PRESIDENT'S REMARKS

THOMPSON WEBB

April 1980

The twelve months since the annual meeting in Kenosha have been a difficult and painful period for the Academy. The officers have spent much time considering financial matters and adjusting Academy affairs to the dimensions of the Academy's reduced income. The McCoy Trust may or may not be retrievably lost, but the income from that source on which the Academy had come to depend has dried up and will certainly not be available in the near future, if ever again. My distinguished predecessor bore the full impact of the unexpected termination of this revenue. President McCabe, Executive Director Batt, and members of the Council serving in that distressing time deserve the gratitude of all of us for the time and dedication that they gave to Academy affairs in making the transition to present fiscal circumstances as gracefully as they did.

That is now behind us. We can wish for return of the McCoy Trust; but, meanwhile, we have to live within present means. Squeezing Academy programs into a reduced budget in inflationary times has been no small task, a heavy burden especially on our Executive Director; but somehow here we are, one quarter into the current year with the prospects of a balanced budget and, so far, no major activity suspended. The Academy is not without resources. If they are used carefully and if realistic expectations for gifts materialize, no invasion of the endowment will be required this year. The Academy's transition to more straightened circumstances has been a process that has absorbed the full attention of both elected and staff officers for more than a year. It is time now that attention be returned to program.

It is regrettable that the staff has been reduced by one full position, which puts a greater burden on remaining personnel. The Academy is more dependent than at any time in recent years on grants from donors and on the dues of membership, and generating revenue of these kinds will inevitably take up increasing amounts of staff time. Nevertheless, the Academy must turn attention back to its program. The Executive Director and the elected officers must now consider the goals of the Academy, as defined in charter and by-laws and as eloquently expanded from time to time in our publications and committee reports. What is needed, and I consider this imperative, is a plan of action. The objectives of the Academy need no further statement; we know what they are. With the brush fires of recent months beaten back, what is urgently called for at this time is a concrete program based on a clear set of priorities, a program that identifies a short list of specific steps that are to be the Academy's principal concern through the short-term future.

A year or more ago, President McCabe set in motion important steps which, in time, may result in legislative support to supplement income from endowment, dues, gifts, and grants. Our Executive Director is actively and successfully engaged in soliciting donations, and he promises further efforts toward attracting additional members. On such activity the Academy depends; but we face what is almost a "hen-and-egg" problem. Funds are needed to support programs; but my feeling is that programs are needed to attract funds. When the Academy goes to the legislature for an appropriation, the question is what does the Academy do that deserves taxpayer's money? When foundation, commercial, and
business executives are approached, they want to see persuasive evidence of accomplishment. Surely the prospective new member wants to know how the Academy contributes to specific interests of his in order to be entitled to his support. To all these it is helpful but not wholly sufficient to point to Transactions, to the Review, to the Youth Program, and to other Academy work, though the questioners may respect those activities as we do. The Academy's major responsibility after Transactions is to facilitate studies and investigations, as we all know; but few funds are likely to be attracted on the basis of potential alone. This is a what-have-you-done-for-me lately matter. Initiative will have to come from the Academy. It should turn its attention as actively as present resources permit to the search for projects and programs of the kinds defined in our charter and to attracting funds to implement such activity. An outgoing schedule of that sort is an effective answer to questions from legislators, from foundations, and from prospective new members.

The Academy was established as a service agency. It has provided distinguished service for more than a century and is respected for its accomplishments and what it is continuing to accomplish, but laurels are not enough. The Academy must continue to look for jobs that need doing. The respect that it enjoys depends on its own ability to find significant ways of serving Wisconsin and our fellow citizens. I intend to make it my objective in my term of office, which continues through 1980, to consult closely with the Executive Director on the program of the Academy and the search for ways in which the Academy can contribute as in the past to the state and its people.

This brings me to a related, and final, point: consideration of the length of terms of elected officers. One year is simply not enough time for a president to become fully acquainted with Academy affairs, to develop a mature response to them, and to see any resulting program even well begun. He, and perhaps other officers, need longer terms in order to be effective and to contribute significantly to the direction of the Academy. I have therefore appointed a by-laws committee to review several constitutional questions, including lengths of terms. My predecessor, Robert McCabe, has agreed to serve as chairman of that committee and to report to us at the annual meeting next year in Madison with recommendations on this important issue.

As you see, complaining of the brevity of my term, I am obviously saying that my association with the Academy as its president seems too short. It is a pleasure to have a part in Academy affairs at an interesting if not always happy time. In 1981, I will pass my responsibilities to my distinguished successor, Professor Reid A. Bryson, confident that the Academy will be in competent hands and with gratitude to all of you for this opportunity to serve an organization that has contributed so much to the intellectual and cultural community that we share.