Chapter 4 - A SCENT OF PRINTER'S INK

Superior Fellow Students...Mathematics...The Principal Wins an Argument...Charles Francis Adams On My Side...Close Shave for Graduation...The Inspiring Teacher...Apprentice Typesetter...Amateur Reporter...The Inspiring Editor...A.H.S. Yearbook

High school brought opportunities, which the district school at Rising Sun had not offered, to be measured against the capabilities of others. As the youngest freshman, I noted that while classmates all were older than I by a few months or a year, the age difference was slight. Even the juniors and seniors were at most three or four years older. Here were more than a hundred young people of my own approximate age. Could I hold my own among so many?

Certainly three-fourths of the boys were superior athletes. That caused me no concern. I had good health and no intention ever to rely on muscles to earn a living. Many students obviously possessed better memories. Whether this was a natural gift, a consequence of greater concentration or the result of more dogged application, I was often to wonder. I could retain the substance of whatever really interested me and hoped perhaps that was sufficient. An assignment to "learn by heart" a poem or a passage from literature meant laborious hours. After nothing through years that men who excel usually possess exceptional memories I wish that more hard hours had been invested in developing the knacks of retention and recall.

Pupils with musical ability were numerous, and I had none whatever. My efforts at song were never praised, perhaps because I could neither carry a tune nor remember the words. I admittedly envied Guerdon Bryant, the handsome junior with curly red hair, who played melodiously thundering marches while we kept step from the assembly room at noon and at the day's close. I was disappointed that he later chose to become a pharmacist instead of a Paderewski. His marches inspired me to take a few piano lessons one summer, but the teacher soon saw that both of us were wasting time.

In another department I discovered talents that were miserably inferior. That was in mathematics. I had managed through arithmetic and simple algebra with moderate success. Their usefulness was evident. The third year curriculum demanded that I pass plane geometry. This subject was not notably difficult, but I thought it extraordinarily uninteresting. I watched with amazement the eager joy with which the superior mathematicians worked out laborious problems. After noting that most of these fellow-students who excelled in mathematics did badly in English and in most other subjects, I consoled myself with a theory that mathematical skill, like proficiency in music, was a gift which had little relationship to solid intellectual ability.

Armstrong Stambaugh, our principal, Professor Freeman having become superintendent, made no allowances. He demanded not only that I understand

each geometrical proposition, but that I, along with all the class, should turn in daily papers with all the “originals” worked out. These required two or three hours of homework just to set down all the necessary figures, although they were not actually difficult to do. I resented what I regarded as an improper imposition on my time and decided to learn what would happen if the original work was not turned in.

For a day or so nothing at all happened. When the principal did not find my paper on the third day, he quietly said, "You may stay after school and do those originals."

I stayed. While Mr. Stambaugh graded papers and made out reports, I continued reading a book which I thought far more inspiring than plane geometry. It was G. Otto Trevelyan's "Life of Thomas Babington Macaulay." At 4:30 the principal closed his desk and came to mine. "Have you finished those originals.”? "No, Sir, I have not." "Why not?" "Because I don't think they are worth the time they take." His jaws took on a grim set as he sensed insubordination. He decided, however, to try reason before discipline. "What have you got against geometry?" he asked. I tried to explain that mathematics, to my way of thinking, formed no necessary part of an education. "They prove that two and two make four," I said, "but things don't always add up that way. Mathematics, however, can mislead people into thinking so."

Mr. Stambaugh patiently emphasized the merits of mathematics as a mental discipline and as an aid to exact thinking, and sought to draw out my answers. I said that for one who intended to become an engineer, or a bank clerk or a mathematics teacher no doubt the subject was essential. I planned no such career, and I suggested that all the mathematics above arithmetic and simple algebra should be left off the curriculum.

"You are forgetting," he grinned, "That we school teachers have to teach something! What would you suggest we should introduce in place of mathematics?" "I don't know. But if you keep me after school again I'll have an answer -- or else do this homework."

