At war with Purdue

Even after World War I ended, George Ade’s ongoing battle with Winthrop Stone reached no armistice. On May 20, 1919, Ade wrote to alert Indiana Governor Samuel M. Ralston to a “crisis at Purdue” about electing a new president. Ade maintained that the Trustees were “about equally divided” on the subject. Many, Ade wrote, believed that Stone by “hard and dictatorial methods” and other faults “has been a blighting influence at Purdue instead of a help.” Ade urged the governor to ask other Purdue people to verify the situation and he, Ade, would be “only too glad to tell you everything I know” (Tobin, 71-72).

There were happy days, too. Ade entertained hundreds of guests at his Hazelden Farm picnics. His estate stood now as a showplace and a Mecca for writers and stars of the stage, screen, politics, and sports. For a number of years prior, Ade had been planning and hosting the annual picnics. From the surrounding townships large numbers of youngsters came to devour hot dogs, fried chicken, and ice cream, to compete in contests and vie for prizes. Ade filled the home with souvenirs from around the world and with mementoes from notable people.

In the fall of 1919, Ade kept campaigning for administrative reform at Purdue. On October 17, in a letter from Hazelden, he wrote to Dave Ross, the fellow alumnus he had almost met. Ade briefed Ross about both the Purdue “crisis” and a personal political “fix” he wished to dodge. The “fix” loomed because Republicans had asked Ade to sign a letter of endorsement for Warren McCray, from Kentland, as a candidate for Governor of Indiana:
There are certain reasons why I should sign such a letter. Mr. McCray is my brother-in-law...We have not been in political accord at all times in recent years and there has been a coolness between us [and yet] if I refuse to endorse him my refusal will be attributed to petty reasons and small local jealousies.

My refusal is based upon the fact that when he became a Trustee at Purdue [1917-1918] he was an ardent supporter of Dr. Stone and his policies, without giving the alumni a chance to state their case. He declared emphatically to friends of mine in Kentland that Dr. Stone was altogether in the right and that I was altogether in the wrong...Several weeks ago Mr. McCray asked me to give him my support. I told him that I would not make any attempt to prevent his nomination but it would be impossible to line up Purdue alumni in his support since it was believed that he was outspoken in his support of Dr. Stone and in his opposition to the alumni. He replied that he was not committed to any support of Dr. Stone and would be glad to get further information and would be guided more or less by my judgment in the matter. I do not attach much importance to those vague promises because he put himself on record long ago regarding the Stone issue.

Ade informed Ross that he expected McCray to be nominated. He also expected the Democrats to name John Isenbarger, a Purdue Trustee since 1918, to oppose McCray. “If so,” Ade wrote, “I will be in a devil of a fix. If I support McCray I will have to throw down our best friend on the Board [Isenbarger] and I am more interested in Purdue University than anything else in Indiana. If I support Isenbarger I will have to desert my party and oppose the man who married my sister and I will be given credit for being actuated by small and selfish motives... (Tobin, 74-75).

Ross’s response to the letter and solution to Ade’s “fix,” if any, is unknown.
In 1920, McCray won the Republican nomination and the election for Governor. Ade’s sore feelings toward Stone remained unchanged.

Aside from all that—perhaps a welcome refuge for Ade—Doubleday, Page and Company, New York City, published a collection titled Hand-Made Fables. Ade also composed magazine fiction and articles in those years of semiretirement and editorship of The Purdue Alumnus magazine.

As early as January 1919, Ade had written “A Timely Message” for a Purdue Alumnus News Letter and War Bulletin. And in the January issue of the magazine itself he had contributed “The Flag—The Salty Seas—The Yankee Sailor.” In the next five years, Ade wrote seventeen articles, editorials, or speeches that reached The Purdue Alumnus pages.

