Ross-Ade

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A time of change

It was by any means of measurement a time of change. On January 9, 1933 the Democrat Paul McNutt took office as Governor of Indiana. This ended the statehouse life of Harry Leslie. Leslie then chose to cut most ties with West Lafayette and Purdue. He stayed in Indianapolis to help start and take a vice presidency in Standard Life Insurance Company.

Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt, touting a series of Depression-relief ideas, took office as U.S. President.

The Purdue Research Foundation already was paying dividends. The *Journal and Courier* reported on January 31, 1933 that PRF research for Radio Corporation of America had produced a “television set.” A Purdue electrical engineer team plugged the receiving set into an ordinary electrical outlet in a West Lafayette home at 503 University Street. Professor Francis Harding, Head of the Department of Electrical Engineering, lived there. PRF had contracted for grant money for the work from the Grigsby-Grunow Company in Chicago. Harding directed the work of researchers Ray Abbott, Roscoe George, and Howard Heim. The Federal Radio Commission had permitted Purdue, in the spring of 1930, to try to build a television transmitting station. That done, the challenge now was to make an affordable receiving set that consumers could buy and use to “see” the station’s TV signals.

The 1933 tests involved a portable (albeit big and heavy) receiving set. The men conducted the first preview of it at Harding’s home on the night of January 31, 1933. The first test involved tuning into pictures transmitted from the station’s tower on high
ground outside Ross-Ade Stadium at 9 p.m. Purdue’s station had been assigned the call letters W9XG.

Pictures materialized seemingly out of the thin air in an almost eerie fashion as the receiver was tuned in on the Purdue station, but the momentary “ghost-like” effect was removed almost instantly by the sharpness and contrast of the pictures that moved across the “window” of the receiving set.

The receiving set has reached the state where it is ready for commercial production at a price that will be within the range of the ordinary radio fan. (*Journal and Courier*, February 1, 1933)

W9XG had been sending experimental programs since March 29, 1932. The Grigsby-Grunow Company had invested about $120,000 in the project. George and Heim achieved success with a smaller, lighter, and therefore portable receiver. George had earned Purdue engineering degrees in 1922 and 1927, the second one after he developed cathode ray oscillography crucial to TV success.

A depressing report heard by the Ross Gear stockholders in March showed that in 1932 the company’s assets had fallen by about $200,000 to a value of 2.4 million. At Dave Ross’s struggling Rostone Corporation the top people felt that demand for homes made of its synthetic stone could be created, advertised, and accomplished, and good will created more rapidly and at less cost, at the Century of Progress World’s Fair in Chicago. However, before such a house could go up the nearly bankrupt Indiana Bridge Company withdrew from its agreement to build a steel skeleton, and Rostone had to build its own.

Rostone officers Paul Jones and Floyd Wymer gave a talk about producing synthetic stone out of quarry waste and a shale binder to the American Chemical Society at a meeting in Washington, D.
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C., in early 1933. The July issue of *Industrial and Engineering Chemistry* contained the text of their remarks.

In late March 1933, George Ade finished writing “Autobiography of George Ade.” Calling it “the hardest writing job I ever tackled,” Ade mailed it off in response to a request from an editor and author named Stanley J. Kunitz. Kunitz put Ade’s work in abridged form in a book he co-edited titled *Authors Today and Yesterday*. That book came out in 1933. Ade’s piece showed up again in *Twentieth Century Authors* in 1942. Among its highlights:

- After high school I attended Purdue University, taking the scientific course because I had no ambition to be an engineer or an agriculturist. [I was] a star student as a freshman but wobbly later on and a total loss in mathematics. In 1887 I received my B. S. from Purdue.

- In 1905 I took up a permanent residence at Hazelden Farm near Brook Indiana, within fifteen miles of my birthplace. I have been away from this place very few summers since that time but the wanderlust was upon me every autumn. On checking up I learn that I have been to Europe ten times, cruised through the West Indies eleven times, visited China and Japan four times and have looped the globe twice.

