

The Mile Post at Twenty Five

CHAPTER XVII

Fifty years from now, I hope to be sitting on a cloud smiling down upon a great university and saying to those around me, "Just see what I started."¹

These words were part of the speech given by Bishop Barnwell to the 1956 graduates of Boise Junior College. The fact that he was even at these graduation exercises was a miracle in itself.

Following World War II, President Chaffee tried for many years to have Bishop Barnwell, the first president of Boise Junior College, as the commencement speaker. Every year Bishop Barnwell replied that he could not make the trip *this* year from Georgia to Idaho, but that some year he hoped to do so.

In his letter to the Bishop in 1953, after inviting the latter to visit the College he founded, Chaffee stated, "I am going on the theory that water dripping constantly in the same place will eventually make an impression."² Finally, on February 17, 1956, at about the time that the new gymnasium was being completed, the annual request was made once more by President Chaffee and to everyone's surprise and delight the Bishop sent the following reply: "You are making a big mistake, but if you want me I will agree to come, barring acts of God which are beyond my control."³

Of course, the Bishop had many friends in Boise, but he was an independent person and wanted to be free to see many friends rather than to stay with one. It was arranged, therefore, for him to stay in one of the fine motels immediately adjacent to the College campus where he was taken when he arrived on the 9:40 p.m. City of Portland train on June 1, 1956. It had been suggested that he come by air, but he was very positive in this regard, "I will not come by air. I do not like the air."⁴ No one minded his means of transportation, but air was suggested because it took less than a day to cross the continent by air as compared with three days by rail.

The Bishop's health was not what it had been and the three days in Boise were strenuous ones since he spoke at not only the College commencement on Sunday, but at St. Michael's Cathedral and also saw many friends. Everything, however, went smoothly except for an incident which took place Saturday morning. It was carried in the *Idaho Daily Statesman* and speaks for itself:

Everyone knows Dr. Eugene Chaffee, president of Boise Junior College, as a completely poised man and one meticulous about keeping appointments.

Saturday he proved he was not one to cry over spilled ink. He had just called Bishop Middleton S. Barnwell who came all the way from Georgia to address the 23rd graduating class of BJC, and told him that he (Chaffee) would pick him up in a few minutes and take him on a tour of the campus.

Chaffee was signing diplomas for today's commencement. The phone rang and as he swept his arm across the desk to it, the cuff spilled the printer's ink. Four diplomas were ruined. The ink bottle was in a box and as Chaffee picked it up and walked across the floor, the bottom came out of the box. Ink splashed all over his fresh light suit and onto the rug.

The president put in a hurry-up call to Mrs. Chaffee who hurried down with another suit while a custodian worked madly on the rug. An emissary was sent off to pick up Bishop Barnwell and by the time he arrived, Chaffee was in another suit and the rug was spotless.⁵

The commencement the Bishop had conducted when he was president of the College had 30 graduates and was held on the lawn in front of St. Margaret's Hall. His speech in 1956 was heard by 206 graduates and of course by his many friends. It

was the first commencement to be held in the new gymnasium which had been completed four months before. In his address the Bishop emphasized his great satisfaction with the wonderful growth that Boise Junior College had made and envisioned what it would be in 50 years time. He paid tribute to the faculty members still with the College which included more than 50 percent of those from the first year of 1932.

He had never been quite able to separate himself from Boise in spite of the fact that he was born in the South and lived most of his life in that area and remained in Idaho only some 12 years. His love of this country was attested by his request that President Chaffee take him out to the desert where he could dig some sage and take it back to his new home on Long Island. When the president indicated that there were many clumps of sage along the river drive by the campus and suggested that they go there, the Bishop of course was more delighted than ever since he not only had his sage, but this particular plant grew on the land made dear to him by the College he had founded.

Actually, this visit became the spark that created the 25th Year Celebration which was to start the following fall and would be culminated at the end of April of that same year, 1957, with a big banquet in the new gymnasium.

