Ross-Ade

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“A multiplier of the power of men”

Old Mister Ade”—kidding himself about being “rickety in the hind legs”—still escaped the Indiana winters by basking in Miami Beach, but even Old Mister Ade sensed that his days were numbered. Back home at Hazelden his daily affairs remained in the trusted hands of James D. “Jim” Rathbun. Rathbun had married Ade’s niece, Nellie, and for years had managed Ade’s farms and personal business. Ade wrote candidly in a letter he dictated from Florida to Rathbun on January 10, 1943:

Dr. Shaw has prescribed for me some kind of sleeping tablets to reduce blood pressure and improve my general condition. He warned me that they might upset me and make me feel miserable and dopy and he was right. I am taking three a day as ordered but feel about three jumps ahead of an epileptic convulsion.

I went to the Kiwanis Club luncheon on Thursday and am booked for the Exchange Club in Miami on Tuesday...But I will spend most of my time at home from now on. I wish I had the ambition and the physical energy to take long walks. Walking would help to kill time and get me to nearby places of interest, but I am so rickety in the hind legs that a trip to the corner and back is about the limit of my venturing forth and such a brief outing does not provide any excitement or change of scenery. (Tobin, 233-234)
On January 29, there went out from Miami Beach to his assorted friends in the North another “News Letter From George Ade”:

This has been a week of stepping out. On Wednesday evening I put on my dinner coat and attended a dinner of the Book-Fellows at the Urmey Hotel in Miami. A majority of the 150 “fellows” were gals. The dinner had a special interest for me because I met for the first time Edison Marshall, author of many novels, who was born in Rensselaer, Indiana, only 12 miles from Hazelden...

Yesterday I attended the weekly luncheon of the Kiwanis, having been advertised as one of the attractions, so I recited “The Microbe’s Serenade.”

My entire offering was recorded by a sound machine, and the record will be run off at the next meeting. Last evening I was a guest at the dinner opening a drive for the Community War Chest. No less than 500 people were seated at the tables in the very large and palatial clubhouse of the Women’s Club in Miami. I was one of several speakers...

My birthday comes on February 9th. I have written some observations regarding my 77th anniversary and they will be released by the North America Newspaper Alliance on Sunday, February 7. (Tobin, 235-236)

Ade stayed in touch with Rathbun again on February 5:

This is my day for dictating but in as much as I had a rather sleepless night and am feeling below par today I have asked Mrs. Boswell to postpone her visit until tomorrow. She lives out near Coral Gables and is employed each day at the Bath Club so she has to do a lot of miscellaneous bus riding in order to keep her appointments with me. I think you met her down here and will
remember she is a very attractive gal. Also she is a rapid shorthand and a good typist. (Tobin, 236-237)

During four days, in early March 1943, American warships defeated a Japanese supply convoy in the Bismarck Sea. Those waters stretched for hundreds of miles from New Guinea, the same vast expanse of equatorial blue flown by the tragic figures of Amelia Earhart and Fred Noonan in 1937.

At home the war had changed and kept changing many things. The Purdue Field House, for example, sheltered an unlikely visitor. The professional Cleveland Indians major league baseball team, because of wartime travel rules, conducted “spring training” at Purdue. League rules mandated training in the North instead of Florida, Arizona, or California. This limited travel to training sites east of the Mississippi River and north of the Ohio River.

So the Cleveland team came to Purdue. The Pittsburgh Pirates chose the Ball State College campus in Muncie, Indiana. The Cincinnati Reds went to Indiana University in Bloomington. The Chicago White Sox and Cubs visited the adjoining resort towns of French Lick and West Baden, Indiana. The Detroit Tigers picked Evansville, Indiana, and so forth.

On April 18, Purdue graduated 398 seniors in a streamlined commencement more than a month earlier than usual because of war priorities. A thousand male students already had left Purdue to wear military uniforms since the fall of 1942.