A day or so later he again directed me to remain after school was dismissed. "Well," he asked, "shall we nave a new course to teach or are you going to do your assignments?" "I didn't believe it would be much trouble to think of something better than geometry, and it wasn't," I said. "I propose that we substitute a course in learning to play checkers and chess." The news about "progressive education" had not reached Ada. Mr. Stambaugh displayed all the astonishment I had hoped for and asked if I could justify a suggestion so preposterous. I thought that I could.

"The trouble with mathematics," I argued, "is that it deals only with exact quantities. Thus it is valuable to the engineer and to the bookkeeper. Such

specialists must know mathematics. But most of us here in school will be dealing with people. Human beings are not exact quantities. We shall need to learn how human beings act. Where is the other fellow going to jump next? A course in checkers and chess should therefore be more valuable than the study of geometry." "Very ingenious," commented Mr. Stambaugh. "You may go now. But I think you ought to work out a few of those originals. You might meet an exact quantity sometime!

A half-century after this episode I picked up the autobiography of Charles Francis Adams, son of John Quincy Adams, who acquired note for himself as a railroad and business leader. After writing the volume during the very years while I was in high school, he sealed his manuscript and delivered it to the Massachusetts Historical Society to be held until after his death, which took place in 1915. The book was published a year later.

Referring to his years in Harvard's Class of 1857, Adams had written:

> "At Harvard there was quite a sufficiency of elective courses in my time; and, since then, they have been multiplied all out of reason. And yet what would for me have been the most valuable of electives for purposes of mental training has never been proposed -- a course in chess! Gravely to suggest it even would give rise to a look of surprise -- probably a smile. Yet what is it but the German Kriegspiel adapted to civil life vocations? In playing chess, you must have a defined plan of campaign and follow it up intelligently and consecutively; you must watch your opponent and understand and meet his play. You must measure yourself against him. All this I have been doing after a fashion throughout my life; yet I never went through any special training in preparation for it. A course in chess would have been for me -- kriegspiel! So, also, for others. Why not sometimes educate through amusement?”

Thanks to a little harder work on my part and considerable indulgence by the teacher, I passed the course. The geometry did me no permanent harm, nor did his knowledge of the subject prevent Armstrong Stambaugh from getting on fairly well with the inexact characteristics of human beings. He became Chairman of the Board of the Standard Oil Company of Ohio.

Professor Freeman was always the outstanding teacher; others left their memories or made their marks. One young man stayed with us only the first year, and his absence was not regretted. In his place came Marian Finley, a capable, healthy, smiling young woman who inspired her classes to meet the standards she set. Almost as popular as Freeman was W.W. Meyer who sang so wonderfully that we expected him to become a famous concert artist. Instead he went to Yale, studied law, and became general counsel for the New Haven Railroad. Principal Stambaugh was effective and popular.

Back in the 1870's the town of Ada had bonded itself for $30,000 to pay for a new building needed by the then privately owned Ohio Normal University. Around 1900 new administrators had changed the name to Ohio Northern University. Still in force, however, was an agreement made when the bonds were issued. It provided that the senior year instruction for Ada's high school students should be given by the university. Thus during our final year of high school we were students in college, too.

I came perilously near failing to graduate. The new environment was stimulating and challenging. The library, the college literary societies and the varied acquaintanceships invited participation in diverting activities. I worked hard at the studies I thought useful and neglected others. Among the "others" was physics. No doubt I then blamed the professor because the physics classes and laboratory work appeared to be dull. He was unquestionably generous when, despite my inattention to the work and a fortnight's absence from classes during a simultaneous attack of mumps and measles, he gave me a term grade of 69. The college required a minimum of 70 for passing.

This was a violent blow to my rampageous ego. I couldn't laugh off that grade. I know I deserved even less. All my plodding classmates were going to graduate while I, humbled by knowing that I could easily have made a higher grade by trying, was to be left behind. The hurt might have been less if I had worked hard and failed. I had outsmarted myself by being too independent.