As editor, Ade used its pages to snipe away further at President Stone, sometimes in editorials signed “By George Ade,” other times “By the Editor,” as he did in an “Observations at Random” essay published in the January 1920 issue:

In the December number of THE ALUMNUS Dr. Stone found occasion to say:

“The constant multiplication of diversions and ‘activities’ among college students has reached the point where even the most liberal-minded of college and university authorities feel that great inroads are being made upon scholarship. Recognizing to the utmost the necessity for recreation and diversion among students one cannot help but feel that these things have gone to excess in our American colleges and that here at Purdue they are becoming one of the several factors which are operating against the realization of the best results in teaching.”

If Dr. Stone is finding fault with only the “activities” which are put under way for “recreation and diversion,” the organized
alumni could hardly take reasonable exception to anything in the above paragraph.

Perhaps the alumni and Dr. Stone have pleasantly disagreed in the past because of a failure to get together on the definition of student “activities.”

But when it comes to a consideration of the Student Union, of the athletic teams, of the daily paper, of the Debris, of Homecoming or Gala Week, or the Band, or the musical clubs, or the dramatic clubs—we cannot regard these sample activities as insignificant, even when compared with the most serious plans of the instructional departments...

Perhaps the difference of opinion between the administration and some of the bothersome alumni, regarding undergraduate privileges, has been due to a misunderstanding as to the real meaning of “activities.”

Dr. Stone suggests that the student enterprises which jazz up all the machinery of the curriculum are devoted to “recreation and diversion.”

The student “activities” for which the alumni have been pleading may carry with them some incidental “recreation and diversion,” but primarily they are intended to unite the student body in loyal support of their alma mater, strengthen the community spirit, cultivate initiative, teach the value of team-work, make the college four years a sentimental journey as well as a hill-climb and give the young people that important training which comes only from many-sided contact with people of brains and ambition and sweet human qualities.
The alumni (years out of college and far removed from the campus) have not been lying awake nights worrying for fear the boys and girls at Purdue will fail to get their proper “recreation and diversion.” They may be depended upon to find it, in one way or another...

The complaint of the alumni has been that the activities which seemed to them important, and almost essential, have been tripped up and reprimanded and put on half-rations and reminded of their imperfections until some of them have voluntarily walked across the levee and jumped into the Wabash River.

Their experiences in business and professional life have led them to believe that the “all-round man” who has initiative and ambition and some of the qualities of leadership enjoys a decided advantage over the mere “grind” who was spoon-fed at the University and did not mingle freely with other human beings.

You cannot improve the mental habits of a young fellow by hiding his dancing pumps. *(The Purdue Alumnus, January 1920)*

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Topping’s research led him to write that Ade’s overall onslaught against Stone was “terrible to behold.” The attacks mainly occurred in Ade’s private letters, but Stone, Topping said, “resisted it with grace” *(Topping, 181)*. The onslaught abruptly and shockingly ended a thousand miles away and eighteen months later. The Stones had paused high on Mount Eon. Margaret had called ahead to ask whether Winthrop had reached the peak more than two miles above sea level.

“I see nothing higher,” he had replied.

Suddenly, loose rock slid away beneath his boots, and he fell nearly 1,000 feet to his death. Winthrop Stone was fifty-nine years
old. Dazed beyond belief, Margaret inched back down to a narrow rock shelf, from which she could safely go nowhere else. Stranded there for nearly a week, she survived on a trickle of water from the rock wall. A rescue party led by a Swiss Alpine guide found and carried Margaret down to the base of Mount Eon for treatment by a doctor and nurse. She suffered from bruises and exposure. Margaret urged someone among the rescuers to telegraph her husband’s Purdue secretary, Helen Hand, about the tragedy.

Once he heard the sad news, Joseph D. Oliver, President of the Purdue Trustees, telephoned Lafayette from his South Bend home to ask Henry Marshall to “look after matters at the university until [we can take] other action.” Marshall, a Trustee only since February 1921, already chaired the Executive Committee.

The heavy-hearted Trustees met on August 4 and appointed Marshall Vice President (and later acting President) of Purdue until Stone’s successor could be found. Oliver appointed Marshall, James W. Noel of Indianapolis, Dave Ross of Lafayette, Perry Crane of Lebanon, and himself to a search committee.

