June 17, 1927

To the Trustees of Allegheny College:

Doubtless you will read in the associated press reports the story of a tragic accident Saturday night, involving four Allegheny students. I do not know that those reports will say - but I want each member of the Board to have the exact situation before him.

There were three young men and one young woman in the party. The driver, Mr. Arthur Ellis, who graduated last week, lives in Meadville and presumably had his parents' consent to use the car. He and Mr. Edward White were in the front seat and, in passing Mr. Ronald McKay and Miss Carolyn Holmes, invited them to jump in the rear seat and have a ride. Miss Holmes had a date with McKay and also had twelve o'clock permission from the matron of the hall. They drove toward Erie - perhaps clear to Erie - and had returned as far as McGuffintown Bridge, about three miles north of Meadville, when Ellis, the driver and owner of the car, noticed something go wrong with his lighting system. Sparks were flying and the under part of the car seemed to be in flames. In the confusion, he struck the bridge-head, and the car swung clear across the end of the bridge, the rear striking the opposite side. Presumably this burst the gasoline tank, for in just a moment the whole car was a mass of flames. McKay and Miss Holmes were in the rear seat and both were rendered unconscious immediately when the car struck the bridge. They were very fortunate in that Judge Kent was almost immediately behind them on the road home.

Miss Holmes has escaped with head bruises and a serious cut in the scalp. Ellis, the driver, was uninjured. White, sitting on the front seat with Ellis, was cut somewhat about the jaw. McKay, who would have been a senior next year and the captain of the football team, died of terrible burns about an hour and a half ago.

I have made inquiry concerning the possibility of some or all in the party having been drinking during the evening. The doctors say there was not the slightest suggestion of liquor when the party reached the hospital, and I do not believe there had been any drinking. I am quite convinced in my own mind that it is a case of sheer misfortune for which nobody can be blamed. It was the kind of thing that might have happened to anyone driving anywhere. Ellis, the driver, will doubtless come in for some criticism from the "arm-chair" critics for not doing this and for doing that. But none knows what he would do in the emergency such as faced this young man. Personally I think that the final proof that there was no drinking appears in the fact that Miss Holmes was rescued from the car almost immediately, though she was unconscious from the blow on her head. In some mysterious fashion McKay's trousers caught on fire and he was literally roasted to death below his hips. How the girl escaped, or any of the party for that matter, with their lives, is a mystery to me.

Yours very truly,

James A. Beebe.