

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CHARLES MCKENNY

1912-1933

*I could not bend the bow Ulysses bore
Nor pose King Arthur's mighty blade . . .
And yet my soul will thrill at noble deeds,
And I may light my lamp at heavenly fire.*

—Charles McKenny

This bit of poetic fancy does only partial justice to its author. In the league to which he belonged he bent a strong bow and wielded a heavy sword. But it does reveal an important side of Charles McKenny. Normal was fortunate indeed in securing the services of a man who would carry on for a score of years the spirit of his predecessor—a spirit now to be illumined by the inspiration and insight of the poet.

For the first time in her history Michigan Normal was placed in the charge of a native son. McKenny was born in a log cabin on a farm near Dimondale. He earned a bachelor of science degree at the Michigan Agricultural College, and at Olivet (Michigan) earned both the bachelor of arts and the master of arts degrees. His career was that of the teacher and educational administrator at both the public school and college levels. In the former, he taught for a time in the Charlotte schools, then became principal of the Vermontville high school. At the higher level he was professor of English and History at Olivet College until the State Board took him to head its newly-acquired Central Normal School at Mt. Pleasant. Four years later, he left to accept the presidency of Wisconsin State Normal at Milwaukee. In 1912, the Michigan Board brought him back to preside at Ypsilanti.

He returned to Michigan to guide the destinies of Normal not

only over a lengthy period (the longest, to date, of any of Normal's presiding officers) but through years that witnessed events which changed the very character of America—war, post-war, devastating depression. He came to Normal at age 52, vigorous, eager, experienced in college administration, with clear ideas as to Normal's needs. He was inaugurated in a large tent, erected on the north side of the campus. When he retired, at age 73, he was tired, ill, and inclined to be despondent, yet he had ample reason for satisfaction in what he had been able to accomplish, and in the expressions of respect and gratitude from those for whom Normal had deep meaning.

The first problem that he tackled was that of the physical campus. In his first report to the State Board, made within a few months after taking office, he boldly asked for a college hospital ("health cottage"), a building to house the Domestic Science Department, a men's gymnasium, an addition to the library, and an auditorium which would also house the Conservatory of Music. He described the existing plant as run-down, pointing especially to the gymnasium:

During the twenty-five years the floors have become broken and have been repeatedly patched, as have also the linings of the pools. The pine partitions of the showers have rotted, and most of the showers are out of commission.¹

His appeal led some 25 or 30 legislators to visit the campus the next year. But he followed this up with a novel request. He did not ask for an all-out, immediate appropriation for everything, but rather for a commitment of \$100,000 a year for the next seven years. The legislature granted his request.

The local paper records the enthusiastic response in Ypsilanti to the news of the legislature's action:

Whistles and bells will announce the gathering of Normal students and citizens in the natural amphitheater at Owen's field to celebrate the recent million dollar appropriations granted to the college by the legislature.²

There would be music by the college band, and speeches by the local legislators, President McKenny, President-emeritus Jones, outstanding members of the faculty, including Lathers, Strong, Ford, Barbour, Julia Anne King, and student leaders.

The outcome was a men's gymnasium (as an addition to the existing gymnasium; completed in 1913); a nursery ("plant house") for work in the natural sciences, a health cottage (1914); the auditorium-conservatory that President Jones had repeatedly requested, but smaller (1914); a building intended for domestic science but devoted instead to industrial arts, art, and administrative offices and known as the Administration Building (constructed on the site of the old Conservatory building) (1914); and the renovation of the old gymnasium (1916).

In later years, but not directly related to the program, several other notable projects were accomplished—the rural consolidated Lincoln School (1924); and the alumni-student-faculty social center, McKenny Hall, financed by private contribution (1931).

In 1927, McKenny inaugurated a second building program, this one to extend for six years. His approach to the legislature this time was based on a comparative showing of legislative favor for the other State institutions of higher education, in which Normal stood next to the lowest. One building only was constructed under this program, the library (1929). The Great Depression had struck, and an ambitious but much-needed building program became a casualty.

However, with the sole exception of the Elementary Training School building, this program, expanded and modified to meet the needs of a growing institution, provided the pattern for the building achievements of the next two administrations (the 35 years of Presidents Munson and Elliott).

It is reported that McKenny had one other thought for his campus, an air strip and a plane to carry faculty and athletic teams on their several more distant missions.