In Canada, the recovery team found Stone’s crumpled remains on August 5 jammed between the sides of a seventeen-foot-deep crevice. The team climbed up to the peak of Mount Eon. There the members built and photographed a rock cairn and crowned it with Stone’s ice axe and a box containing a sheet of paper inscribed:

This monument was built in tribute to Dr. Winthrop E. Stone, President of Purdue University who on July 17, 1921 with his wife virtually completed the first ascent, reaching a point not more than fifty feet from this spot. Dr. Stone’s axe crowned this monument. (Topping, 183)

President Stone’s death shocked all connected with Purdue. Margaret Stone had to be escorted back to Indiana for Winthrop’s funeral on August 13. Many an eye quietly turned to George Ade for reaction. He waxed diplomatic:

Like everyone else who knew Dr. Stone intimately I am much grieved to learn of his death. We all recognize his great devotion
to the university and its interests and realize at the same time that the university has suffered a loss that will be hard to repair.

“Stone belonged to the nation,” Topping would write years later. “He was much admired and respected in the national circles of higher education management and the world of scientists and scholars. Tributes to Stone poured in from all over the country” (Topping, 183).

Some viewed Henry Marshall, fifty-six, as a crusty, opinionated conservative, but his savvy business knowledge worked well for Purdue in this crisis. He stayed in the background and handled Purdue’s affairs smoothly. He and Professor Stanley Coulter, president of the faculty, worked well together. Marshall stayed out of academic affairs. Both men helped in the candidate search.

One other Purdue man besides Ross and Ade had been detecting the hunger for Purdue Pride. He was that first band director, Paul Spotts Emrick. Emrick hit on the idea of beating on a really, really, really big drum to draw attention to his Purdue Marching Band. Members of Lafayette’s Lodge 143 of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks pitched in to help Emrick get the money. In August 1921, Emrick paid eight hundred dollars to the Leedy Manufacturing Corporation in Indianapolis to make such a drum. In those days, the size of steer hide available for drumheads limited the dimensions of a drum. The huge hides located for use on this drum were said to have come from Argentina. When introduced in the 1921 football season as “The World’s Largest Drum,” it made the desired splash and remained a crowd-pleaser before interruption in 1940. The finished drum—its diameter in the range of ten feet (but kept secret by Purdue bandsmen) and its width of nearly four feet—weighed about three hundred pounds. In parades or on football fields, four designated bandsmen had to roll it around on a wheeled carriage while two drummers ran alongside pounding away on both skins. The drum with its uniquely deep
boom served as a sort of heartbeat that kept the musicians in step.

In May 1922, the Purdue Trustees elected Edward Charles Elliott, forty-seven, former Chancellor of the University of Montana, as Purdue’s next president. Years later, Topping compiled a helpful summary:

President Abraham Shortridge managed to get the doors of Purdue University open and classes started. President Emerson E. White answered the question of what Purdue was going to be. President James Smart picked up the school’s tempo and made it a widely recognized engineering school. President Winthrop Stone balanced the academic scale and insisted on scholarly standards of high order. Elliott’s charisma and administrative brilliance carried Purdue far beyond the wildest imaginings of his predecessors. (Topping, 185)

Elliott first met with the trustees on May 16, 1922. He asked for unanimous approval, an indefinite term, salary, moving and business travel expenses, a month of vacation, a residence suitable as a home yet large enough to meet a president’s social demands, and an expense account. The trustees saw no problem.

Elliott formed a team around him that included Robert Bruce “R. B.” Stewart, a brainy young money man; Trustee Dave Ross with great ideas, vision, and generosity; Agriculture Dean John Harrison Skinner; and Engineering Dean Andrey A. Potter, a Lithuanian-born graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Topping wrote:

This remarkable coterie steamed undaunted into the battles against ignorance. The Elliott-Ross-Stewart team was one of the most noteworthy, perhaps phenomenal, combinations of administrators in higher education. Certainly their impact on the direction Purdue traveled in the 1920s and 1930s is indelible. (Topping, 193)