Searching for some comfort in the situation and some way to justify myself with a minimum of public humiliation, I assumed a "What's a diploma?" attitude. No one, I persuaded myself, was ever going to ask to see my diploma. What I had learned I had learned, even though the sum of my accomplishment in mathematics and physics was small. No one could take away whatever education I had obtained and it was to get an education, not to win a mere diploma, that I had spent four years in high school. I vowed that even if I had a diploma, its ribbon would never be removed unless some prospective employer insisted on seeing the document.

E.H. Brown, the superintendent of schools in our senior year, called the class together one day to discuss the approaching commencement plans. I took occasion privately to express my regret that I would not be graduating with the class. "Why not?" he asked in obvious astonishment. "You have always made pretty good grades!" "I failed in physics." "No, you didn't. I'm sure you didn't." He took me to his office to re-examine his records. Why, no! What made you think you had not passed? The passing grade in high school is 60, and yours has been certified to me as 69. You have nine points to spare."

I had not been aware of or had forgotten about the different requirements. As a college student I had failed in physics; but as a high school boy I had passed.

The fright taught me not to get too sure of myself; the outcome suggested that the worst does not always happen. The incident should have taught me a little humility also. Instead I promptly became guilty of a streak of ill-mannered and unsocial individualism for which I should have been decently ashamed. Having persuaded myself that a diploma was a needless decoration, I argued that the graduation exercises were useless flub dubbing. Instead of sitting on the stage with the class on commencement night I sat in the audience with my puzzled Father and Mother. I am sure my actions won no admiration from the classmates who had been friendly, helpful and tolerant during our four years together. Superintendent Brown handed me the diploma privately after the commencement exercises were over. No one ever did ask to see it.

So I had a diploma; a diploma and four years of Latin, four years of algebra and geometry, a little general history, half a year of physical geography, a little science and four good years of English. High school had given me those with small effort on my part. It had not supplied any particular sense of direction. Some of the boys talked about becoming engineers or pharmacists, but there had been no "vocational guidance," nor any adult discussion as to how we might eventually make our livings. Beyond exhortations to determine to aim high and "make good" the future prospects of having to earn livings were mentioned less often than the importance of going to college. We gazed at Halley's comet those 1910 spring evenings with little more idea of where we were going than of the comet's future course.

Being only seventeen, and being able so far as I knew to continue in school, I assumed that I would "complete" my education in our hometown Ohio Northern University. I had not thought much about what services I might later offer to society in return for a living. I did not intend to follow my father's footsteps as a farmer, nor did he ever appear to expect that I would. I had already discovered, as a wit remarked recently, that everything one picked upon the farm was heavy and often had to be lifted. So far, however, I felt no call to any future mission. If I thought at all about making a living, it was to assume that a young man with an "education" who was willing to work would find a place.

Professor Freeman had ignited a spark that was to keep glowing, although I had as yet no thought of its meaning. His teaching had made English and American Literature exciting and the English language fascinating. He assigned writing tasks to his classes as generously as Mr. Stambaugh had loaded us with geometry problems. The topics he chose had point and purpose. His criticisms after the themes were read in class always helped toward making the next writing job better. He implanted the desire to read the master authors. As one result, I have never yet caught up with reading.

Tall, lean, firm-jawed, square-shouldered, well built, Freeman had been a football player. Black hair, gleaming dark eyes, a wrinkly countenance that could break in a flash from grim bleakness into merry smiles, a rich voice combined with an

apparently endless fund of literary and historical knowledge, and a penetrating knowledge of young people made him by far the most stimulating of our teachers. He became superintendent of the public schools after my first year in high school and two years later went on to the university as head of the English department. Years afterward he served a few terms in the Ohio legislature, but continued to teach until he was eighty. When we learned the word "dynamic" we agreed that he was one man who the term fitted perfectly. He always moved quickly and purposefully; and he galvanized his pupils into study and work.

