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Tribute to Donnal Smith

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The Measure Of A Man's Influence

A Tribute to the Presidency of Dr. Donnal V. Smith

by

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A few days after Dr. Donnal V. Smith announced his resignation from Cortland State Teachers College, an inquisitive faculty member stopped in his office and asked if he would reminisce about the fifteen or more years he had spent as president of the college. "What," he asked, "were the great moments of your tenure, the experiences that gave you the most satisfaction?"

Dr. Smith leaned back in his chair, looked out of the window, drummed on the desktop for a few seconds, then began to talk. "I suppose the greatest moment was when George Brockway decided to give us the hundred thousand dollars toward a student union."

On September 1, 1943 when Dr. Smith became the president of Cortland State Teachers College there was one building, a campus of 33 acres, and a student body of 443. Fifty-eight people were then employed at the college, of whom 41 were faculty members. The total operation of the college for that fiscal year involved a sum of \$203,494.00.

Contrast those figures with the situation at Cortland as Dr. Smith leaves the institution. The campus includes over 100 acres; 12 buildings are in use and five others are under construction; a new library building is to be contracted for in weeks, or even days—surely before this appears in print. There are 2,212 students and 325 people employed full-time, 154 of whom are faculty members. The yearly budget has soared from \$203,494.00 to \$1,767,196.00. In addition, auxiliary enterprises such as food services and a bookstore involve an income and outgo of another \$750,000.00 a year.

When Dr. Smith became our president there was no graduate program at Cortland. Five years after his arrival such a program was initiated. The number of students earning masters degrees from Cortland has increased from seven in 1951 to 93 in June of 1958. The total number of

matriculated graduate students, earning credits in summer session, extension programs, or both, is now 515. For three years Cortland has been certifying students to teach in the junior high school. This last September Cortland admitted freshmen who are enrolled in a curriculum leading to secondary certification in science and mathematics. In 1943 no extension courses were offered. During this past semester 855 students were enrolled in 43 courses offered on campus and at 29 centers throughout Central New York.

Yet no recital of the physical growth of Cortland State Teachers College under the leadership of Dr. Donnal V. Smith can adequately express what his presidency has meant. His vision, his imagination, his daring leadership are the major ingredients of a growth more impressive than mere physical conditions or numbers. As soon as he arrived in Cortland he began planning for the expansion of the college. Very early in his presidency he met with a group of leading citizens, at the home of a local architect, and talked about the future of the college.

For a number of years, Dr. Smith endeavored to interest Cortland County's wealthier individuals in making a gift toward a student union. One man agreed to do so, even met with his lawyer the president of his bank, and Dr. Smith, to plan such a gift. He instructed the lawyer and the banker to go ahead and draw up the necessary papers; then he changed his mind and withdrew the offer. That was a low-point for our president. A few months later, sitting in Mr. Brockway's office on Main Street, Dr. Smith heard the elderly, retired industrialist say, "Miss Moxie, is there any reason why I can't give Don Smith the money he needs?" In a short time the money was on deposit in Albany, and Donnal Smith's dream of a student union at Cortland was much nearer to reality. Not only were the students at Cortland to benefit from our presi-

dent's foresight and Mr. Brockway's generosity, but students at each of the other ten teachers colleges were also to benefit. Inspired by the leadership of Cortland, it was decided to build student unions at each of the state teachers colleges.

A second event that will always rank high in importance in the memory of our president was the decision to purchase the land once occupied by the veterans' housing project, land where four new dormitories and a second student union and dining hall are now nearing completion. This land was purchased during the war years for \$40,000.00. By contrast, the narrow strip of land along Prospect Terrace, purchased a little over a year ago, cost over \$300,000.00. Furthermore, the decision to purchase that first land on Water Street broke the mental barriers that had restricted the planning of all Cortland's future growth to the original campus. Since then there have been land purchases from the Jenman Estate, from Mr. Abdullah, and yet more land is being negotiated for at the present time.

Obtaining the present Physical Education Building taxed the enthusiasm, perseverance and patience of our president. Many people in Albany thought of a physical education building as a gymnasium, a playroom. When Dr. Smith talked in terms of laboratories and classrooms, he found it difficult to persuade state officials that he was being reasonable and practical. That he succeeded is evidenced by the fine educational plant into which Cortland staff and students moved in to the spring of 1954. Acquisition of the camp at Raquette Lake also ranks high in the memories of Dr. Smith, and he hopes that his successors at Cortland will continue to recognize in the camp an educational as well as a physical challenge.

Thinking back over the years, Dr.

Smith remarked that "my greatest satisfaction has come from the relationship with faculty people. The years of close association with many men like Lynn Brown, Francis Moench, Ben Sueltz and so many others, has been the source of pleasure and satisfaction that I will remember longest."

