

# THE VIRGINIA TEACHER

Volume XIV

OCTOBER, 1933

No. 7

## "ONLY YESTERDAY"

*The fundamental character of the school; relative values in schools and roads; the rich personality essential to a real teacher; and other considerations affecting the liquidation of our educational system.*

MR. PRESIDENT, Ladies and Gentlemen of the Faculty, and Members of the Student Body: It is a very great pleasure to me to return to this platform.

I didn't realize when I accepted your gracious invitation, Mr. President, that I was to have the honor of participating in the twenty-fifth anniversary of your institution. I should like to convey my congratulations not only to the institution but to you on your successful administration. As a matter of fact, an anniversary offers a peculiarly convenient occasion for me to say what I have to say here this morning.

As President Duke has said, my subject is "Only Yesterday." A good many people in this audience probably read a book which was written by one of the editors of *Harper's Magazine*, Mr. Fred Allen. The book was called "Only Yesterday." It was the history of the nineteen-twenties. I lived through the nineteen-twenties, as will be apparent from the fact that I am more than three years old, but when I read this book, it seemed to me to be the history of the Early Stone Age. I could not believe that I had actually participated in all of that. I didn't like the looks of things in the nineteen-twenties in this country. I didn't like them as much as I like the nineteen-thirties

—which have their faults. And yet it is a peculiarly profitable exercise, I think, to glance back over that decade, that very mad decade which Mr. Allen treats of, between the end of the World War and the end of the Big Bull Market—carnage, you see, at either end. It seems to me peculiarly profitable for everybody in this room to glance back, because if you will look at that decade, it presents a very kaleidoscopic picture—you will see not merely the rise of lipstick and the rise of skirts and the decline of skirts (for I think the skirts got down again, by the end of the book, though I am not sure) but also the rise of the radio industry, the automotive industry, the peculiarly American art of keeping up with the Joneses, and finally an orgy of speculation, and ballyhoo.

Incidentally, I think you will be forced to recognize, yourself, that a certain quality of ballyhoo which ran through American life ran through the educational system as well. In general, I should say that the educational system participated in the American formula of the nineteen-twenties: Bigger and Better, particularly Bigger. It was a period of expansion. A century and a half of rather unfortunate experience lay back of it, unfortunate because it had created in us a spirit of unreflective optimism. Very little thinking was done about it. Candidly, we were too busy to think. I know I was. Most of the people I knew, were. We were controlling, or trying to control, a more or less run-away system. We assumed that so much needed to be done in the way of pioneer work, that it was impossible to build too many buildings, to get too many students, to give too many courses. Sometimes people said, "We admit that very little of consequence is happening just now except

An address delivered at the fall Convocation on October 4, marking the beginning of the twenty-fifth session of the State Teachers College at Harrisonburg.



in the material sphere, but, when we get through with this pioneer job, then things are going to happen." That, ladies and gentlemen, is an American idea that I, for one, have had enough of. For at least thirty-three years I have heard people explain that in those particulars in which America signally failed to excel, she would excel later, as soon as she had done her pioneer work. The trouble is that pioneering has gotten to be a habit. It is possible to spend your life straightening up your desk. You and I know people who have never done an honest hour's work in their lives because their desks are never straightened. If they had sat down and tried their luck at working at a disordered desk, they might incidentally have found that the desk had straightened itself. As a people, we have, I think, fallen into the habit of straightening our desks, doing things that apparently have to be done as a preparation, but things that have no significance unless you go and do something after you have made the preparation.

The depression has now brought a general liquidation, a general deflation, and among other things deflation in education. When that deflation came, we had just spent a lot of time getting the community interested in education. As a result, the community was supporting it—for no very good reason of their own. True, the ballyhoo and publicity rather disturbed us. I know plenty of good, honest men who said, "I wish it could be done without ballyhoo. After we get it going, we will gradually drop off the ballyhoo." Ballyhoo is very difficult to "drop off." Get into the habit of thinking in headlines, and then try to drop it and see what happens.

But a great many activities, very important activities, were being crowded to the wall. Those of us who are interested in educational institutions thought that so much had to be done; so many buildings had to be built; so much expansion and liberalization of the school curriculum had to take place that, for the moment, anyhow,

we were safe in going straight ahead at full speed. Unfortunately, everybody else made the same enthusiastic assumption. Everybody driving a car on the road made it. Since the road looked straight and apparently very long, the thing you needed to do was to "step on it" and the traffic would take care of itself. Well, since the nineteen-twenties, several smashed wind-shields have proven that that won't do.

In schools, the collapse means fewer students; that is, in the colleges and schools where the registration problem is a serious financial problem. In the wealthy colleges, it means many less research projects going on. A friend of mine who is president of a famous university told me they had practically dropped their research work. (He was exaggerating, but, as a matter of fact, his university, being one of the richest in the world, had been able to devote a large portion of its budget to research, and consequently could tighten its belt by merely closing some laboratory doors.)

Some people are saying that education, like every other business, must liquidate. That sounds a bit like a doctor who should say that the best way for his patient to get out of a high fever was to let nature take its course. From the patient's point of view, it is a quite inadequate prescription. When every institution we have is staggering on its last legs, the average person wonders if by liquidation you don't mean dissolution.

General deflation? I think the wrong things will get deflated. We don't trust the people who will do the deflating. As to what will get dropped out of the school curriculum and what will be retained, we have to do some very careful thinking. And we are out of practice. Thinking is very painful at best, and you don't think unless the alternative is even more painful—until you have gotten to that unhappy stage where not thinking is even more painful than thinking. Now, our thinking will involve a general re-shaping of schools, colleges, and universities. As a matter of fact, they



are going to be re-shaped, anyhow, whether we think or not. The budget will take care of that.