I never saw him move faster than one day an instant after two of the biggest boys had committed some misbehavior against which the superintendent had warned only that morning. Freeman appeared out of nowhere, seized two coat collars and almost before anyone saw what was going on, yanked the two tall fellows out of their assembly room seats and flung them down a stairway. Then he quietly strolled forward and opened the afternoon session.

Though he always sought to appear impartially interested in every pupil, there was some thought, in which I probably shared, that he favored me a little because I read more and wrote more than most others in his classes. One day he asked class members to read their themes aloud. Mine, I thought, was above my previous best. It had action, fancy vocabulary and special metaphors. I read it loudly and oratorically. During the next few minutes I learned a great deal, not only about Professor Freeman's verbal resources but an even more valuable lesson. I had odiously compared a revered and sacred institution to an aggressive python. Had I been looking at him, I might have seen the thunderclouds gathering around Freeman's face. The lightning struck almost before I could sit down. His denunciation of my bad taste was picturesque, vivid and violent. He scorched me for every pretentious sentence, wilted me for every irreverent phrase, ridiculed and denounced me until the bell rang. The class was almost as stunned as I was. Never before nor since have I been tongue-lashed so marvelously, nor more justly, nor more effectively. That lesson I never forgot; and I couldn’t resent its manner. He was so eloquent and convincing that I could find no defense except to never again to make so gross a mistake against good taste.

A high school boy in Ada who wanted to make a little extra money could find ways to do it, but most of the ways required either physical labor or extra early rising. I didn't need money badly enough to want to open and sweep out a store at 6 a.m. nor to deliver groceries. Father provided adequately for room, board and books. He would have added more "spending money" had I asked for it, but it didn't occur to me to ask. If one wanted luxuries, he was supposed to earn them for himself and that was that.

One afternoon after school the editor and proprietor of the *Ada Record* found me inquiring whether he needed a willing worker. The urge to earn some additional money no doubt provided the primary motive. Maybe Franklin's autobiography

had inspired some special interest in printing offices. Perhaps the interest Professor Freeman had aroused in literature had made me want to become associated with its sources. At any rate, the *Record* editor, Agnew Welsh, agreed to let me work in his shop. That he did so I am sure was not because he particularly needed help, but because he wanted to encourage a youngster.

The first assignment was to sweep out the shop at the close of day. He showed me how to spread the oil-sweeping compound over the floor and how to leave the shop completely neat and clean for the next day's work. Within a day or so this art had been learned well enough that the job only took a few minutes.

"Want to learn how to set type?" Mr. Welsh had anticipated my earer affirmative by selecting an old case of ten-point for my first effort. Seated on a high stool, I found before me a wonderful area of esoteric and technical knowledge. In the slanted flat box were compartments for all the letters, for punctuation marks and for spaces to put between words. An upper case contained the capital letters. Mr. Welsh explained why the biggest, most easily reached compartment contained the pieces of type from which "e" was printed – because "e" is the letter used most often. He pointed out that the "a" and "c", the "h" and "n" boxes were bigger than those for "x" and "q" and "z" and other less frequently used letters. Then he put in my hand a printer's stick, a sort of metal box adjustable to the width of a column, in which the pieces of type were placed, one by one, upside down. It held about two inches of type. He gave me a rule, the metal strip which a typesetter used to back up the line he was setting and which he moved with each new line. He showed me how the "leads" were inserted to space between the lines of type, and then how to put the spaces between words so that in printing the white space-intervals in each line appear equal in size.

After several hours of assiduous work, spread over a week of afternoon spare times, I had half a galley of type. Each time the stick was full it had to be wet thoroughly with a sponge, so that the letters would adhere together while the type was lifted over to the "galley," a sturdy sort of long, brass pan. The galley usually rested on an unused, slanting case. The type was carefully slid all the way to the upper end of the galley and rested on the lower side. A heavy piece of lead prevented the last lines from falling. The galleys were nearly as long as a column. Their lower ends were open so that the type could be moved when the time came to and easily pushed off on a composing stone or into a form.

