

just a small request



as made by Associate Professor of Journalism William Foster-Harris on his wall-to-wall carpet.

RECENTLY my students—most of whom had already received passing grades, I record hastily, for the benefit of cynics—presented me with a very handsome rug, wall-to-wall. I was duly grateful. But presently it came to me, perhaps they expected me to sit on it in odd moments and meditate on my sins and even, perhaps, prepare an appropriate prayer.

So I am writing this sitting on my new rug. And after due meditation, here is my prayer:

"Oh, Lord, I pray that someday You will give my state, Oklahoma, a soul.

"Not a Big Mouth Soul, Lord, like some neighbors we could notice. (But, loud or not, they've got It, we admit.) Just a Quiet Soul, Lord; one that sees and takes pride in its own spiritual, as well as material resources; that loves the red earth, respects

its own past; that finds its faith in its own future. That's all, Lord. We just ask."

I remember, a long generation ago, a great European philosopher, Count Herman Keyserling, visited these United States and wrote an amazingly prophetic book about us. In it he said that, materially tremendous as we were, to his scanning eye America still lacked a soul. Intellectually we were still a European colony. A truly native civilization had not yet developed. He predicted the exploding metropolis which is so present a problem. American cities expanding, expanding at the perimeter, rotting at the core, until the land becomes one single city; and then one single ruin. He forecast the pyrotechnic rise of the Negro American, who alone among us, Keyserling believed, possessed a genuine soul; and who, surrounded by white Amer-

icans with a void in their similar region in the unconscious, would invade that void, "as a gas pours into a vacuum, with tremendous force."

He foresaw the termitoid state which is also upon us, nobody really daring to express his honest opinions, or, indeed, to have any, lest he be liquidated by the ant-hill "organization" to which he belongs. But he also saw hope that some day the "animal ideal" of an endlessly soaring standard of living, the wolf heaven of numberless rabbits, would give way to a higher ideal. If the nation did not destroy itself with slavepower (and how many of us realize we now have among us the equivalent of 40 billion slaves, in the forms of machines, motors, engines and the inanimate energy to move them) then some day,

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thought Keyserling, the human spirit might indeed be restored, once again to its proper place as ruler of all things human.

Sitting here quietly on my rug, it comes to me that I have seen all of his bad predictions and precious few of his good ones coming true in the 30 years since his book (*America Set Free*) was written. I have watched the world expansion of a culture of Cokes and Camels, soft drinks, soft cushions, soft living and soft heads; a mechanical materialism that in some ways is the most terrible this world has ever seen. Terrible in that it flatly denies the very existence of the human soul, asserting instead that a machine can always do it better, terrible in that, like the Purple People Eater, it proposes to eliminate man from his own working world.

I think here in Oklahoma, the spiritually youngest of all the States, we have, in some respects, compiled some of the most frightening records of all. I was born in Indian Territory and expect to go back to the Red Earth when I die: I am wistfully proud of my State, or wish to be. But there are some things we do of which I am not proud.

I am certain, for one, that a people without a literature will fail also to leave much history. As Dr. Samuel Johnson put it, "The chief glory of every people arises from its authors." But in my Oklahoma, alas, save to a very few, a native author rates exactly nowhere and must go elsewhere to receive acclaim, while even an imported one fares scarcely better. Even the imports we value more by the distance they have come (and into which they will presently vanish) than by the message, if any, they bring us. While as for actually reading their works, what Oklahoman ever does!

I admire oil wells and grain elevators and football players greatly, and I wish I owned some of them. But I wish also a few gallons of Oklahoma oil, a few more gallons, would be used occasionally for the spiritual enlightenment of Oklahomans, for oil for the lamps of literature, as well as for the hurtling motors and throbbing, all too often deadly, engines. I wish a few grains of our wheat could be used for spiritual bread.

A crowd of 50,000 at a football game is a fine thing: I'm often one of it. But I wish we could get 500 to listen to a philosopher, or an artist, or an author.

