

Reminiscences of Columbus
Address of Hon. Sam B. Johnston before the Rotary Club

You young men with heads up, shoulders squared and eyes to the front march towards new lands and ideas. Men of my age stand on the sidelines in a retrospective mood, reviewing long past scenes and incidents which mark the paths along which they have trod. I, therefore, shall pass over prohibition, technocracy, the depression, the World War, Gold Standard, Boy Scouts, Farm Relief, Bank Failures and innumerable other Doodads and Gadgets which now consume all our time and supply mental pabulum and touch on one or more incidents of the early history of this county.

In the early [18] 70s, I have seen Negroes from the west of the river march up the hill a fife and drum corps every hundred yards, going to a political meeting at the old Negro school house south of town. ...Still marching past the [Gilmer] hotel when the head of the procession was below the Mobile & Ohio Railroad tracks. No white person could cross the street as the marchers passed along.

This hotel, in an incomplete condition, was literally filled with the wounded from the battle of Shiloh, and daily down the street in wagons drawn by mules, in plain pine boxes, they were sent to their last resting place.

The mode of announcing meals at the hotel was by beating a gong which would make more noise than a hail storm on a tin roof. On day, soon after the close of the Civil War, there were about 40 Yankee cavalymen, sitting at ease on their horses in front of the hotel when the gong sounded for dinner. The stampede of the horses was sudden and complete. Half of the men were unhorsed. They were a day or more in finding and catching the horses. They returned to the hotel to find it closed - no servants or the proprietor to be seen. The proprietor spent three days hiding on the roof of the hotel. Catfish Alley for a block, now filled with Negro doctors and Negro insurance agents, and the seat of the annual Watermelon Festival, and eating houses from which float the odors of frying catfish was, for a long time, our "Wall Street". Our first bank was located there and in an adjoining building was an Irish shoemaker, Mike Kelly, who could make you a pair of boots, or by the mystery of conjury, remove warts from your hand.

On Market Street, where the 10c Store now stands, was where an occasional circus pitched its tent and in addition to the usual attractions, would give a concert with romantic songs with such titles as "Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines - who fed his horse on corn and beans, which was, of course, quite beyond his means - but he was a Captain in the Army." And another equally romantic ran "They are Building Their Gunboat Down on your Banks, to Run by Machinery, and Be Turned by CRANKS. They have looked for a Captain - They have looked high and low, But who is your Captain, But William Barlow"

If I had wanted a drink at a later day, I could have gotten it at a bar on the first floor of the hotel, or at the Opera House corner, or over where the Bakery now stands, or where the Bell Cafe is now located, or two places on north Market Street, or where Ater's Jewelry Store now stands, or at the site of the present P&M Green Grocery Store, or down where Mayfield has a drug store. The liquor was good and mellow. The art of making it out of snuff and lye and buckeye was unknown. Early good whiskey was 90c and brandy \$1.00 per gallon.

There were three wooden hotels here at one time – Howard’s, Taylor, and City Hotel. At one of these, one day, where the fare was notoriously bad, as dinner was announced by clanging of the bell on a pine pole in the back yard, a hound dog raised his voice in a doleful and loud howl. A boarder angrily said to the dog “What are you howling about? You don’t have to eat here.”

For the special benefit and comfort of my friend, Mr. Stovall, I now admit that I was once President of a railroad. It began down near the Mobile and Ohio station and was brought up – (now catch that expression – WAS BROUGHT UP) Market Street, and by some unusual and original engineering, we bent it around Beard’s Corner and went on east toward the sun, half a dozen blocks. Then the funds of the organization froze – the subscribers to the capital stock refusing to pay their subscriptions. At that time, a local firm had a car of corn at the M&O. I determined to show the public that I had a railroad, persuaded an engineer of the M&O to hitch his switch engine to this car of ear corn, and started up Market Street, pushing the car of corn. At the site of the present Post Office, we had a twist, not a curve, in our track of the most unusual intensity, when after much struggling that point was finally reached, the car of corn turned over one side of the twist and the engine went off on the other side. At that moment my railroad scheme went into total eclipse. The City ordered the tracks removed from the streets and the iron was sold to pay labor. “SIC TRANS GLORIA MUNDI”.

My old friend, Will Mahon, was the manager of Concert Hall – once a church, and now the Jewish Synagogue. It has been the scene of many hilarious events. Tragedy, comedy, domestic drama and burnt cork minstrelsy. After the elapse of several years a certain minstrel troupe returned to Columbus on a second visit. Mahon carried the manager of the troupe to the Hall to show the equipment. On returning to the hotel, Mahon asked the manager if he noted any changes since his first visit. “Yes” he said, “100 per cent for when I was here before there were only 12 window panes broken out and today I counted 24!”

Now if you will pardon me I will relate an incident in the life of my father, who was in business in a wooden building at the present site of Weaver and Harrington’s Drug Store. Along in 1862 when the heat of battle was at its highest, it was an act of vilest disloyalty to mention the name of President Davis except to raise your voice in highest praise. My father had two sons in the Confederate Army. In conversation with another citizen, and discussing the war, my father said our cause was hopeless as the North had the money and the means to prosecute the war and all Southern ports were blockaded. These remarks of my father led to blows and a shooting. The other party opened fire with a cap and ball pistol, carrying a ball as large as your thumb. My father had only a dirk and let me say that nearly everyone carried a dirk or a sword cane, so under fire, he stepped in the door of his shop, came out with a shotgun and cut loose at his opponent. The shot hit everybody in front of it, including some of our soldiers at home on furlough, but none were hurt seriously. Then was heard the cry – “Hang him! Hang him.” Three of my father’s friends, the Rev. J.A. Lyon, Presbyterian Minister, and Colonel Thomas G. Blewett, and Mr. Henry Barrentine, of Caledonia, came to this rescue. They came to the old home where I now live, closed the windows, barricaded the doors, and sent word to the mob – “Come and get him!” This siege lasted nearly a week. One of my brothers was at home on furlough and that day on horseback, with me behind him, had gone down the river hunting. Returning to Columbus, we met Judge Beckwith, who hailed us

and asked if we were Harrison Johnston's sons. My brother replied, "Yes sir". "Well," said Judge Beckwith, "If you want to see them hang your daddy, you had better hurry home". Needless to say we hurried.

Now for a compendium of those characteristics which make a full fledged enthusiastic Rotarian:

Genius of Bismark, devising a plan,
The humor of Fielding, which sound contradictory,
The coolness of Padget about to trepan,
The science of Julian, the eminent Musico,
The wit of McCauley, who wrote of Queen Anne,
The pathos of Paddy, as rendered by Boucicault,
Style of the Bishop of Sodor and Mann,
The dash of D'Orsey, divested of quackery,
The narrative powers of Dickens and Thackery,
Of Tupper and Tennyson and Daniel Defoe,
Anthony Trollop and Mr. Guisot,
Take of these elements all that is fusible,
Melt them all don in a pip kin or crucible,
Set the to simmer and take off the scum,
And a live Rotarian is the Residuum

[Newspaper clipping in E.R. Hopkins Scrapbook – no date]