Essay: Now and Then

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My 1929 Iowa State College pennant says Ames on it. The next year it read Iowa State. It became ISU in 1959. Most folks who walk on campus today are not familiar with these and many other changes that have had an impact on the life of Iowa State University.

As a graduate of Iowa State of more than sixty years ago - and one of a few perhaps, who still are privileged to walk across the local campus almost daily - I have to say that such reflections of the past come to mind with increasing frequency and intensity.

It was in 1929, my last year in Ames High School, that Iowa State's athletic teams made the change from their long time identity as 'Ames' and only since then have been known as 'Iowa State.' That change in name made obsolete the once famous 'Fight Song' entitled 'Fight Ames Fight.' That rousing song, noted for its World War I tradition, was written by a Harvard graduate as a tribute to Ames graduates with whom he had become acquainted through published accounts of their bravery in 'going over the top' with the famous 168th Infantry unit from Iowa, known as the Rainbow Division I.

Because of that change in 1929, a new fight song was born, 'Fight, Fight, Fight - for Iowa State' and the now famous 'Bells of Iowa State' unites tradition with emotion in the best sense of the word. But I have a desire that the story of the old 'Fight Ames Fight' song not be entirely forgotten.

At this point, you realize that I may be an Ames native. Also, my father and both of my wife's parents graduated from Iowa State between the years of 1898 and 1908. Occasionally, I am asked if I have lived in Ames all of my life. My response is "not yet."

A decade before I entered college, Dean Edward W. Stanton, representing the college administration, opposed the construction of movie theaters in the campus towns. His argument was supported by other college deans and department heads who felt that there was a real advantage in not having such a distraction that close to the campus. At the same time, Iowa State President Raymond A. Pearson in a letter to the Ames City Council, said that Iowa State's reputation as an educational institution was such that he would "regret having a movie theater" too near the campus.

Those ideas of the past seem unreasonable today. Perhaps some of today's activities should also be viewed with a long range perspective. Recalling such past events represents how society has changed in the last 60 years.

Today with its multicultural make up and emphasis, it becomes necessary to find better ways to continue and active college experiences within their choice of life standards. I am uncomfortable with the idea of a society that seeks to blend into some sort of common denominator. I think I see a sense of adjusting downward; although the trend is not campus-wide.

Most changes have been beyond the control of educators. In some ways campus student life doesn't seem as inviting as it was in my day. Are universities now too big and impersonal?

Many students that I see on today's Iowa State campus look to be potential great citizens now and for the future. "What if I were of college-age today?" This is a question that crosses my mind occasionally while on campus. I would have problems, but it would be interesting.

To say that trouble areas don't exist would be wrong. For example, the recent announcement of a fraternity that plans to operate without alcohol within its premises, to me, is a bright spot.

In the 1890s, instead of joining fraternities and sororities, students centered their social life in their literary societies. One was known as the Bachelors Debating Society. They had started a fund to build a building on campus in which to carry on their literary and social activities. By 1930, that fund had amounted to more than $5,000, but there no longer existed any purpose to use those funds since the society had ceased to exist. A proposal was made by way of a letter to the alumni members. Here is an excerpt from one of the replies, written in 1932, to that suggestion:

What sort of weaklings now infest the campus requiring an elevator to carry them up and down stairs?

I used to room in Freshman Heaven in the Old Main and run up and down five flights of stairs a dozen times a day; and not only that, but tatted my trunk on the first trip.

There were giants in those days.

If the students of today have degenerated to the point where they can no longer walk upstairs, it is time for the building to burn down and the whole institution to sink into innocuous desuetude.

Have you put in moving sidewalks yet?

That point of view was in the minority. The fund did not go into an elevator, however. It was used to purchase the initial supply of books for the Browsing Library that today is located on the ground floor of the Memorial Union. One observation about the library is that, as I recall, it was to be known as the 'Bachelor's Browsing Library.' Subsequently, the "Bachelor" name was discarded. Undoubtedly, it was not "politically correct."

I invite students of today to visit the Browsing Library and perhaps remember the students who preceded them and made Iowa State the great institution that it has become.

May you find ways to keep it that way. It won't be easy.

Farwell T. Brown is a graduate of Iowa State University in agricultural economics who is the author of Ames The Early Years in Word and Picture.