Nothing was more evident of the values held by McKenny than his belief in the greatness and high importance of the role of the teacher. This belief had the quality of a religious faith, and shone in his numerous addresses before professional groups, in his enthusiasm for his work, and in things that he did to promote and inspire better teaching.

"As a stream cannot rise higher than its source," he said, "so no educational system can rise higher than the character and qualification of its teachers."³

The critical importance he attached to public education is perhaps most pointedly shown in his comment, prompted by the Great War that occurred during his administration:

War is no longer a contest between men on the battlefield but a struggle between the inventive, constructive, administrative, and moral capacities and forces of nations. Victory will finally come to the side in which these capacities and forces are strongest, and while it is not so evident it is just as certain that peaceful contests between nations for leadership in the world will be determined by the same factors. The world will appreciate education and schools as it has never appreciated them before and the nations after this war will make one of their first considerations the reconstruction, where necessary, and up-building everywhere of public education.

It took another great war, and the launching of the first Sputnik to demonstrate the full force of this prophecy.

His attention to the character, quality, and growth of the teacher was noteworthy. Two years before coming to Normal he had published a small book titled "The Personality of the Teacher," the outgrowth of a lecture that had proved popular at many a teachers institute. In it he discussed such topics as the tone of the school, sympathy, sincerity, good breeding, growth in personality, the joy of living.

"Its matter," he explained, "is old; so is the multiplication table. But there are always the young among us to whom the common wisdom of the world is new."

To provide stimulus, inspiration, and direction for his school and its alumni and the teaching profession in Michigan, McKenny initiated the Mid-Year Conference, bringing speakers of national importance and providing opportunity for intimate group discussions in departmental programs. The occasion for the first such conference was the cancellation of the annual meeting of the State Teachers Association and most of the Institute dates in 1918 because of the devastating influenza epidemic of that year. The response was so enthusiastic that the Mid-Year Conference became a tradition. It was held for 15 consecutive years, beginning with January, 1919. Its final program took place in the year of McKenny's death.

The pattern was simple—two days (Friday and Saturday), three or four main speakers of national repute, and discussion groups organized by the several departments of instruction. The invitation was broad—to teachers and educators throughout the State. The attendance was consistently large, taxing railroad and street car transportation and hotel facilities beyond their capacities. Along the way, the Conference became a convenient occasion for special

observances—the dedication of the Lincoln Laboratory School in 1924, of the Roosevelt Laboratory School in 1925, Normal's Seventy-Fifth Anniversary in 1927, the laying of the cornerstone of the Union building (McKenny Hall) in 1931.

Speakers were brought from far and near, and included such names as Dean William C. Bagley, Teachers College, Columbia; Vihljalmar Stefansson, arctic explorer; Charles H. Judd, head of the Department of Education of the University of Chicago; John Grier Hibben, president-emeritus of Princeton University, and such outstanding Normal alumni as Charles E. St. John ('76), astronomer at the Mt. Wilson Observatory in California; William McAndrew ('81), superintendent of the Chicago schools; Stratton D. Brooks ('90, '92), president of the University of Missouri; Isaiah Bowman ('02), president of the American Geographic Society; Dean Benjamin F. Pittinger ('06) of the University of Texas.⁴ For two decades after their demise these meetings, often referred to as the Midwinter Conference, were recalled wistfully by the faculty.

As with Lewis Jones, his predecessor, McKenny held his faculty in high regard. In one of his first reports to the State Board, he commented:

Before coming to the Normal College I frequently heard it remarked by educators that in respect of the scholarship and productive activity of its faculty, and the general character of its courses, the Michigan State Normal College was unsurpassed by any institution of its kind in the United States . . . On coming to know the faculty and institution as only the executive head can know them, I am pleased to say that it is my conviction that the reputation of the College is well merited.⁵

His concept of what made a good faculty member in a teachers college included the belief that he should have had some teaching experience in the public school, for "no man can function as he should who does not know the public school problem." At another time he exclaimed that the president of a teachers college would give much to be assured of a teaching staff with scholarship, teaching insight, stimulating personalities "and the divine gift of being ever young in heart."

In working with the faculty the President at first operated through an administrative council which had been in informal existence since 1880, and informally recognized since 1902. During the administration of President Jones this body had tended to lose its distinctive

character of department head membership by including all members of the faculty of the rank of associate professor or higher. This trend continued under McKenny until, by 1915, it had lost all character and included all members of the faculty above the rank of instructor (and there were very few indeed of the latter). At this point the faculty in organized form seems to have faded from view. The President looked formally to his administrative staff for counsel and recommendation, informally to individual heads of departments.

