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Aggie Incredibles

by Palmer Henry Olsen
I don’t really know why I went to Texas A&M in 1912, but I enrolled with very high expectations. So, when I received my first scholastic schedule, I was shocked and mortified. Solid geometry and physics were the same texts I had finished in high school. I knew both thoroughly. Dean Puryear refused my strong plea for more advanced courses. He even laughed as he told me that a review would do me good. I was so disgusted I debated going home.

Hazing saved the day. I was quick, agile, and strong. Also, maybe strangely, I was blessed with an unusually tough hide. After a couple days, the hardest blows, with heavy leather belt or with bayonet, produced only temporary pink stripes. There was no pain. Running the gauntlet I would have made Daniel Boone or Kit Carson envious. I had a ball! In fact, any honors I received at A&M must have come because of my freshman speed, my tough skin, and my ready laughter.

In my first physics class, I explained to Prof. Skeeler about my hassle with Dean Puryear. He examined me thoroughly and had an exciting job waiting for me. It was my most pleasant experience at A&M.

Bonner Frizzell was my English teacher. Without ceremony, at our first lesson, he called the roll and told us to get a pencil and paper ready. Twenty simple words were given us to spell. College work? My God, I thought, am I now demoted to fourth grade? In one week all my hopes and dreams had been shattered. I had never cried, “I want my mamma,” but now I needed help.

Again, hazing saved the day. There was something new and different every night. And considerable hope was renewed in my second English lesson. Frizzell explained why he had given a spelling
quiz. Only two of us had spelled all words correctly. Five students from prestigious Ball High School had each missed more than ten words. All five were in “L” company, my company. For two weeks I had marveled at and maybe envied their city sophistication. Now, I had something to brag about.

To stay at A&M, I had to earn most of my expenses. At first only one job seemed available—juicing cows. But four a.m. and one good look at twenty Jerseys in a row was too much. Knocking over or digging stumps in a large field, where Highway 6 now traverses College grounds, was not bad but disgusting. Why should a thirty-five-year-old agricultural college have stumps and cultivate with a one-mule plow?

Dr. Bolton gave me hope. He wanted all windows in the new Electrical Engineering Building cleaned inside and out. Painters had splattered them. The building was next door to Austin Hall, my dormitory. Also, Dr. Bolton, pleased with my work, allowed an hour for my fifty-minute vacant periods. Windows finished, I drilled countless three-quarter-inch holes in large marble slabs for switchboards in the basement.
Doomed To Die

On January 15, 1913, we had some of the most shocking and stunning events I have ever witnessed, peace or wartime. It was petrifying. Basketball season had just begun. Archer Koons had practiced the day before, eaten supper, was stricken ill and died in a few minutes. Cause of death was diagnosed as meningitis. W. C. Mcbirney, a freshman in Austin Hall, who had practiced with Koons, had eaten several big, juicy T-bone steaks. They had probably tasted too good, his stomach couldn’t handle the overload, and now he was having a hard time riding his nightmare. His action was so loud and violent that all of Austin Hall was awakened. Some cadets already knew of Koon’s death and, never having witnessed a wild nightmare, concluded that “Mac” had meningitis, too. He was rushed to the hospital, but everybody concluded that he was a dead duck. Uncertainty and fear ruled the roost.

At breakfast speculation was rife and ominous when a corps meeting was announced. No death march was ever more solemn than our trudge to Chapel. Even after we were seated, a morgue couldn’t have been quieter. Shortly, Dr. Ehlinger, the lone College physician, appeared on the stage and began an effort to reassure and calm the students. He looked terribly tired and haggard. Hardly a word had been spoken when his talk was interrupted by a loud and desperate cry from the entrance of the Chapel, “Doctor, come here quick!”

Never have I witnessed such silence, awe, and portent of disaster. Our company was seated in the balcony; I sat next to the middle aisle. When Burl Cooper, a Clifton boy and friend, sitting two rows behind me suddenly slumped unconscious at my side, I suffered the most trying time of my life. Freshmen had no rights; could start no action. But when, for eternity, nobody made a move, I thought, “Well, come Hell or high water, I’m going to help Burl.” Then, his captain and two sergeants picked Burl up and carried him downstairs. I learned later that he had merely fainted.
After a few minutes—moments of incredible suspense—Dr. Ehlinger appeared in a door at the back of the stage, leading a cadet by his ear. Doc made his point; fear was the greatest danger. Yet, one other cadet died that morning.

**The Doc as Patient**

Dr. Otto Ehlinger was an amiable and very competent college physician. But, he could be crusty and intolerant. Car owners in that time had no liberties or rights, though sometimes, when irked by some old farmer, they attempted to assert them. To the old hay-seeds, the auto was an interloping hog that served no purpose but to scare their horses half to death.

One day, Doc, in somewhat of a hurry, was coming from Bryan on the very narrow and deep-sandy road along the railroad tracks. There were no paved roads around College at the time. Small hills of sand bordered the buggy-width road. Honking his raucus horn only scared a farmer’s team, angered the old country coot and stiffened his neck. He yielded not an inch.