Commenting that there has never been restraint, from Albany, upon curriculum making, Dr. Smith remembered that it was in his first year at Cortland that the initial breach in the state's old curriculum pattern had been made. Cortland at that time, largely through the efforts of Dr. Smith, Dean Brown and Dr. Moench, had adopted and put into operation a curriculum that departed from the common pattern previously decreed from Albany. Looking ahead into the future, Dr. Smith hopes that Cortland will continue to pioneer in developing new patterns of work and thought. Commenting that higher education, all over the country, seems unable to "come to grips with the major purposes" of education, he expressed the idea that curriculum revision is the major problem now facing higher education.

Shortly before Dr. Smith came to Cortland, in 1941 or 1942, Cortland had failed in its effort to be accredited. Therefore the acceptance of the college, in the form of accreditation by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools in 1948, was a high spot in Dr. Smith's tenure as president. As indication of the academic growth of the college under Dr. Smith, it may be well to quote from the report made by the accrediting committee at that time:

State Teachers College of Cortland, New York, can certainly justify the reasons for its existence. The program of the college is in a state of flux, but it is moving forward in the training of teachers who will be well-educated, cultured persons who are also well equipped in the knowledge of their specialty.

The spirit and morale of the whole college is excellent. There is a cooperation between administration, faculty and students which stems from a feeling of mutual respect and consideration. The humility on the part of the administration in the search for what is best for all concerned is to be commended.

It is the feeling of the inspector that the staff at Cortland is making educational history with its approach to solving problems faced by the organization. The esprit de corps of the personnel contacted is unusually fine.

Again in the fall of 1954 Cortland was accredited, this time by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education. In their report, the visiting inspectors remarked that "The Cortland program reflects critical thinking on the part of the administration and faculty."

Perhaps the most dramatic aspect of Cortland's growth is its steadily increasing popularity among prospective students. When Dr. Smith came to Cortland the student body was so small and the interest in the college, throughout the state, was so limited, that a high educational official at Albany tried to discourage him from accepting the presidency, remarking that "It would be better to let that college die, anyway." Yet for the past decade no one of the teachers colleges in the state has been so often chosen by high school seniors wanting to become teachers, as Cortland. The number applying for admission to Cortland during the past few years has been as follows: 1954, 1575; 1955, 1847; 1956, 1993; 1957, 2382; 1958, 3143; and as of January 1, 1959, there were 1700 applications for the fall of 1959, a number that is expected to increase to more than 3500, perhaps as many as 4000, by September first.

Why this sudden enthusiasm for and interest in Cortland? There are, of course, many reasons: an enthusiastic and loyal alumni body; its geographical location (though it is pertinent to point out that the latter has not changed since the days when Cortland nearly withered away); its many outstanding athletic teams and performers. Undoubtedly these play a part, yet when one traces the enthusiasm for Cortland back to its sources, he is impressed by the role played by President Smith. One of his very important contributions was the new freedom given to students to participate in and manage their own affairs. For many years the Cortland student body had been guided in an efficient but in a conservative and generally restricted manner. To cite just one illustration: Dr. Smith found a student government in existence, but not a single copy of its constitution could be located. Obviously, the student government was such in name only. The entire student setup was revamped, the students were given an opportunity to assume responsibility. In 1952, he approved the establishment of a Women's Self-Governing Association at Cortland. Dr. Smith also led—not only at Cortland, but throughout the state—in the move to bring in personnel workers and to consider the emotional as well as the physical health of the students. Increasingly, Cortland students began spreading the word that Cortland was a college

where students were treated like adults.

The new curricula patterns, with their flexibility limited, it is true, but still much greater than had been known previously, was another factor in attracting students. The steady promotion of academic respectability, the emphasis upon hiring young faculty members who gave promise of capacity for growth, the growing recognition that a Cortland education was something of which a student could be proud—all of these played a role in extending the appeal of Cortland. The fact that in Dr. Smith there was a leader who had the courage and the stature to allow criticism, whether by faculty or by students, also impressed many people and contributed to the popularity of the college.

Faculty members who have worked under President Smith have come to respect his basic philosophy, to appreciate his desire to do a real job, to admire his vision and capacity for hard work. This man who has been at the head of your college for the past fifteen years has always had courage, vision, ambition, physical drive and inherent decency. There has been an air of integrity about him that has been reflected in faculty confidence and morale.

How then shall we show our appreciation of this man? In time, I am sure, there will be a building named for him. Perhaps there will be a plaque on its wall, or a portrait that will pass on to future generations of Cortland students the physical likeness of the man. The alumni, or some distinguished and wealthy benefactor may endow scholarships in his name. Sometime there might even be an endowed professorship named for him. Any of these will have been deserved; all of them would be fitting. Yet it does not seem to this writer that any, or all, of them would be adequate.

The great contributions of Donnal V. Smith have been things of the spirit: dreams, ideals, visions, and the courage and initiative to make them real. How then shall we measure the influence of this man? Cortland is not only a larger and better equipped college, it is also a better educational institution because he was here. The teachers colleges of New York State are better equipped and more intelligently staffed because of his leadership, his vision, his initiative. Cortland has sent out into the field thousands of young people, better prepared to be teachers because Dr. Smith came to Cortland. This, then, will be remembered as the real measure of Dr. Smith's influence.