

Make No Small Plans

Building a New Campus
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An address given by President Palamountain on March 5, 1978 for Father-Daughter, Mother-Son Weekend. Theme of the weekend was "The Way We Were."

"The Way We Were." When I heard that turn-of-the-century Saratoga had been chosen by the planning committee as the theme for the weekend, I was struck with its peculiar appropriateness in this year of 1978.

Today, unbelievable as it seems to those of us who have been around for a while, we stand only a few months short of completing that gigantic trek begun in 1965 from the charming but outgrown and outworn campus along Union Avenue to this one. It took Moses only a few hours to cross the waters of the Red Sea, our crossing of Broadway will have taken us almost thirteen years.

Few will deny that parts of that passage have been rough. The uprooting and replanting of departments has been traumatic for the faculty involved, to put it very mildly. For students living on the old campus . . . and many of you have loved it and will miss it . . . the time involved, the time *wasted* in driving or being bussed up here for classes, seminars, meetings, parties, films has taken its toll in energy and patience. And the unity and community we have achieved has had to overcome the trans-Broadway gap.

Turn of the century Saratoga! The phrase rings a very special bell for those of us who know how and why Skidmore had its beginnings. For it was precisely at the turn of the century when Lucy Skidmore Scribner, widowed, alone and ailing, came to Saratoga to imbibe the healing waters and to inhale the salubrious breezes, decided to stay, became bored with a life of teas, gossip and card playing and started a school where local girls and young women could learn higher-paying skills than domestic and factory work, all the while experiencing the spirit-stretching challenges and satisfactions of the fine and performing arts.

By 1911, Lucy's Young Women's Industrial Club, as it was first called, had evolved into the Skidmore School of Arts, chartered by the Regents; in 1922 the Regents formally pronounced Skidmore a four-year college, dedicated, as it is to this day, to the pursuit of achievement, practical, intellectual and creative, and to a paramount concern for a sense of excellence in all endeavors.

Searching for a site for her school, Mrs. Scribner's eye fell on the land where this campus now stands. It was, or had been, the estate of a New York family named Hilton, and embraced five enormous houses, tennis and croquet courts, ornamental ponds, extensive lawns and gardens, a statue of Hiawatha by the eminent sculptor, St. Gaudens, and a flock of sheep with an attendant Scotch shepherd in kilts. Badly hit by a stock market panic, the Hiltons had left Saratoga in the early 1890's, never to return, but the property was so tied up in a probate and estate settlement that Lucy gave up trying. Her school was located instead in downtown Saratoga, and it was not until 1960 that Skidmore was able to acquire the land as a possible site for this campus through the generosity of J. Erik Jonsson, then the father of a student and later a trustee.

I say "possible" because the board of that time underwent a painful period of soul-searching before accepting Mr. Jonsson's challenge. Did Skidmore really wish to abandon its then home, so carefully assembled over the previous half-century? With no experience at all in fund-raising, did it really wish to gamble its very existence on the proposition that it could build, from scratch, a totally new campus on a new site? Would that be prudent?

For by the late 1950's, 84 buildings had been incorporated into the Scribner Campus, only five of them built by and for Skidmore, the rest acquired piece-meal, as tributes to the art of improvisation. Skidmore's second president, Henry T. Moore, successor to the brilliant and dedicated Charles Henry Keyes, had assembled most of this real estate during his thirty-two years in office. (There were giants in those days!)

Under his leadership, academic programs were expanded. Strong in support of the professional and creative areas, the core of Lucy's original school, Moore especially built up and added to the departments of liberal arts and sciences.

In those halcyon days, students fees, low as they seem compared to nowadays, met virtually all the costs of a college education. Not only that, they enabled Skidmore to acquire more and more buildings as needed, including a number of Victorian mansions and carriage houses, a tuberculosis sanitarium, several small summer hotels, at least one bordello and a haunted nunnery.

Henry Moore's methods were wonderfully unobtrusive. Each May, according to local legend, the college lawyer and the president of the local bank, both trustees incidentally, would join President Moore for a leisurely stroll along Union Avenue. The lawyer would mention in passing that the Widow Brown was getting ready to sell her summer boarding house and move back to Tennessee to live with her sister. Should they make her an offer of \$8900 for her house? The banker thought \$8700 a perfectly fair offer. So September would find yet another building, housing another 20 students, added to that patchwork campus, of which our alumnae have such fond memories, and with reason. Its charm was enormous, and it worked — so much so that I am still passionately confronted from time to time by graduates who cannot understand why that campus could not have been repaired and added to and made to do.

I answer that, in 1959, that idea was seriously explored by Skidmore's third president, Val Wilson; in fact at the time there seemed to be no other option. But problems were found to be many and complex.