Doc, frustrated and furious, couldn’t stand the strain. He’d show the old rustic a thing or two. But the loose sand was more of an obstacle than Doc had figured. Though silent, it had plenty to say. A small pile flipped his light tin lizzie touring car onto its top. The bows crumpled and the back of the front seat pinned the furious doctor face down against the fabric top and the ground. He couldn’t move, his arms locked. To add insult to injury, the wagon master calmed his team, took a good look at Doc, gave him some indelicate advice and drove away. Doc had to wait some time to be rescued.

**Lathes & Ladies**

H. E. Smith was a very young man, maybe only a country bumpkin, I thought when I first saw him. So we were kin. Though not an impressive speaker, his earnestness and knowledge seemed
above reproach. But he was easily embarrassed and would blush the easiest and reddest I ever saw.

On a very hot and sultry Saturday morning at eleven o’clock near the end of school in June, 1913, Prof. Smith had the lathe as his subject. The very large class filled the room but seemed half asleep.

After going over the speed gears, the chuck, and other exposed parts at the top of the lathe, Prof. Smith came around to the front. “This,” he said, touching the plate below the bed, “is what we call the apron of the lathe. Now, let’s lift the apron and see what we can see.”

I’m sure that none of you has ever witnessed or heard so tumultuous an explosion as burst upon Prof. Smith. His face seemed aflame with embarrassment. Only after several seconds could he find the voice to dismiss the class. We never saw or heard or learned exactly what was under the apron.

As The Case Might Be

Hugh Cassidy was one of the younger, more affable professors, but he had one fault. At the beginning, after every pause, and always at the close of every sentence, he’d say, “As the case might be.” It became ridiculous and distracting. I decided to try something.

Cassidy’s lectern was in a corner near the entrance. Benches reached across the room to a blackboard. I decided to sit at the end of the second bench so, unnoticed, I could keep score. In no time at all, I had a flock of x’s, domino scoring fashion.

After twenty-five x’s, the class became unusually alert; a few couldn’t hide their smiles. Prof. Hugh became suspicious. Puzzled, he began slyly examining his person. Nothing seemed awry. However, with each new “as the case might be” the merriment became more obvious, the laughter less controllable, and the professor’s puzzlement more unbearable. When the score on the blackboard showed forty-five tell-tale crosses after only a few moments, the class exploded. Professor Cassidy exploded too. “Get the Hell out of here,” he barked.
At our practice session a few days later, Hugh and I were early. He promptly asked me what had been wrong. I pointed to the board and my x’s. “That’s a domino count of your ‘As the case might be,’” I said. Startled, he paused, but then gave me a hug and said, “Thank you.” He was a true sport.

**Ticks & Tact**

In my days at A&M, tick fever was a serious problem for farmers. Dr. Mark Francis of our veterinary department had discovered the cause and cure, and was already recognized world-wide as an authority. However, many farmers and stockmen still doubted. One group came to College to argue. Francis was a closed-mouth operator; he wouldn’t argue, he’d show them.

The Electrical Engineering Department was persuaded to build a table to specifications. I was one of the two-bit helpers. A 600 lb. calf, full of ticks, was strapped to the table. I missed the party, but heard from the rooftops that when the switch was thrown, the calf flung feet to the four winds, gave an earsplitting bawl, and breathed his last. Dr. Francis snorted and went home.

**Unexpected Triplicates**

In 1914, when Dr. W. B. Bizzell came to A&M from a sissy school, he was subjected to some trying moments. We loved the sissies but had doubts about their male overseer. However, his practice of getting prominent preachers of the state for compulsory Sunday services met with favor.

One Sunday the preacher began his hour by relating the tale of the city boy visiting his country cousin. The boy was an eager beaver and wanted to do most tasks alone. Near the close of day he was allowed to bring in the lambs from a nearby pasture. When darkness began creeping over the land his uncle became worried because neither his nephew nor the lambs were in sight. He found
his nephew chasing jackrabbits and crying because he couldn’t drive the lambs home. Most of the audience smiled, and the preacher felt that he had made a good point.

The next Sunday, a different preacher from a far different area and a different denomination began by telling the same story with hardly a change. The audience was truly amused this time and gave the preacher some honest smiles.

On the third Sunday, a still different smiling and jubilant preacher again began with the innocent little city boy. The roof nearly flew off the chapel. Anyhow, if the preacher had suddenly lost his pants, he couldn’t have been more surprised. The laughter continued so long and raucus and unabated that the preacher was shattered. Dr. Bizzell had a hard time explaining.

My Electric Necktie

In my days at A&M we could have some very violent electric storms. In 1916, about six o’clock one morning, we suffered the worst storm I had experienced since a boy. I had just dropped the Dallas News on Dr. Ball’s porch and was running full speed along the walk toward the Chapel. The rain poured and the wind howled.