Several whom McKenny added to his staff made important contributions to the life and tone and intellectual standards of the college. Such, for example, were Dean of Women Lydia Jones; outstanding classroom teachers Ruth Barnes (Children's Literature); Jennings Hickman (Natural Sciences), and Carl Pray (American History); Gerald Sanders (widely-known for his textbooks on literature and English composition); and scholar of international repute Charles Frederick Harrold (Carlyle and Newman).

In general, McKenny's relation to his staff was comradely rather than authoritarian. He expressed his sense of fellow-feeling in a poem entitled "The Sabbatical." It read in part as follows:

I've studied and lectured and quizzed
 Read blue books till I was blue
 But now I'll junk my work for awhile
 As a wise man ought to do.
 I'll leave this terrible clime
 Of winter and rain and snow
 And go for a rest to the golden west
 Where the roses forever blow . . .
 Like the Lotus Eaters of old
 I'll dream of the ghostly past
 Till a western quake shall shake me awake
 To the rude old world at last.⁶

McKenny had a close feeling for students. Professor D'Ooge, commenting on this aspect of the man at the time of his death, spoke of "his love for young people, his sympathy for them and his ability to understand their problems."

"This was largely due," D'Ooge continued, "to his own extraordinary youthfulness which he maintained to the end of his life. He . . . loved all kinds of sports and was no mean contender himself.

Less than a year ago I saw him play a hot game of tennis. On the golf links, too, he made an excellent score. Needless to say he was present at every athletic event on our campus and the boys and girls felt that he was with them in their struggles.”

He felt also a deep concern for transforming them into teachers who would be not only capable but acceptable to a conservative mid-western public. In his first report to the State Board, he revealed a lively interest in both the health of the students and the regulating of their conduct.

He sought to aid the Dean of Women in the discharge of her responsibilities. He secured the services of a trained nurse, and created a Women’s Council to advise the Dean on housing and social problems. The trained nurse idea proved to be the germ of the present-day health service for students. The Council was composed of members of the faculty and representative women from the city. Rules governing rooming houses were drawn up and published in the college catalog. They appear to have been satisfactorily effective with one major exception, the rule against smoking.

In the spring of 1922, a rumor appeared in the newspapers that seventeen coeds had been dismissed from college for smoking. A furor of national proportions ensued, and before it was over the Governor of the State, the State Board of Education, the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, and even the courts became involved. Actually, the number of girls dismissed for smoking was only four. But one of the four (Alice Tanton) sued in the Washtenaw Circuit Court asking for a writ of mandamus to compel the Normal to readmit her. Failing here, she appealed to the Michigan Supreme Court, where again her request was denied. A unanimous Court said:

As is well known, the Michigan State Normal College is maintained at the expense of the taxpayers to prepare teachers for our public schools . . . Inherently, the managing officers have the power to maintain such discipline as will effectuate the purposes of the institution . . . Mrs. Priddy (Dean of Women) . . . should be commended for upholding some old-fashioned ideals of young womanhood.⁷

McKenny fully supported the dismissals, basing his position on the public attitude toward teachers. The College, he said,

believes that few, if any, school boards in Michigan would elect to a teaching position a woman who smoked. Since the college is to furnish teachers to meet the standards of Michigan, it has taken the position that girls who smoke are not suitable candidates and consequently should not remain in college.⁸

McKenny did not misinterpret the attitude of the times. Resolution of support came from student, teacher, and women's organizations. The State Board upheld him. Nine years later this ghostly problem was to rise again, prompted by the formulating of regulations for use of the new Union building. This time a nation-wide reaction submitted the President to both praise and ridicule, the latter spurring him to defend his position in the *Baltimore Sun*. In the course of his statement he said: "I suppose that, second to the United States Senate, I am just now the biggest joke in America. The newspaper boys are having a lot of fun with me . . ."⁹

Fortunately for McKenny, and the College that he served, his devotion to the teaching profession and his deep feeling of responsibility were mellowed by the vision of the poet and lighted by a sense of humor. One of the perennial problems that came to his desk, occasioned by his own insistence on clarifying and then enforcing housing regulations for women, was the Matron's Association of Ypsilanti. His presence at one of the meetings of this Association was reported in the local paper as follows:

Whether or not the President of Michigan State Normal College winked at someone in the audience while a matron was explaining her position in the organization, is a new issue today in the controversy between the Matron's Association and College Administration. The President is in Detroit, so there is no official word available as to whether the alleged wink was really a wink or just a blink, and no other member of the faculty, or other person present at the meeting, has been found who wishes to assume responsibility for explaining the president's action or state of mind.¹⁰

McKenny was equally solicitous to keep the cost of a college education as low as possible. Noting that in large part the students who aspired to be teachers came from the homes of the common people and the great need of the State for their services, he placed heavy emphasis on the importance of low-cost education. He pointed out

that the cost of an education at the Normal School was about 60 per cent of that at a university.

In the first year of his administration McKenny initiated a health service for women, and a program of off-campus instruction. As to the former, he pointed out to the State Board:

Ypsilanti has no hospital. With relatively few exceptions, students room two in a room or two in a suite of rooms. The sickness of a student consequently means discomfort and perhaps danger to her roommate . . . Should a contagious disease break out among the students, the situation would be serious. The college should follow the custom of the better class of educational institutions and have a health cottage or hospital under its own control.

Step by step the goal was reached, first a trained nurse, then a room for headquarters, then a residence equipped as a "Health Cottage" and the service of interns from the Medical School of the University of Michigan, then (by 1917) a full-time physician to serve as Director of the Health Service.

As for off-campus instruction, time and patience were again required. McKenny requested a special appropriation for this work, saying: "Not only is it necessary to train teachers for their profession, but it is necessary to keep them growing after they enter the profession." His plea was not granted. But the work was continued as a self-liquidating proposition, and in 1921 an Extension Department was organized which rapidly expanded off-campus services.

In 1914, preparation of teachers for handicapped children was undertaken in a tentative manner. Professor Charles Elliot of the Normal Education staff, working with Professor Walter Scott Berry of the Education Department of the University of Michigan, received encouragement to try out a program in the summer session of that year. The program was transferred to the Detroit Teachers College for a time; then, in 1923, brought back to Normal's campus and organized as a separate Department of Special Education.

In 1924, a project to consolidate 13 rural school districts south of Ypsilanti, initiated by Marvin S. Pittman, head of the Rural Education Department, was consummated with completion of the Lincoln Consolidated School, which would also be used as a laboratory school for practice teaching by Normal.

In 1925, a campus laboratory school, Roosevelt High School, was completed. This building was planned to increase the capacity of the

Training School and to provide a suitable facility for the conduct of a relatively new concept in school organization, the junior high school.

McKenny had begun a campaign for a separate building for the high school in 1914. Two years later he revived the question, noting that the appearance of the high school in American public education had brought great changes and that the Normal must now prepare teachers not only for the common schools but also for the rapidly increasing number of high schools. He persisted in spite of the fact that a world war was in progress. After the war was over he pressed for acquisition of a site, which involved condemnation proceedings. And by 1925 the building stood ready for occupancy.

Use of the Roosevelt School did, however, cause a major headache. Once the war was over, student enrollments increased greatly and by 1926 had reached a high that would stand for many years. Space again was at a premium on the Normal campus, and to meet the threatening emergency it was proposed that the elementary training school be moved to the Roosevelt School building. To do this, McKenny advocated the abandonment of the senior high school, arguing that practice teaching could be provided adequately by the Lincoln Consolidated School. At once he was met by violent protest from Ypsilanti citizens whose children had attended or were attending Roosevelt. McKenny and the State Board capitulated.

A proud institution whose true status had been ignored, with a line of presidents of national stature, turned its attention to the national scene. Boone had been active with the National Education Association before coming to Ypsilanti and continued to play a role there; Jones had continued this relationship, and McKenny, working with a group of mid-west presidents of normal schools that had become colleges, was a pioneer in helping to establish an organization of teachers colleges that was national in scope. The story in brief is as follows:

Upon the initiative of President Homer H. Seerley of Iowa State Teachers College, five presidents of four-year degree-granting teachers colleges in the mid-west met informally in Chicago early in 1917. McKenny was present. Arrangement was made for a session to be held in February in Kansas City. This proved to be the first regular session of the American Association of Teachers Colleges. Two officers were elected at this session, a president and a secretary.

