our accustomed getting-up time.

Almost ever since I could remember I had been hearing about Simmons College. Oscar Henry Cooper had become president of the college in 1902, and my mother, a former student of his, began to tell me that I was going to Simmons College. Those were the days before parents proposed in such matters, and their sons and daughters disposed of the proposals after their own liking.

My father had insisted on coming along to see to it that I was properly located or "entered" and that everything was in good order. Feeling the weight of all my sixteen years and wishing to appear sophisticated, I was not enthusiastic about his accompanying me. I was well able to take care of myself, I insisted. But W. B. Richardson had his own ideas about that as about many other matters, and since he was going to pay the bills I could not well object.

The next morning as we were getting hair cuts and squan-

## *Famous Are Thy Halls*

dering our money for shoe shines, we inquired of a barber how to get to Simmons College. (The barber's name was Barber and for many years he was active in the First Baptist Church.) The response was more encouraging than that received by Dr. Julius Olsen five years before, when he inquired about Simmons College of a hotel porter who had lived in Abilene all his life and had never heard of the school. Simmons College was due north two miles, we were told; and since we had to have my trunk hauled out, we traded with a baggage hauler to take us along with the trunk.

From Abilene, Simmons College was reached at that time by way of Hickory Street. The street was just the Anson road then, not a street, when it reached the campus. It left down-town Abilene by way of Pine Street, passed by the post office, and after two or three blocks it bore westerly to Hickory Street and followed that to and through the Simmons campus. At about North Eighth Street, pasture and farms set in, and there was a house only occasionally on the way to the college. In fact, there was a horse pasture of good size south of North Eighth Street.

Simmons College then consisted of Main Building, about 200 feet south of the Sid Richardson Science Center. Anna Hall, a dormitory for women which was demolished in 1961 to make way for the Student Center; a two-story wooden building at the site of Caldwell Hall; and five brick cottages for boys in the vicinity of Abilene Hall. Main Building was enclosed by an iron fence. With its links of pipe and heavy posts set in concrete, the fence was a prized campus feature. It was not built altogether for ornamental purposes. Cattle and horses grazed in the vicinity.

Having reached the campus we called at once on President Cooper, He greeted us with a measure of cordiality, and I appreciated the fact that from the correspondence he remembered my name. My father liked him very much and described

## I • *Off to College*

him as friendly and "a nice quiet sort of man." By "quiet" he meant that he evidenced reserve and dignity, was not a back-slapper. This was before the *Tom, Bill, Sally* and *Frances* days; but even if he were living in our own time I do not believe that Dr. Cooper would be known as *Oscar*. He was *Dr. Cooper*. I soon learned that among the boys he was referred to as "*Old Doc*," a term that did not in any way imply lack of respect. Oscar Henry Cooper would have commanded respect in any group of civilized people on earth. He was never boisterous, but he could speak in clear, positive tones and commanding style. I never saw him in a rage or tantrum, but his reprimands could cut like a scorpion and his wrath was something to fear. Generally he found it unnecessary to do more than just look. I recall once, as a football team was gathering in front of Cowden Hall before leaving for a trip, quarterback J. E. ("Dooley") Graves, an unforgettable fellow, said: "Now gentlemen, before this team leaves, I want to pull off a little stunt." Whereupon he took a half-plug of tobacco out of his pocket and started to bite off what seemed to be at least a quarter of the half-plug. Just then he looked up and saw Doctor Cooper gazing at him with his piercing eyes. Nobody said a word; but the stunt was not pulled off, and Dooley faded from the scene like a wisp of smoke. Dr. Cooper generally wore a smile, but often it was a slight one which could disappear in the flash of an eye. For years I was afraid of him and never felt comfortable in his presence. One morning, after school had been in session a few weeks, the great man frightened me. When I was passing his office, he called me in and told me unequivocally to wear a collar with my military uniform. The reprimand smarted all the more because I knew that he was right.

We had arrived on the campus early. There was no planned orientation for new students in those years. Indeed, it would be a long time before formal freshman orientation came into use. In fact, but few of those then entering Simmons for the first time had reached freshman level. Those days were not dull,

however. Really, in youth as in later years, there have been few occasions indeed when I find either people or situations boring. I have my doubts about the person who complains too often of being bored. Either he lacks the ability to adjust to people and to situations, or he is acting. There was nothing tiresome about the two or three days that I spent on the campus before we registered and classes started. I learned more about Simmons College, its history, and the way of life on its campus during that time than I have ever learned in any like period since. Few boarding students had arrived, but the boys of the neighborhood who visited us at the cottages were good teachers.