When we have thought a while, then, and liquidated a while, I wonder what will be left. I don't pretend to be a prophet, and it is very hard to tell just what we will rescue from the general shipwreck—what kind of ship we can construct from the wreck, in other words. It *could* be a very trim ship. I know some things I would like to rescue, and I can conceive, even in a world as unsatisfactory as ours, that some of those things will pull through. For instance, take our personal end of the problem. We will have to have a much clearer idea, I think, of what a teacher is, what he thinks he is doing; and that is a big job. It is much easier to re-shape a curriculum than it is to sit down and ask yourself what you think you are teaching your students—especially if you examine them and find out how little they have learned!

I suggest that, as long as human beings are alive and as long as communication can take place between them, there is going to remain for the student the clear, indescribable, intellectual excitement of impact with a rich personality, and it is going to remain, regardless of what the rich personality theoretically is teaching. If we were fortunate enough to have several thousand persons teaching in our schools who were real persons, independent of the subject they were teaching, we would have an amazingly fine school system—people who could guide minds less mature and experienced than their own, who could get the kind of pleasure out of teaching that alone justifies teaching. I wouldn't care much what they taught. I believe we would have a system, then, that would furnish us with better, and much more understanding, support from the community.

And we have many competitors for that support. I have a newspaper friend who asks this question periodically in his paper: "When are we going to disestablish the re-

ligion of road building?" Far be it from me to blaspheme against roads. I have just driven all the way from Charlottesville on a road for which I am personally thankful to Mr. Shirley. But the point my friend makes is, How much do you value a road and how much do you value a school, if they have to be weighed against each other? There is clearly a place for both, but what kind of schools are we willing to pay for, and what kind of roads are we willing to pay for? In the last analysis, which would we rather have?

But roads—which, I repeat, are very desirable—are not the only competitor. The tax-payer's dollar is getting to be a prize for which more and more persons are contending, and any institution which depends on taxes is going to have to convince the public that it is doing something worthy of support. It used to be thought that every one who had gone through college had an immense economic advantage over those without a college education, that they would make more money, but that idea—happily—is wobbling. I knew a man who never employed any one who had not been expelled from college, because otherwise, he said, they had no initiative! Grading people today by whether they have been to college is like grading people by whether they have gone through the Hudson tunnel. The college can't pull that gag any longer. Too many people have gone through college and have come out the worse for wear; or, rather, the worse for lack of wear. What is the defence of college, then? We have them scattered from coast to coast.

Well, some will say, they make better citizens. What kind of citizens? I don't know. I take it that a person whose interests are broad, who is given a wider culture, would indeed be a more worthwhile citizen, but I should consider that a by-product of college. I should hate to send anybody to school for the express purpose of making him a better citizen. What remains? It depends, of course, upon what



kind of education you are talking about. We will always have a great many institutions of your sort that are concerned very largely with preparing people to teach. We are going to have a great many institutions that profess to be interested exclusively in a liberal education. We are going to have many institutions for the purposes of research, for the purpose of understanding the subject-matter more thoroughly. In any case, the problem of education, as a whole, is going to occupy a very conspicuous place in people's minds, as long as we are in the desperate economic shape we are in at present.

I repeat, I am interested, and I want to enlist your interest, in questioning ourselves as to just what ought to get liquidated—what we can afford to drop with least damage, and what we are going to hang on to if we are going to have any school system worth having at all. It seems to me it would be a very distressing thing if history is compelled to record that the nineteen-twenties were a period in which things had to be made bigger and better; and if it should also record that the nineteen-thirties were a period in which it was equally assumed that anything that had shrunk was superior. We need to know what things to discard and what not to discard, and that is going to take very acute thinking.

STRINGFELLOW BARR

There is no surplus of properly educated public school teachers in Virginia; on the other hand, there are teaching in our schools today 4,000 white teachers who have not yet met the present minimum requirements.

Samuel P. Duke

A large proportion of Virginia teachers are still without adequate professional preparation. . . Four years of college preparation should be the minimum requirement for teaching on any level.

Julian A. Burruss

## THE SWORD OVER EDUCATION

*It is folly to follow longer an economic leadership that now counsels for the schools a bogus economy; such a course may mean national suicide.*

A SWORD hangs over education throughout the United States. To prevent this sword from sinking to the vitals of the whole enterprise of education, builded of the blood and sacrifice of pioneers, will demand the utmost of statesmanlike co-operation between the leadership of school and the leadership of society. This sword that hangs over education is but sign and symbol of the peril that confronts all of the social and cultural enterprises of our common life in this phase of unprecedented depression through which we and the world are passing.

The sword that hangs over education and over social enterprises of government is the sword of imperative retrenchment forged in the fires of an irrational depression. The peril lies not so much in the existence of the sword as in the way we wield it.

That economy, drastic beyond anything we have been accustomed to think of, is imperative in the conduct of local, state, and national affairs no intelligent man will question. Since 1929 our income has gone steadily down, and outgo has gone steadily up in its relation to income. The expenditures of local, state, and national government, when related to the toboggan slide down which the national income has raced, have bent the back of the American people. Either the back must be strengthened or the burden must be lightened. For a nation cannot long endure a consistently falling income and a consistently rising outgo.

When the books of 1932 are fully balanced, we shall probably find that at least one out of every three dollars of the national income went into the enterprises and