Mr. Welsh had speared the text of that first "copy" from an exchange with his long editor's shears and had pasted it up on a letter-size sheet of blank newsprint. It was a half-column history of the American flag. When finally and proudly I reported to Harlow Povemire, the shop foreman, that the last line was finished, he dropped whatever he was doing and set about to "pull a proof." He laid the galley, with the type carefully braced on its unprotected side and bottom, on the long proof press, inked it with a rubber roller, spread a long narrow sheet of paper, and then turned the heavy, cloth-wrapped proof roller over it. When he

lifted the sheet there in printed words was the text I had been setting. Before I had a chance to read it over Mr. Welsh took the proof to his desk, seized a pencil and with a mischievous look at me over the tops of his nose-glasses said, "Now, we shall see how many egregious errors you have made!"

His pencil darted to mistake after mistake, drew lines out to the wide, blank margins of the proof and by signs and letters indicated corrections. When he had finished he offered the compliment that at least half the lines had no errors in them and declared that for a beginner the proof was fairly clean. Then he explained one by one the meaning of the marks he had made. The foreman showed me how to work the type-errors out of the lines, replace them with the correct pieces, and how to readjust the spaces when necessary. After one or two additional proofs had been taken the job was pronounced "OK" and some time later the article appeared in *The Record*. That first proof with Mr. Welsh's eleven corrections survives as a prized item in a scrapbook of those days.

The smell of printer's ink was agreeable, and I liked the creative atmosphere of the newspaper office and print shop. After a few weeks I became a fairly accurate typesetter, although never a fast one. Mr. Welsh suggested that I try reporting basketball games and other school events. He printed the accounts about as they were written. The dollar or so a week he gave me seemed to be generous pay for the pleasurable chores I performed.

The art of shuffling piles of loose sheets into perfectly neat stacks, the use of the wire stapling machine to make booklets, the management of the big knifed paper cutter to reduce big sheets to desired sizes and to trim edges, the way to make paste and the uses of binder's glue, all these elementary skills he taught. Interesting as I found work in the shop to be, and much as I liked seeing my little pieces in the paper, the idea of becoming a newspaperman had not established itself. Mr. Welsh was nudging me in that direction. I enjoyed learning something new and was proud to be doing something no other boy of my acquaintance had attempted.

Harlow Povemire patiently answered questions about printing, and was too much the gentleman to make me the victim of the standard practical jokes which were inflicted on printers' devils. He never sent me to find the paper stretcher. He did show me the type lice, but in such a manner that I understood the idea without suffering its consequences. Despite the processes of modernization and disinfection, no doubt type lice may still be discovered in many printing shops. They are found by leaning closely over a galley of handset type which has first been made dripping wet. Half the type is shoved three or four inches down the galley and the observer urged to look hard to see the lice scampering in between. Then, when the type is quickly pushed back into place, the dirty water splashes up into the observer’s face.

Harlow was too kind to play such tricks. A bachelor, he lived with his mother and two sisters who ran a large student rooming and boarding house. He was an ardent student of Lincoln and eventually owned a creditable collection of Lincoln books and memorabilia. Aside from work and Lincoln, his interest centered principally in Company G of the Ohio National Guard, the Ada company of which he was then a lieutenant. He served with the Guard in its 1914 Mexican adventures. Later Captain of the company, he led it through France during World War I. Profitable investment of his savings enabled him to live in Ada through later years of quiet ease, never again permitting himself to be conspicuous except for a short period when he consented to become president of one of the banks.

With constant encouragement from Mr. Welsh I continued to write news articles about school events. One summer I took an excursion to Niagara Falls. The round trip fare was five dollars, by rail to Cleveland and by boat overnight to Buffalo. Lake Erie chose that particular night for a grand storm which I proudly enjoyed, especially as no sickness overtook me. In Buffalo I stayed with relatives, so that my total fund of fifteen dollars was still not exhausted at the end of the trip. At the Albright Art Museum, I saw sculptures for the first time and decided that they represented my favorite art form; a bust of Oliver Wendell Holmes was especially impressive. I had been reading the publications of the then widely known Elbert Hubbard, so I journeyed out from Buffalo to East Aurora to see his printing establishment and Roycroft Inn. I even had a glimpse of the long-haired sage himself. Mr. Welsh printed the account I wrote of the visit to East Aurora, and even sent to Hubbard for a cut of the Inn with which to embellish my story. So I was a travel writer!