- From 1913 to the present time I have promoted the Hazelden Country Club which has attractive buildings and a good golf course adjoining my home.

- Ten years ago David Ross, a worthy graduate of Purdue and now President of the Board of Trustees, invited me to go with him on an enterprise which involved the purchase of sixty-five acres of land [and] the incorporating of the Ross-Ade stadium high up
on a majestic hill overlooking the campus and the Wabash Valley. It was not a million-dollar extravagance. A glacial drift some time ago did most of the excavating. It seats 25,000 people and is almost a replica of the stadium at Athens. Purdue began to climb toward Big Ten ascendancy on the day we dedicated the stadium. For quite a number of years I paid more attention to Purdue and various activities in my home state than I did to writing for the magazines.

- I am a bachelor but I prefer to live in my own home. My enthusiasms include golf, travel, horseracing and the spoken drama. My antipathies are social show-offs, bigots on religion, fanatics on total abstinence and all persons who take themselves seriously. I read all the periodicals, sober and frivolous, sacred and profane, and try to know what is going on in the world. I have a card-index memory for the words and music of old hymns, old popular songs and old ‘numbers’ from the light operas of day before yesterday. I love to put on big parties and see a throng of people having a good time.

- [My] books number twenty, not counting eight or ten plays.

- I nearly forgot to say that I am a member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters, and on the Executive Committee of the Authors Guild. Under an alphabetical arrangement my name was first on the list of those selected to direct the efforts of the Association for the Repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment. I belong to no secret orders, and I do not choose to make or listen to speeches. (Tobin, 14-17)

During 1933, Arrow Editions, New York City, also republished a collection of Ade’s old articles titled *Thirty Fables in Slang*. 
Meanwhile, the March 1933 issue of *The Purdue Engineer* contained Stanley Meikle’s informative article, “The Ross Marker.” The piece told about the cat’s eyes reflections and so on. It also revealed that the Corning Works produced the mirrored reflector from Pyrex glass nearly the equal of perfect ground lens.

In 1932, the Indiana Highway Commission agreed to install several hundred of these markers if PRF would supply them. Ross Gear and Tool Company made 500 markers. The State installed most of the markers during the early summer on state highways within a radius of seventy-five miles of Purdue.

“At no other time do the reflectors show as brilliantly as while being washed by rain,” Meikle wrote. “The first installation was made on Northwestern Avenue north of the university and extending from the West Lafayette city limits for one mile, including a compound curve and a straight stretch...Studies have resulted in minor changes and the marker is now [early 1933] being put into final form and arrangements are being made to offer the device to the general public.” On April 6, a company in Marion, Indiana, began making the Ross highway markers.

Rostone operated its show home during 1933 and 1934 at the Century of Progress. This venture had cost Dave Ross hundreds of thousands of dollars. “But,” he said “we have demonstrated that it is possible to build beautiful houses inexpensively from raw material available in many parts of the country. It isn’t necessary to cut down trees in Oregon for a house in Indiana. I don’t know how long it will take to convince the public, but this Rostone experiment will finally prove to be the most important thing I have done” (Kelly, *Ross*, 126-127). This, to be blunt, was Dave Ross’s worst forecast, as time would tell.
On the first of August in 1933, the National Recovery Act or “NRA” took effect. In Lafayette, several cooperative unemployment relief programs involved industries and businesses. A shorter workweek cut down on the rampant unemployment by giving more workers jobs. The federal government urged American consumers to patronize stores displaying “blue eagle” NRA logos. A national goal was five million new jobs by Labor Day.

Noble Kizer’s 1933 Purdue football team won six games, lost one, and tied one. In Ross-Ade Stadium, the team beat Ohio University thirteen to six before 10,000 fans, beat Carnegie Tech seventeen to seven before 18,000, and lost to Iowa fourteen to six as 16,000 people watched. In all three home games, there were thousands of unoccupied seats in the enlarged stadium.