Tall, shining, multi-million dollar buildings are mighty nice to have. But I remem-

ber, Christ sat on a lakeshore, Buddha sat underneath a tree, and Lao-tzu sat humbly on the good, black earth of ancient China to impart their messages. I do not recall that the kind of buildings, if any, around them, was recorded. I do recall the classic definition of a University, and it was not Mark Hopkins, gifted teacher, on one end of a television log and 50,000 Future Voters on the other end. One Mark, one log, one student, instead! And as an even more Dangerous Thought, a blackening heresy, I seem to detect a suspicious similarity between those shadows on the shining, silver screens and those other shadows which Plato's famous, chained slaves saw on the walls of their dark cave—and likewise took for real. Perhaps I shouldn't even think such things!

But I do not believe ability comes cheaper by the dozen, or, indeed, comes in quantity at all. Quantity and quality are entirely different measurements, in different worlds, even if there are those who think they add up just the same. Twenty thousand garbage wagon horses can't outrun one Man o' War, for all of that. I wish my state would quit looking at "Bigger," for a little while, just now and then (say 10 minutes' worth anyhow, every three weeks) and consider instead "Better."

Along with our new \$40 or \$50 million legal liquor bill, I wish we could find, say, \$400 or \$500 to put up some prizes, plus a small drink of appreciation and prestige, for the best novel produced by a native author still resident in Oklahoma, for the best poem, the best play, the best non-fiction, the best painting, the best statue. Only Old Grads will long remember our Best Beer Busts, and they're generally down in Big D anyway.

I wish my state would work a little harder at raising and keeping some truly Great One besides—and who else?—Will Rogers.

I wish my university, my Alma Mater, would some day be known as the Mother of Minds, as well as of the Big Brass Brain and the Big Red. If Oklahoma wanted that, I think it could be done. The faculties are available now to do it.

Sitting here humbly on my brand new, wall-to-wall prayer rug remembering all the faces, so many, many over the years, I make up my own small, private prayer:

"Oh, Lord, if I have taught just one of them to think, to find his soul and be an individual, the master of his mind, the captain of his fate, then I have not gone by this way in vain. Just one, Lord. Please!"

Now you-all can roll me back up in my rug, if you think you'd better, and replace me with an, ugh, computer.

But you gave me the rug.

NEW BOOKS

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Indian country) with much humor, characterization, and Americana appealingly interspersed between the inevitable crises.

Although Taylor's book is a We-were-there type thing designed to instruct kids in history, it is interesting to compare it with Culp's more ambitious work as regards humor. Taylor, when writing about a kid for kids, makes very few jokes at his hero's expense. Culp, on the other hand, kids his kid constantly. And although Culp has an adult audience in mind, I think he's got a brand on something both kids and adults will enjoy.

RECOMMENDED: Taylor for the younger brothers; Culp for everyone.

William Dean Howells by George N. Bennett, University of Oklahoma Press

CONSERVATIVELY shocking, profoundly pleasant, and occasionally worth reading, William Dean Howells was one of the most popular authors of America's 1800s. The *Saturday Evening Post* of his day. Even close friend Mark Twain considered Howells his better. Now, of course, you never hear about Howells unless you take a survey course in literature; and then the poor man is only briefly dragged from a musty closet and rattled about as a father of American realism.

It's debatable whether Howells fathered anything in literature except debate about Howells and a way of writing in a felicitous manner (no little accomplishment considering the stilted styles of most authors at that time). The fascination professors have in evaluating the man suggests that like most controversial figures William Dean Howells was not black-or-white good-or-bad, but gray.

This seems to be the conclusion of George N. Bennett whose history of Howells' development as a novelist is about the most exhaustive and objective study that either friend or foe or the indifferent majority could possibly want. If for no other reason, Mr. Bennett should be admired for obviously having read all the words pleasant William Dean Howells ever wrote, which are evidence of no little dedication on the part of both Mr. Bennett and Mr. Howells.

RECOMMENDED: Now that a good study has been done, let's be done with the good man.