The 25th Year Celebration was headed by a faculty member, Dr. Joseph B. Spulnik, and was well supported by all faculty members so that it became in truth, an institution-wide celebration.

The week allocated to the celebration began with a proclamation from the City of Boise and was delivered by the mayor through all news media:

WHEREAS, Boise Junior College this year will complete its twenty-fifth year of service to the community, and

WHEREAS, the Boise community is especially interested in the growth of this institution, to the extent of helping to make it a true community college

NOW, THEREFORE, I, R. E. Edlefsen, mayor of Boise City do declare the week of May 12-18 BOISE JUNIOR COLLEGE

WEEK, and do urge all residents of the community to assist in celebrating this anniversary by visiting its day and night classes and the functions specially prepared by the college for this week and by attending the banquet for alumni and friends of the college in the gymnasium Saturday, May 18 at 7 p.m.

All classes were open to visitors. A booklet stating where and at what time each subject was in session was published. Visitors were invited to just "walk in." Every member of the faculty and administration had a place in the program. They gave talks to local service clubs all through the week and appeared on television and radio programs, as well as continuing with their routine teaching and administrative work.

The *Idaho Daily Statesman* gave a full ten page section to the institution as it existed in 1957 with articles contributed by faculty members and members of the administration. Every section of the College was represented. The history of the College and an historical chronology were described by W. L. Gottenberg, Vice President. The Academic Growth of each department was written by Dr. Elsie Buck, Mathematics Instructor, and the Future Growth of each department including the library by Ruth McBirney, Head Librarian. The Music Department was traced by Eleanor Snodgrass, piano instructor, and the College's Athletics by Gordon Ross, Assistant Director of Student Affairs. A chronology of the board members was given by Claude Waln, Vocational Instructor.

At the dinner that culminated the celebrations, speeches were made by Boise's mayor, Russell Edlefsen; Otto Power, member of the 1934 graduating class; Harry Morrison and J. Lynn Driscoll, both former board members of the College; and Eugene B. Chaffee, President of the College.

Numerous telegrams and letters were received from college presidents, educational associations, and friends and alumni from all over the United States. Many of them were read at this dinner.

And so the 25th Anniversary passed into history. A full week had been spent in depicting what this history actually

was and many had sent congratulatory messages as indicated above. It was a glorious celebration and as the president said in his speech that capped the final banquet evening:

For me and my faculty, this is truly a time of thanksgiving—thanks to an enlightened and generous community. This type of community is unique and, as a result, it has produced an unusual institution. The element of selfishness has been foreign to all groups and individuals with whom we have worked. There have been no cliques or pressure groups that had to be considered. The faculty and the Board of Trustees have principally concerned themselves with the needs of the college, not with satisfying the expedient.⁶

There was only one event that marred the celebration. The week before, on Sunday May 5, the first president of the College, Bishop Middleton S. Barnwell, passed away at Savannah, Georgia. He had done his job well and had had many tributes paid to him just a year earlier when he delivered the commencement address on June 3, 1956. Again, at his passing, many tributes had been offered by radio and press in the week preceding the final week of the 25th Anniversary Celebration.

His successor, President Eugene B. Chaffee, paid generous tribute to Bishop Barnwell on the night of the final banquet when he indicated that while others had come out in favor of a junior college in Boise, nothing had developed until the Bishop, in the early spring of 1932, had indicated he was going to convert the old St. Margaret's Academy into a junior college.

The Bishop's passing brought to a close an epoch in the history of the College. This particular year of 1957 was to initiate action which would culminate in a four-year institution eight years later. Bishop Barnwell was a personality who was forceful enough to lead a community into a program of higher education and prove its need, feasibility, and value.

¹*Idaho Daily Statesman*, June 4, 1956.

²Letter from Eugene B. Chaffee to Bishop Barnwell, January 6, 1953.

³Letter from Bishop Barnwell to Eugene B. Chaffee, March 7, 1956.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵*Idaho Daily Statesman*, June 3, 1956.

⁶Speech given by Eugene B. Chaffee at the 25th Anniversary Dinner on May 12, 1957.