

Remarks at the 30th Anniversary Celebration of the

U.U. Fellowship of Columbia at the Flaming Pit, March 14th, 1981

by: Henery Bent

The importance of the roots of our Fellowship is suggested by an incident in Columbia a few years ago. Not long after Christmas some men appeared in Columbia selling lovely evergreen trees nicely balled and burlapped. But when other evergreens were putting forth new leaves these trees seemed dormant and even looked poorly. Finally, one of the owners dug up the tree to see how its roots looked, only to find that what looked like nicely balled and burlapped roots was simply a ball of dirt about the sawed-off end of a Christmas tree.

Our roots go back to a time when we knew each other well and were few in number. W.C. Curtis was one of our most regular members. The story is told on him that when he was in the Boone County Hospital he was questioned by one of the nurses as to just what Unitarians believed. She finally asked him how often the name of Jesus Christ was mentioned during our services. According to the story, he replied that it was mentioned a few weeks ago when the Janitor fell down the stairs during the service!

The following Sunday, the minister of the largest church in Columbia, who had heard this story, repeated it in church, not calling Dean Curtis by name but just saying it was attributed to a Dean of the University of Missouri. Since by this time Dean Curtis had been retired for several years, many of my friends assumed that I was the guilty one!

Not too much was known about Unitarians in the early days. Some thought we belonged to an off-beat sect and were more or less odd balls. However, as we grew we came to have nearly half the deans

of the University of Missouri in our membership. These included the dean of Arts and Sciences, of Engineering, of Journalism, of Business and Public Administration and of the Graduate School.

For several years the membership and the attendance were small, perhaps but two or three dozen. At the beginning it was so small that Phil Stone, who was chairman for several of the first years, told me that each fall they would wonder if they could keep going. They might have had 12 or more active members in May, but by September half or more of these would have left Columbia. Without the encouragement of Seth Slaughter, Dean of the School of Religion, we might never have made it.

Our first years might best be described by enumerating the things we did not have. We met in the room on the second floor of Lowery Hall at the north end of the building. We had no chairs, no collection, no committees, no crede, and, of course, no minister. Each Sunday a few of the men would come early and push chairs the length of the hall from the south end of the building. At the end of the service the chairs had to be pushed back to the class rooms from which they had come. The chief contribution of the School of Religion to the atmosphere of our meeting room was a large glass case containing relics acquired by visitors to the Holy Land.

Walter Hearn, another member of the faculty of the School of Religion, was also most helpful. For perhaps a year or more he took charge of the formal part of our Sunday meetings. On one occasion he preached the sermon and chose as his subject, The Trinity. During the discussion period at the end of the meeting Dean Mott presented a dilemma. He agreed with Walter

that he was first a son, then a husband and finally a father, but, he said, what about being a grandfather? That is something quite different.

Isador Kayfitz, another member of the faculty of the School of Religion, was also a frequent speaker at our meetings. He owned property on the east side of Columbia, and at one time offered to make some of it available to the fellowship if we were ready to build a meeting house. We were most grateful for his generosity but felt that the location was too far from the center of Columbia and the problems of utilities might be troublesome.

This offer came at about the time that we were looking for either a piece of land or a suitable building. We wanted to be as near the colleges as possible in order to make it possible for students to attend our meetings. However, we looked at everything we could find within a radius of about five miles. We saw rural schools, churches, rest homes, private residences, railroad stations and, of course, vacant lots. At one point an enthusiastic member of the fellowship made a down payment on a house, but the fellowship did not agree that it would serve our purposes.

The land we finally bought when John Peterson was chairman, I believe, was made available to us at a very moderate price by Mr. Ross who, I believe, had been a Unitarian while living in another city. In some ways it seemed pretty bleak. The north half was rather steeply sloping ground covered with a dense second growth of spindling trees, largely hickory. The south half was bare except for a vigorous growth of ragweed, dead and brown in late summer. The top soil had been removed and sold by the previous owner. The only trees on this half of the

property consisted of two sycamores about six inches high. (These are now two of our best trees, about fifty feet from the south-west corner of the church.) Shepard Blvd. was a narrow gravel road; there were no street lights and no water and no school across the street where we could get water. When we started planting trees we found we lost some because we could not find them in the weeds. The watering of the trees, so necessary during the first summers, was accomplished by getting several dozen bottles and filling these gallon bottles at home before coming to the church. At that time we had no members living on Shepard Blvd.

EARLY EFFORTS

With John and Merle Peterson we planted our first tree, a Zelcova. This tree resembles an elm but is not subject to the latter's diseases. From this effort we learned that a tree would not survive under our conditions if all we did was plant it carefully and water once in a while. During the heat of the summer young trees needed to be watered several times.

The first plans submitted by our architect, Mr. Christner of St. Louis, indicated that almost all of the land north of the church would be cleared of trees and made into a generous parking lot. This we agreed was a mistake.

The first design for the building, which was supposed to be not more than one hundred thousand dollars, turned out to receive a bid of one hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars. This led us to start all over with a much simpler design. The second attempt presented us with a design which cost about one hundred thousand dollars.