The longer Dave Ross functioned at the highest levels of Purdue—as President of the Board of Trustees and as a morning-coffee pal of President Elliott—the further his vision extended. He came to believe that Purdue should have the land it might need for at least half a century. That explains why, in the early 1930s, he bought so many acres west of Ross-Ade Stadium and gave it to the Purdue Research Foundation. Ross shortly persuaded PRF to put part of the land to use for experimental housing projects and research. Eventually, part of the land became PRF’s “campus.”

The subject of housing still intrigued Ross and presented numerous problems to be solved. Rostone had been only a beginning. Ross patented a furnace so compact it could be carried through a household door. Then he designed a window-and-frame unit with glass on the outside. This allowed more daylight to come into a house. He influenced PRF to carry out studies of even more housing challenges. PRF became the agency through which a Purdue Housing Research Program took form in the mid-1930s. Ross en-
couraged several University departments to help in the research. If better paint was needed, Purdue’s Department of Chemical Engineering worked on the task. Civil Engineering assigned students to find new ways to frame a house. Aspiring mechanical engineers dealt with home heating and cooling methods. Electrical Engineering and Home Economics added expertise to kitchens, lighting, and wiring. Lowering the overall cost of homes was another goal.

Ideas for inventions—better ways of doing things—still came to Ross almost any time or anywhere. In his spare time, Ross invented a ventilating system for school classrooms, a diesel internal combustion engine, and an earthenware home humidifier. While waiting at a railway junction he studied the brakes on a freight car. That night he worked on a new type of brake drum. After a ride in a streetcar in Washington, D. C., he took a pen and envelope from his pocket and designed a new type.

Ross invented a baseboard for homes with electrical outlets every few inches apart. And one summer night while guests at The Hills were swatting mosquitoes, Ross decided to “rig up a bug-catcher.” In his basement workshop he found a big can and glass funnel that would fit over the opening. He knocked the spout off the funnel and wired a light socket and bulb into the can. He then rejoined his guests, put out all other lights, set up, and plugged in his new device. Insects drawn to the light in the can crawled down through the opening in the funnel and were roasted by the heat of the lamp.

One time the Trustees heard an urgent appeal for funds for a new barn on a Purdue dairy farm. Ross reviewed the plans, then began firing questions. “Have you asked the cows what kind of barn they want? How many cubic feet of fresh air per hour does a thousand-pound dairy cow need? How many heat units does she produce? How much moisture does she exhale every day? We ought to use our need for a new barn to learn how to build a good one, better than most, and cheaper” (Kelly, Ross, 161-162). Ross once drew up a new kind of milk can with a hollow tube in the middle to hold dry ice and keep the milk cold. A friend kidded: “Why don’t you apply the same idea to a cocktail shaker?” “I doubt
if cocktail making should be any more efficient than it is,” Ross responded (Kelly, Ross, 97).

Ross applied his “let’s-do-it-better” philosophy to such things as buying postage stamps, bread, oranges, potatoes, apples, and canned goods from vending machines. When someone told him they were already doing that in Sweden, he simply smiled: “Does that show that I was stupid not to think of it first, or prove that those Swedes are smart?” (Kelly, Ross, 98).

Besides the Dick Russell land acquired by eminent domain and the Neville land bought by Ross for the airport, Purdue added other land during the 1930s. During the Depression, many farm properties were losing money. Ross, who knew the local situation, would study a Wabash Township map trying to plot a periphery around the campus that the University could control. If he thought certain parcels would benefit Purdue and could be bought, he would send R. B. Stewart to negotiate with the owners. Stewart’s theory was to buy when the other fellow wasn’t interested in the land and wanted to sell (Freehafer, 72).

In most cases, Ross’s gifts of money, land, and other goods or services remained a secret. Purdue insiders who knew about them expressed wonder over his generosity. “Well,” the bachelor Ross would say, “some men keep race horses or women. I’d rather help support a university” (Kelly, Ross, 132).