The thirty-four acres comprising the city campus were chopped up by city streets and separated by properties owned by others. The buildings which had been acquired so cheaply were becoming increasingly expensive to operate as age took its toll and labor costs mounted. Science laboratories were housed in an inadequate wood frame building with dangerously narrow halls and stairs, the library was too small both for the number of its volumes and for the student body. Most of the land used for recreational sports and available for expansion was about to be annexed by the Adirondack Northway. And so on and on. The cost of rebuilding the campus was estimated at \$23 million, but a three-year campaign to support this project — the first in Skidmore's history — had come up with only about \$1.2 million. Even if the money had been raised, enrollment would have had to be frozen forever at its 1960 level of roughly 1300, as there would be nothing left over to build or buy new dormitory space.

Then, almost miraculously, another option appeared in 1960, offering President Wilson and his board the opportunity to honor Saratoga's gambling heritage by betting the very existence of the college on a very risky venture. The Hilton estate had finally come on the market. With the idea that the college might consider building a new campus on the site, Mr. and Mrs. Jonsson gave the funds for its purchase.

New studies led to a cost estimate of \$26 million for the construction of this campus. (That, of course, was in 1961 dollars. It has cost us more than \$40 million already and the end, while in sight, is not quite at hand: the total, however, when corrected for inflation, still falls within the original estimates.) In October of 1961, the board voted bravely and unanimously to go for broke . . . (how many times, over the years, I've lain awake brooding over the ominous undertones of that familiar phrase!) . . . to wager the future of Skidmore on its ability to beg, borrow or steal enough funds to fulfill their audacious commitment.

Tragically, Val Wilson died in the spring of 1964, before the first new building was completed. But he had heard the charge to the architects by the chairman of the Board of Trustees, Josephine Young Case, who, at his death, was to take over the responsibilities of acting as president for more than a year. Many of you are familiar with the charge, but I hope you will not mind hearing parts of it again for though it has little to do with the way we were it has everything to do with the way we wanted to be and are. I quote:

"You will design a campus which will provide for both student and teacher a feeling of freedom and wide horizon . . . provide the physical opportunities for attaining that freedom in the mind and that horizon in the spirit, allow space for contemplation and for aesthetic pleasure and for play; privacy for thinking and study; and a pervasive atmosphere which will be at the same time serious and gay, somber and warm, traditional and forward-looking, made up of time past, time present and time future.

"For here the student must discover self, and through self others and the world, and through the world others, and through others, self.

"At the heart of the beating center, set the library, where every book wanted is immediately at hand, and a thousand others wait beside to be discovered.

"All . . . learning rooms must be so placed and so designed that the campus expresses the unity of knowledge . . . access between departments must be easy, so that students moving through this rich array feel from the first a single impact, and gather from the harmonious interplay of disciplines some inkling of the universality of human experience. . . .

"And since it may be a campus used throughout the year, its planning must offer as much way for summer's winds as it does shelter from winter's. Daylight, even in December, must flow through all its rooms; yet there must be shade in summer for peripatetic scholars.

"One thing we do not want for our new campus and that is walls or gates. For we want the world to enter. These students would not and should not have isolation from the immediacy of current problems, however dire. Their concern will reach out far beyond the campus to others everywhere, for awareness will be a virtue of this place."

The architect chosen by the board was O'Neil Ford of San Antonio, and his campus planner was the late Sam Zisman. It was their assignment, working with the college, to plan the conversion of Woodlawn Park, as the estate had come to be known, into a college. Here are some of Sam Zisman's notes as they appeared in the *Alumnae Quarterly* in 1962:

"The Woodlawn site is magnificent . . . the perimeter, in its southerly points, is bordered by fine homes; in the northern part, the terrain itself, high and mostly undisturbed, offers a built-in buffer. The ground is uneven, both a problem and an opportunity for variety of building location and change of level in moving about."

(Let me say here that due to the unevenness of the ground, the contractors were in for many surprises. This whole section of Saratoga has always been known locally as "the rock." Because there's so much of it so near the surface, Case Center had to be raised 18 inches, Dana and Bolton 3 feet higher than planned. Especially in the case of Dana, the change of plans had its advantages, including added room to house a separate Department of Geology, not to mention an electron microscope!)

Now more from the notes of Sam Zisman:

"The center of the site, where the more open slopes are graced with fine trees, suggest the location of the main campus buildings, with the library at the very center. On the east of this area . . . an art center and galleries, auditorium and administration buildings . . . offer quick welcome and identification for those approaching from the city center. On the flatter ground south of the central complex would be the playing and sports fields. On the west . . . the residential facilities — dormitories, dining rooms, lounges to provide the living side of the campus. To the north, where the terrain is rugged, there abound wonderful possibilities for both winter and warm weather sports . . . ski and riding trails, lookout points and arborways, a botanical setting for walks . . . The early schematics will be adjusted to the details of the site, a space changed here to save a magnificent tree, a building arranged there to take advantage of the slope. . . ."

