OF ELMS AND THE ACADEMY

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I am eternally searching for symbols of a permanence in life; of firm values that do not change, of faith and belief that is unshakable.

It is growing harder and harder to find such symbols. Occasionally I think I meet a man or woman who exemplifies what I mean, but the symbolic, traditional objects and institutions with their attendant securities, seem to be harder to find, or to recognize.

To me the Academy is one such symbol. It was founded by persons of idealism, and has stood more than one hundred years, a symbol of aspiration, of high hopes for mankind.

To me the Academy speaks of the magnification of man, of a vast humanism that encompasses all time, all knowledge, all hope that man might express the best of himself, not the worst. To me, the Academy is this kind of an Island.

But the eras do change, and our traditional symbols do slip away. I reverently hope that the Academy will remain, and that its ideals will prevail.

Let us expand a bit on what I mean by changing or disappearing symbols. The elm trees that once shaded America are excellent examples.

Near the front door at our home in Madison, we had one of the largest elms in the area. My wife purchased the house and property because of that great tree. Often she said, "If that tree ever goes, I go, too."

We had the wonderful tree for 20 years; then, though we struggled to save it with many scientific treatments, it withered and died. My lady wept when the men came to cut it down.

Something soon happened to our environment. A ground cover died the next summer; ivy began to cover the front of our house. The whole front looked different, inadequate. But she didn’t go; she stayed, and we planted another tree: a Gingko. She said it would probably last for 500 years. I didn’t want another tree. I felt the change. As a writer, the loss of the tree desensitized me for a while, but that’s when I began to ponder about the death of elms across the breadth of the land.
The great elms are gone—victims of rampant dutch elm disease. The streets the elms once adorned are blank, empty. The feeling of grace, of an almost ageless tradition ended with the disappearance of their tall arch. With their passing, an atmosphere has vanished; the whole air of permanence, of a corridor through time, has passed. We have had a corresponding generation of turmoil and unrest.

When I was a lad, I heard of the arch of the elms of New England; and I was told how Kansas pioneers, many who came from the East, first planted elms in the town square and lined the new streets with the sturdy trees, almost before they built houses. The stability of America itself somehow was symbolized by the elms.

Lately I visited my old hometown in Kansas. Once there were tall elms in the courthouse park and green wooden benches placed beneath them. At one side stood an old horse watering trough. But when I visited last summer, the trees were all gone—so was the trough; so, indeed, was the old red-brick courthouse. A low structure of yellow brick, entirely unshaded, sat uneasily in the middle of the park.

I cannot believe that the death of the elms has had no effect upon us as a people. The tradition of a leisurely college life, enhanced by the presence of great trees above a quadrangle, or along a student walkway, appears to have departed. Perhaps students are more restless than they were a generation ago. Could it be that great trees that spoke of quietness, a timeless tradition, a deep feeling of place, had their effect upon the young?

There is a bleakness now in the atmosphere of colleges. Two or three generations hence, when the new trees have grown, the atmosphere may return. But what in the meantime? Colleges are not necessarily known for the beauty and uniformity of their architecture. Without the trees, the buildings sometimes look stark, and their windows empty and lonely. I have noticed also, as the trees have disappeared, that the traditions of the colleges themselves have grown less important—indeed, the traditions seem often forgotten. I recently found the senior class calumet—the peace pipe smoked in friendship by each senior class at the University of Wisconsin since, I believe, 1887, in a dark closet, entirely forgotten. The famed “little red wagon,” so important to athletic teams of the university, has disappeared. Nobody knows where. It was the wagon that students drew with ropes; hauling the victorious teams from railroad station to campus.

And the tradition of great professors of magnificent bearing and influence... where are they? In a time of great elms the great
professors flourished. Bennie Snow (Academy member), noted professor of physics, who received a “skyrocket” before each class; “Wild Bill” Kiekhoffer (Academy member), great economics professor with a deep love of students; Carl Russell Fish (Academy member), historian and lecturer par excellence who was literally followed by groups of students wherever he walked under the elms... these great professors have vanished with the trees. With them, of course, have gone the cherished stories... Bennie Snow, for example, one day walking down a sidewalk on State Street. He was walking with one foot in the gutter, one on the walk. An inquisitive student, noticing this curious performance, asked the professor whether something was the matter. “Why,” said Bennie, “I believe one leg feels somewhat shorter than the other.”

Ah, for the great trees again!

I have many older friends these days, especially since I myself have qualified for the golden years. Once the elderly sat peacefully beneath the elms. Tales told there carried on the oral tradition of generations. A bench now, set on a bare corner or in a treeless park, seems forlorn, though it may be occupied by two or three old cronies. Their daily meeting, the passing talk, seems to lack the benediction of the elms and often my older friends comment on the feeling of loneliness and uneasiness.

“Elm shade,” one said, “was once the essence of friendship. Most of our elms are gone in this town. We moved in from the farm, my wife and I, to be under the elms... that’s what my wife said. She liked this town because of the trees. She said the elm was a woman’s tree, a woman’s friend. This town will never be the same to us since the elms have gone. It’s harder now to make new friends.”

Our national values, our national character, may be affected by the loss of the trees. There are many, many reasons why our whole system of ethical and moral behavior is changing. The elms certainly are not to blame; yet the changes have occurred simultaneously with the death of these trees. The elms have always symbolized home and its values; the lure and pull of a homestead, of waiting friends and parents when one returns. Once, the trees planted at the doorstep to commemorate family events furnished shade and comfort in times of joy and grief. Now the trunks, dead and gray, stand sometimes in the yard beside the door. Or there is simply a blank space—or a stump remains where grandfather planted the elm sapling when the first baby died in the fall of 1861...
We are certainly a nation which has developed its character through the associations of family life. Family life relied on the elms. The effect of their going may be subconscious upon us; but a phase of American life—the serene elm phase—probably will not come again.

Let us hope that the death of the elm trees does not point toward the demise of the ideals of the Academy.

Let us hope that we may preserve and nourish the Academy. It may be more precious than we realize. But institutions and organizations are subject to the winds of chance. Recognition of values and planning for the winds of change are the only answer. I plan to work on that, and trust that we all will.