As various individuals became active in the fellowship, the emphasis in our programs changed. At one time when students at the University of Missouri were active, our meetings for a time suggested the Oxford Movement. Sharing personal religious experiences became important. At another time social service became very important. Support of the United Nations and prison reform have both been major concerns. At one time our religious education program was very impressive and received enthusiastic support from those doing the teaching. In fact, the need for this program for more space and equipment was the prime stimulus for a new building.

ACHIEVEMENTS

We have achieved much in our thirty years of growth. Most important of course is the creation of a Fellowship. Vital to this effort we felt was a building. In the late sixties we increasingly felt that the Fellowship could not survive without a building, and this we achieved. Here I will mention three achievements which are not so well known.

First was the sustained effort of the women of the Fellowship in raising money which eventually was used to purchase our piano. Over a period of years rumage sales and food sales collected enough to make this purchase possible. To me this was a remarkable display of faith at a time when our membership was small and we had no building of our own. For this we will always be grateful.

A comparable act of faith was shown over a period of several years as we moved into the decision to build our church building. Our expenses were so little when meeting in the Bible College that we had no reliable measures of how much money we could raise.

Therefore, we attempted to increase our pledging for a period of three years to the point necessary to finance a building. The result of this effort was that we had approximately half of the cost of the building in hand at the time ground was broken. Had we not done this we would have found great difficulty in securing a mortgage and making the necessary payments while maintaining our program.

A third achievement has been the support of many members of the Fellowship, including friends, in furnishing the building. The kitchen has received a stove, refrigerator, and various items of equipment. Mimeograph machines have been a tremendous help. And during our whole history there has been a generous gift of time and thought and hard work in maintaining our facilities and our program.

MEANING OF THE FELLOWSHIP

For each individual the Fellowship has had a different significance. In describing my own experiences I will be giving illustrations rather than a comprehensive history. Every member will have his own list. These are what I have observed.

Sometimes the Fellowship has provided a solitary experience. I remember the wide-eyed excitement with which one young member not yet in his teens, reported that he had just seen a baby deer in our woods. His description convinced us that it was probably not more than a few hours old. We decided to tell no-one for fear the mother might be disturbed and not return. A rare and impressive experience.

When I see our name on the sign near the street I remember the day I found myself alone with the sign and a post hole digger. The legs of the sign were to go down over 2½ feet in the ground. The worry was not that I could not dig the holes, but rather the knowledge that if it was not right the first time it would be quite impossible for me to get it out and correct an error!

Sometimes there were two of us at a time. The termites are such a problem in Columbia that it seemed worthwhile to protect a wooden building from their attacks. Adrian Pauw and I spent one cold winter evening, just as it was getting dark spraying the excavation and the ground beneath the level of the basement floor. The water was freezing a bit and it was too dark to see well before we finished, but we both enjoyed sharing in a task which we felt would be good insurance for our building.

One afternoon, a visit to the church revealed that all work had come to a stop because it took three men to raise a rafter and put it in place and there were only two. (Even a Unitarian at times must admit that it takes three to get the job done.) Two of the carpenters were still there, one to guide and fasten each end of the long rafter as it was raised. So with the help of a substitute, the work could continue and the long rafters installed that day.

Frequently a crew of many members of the Fellowship was required. This was true for the planting and care of the trees. With one or two exceptions these were all seedlings obtained from the state nursery. Phil Stone planted these seedlings in his garden. After a few years when they were large enough to survive without carefull protection, they were moved to the church.

Then for several years they were watered regularly during the summer. I believe even after they became large trees, they have been watered at least once each year, sometimes in January if the wheather has been very dry. The sweet gum trees forming two arcs in front of the church were balled and burlapped at H.H. London's farm and brought in with Jim Harrington's station wagon. These were sizable tasks which required many hands.

Two hundred dogwood seedlings were planted throughout the woods to the north of the church. These too were watered during the summer. Since dogwood is not easy to transplamt, we did not expect all to grow, but we still do have quite a number which look healthy.

As further protection from termites, all the wood for the exterior of the church was sprayed with "penta." This involved handling each piece of wood individually, including the 4' X 8' plywood which now covers the entire building. A few years after the building was completed, it seemed desirable to give the wood a second treatment. Union regulations would have required scaffolding and paiting with a brush, which would have been very expensive. We therefore devised equipment which would let us spray the entire building from the ground, and with a fine crew, we finished the job in one day.

Perhaps our most ambitious task was the concrete patio on the north side of the building. With a fine crew and good supervision by experts such as Adrian Pauw and Charles Parker, we finished this project in one day. The physical exertion was almost too much for one participant, but he did survive.

It is not possible for me to enumerate all of the important contributions to the Fellowship. The care of the building in many ways, the responsibility for regular programs, the fine music and the endless responsibilities which our programs demand will be known to only those who have participated.

To all of these we are most grateful and we extend our most sincere thanks.