The saving of a magnificent tree reminds me that when we came to build the ski slope, it was obvious that a handsome tree, right in the middle of it, was going to have to go. Sam Zisman howled his protests, and fought like a steer to save it. "Sam," queried my wife gently, thinking of the famous Charles Addams cartoon of the skier whose tracks reveal that he has obviously skied not around the tree in his path, but through it, "Sam," she said, "have you ever, in all your skiing experience (she knew full well that Sam had never been on a pair of skis in his life) — "seen a ski slope with a tree smack in the middle of it?" Grudgingly, Sam allowed the tree to go. And a few weeks later was heard to intone pontifically at a planning meeting: "Last winter, when I was skiing at Zermatt. . . ."

There are two radically opposing schools of thought governing campuses. The first requires that all structures be so designed as to dwarf their inhabitants and make them realize their own insignificance. The Aztecs believed strongly in this philosophy, as, obviously, did the builders of the State University in Albany, not to mention the Albany Mall. Conversely, Sam believed fervently that if a college was to take seriously its human dimensions and humane concerns its campus should everywhere honor human scale, and I defy you to find a space on this campus which does not honor and appropriately frame the human form, whether it be the bay windows, outer walkways, or the entrances to buildings.

And O'Neil Ford believed that, firstly, a building should honor the ground it stands on by adapting to it; secondly, it should honor its neighbors by adapting to *them*, rather than standing apart from them by drawing attention to itself; thirdly, that it should honor the function it is intended to serve. An example of this is the new academic building, Palamountain Hall.

Sam Zisman had noted that "room must be left for the inevitable changes that come with first buildings and late ideas." Our first buildings incorporated the traditional rectangular classroom which pits the teacher, his or her back to the wall, in stark opposition to the students. Such a configuration is quite appropriate for classes being conducted as lectures, but the preponderance of our classes were conducted as seminars, discussions, or lectures *cum* questions and answers. Hence the function called for space with maximum flexibility, in which instructor and class were free to organize their spatial selections in whatever way they found best. The circle seemed to be ideal, but a building full of circles is most inefficient, having the smallest possible proportion of net usable to gross square footage. So we turned to that master builder, the bee, and found that hexagons closely approximate circles and produced a building which, like a beehive, had the highest possible proportion of net usable space.

You've all seen the new art building getting underway. Still in the planning stages are additional physical educational, sports and recreational facilities, including a swimming pool and more space for indoor sports and dance. We'll need some additional housing which will seek to recreate the social dimensions of old campus housing by being organized in units of 30 students, and, later on, a permanent theater.

So, this fall the trans-Broadway move will be behind us. And with the completion of the art building then and of additional physical education and residential facilities in the next year or two, we will have built the essential new campus. To fund these present and the next stages, we will require \$10.5 million in capital funds, as well as some mortgage financing. To raise these capital funds late next month we will unveil a major, public campaign — our first such since that of 1959-61.

The present campus was paid for roughly half by capital gifts and grants and half by mortgage financing. We have averaged a bit better than \$1 million a year in capital gifts since beginning the move, largely raised through rifle shooting — the direct solicitation of selected individuals and foundations. Now we intend to use the shotgun, through all the techniques of a broad, public campaign, seeking to elicit the support of thousands rather than of dozens. The early, behind-the-scenes stages are progressing well. About 60 of the campaign's 80 committees are already in place and have met at least once. Early pledges alone already exceed the \$1.2 million raised by our only other public campaign, and we expect to have much more in hand when we publicly launch the campaign late in April.

But even more encouraging than the early dollar totals at this very preliminary stage is the warmth and enthusiasm with which committee members and prospective major donors have responded. Skidmore truly does enjoy a reservoir of goodwill and support, still inadequately tapped. This campaign should knit together the greater community of which we are the focus as well as provide a powerful impetus to our building program, enabling us to complete the construction of the essential campus within the tenure of students now aboard.

The momentum of that building program over the past dozen years has reinforced the course of our educational programs, generating a sense of movement, of excitement, of change, and of constant qualitative growth. And the new facilities enabled and encouraged the growth and enrichment of existing programs. Thus the new library saw a doubling of circulation in a few years, a doubling of the collection in less than a decade, and the new science building permitted the revision and substantial expansion of the science curriculum.

When our campaign is behind us, and the pace of our building program drops off very substantially, our first priority will have to be that of harnessing other forces to sustain our educational momentum, for we must above all nurture that sense of movement, of excitement, and of constant qualitative growth. Such a commitment may not be as dramatic as the daring yea-or-nay vote of the trustees in 1961, but it will be just as important for the future of the college. And we might well remind ourselves of the advice given the college many years ago by Mrs. Case — the sage words of Herman Wells, the great chancellor of the University of Indiana, who said: "Make no small plans for your institution; the small plans are very hard to achieve."