Suddenly, a blinding flash of lightning and a deafening clap of thunder stopped me. Something struck my throat and sparks flew all about me. I froze. I had run into some live electric power lines, downed by the storm. I couldn’t see and didn’t dare to move. It was a most frightening experience.
A Fool & His Running

I was chosen to run two races in a track meet of classes at A&M in 1916. I had never jumped a hurdle, even a low one, but agreed to run the 220 yard high hurdles with the aim of winning fourth place and one point. I also agreed to run the anchor lap in the mile relay. Can you imagine how crazy or stupid I must have been? Probably, maybe surely, I was the original “dumb Aggie.”

When the pistol fired for the hurdle race I took off at full speed but, never having run a hurdle race, I got too close to the first hurdle before I jumped. I cleared the hurdle easily but nearly fell on my nose. The second hurdle appeared too quickly, but my nose cleared it as my extended arms, my body, and my trailing legs made the dive. Somehow I landed on my feet, paced my steps and won my one point.

I had never run a quarter mile race, but I had seen batons passed. So, when my turn came, I took the baton with ease and opened my throttle wide. About half-way, a most strange feeling came over me; I thought I was going to burst. But suddenly my breath was normal. I took off and hit the tape in first place. My legs crumbled and I slid several yards on the sharpest cinders I ever saw. I looked like I had just emerged from a fight with a dozen wildcats in a small cage.

We won the track meet, but you might have trouble finding the record. Only page 303, 1916 Longhorn, contains this meaty news item: “Mar. 11 Seniors win first Class Track Meet ever held at College Station.”

Seemingly, it was the last class track meet.

Hell and Damnation

About noon on June 13, 1916, my graduation day, the campus was agog over a small slick magazine that contained short life-sketches of all prominent college officers and teachers. When I made quick visits to say goodbye, all of the homes were roaring in laughter.
The stories were very humorous and portrayed their subjects in most unusual and comical roles. Everybody was pleased.

But when I reached my room, there was an urgent message to report to the Board of Directors in Gathright Hall. I took time to rush by Mitchell Hall to take my mother and my sweetheart to the mess hall. I expected to join them for dinner. At the Board meeting, I found Dr. Bizzell in a rage. Mrs. Bizzell was under the care of Dr. Ehlinger. They had found their story to be highly scurrilous. We had thought it exceptionally well written and extremely funny. Nobody thought it evil.

I was drafted as messenger and missed my dinner. Dr. Bizzell was so furious and so determined to find the “culprits” that he had me seek witnesses all afternoon and evening. I did manage to take time to escort Mother and Esther to supper with the Connors. For the Final Ball I turned them over to “Doiter” Daugherty, a classmate who had no company. I finally rebelled at ten o’clock, rushed to my room to clean up and spend a few minutes with my guests. My R. V. uniform, cleaned and laid out, had been stolen. I now barely had time to pick up Mother and Esther and catch the train for home. I could have murdered Dr. and Mrs. Bizzell.

Two years later, on October 30, 1918, I met Johnny Garitty, my classmate and close friend, on a road near the war front in the Meuse Argonne. He had his orders as a machine-gun platoon leader to cover my platoon of engineers, which would cut and clear the barbed wire on our front for the infantry advance in the proposed final drive to end World War I. We both knew it might be our final day.

Johnny had married before going overseas and now had a son. I learned for the first time that he had been the author of the Bizzell story. He had been denied his diploma. Now he wanted Dr. Bizzell to relent, accept his apology, and clear his name for his son. He thought I could change Dr. Bizzell’s mind.

I rushed to my tent and wrote Dr. Bizzell the truth about the reaction of the student body and the college staff. I pleaded Johnny’s case but couldn’t have been more stupid. Dr. Bizzell
wrote me a two-page, single-spaced typed letter calling me every foul name in Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary. He wasn’t about to pardon Johnny. His letter was received in Germany after the Armistice.

The Board of Directors held two meetings. The record of Dr. Bizzell’s hassle is blank, but the meeting is recorded and signed by Ike Ashburn, Secretary. Ike was a very astute man, and probably showed the Board that considerable damage to the College could result if the whole story of Bizzell’s violent anger were recorded.

Fortunately for Johnny and me, the French artillery support for our division did so magnificent a job that Johnny and I were relieved of our dangerous mission. Though both of us had some tough jobs around Dun-sur-Meuse, we came through unscathed.

John P. Garrity, the author’s friend, and party responsible for a humorous sketch of A&M’s president, Dr. Bizzell.
Dear Bubba,

How are things at Texas A&M? We were so proud when we got your latest grades—all C’s. That is a quite an improvement!

Things are the same here. Your daddy got arrested again for hunting possums out of season. I tried to find work at the Walmart, but I missed the #44 bus that was supposed to take me there. By the time I took the #22 bus twice, it was too late for the interviews.

They are talking about putting in a Taco Bell down the street. I don’t know what’s wrong with the phone company we already got. This NAFTA stuff has us all messed up.

That’s all for now. Keep up the hard work.

Love,

Martha (your mama)

P.S.

We were going to send money, but we already sealed the envelope.

xo (whatever that means)