The wartime geography lessons instructed many a jittery American that there was a vast northwest territory called Alaska, and further taught that, flung far out into the cold north Pacific, there were Alaska’s Aleutian Islands, of which two tiny ones—Kiska and Attu—the Japanese had occupied. On May 30, 1943
there arrived the assuring news that American forces at least had ended Japanese resistance on Attu, but there was far more to be done in the war.

George Ade made it back home to Hazelden by passenger train in the spring of 1943, but in a few weeks he took ill at a dinner in the Hazelden Country Club. He had to be helped to his chauffeured car. A stroke weakened his left side but did not impair his speech. Jim Rathbun put in a telephone call to President Elliott’s office at Purdue to report the distressing news. Elliott’s phone was busy because Elliott, back from Washington, was calling Hazelden to inform Ade that Dave Ross had died. Ross had survived for eleven months in his own pitiful state. His death on June 18 came in a singularly mournful week at Purdue. Just two days earlier, death had taken Dean Emeritus Stanley Coulter at age ninety. The next day, Gilbert A. Young, retired head of Mechanical Engineering and a faculty member for forty-two years, died at seventy-one.

Even after his stroke in 1942, Ross had stayed on the Board of Trustees in absentia, but his Board Presidency had devolved to James E. Noel, Class of 1892, of Indianapolis. The Journal and Courier printed a long account of Ross’s life. On the newspaper’s front page there appeared a tribute to Ross composed by Henry Marshall titled “A Hoosier Genius.” Among the key points:

This genius in the several fields of activity in which he won renown rightfully belongs in the Indiana Academy of Immortals...

Much of Purdue’s progressive development is the creation of his active intellect, his faith in the institution and his enthusiastic championship of everything worthwhile in modern trends of education. As president of its board of trustee’s he furnished stimulating guidance in shaping policies and expanding its fields of service.
Its highly acclaimed research laboratories, its stadium, airport, engineering camp and numerous other improvements may be traced directly to his vision, his interest and his generous bequests.

Many men after achieving success in their chosen field are content to retire to a life of ease and comfort once they have amassed a fortune. To him money was but a means to an end, a medium to be employed in making dreams come true, not for one family or one set of friends, but for the whole of humanity. *(Journal and Courier, June 29, 1943)*

Although he had achieved so much, Ross had earned no acclaim or reputation as a churchgoer. So, when circumstances called for a funeral, the choice was downtown Lafayette’s old stone Central Presbyterian Church where the Reverend William R. Graham conducted matters. Ross’s sealed casket then was moved to the “Purdue Research Foundation Campus” on West Stadium Avenue in West Lafayette. Except for its important Navy training classes, Purdue ceased operations between two and four p.m. so that faculty and students might attend the memorial program for Ross. There was a long roster of “honorary pallbearers,” among them Indiana Governor Henry F. Schricker, President Elliott, top Purdue and PRF figures, and state legislators, but Purdue chose active pallbearers from the student body because of Ross’s all-out interest in students.

In legal documents revealed on July 3, Ross left most of his estate, estimated at a value of more than two million dollars, to Purdue, Home Hospital, and to several of his relatives. Ross bequeathed the City of West Lafayette twelve level acres along the Wabash River between State and Brown streets. Ross had pictured that
land for a civic center and public park and even had ordered plans to be drawn, but those ideas died with him. Part of the land became a City dump. Ross stipulated that if the City ever sold the land, the proceeds should go to PRF. The West Lafayette schools did once use the land for baseball, but the City did nothing about a park. Eventually, the City sold part of the land to Sears, Roebuck and Company for a department store. PRF used the proceeds from that sale to buy Happy Hollow property, to which PRF added seventeen acres for more than forty home sites (Freehafer, 139).

As Ross wished, Purdue saw to it that he was buried on a knoll toward the southern end of the old Marstellar farm north of Stadium Avenue. Ross had given that land to PRF. PRF now dedicated eleven acres of it around the grave for a David Ross Memorial.