In this group I remember especially John, Gene and Tom Pearce, Tom Lampkin, Robert Wagstaff, Lewis Adams, Scott King, Truett Compere, Burl Scott, Lloyd Dellis, and Oscar, Stuart, and Hubert Cooper, sons of the president. Oscar Cooper left for Yale, and Stuart soon left for Charlottesville, Virginia, where he was taking a pre-medic course. These fellows were not exactly unfriendly, but it was easy to see in them evidences of a sense of superiority. This attitude was even more pronounced in the boarding students when they arrived. Of these I recall Ed Woodward, Will T. Stewart, Claude Allen, John Airhart, Burleson (Buster) Brown, Albert Mancill, W. C. Reeves, and John Bunting. Reeves, a mature man and college employee as well as a student, was the most friendly, and I remember him especially for his talent at making a fellow feel that he belonged.

When I became a second year student, I understood the attitude of these men and learned why they kept me at arm's length for awhile. They were members of the cult; I was a neophyte and would have to prove myself. There was no formal initiation, no hazing, but many practical jokes, much caustic repartee, and many sells. The dictionaries are slow to accept this last word, but I do not know a better one. There can be no more effective discipline for the upstart than to make some

## I • *Off to College*

strange statement about a person, thing, or situation, leaving an opening for a question, and replying to the inevitable question with some ridiculous answer. The practice is not so common today, for the reason perhaps that people are more sophisticated and cautious.

I do not know how I would have reacted to hazing, the practice that became common in later years. I think it would have embittered me as it did numbers of students of other generations. However that may be, I will stand by my premise that the boys of 1907 were skilled at orienting new students and did a good job with me. "Send your boy to school and the boys will educate him," is a statement with a large measure of truth in it.

We stayed in the cottages, which were, I repeat, five two-room brick structures, in two rows, extending east to west, about where Abilene Hall stands. Attached to each was a porch of generous dimensions, making popular gathering places. Inside each room was a grate for burning coal, one light drop, with a globe of about forty or sixty candlepower, a chiffonier, with a small mirror on top, a small cabinet that served as a wash stand, with pitcher and bowl, four chairs, and two double beds. On the floor of the room, which was about fourteen by eighteen feet, was a well-worn rug that covered about half the space. Baths were to be had in a small shower near by and sponge baths were often taken in the rooms. There was tap water at an outside hydrant near at hand. Hot water was not to be had in the rooms (unless heated in a pan in the grate) nor at the shower.

Except in an emergency, each room was supposed to accommodate two men only, but there seemed always to be an emergency. My first roommate (the first man who joined me in the room) was Theodore Ferguson, a young man of excellent family background, a graduate of Anson High School, ex-

*Famous Are Thy Halls*

tremely neat, orderly, systematic, and highly refined. I wonder how he managed to put up with me. He insisted on keeping everything neat and precise; I was careless. He was something of an inventor and efficiency expert. Among other items, I recall that he invented a device for making easier and improving the polishing of shoes, and his shoes were always spotless, while mine sometimes looked slovenly. He made for himself a schedule which he followed rigidly, rationing his time as though it were fine gold: thirty minutes for lunch, three minutes to wash his teeth, ten minutes for recreation and chatting with friends, thirty minutes for free reading, evenings for study, *et cetera*. Ferguson finished his formal schooling at the University of Virginia and became a successful accountant.

Joining us after a day or two was a youth whose name I shall not repeat. He was a likable fellow, evidently from a fine family, but before he came to college he had fallen into some bad practices. He spoke of clerking in a store and occasionally "knocking down" some change to supplement his meager salary. I had never heard that expression before. Then one day he told us that he was in trouble, and that evening he caught a train for home. He had stolen a small book, which as I recall sold for just fifty cents; but O. H. Cooper, who was his own student conduct committee, did not equivocate in such matters. We felt very sorry for our erring roommate, but there was nothing that we could do.

For a period there was a fourth man in that room, Jack Harris, destined to become an outstanding Texas lawyer. A business college graduate and a little older than the rest of us, Harris was relatively well informed and, for me, something of a teacher. Deftly he made suggestions, and if I ignored them he became more pointed and occasionally sarcastic. I thought that he was a little severe with me at times, but his sense of humor generally removed the sting from his words. Through the years, we were fast friends.

## I • *Off to College*

So much for my beginning in Simmons. Let us turn back now for a brief sketch of my own life before I came here and of the school before I came to know it.