McKenny was elected president. At the second annual session,

held at Atlantic City (1918), he was reelected. He was very active in this organization over a period of years. As chairman of its committee on a national educational honor society, he recommended that the existing society of Kappa Delta Pi¹¹ be recognized and approved by the AATC. In 1920, he served on a committee to investigate the possibility of acceptance of teachers colleges by the Association of Collegiate Alumnae on their approved lists. The report of this committee included an interesting assertion:

This question (of recognition by the Alumnae Association) is of the same character as that of the admission of Teachers College Graduates to the graduate schools of the universities of this country . . . The Teachers Colleges do as good work, to say the least, in their four years' courses as the standard colleges and universities do in their four years' courses, and there is no good reason why their four-year graduates should not have the same recognition that is accorded the four-year graduates of standard colleges.

It should be noted in passing that this organization, under its later name of American Association of University Women, broke its taboo in 1930 by approving the Albany State Teachers' College of New York State. On May 25, 1933, at the Minneapolis meeting, the Michigan State Normal College was also approved.

When, in 1920, the AATC decided to become a member of the American Council on Education, McKenny was named chairman of the delegation to that important body. He served on the committee to investigate the question of amalgamation with another organization—the National Council of Normal School Presidents and Principals, whose report resulted ultimately in that body's decision to merge itself with the AATC. In 1922, as chairman of a committee on teachers colleges of the National Council of Education he presented a detailed and influential report on the scope of the teachers college movement in America and the standards therein. One of the recommendations of this report was that the teachers colleges "should address themselves to the task of standardization." Another asserted that the state legislatures, having created these colleges, should back them up financially.

For six years McKenny was chairman of the AATC's Committee on Accrediting and Classification of Teachers Colleges, concerned with the very heart of the Association's function. The work of this committee resulted in the adoption by the Association in 1926 of a

basic statement of Standards for Accrediting Teachers Colleges.

The importance and influence of the AATC grew rapidly, and in 1925 it combined with the National Education Association as the Department of Teachers Colleges. In 1948, it achieved its ultimate triumph over the ancient prejudice held by universities towards teacher training institutions by reorganizing to include schools and colleges of education connected with universities. Appropriately, it modified its name to that of American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education.

It should be noted that long before the founding of the American Association of Teachers Colleges, McKenny had been an active participant in the National Society for the Scientific Study of Education. In 1908, he succeeded Stratton D. Brooks as president of this Society and was reelected for the year 1909–1910. He served on the executive committee from 1912 to 1914. During his terms as president, yearbooks were published on the Co-ordination of the Kindergarten and the Elementary School, Education with Reference to Sex, and Health Education.¹²

Charles McKenny possessed to an outstanding degree two characteristics that were noteworthy also in his immediate predecessor—a strong feeling for the responsibilities of the teacher and a warm human sympathy which extended both to colleagues and students. He was particularly gifted in ability to work with people at all levels, including the legislative. His was a spirit of fellowship, and to this was added a love of the aesthetic aspect of life, including the natural world of flowers and trees and birds, the endless variations of mood of sun and mist, of calm and storm, of the “crystalline beauty of the snow.”

If, as an administrator, he possessed a weakness, it was the vice inherent in the virtue—a reluctance to exercise the authority that was vested in him.

The range of his interests was broad. His activities at the national level gave him valuable perspective on his own immediate area of concern. He once commented: “The great danger with normal schools is the tendency to live within themselves, and to measure themselves by themselves rather than by social conditions in the state at large.”

He looked upon his own institution as strictly professional in character, pointing out that every student who entered Normal must sign a declaration that it was his intention to teach in the public

schools of Michigan. In consequence, he held that Normal was in no sense in competition with any institution doing the traditional college work.¹³

He served as president of the Michigan Schoolmasters Club in 1920, was a president of the Michigan Authors Association and, as a citizen of Ypsilanti, helped organize the local Chamber of Commerce (and served as its first president). His death in September, 1933, caused widespread mourning. The resolution passed by the State Board of Education was more than a formality:

The State Board valued most highly his counsel and advice. On every issue the Board looked eagerly to him for his opinion, and his attitude on educational matters was always sane, progressive, and constructive . . . President McKenny was a natural leader and a man of great initiative. He was a national figure in the educational world and in every association to which he belonged and in every enterprise he undertook he forged rapidly to the front and assumed a commanding position. Michigan was proud of President McKenny's prestige.

