1932-07-01

Manuscript: Impressions of St. Lawrence

Tarbell, Ida M.
The Editor of the Laurentian asks me for a few hundred words of impressions of St. Lawrence. I am glad to take advantage of this invitation since it gives me the chance to thank the numbers of people beginning with Dr. Sykes - Dean Jones and Mr. Ellsworth who made my week at St. Lawrence in May so exciting and so agreeable. Nothing could have been kinder than my welcome and more intelligent than the planning for my time. Never for a moment did anybody make me feel that I was a bore or an intruder! Thus you see my first impression was that St. Lawrence understands and practices a gracious hospitality.

I went to Canton in search for a background - a background for a study of one of your most distinguished alumni, the President of your Corporation and incidentally the President or Chairman of many other Corporations, which I am not sure that he always considers as important as yours - Mr. Owen D. Young.

One cannot know Mr. Young long without realizing the importance in his scheme of things of St. Lawrence University; and naturally you want to know why and how. So I went up to Canton on a voyage of discovery. Nothing at all did I know of your fascinating North country, only its boundaries, down the St. Lawrence, along the Mohawk Trail, the Adirondack forest,
excepting perhaps what I had picked up...and that was all to the
good—from Irving Bacheller's, Eben Holden.

I wanted to know why it was that St. Lawrence took
such a hold on Mr. Young and Mr. Young's fellow alumni, all of
whom that I have met seem to be equally devoted to the place.

One of the strongest impressions I carried away
explains partly at least their devotion.

When searching for a background you naturally ask
first how this thing happened—why St. Lawrence University? So
I began at the beginning and I do not know when I have carried
away from a hasty review of raw materials, a more reviving, almost
exultant impression of the idealism of men and the indomitable
way in which some of them at least force their ideals into realities.
No man worth his salt could be anything but devoted to an institu-
tion with the beginnings of St. Lawrence.

I suppose someone has told in the College Journal,
though I did not run across it, the story of the Man from Michigan,
who a couple of years ago stopped a few hours in Canton and his
business errand done, looked over a nearby vacant factory about
to be torn down. There on the top floor he ran upon records of
first class importance to the history of the founding of
St. Lawrence; packages of letters, accounts, memoranda, records,
unknown even to the learned Mr. Allsworth.
The Man from Michigan — no one knows his name —
must have had a historical sense for he stopped long enough
on the way to his train to ask of the one person in the town
whom he knew, "Is there a college in this town?" And when he was
told, "Yes," to say, "Well, it seems to be that on the top floor
of that building you are about to destroy there are papers that
they might be interested in."

Such is the thoughtful way in which the Goddess
of History looks after her blind or careless followers.

It was a rich haul for the archives of the college,
rich because it demonstrates, as nothing else that I came across,
the courage, the sacrifice, the determination of the founder.

The papers that I went over were mainly accounts of
Dr. Lee. It is not often that figures stir me to as much
enthusiasm as those figures did — a brave man, Dr. Lee.

But there are others beside Dr. Lee that were
brave, who from the start carried on, through thick and thin as
he did and continued to carry when after years of struggle it
looked as if the end had come for lack of $50.00 — and then
Dr. Harvery took hold.

I commend to ever one who wants to refresh his
belief in man's natural happy courage, the picture of the future
St. Lawrence drawn by Dr. Harvery when he was inaugurated in 1886
as president of a college about to close its doors because it didn't have a dollar to its name.

"In my mind's eye," said Dr. Harvey, "I look forward to the time when we shall graduate our fiftieth class, twenty-six years from now. They will come from every part of this great country; from the halls of learning east and west where they are helping to educate the youth of the land. They will come from metropolitan pulpits, from courts of justice and legislative assemblies, from the great centers of influence everywhere. And they all shall come and shall say to each other and to the youth of that day, 'Here were laid the foundations of all my usefulness and all my fame.'

"The old hill yonder will be crowned with a large group of steady and substantial buildings, fully equal to all the needs of our enlarged work. By that time the alumni alone will be able to take care of the dear old mother, and the treasury will never be empty, and the work will never be hindered for lack of means. The president of that day will be able to say that in buildings, funds, library, apparatus and equipment, St. Lawrence is worth a round million, her courses of study are sufficient for all requirements, her faculty in ability and learning is second to none, and she stands proudly among her sons and daughters, one of the great leading educational forces of this mighty Empire State."

I am always wondering as I go about this country on my little historical sorties and turn up these brave stories of character and steadfastness and high purpose, if we who have inherited the foundations laid by such effort are worth it. There is no manner of doubt, that as far as St. Lawrence is concerned, there is a long list of her products of whom I am
sure the first founders if they could come back would say, "Well, it is for this we were willing to work. We knew men had it in them to do these things and here are the proofs."

So we see, dear editor of the Laurentian, that on the whole my strongest impression of St. Lawrence centers on its founders, their amazing quality of laying hold of hard things and carrying them through to a finish.

But I by no means carried away an impression that because St. Lawrence was largely freed from the problem of how to pay for a roof for the heads of students - coal to warm them - and teachers to instruct them therefore she had no hard problems. On the contrary, I carried away the impression that today the college is beset by problems no less difficult than those fifty years ago when Dr. Hervey took hold - eighty years ago when she came into her life.

In those days the young people who came to St. Lawrence came because they were willing to work and live meagerly if they thereby could have a chance to study. The problem then was to give them the chance they coveted.

Today there is the problem in all our colleges of arousing those who do not covet knowledge, who go to college with doubts of its usefulness, as a favor to parents, a concession to convention, or because they don't know what else
to do with themselves.

Between the two problems I am inclined to think those of today are the more difficult. I carried off the impression that St. Lawrence senses her task, also that she knows - a great thing to know - that it is up to youth itself largely, just as in the beginning. She says so when she puts above the doors of her splendid new Hall for men the words:

Let good use justify what
good will has erected.