Mr. Welsh permitted me to become a sort of columnist, too. Something I had read about the walking philosophers of Greece led to adoption of "The Peripatetic" as a title. Under this heading, boxed double-column, I wrote a weekly grist of youthful observations upon human nature in general. If any of them were clever, they were not likely original, and if original, they certainly were not clever. Nevertheless, the astute editor was building self-confidence into his protégé. Only my little news articles, with their local names and events, had any real value to his business, but he printed the other things because he enjoyed helping a youngster.

One cannot always be certain who has influenced him for good or bad, but of the men with whom I associated during the early years of youth the two who, besides my Father, did most to fan the sparks of ambition and confidence were unquestionably Professor Freeman and Agnew Welsh.

Mr. Welsh was lean, pale, slight of figure and brisk of movement. His body may not actually have sloped forward a little from the hips though it seemed to do so. His hair and close-trimmed mustache were silver and his bright blue eyes usually seemed to be looking over rather than through the glasses which sat easily on

his generous nose when not dangling from their black cord. He was a leading participant in every constructive effort for the community. He had been secretary of the long successful Tri-County Fair, secretary of the town school board for years, an officer of the Building & Loan, and a leader in the Church of Christ. His weekly, *The Record*, was a good paper for the times and did a profitable business. Cheerful, gay, helpful, every acquaintance was his friend.

All of Ada and the nearby countryside were a bit stunned when Mr. Welsh announced that he had sold *The Record* and his home on north Main street, had disposed of his other interests and was retiring to live in Miami. He was then not quite sixty years old and apparently vigorous as ever. He did retire for a while, but found he could not overcome his industrious habits.

He took a job on the *Miami News* and for another twenty years worked busily and happily in charge of that newspaper's "morgue," or clipping library. His enjoyment of systematic and orderly procedure made the work ideal for him. When well into his eighties he retired again but continued for another ten years to write a weekly column of reminiscence and observation which was printed in the *Ada Herald*, He compiled useful scrapbooks of Ohio and Florida history which he presented to appropriate libraries. His sight failed at last and the old nose glasses no longer served. He died at the age of ninety-eight.

The only member of the Class of 1910, Ada High School, whose writings had been published, and the only one with practical knowledge of print shop procedure, was clearly the obvious person to elect to the editorship of the class yearbook. No one else had even half the qualifications. That was what I thought. The class displayed its total incapacity to judge such matters by electing some one else yearbook editor-in-chief. I was to be an associate editor.

Don McDowell, the class choice for editor-in-chief, had been delayed by illness and had not joined our class until late in our junior year. He had poise, personality and charm that everyone admired, plus a baritone voice that better than any other in school could sing, "Sailing, Sailing, Over the Bounding Main." He made himself the ideal editor-in-chief from my viewpoint by agreeing to such ideas as I offered about producing the yearbook and encouraging me to go ahead and put it together.

The *Record* office was not equipped to produce so pretentious a volume, so a deal for printing it was made with the rival *Herald*. The *Herald*, then primarily a university weekly though privately owned, did much of the university printing. Whatever the merit of the contents in the book which finally emerged, it was nicely printed. There was no trouble about getting enough material. Whenever any prospective contributor failed on an assignment, I rose to the occasion happily if not nobly by putting one of my own compositions, verse or prose, into the space. When the *Herald* shop found itself swamped with work, I set type on

the yearbook to hurry things along. Whether others shared the sentiment or not, I greatly admired the finished product when finally it was distributed.

The yearbook was printed. The diploma was laid away. No "call" had been heard to indicate the future. What next? The question of how to earn a living was coming closer.