There had been whispers during the last year of Ross’s life that President Elliott’s relationship with Ross and the other Trustees had privately cooled. Shortly before he died, Ross let his attorney, Alison Stuart, know about the “talk,” and that he was thinking about changing the will he had made in favor of Purdue. Stuart conferred with R. B. Stewart about the “talk” and the two visited Ross in his hospital room. Stewart convinced Ross that Purdue would endure long after President Elliott or any individual. So Ross let his will stand. Stuart and Elliott became its executors. PRF remained the main beneficiary.

In the will, Ross gave “The Hills” with his summer home and 197 acres bordering on the Wabash River to PRF. Other property given to PRF was to be added to the well-disguised “XR Fund.” Ross also willed to PRF his stock in Ross Gear, Fairfield, and Rostone. The eventual book value of property Ross left to PRF totaled more than $2.5 million. One historian added, “no one can place a dollar value on his interest and encouragement, years of devoted time, and planning for Purdue’s future” (Freehafer, 95-97). And Elliott intimated no rancor between them when he eulogized Ross:
This modest man of might for more than fifty years always was ready to act either as a servant or leader of men of good will. He created his own distinguished and useful career and created the careers of a host of others. He was a multiplier of the power of men. Many knew him only as the inventor and maker of steering devices for motor vehicles. Many more knew him as the inspirer of men for the right steering of their own lives.

Ross’s burial place came to be enlarged and landscaped as a memorial with a granite slab covering the grave. Carved in the granite:

David E. Ross, 1871-1943

Dreamer, Builder, Faithful Trustee

Creator of Opportunity For Youth

Life went on. After all, there was a war going on. Don Fernando’s Orchestra played a stage show in the Hall of Music. Admission was forty-four cents. They put the Hall of Music to use again in September. A variety show in connection with the nation’s Third War Loan campaign featured radio singer Rudy Vallee leading his U.S. Coast Guard band. In two shows, 8,500 people bought more than two million dollars’ worth of war bonds. For every seventy-five dollars they invested in war bonds, the buyers could get back one hundred dollars after ten years.
For various reasons, for the first time in twenty-five years, George Ade spent the winter of 1943-1944 in Indiana. As the October frost set in, friends moved “Old Mister Ade” from Hazelden to the Harry Hershman home, three miles from Brook. The move took place because Hazelden, with its 1905 oil-burning furnace and limited (because of a wartime shortage) oil supply, was going to be too hard to heat. Ade’s old neighbor Hershman was away in California with his own family.

On the night of October 5, Lafayette and West Lafayette neighborhoods went through a practice “blackout” in case of air raid between 8:30 and 9:30 p.m. There was rising fear that Germany or Japan might bomb America. Neighborhood blocks were divided into territories supervised by air raid wardens. Such precautions took place all over the country.

On the night of October 23, young Albert P. “Al” Stewart, energetic Director of Purdue Musical Organizations, emceed the first in a “Victory Varieties” series of wartime entertainments. Two thousand people attended in the Hall of Music. The stars of the show were slapstick bandleader Milt Britton and popular singer “Wee Bonnie” Baker. A month later the singing Vagabonds quartet headlined the second in the Victory Varieties series. Bandleaders Les Brown, Art Kassel, and Tiny Hill kept the series going. Subsequent shows starred a long list of bands and stage show greats until 1968.

World War II treated Purdue kindly at football time in 1943. The war brought Alex Agase to West Lafayette after he had played an all-American season at the University of Illinois in 1942. The Ma-
rine Corps assigned Agase to Purdue for officer candidate school along with more than thirty other Navy and Marine Corps athletes. With that much talent, Purdue won all nine of its games, outscored opponents 214 to fifty five, shared with Michigan the Big Ten Conference title, and ranked fifth in the national Associated Press poll.

Head Coach Elmer Burnham molded twenty-six Marines, nine civilians, and seven Navy men into that undefeated squad. “Football is teamwork and we jelled pretty quick,” Agase said. “The coaches—Burnham and assistants Joe Dienhart, Sam Voinoff and Cecil Isbell—did an excellent job of putting that team together. That’s not easy to do to take people who don’t know each other, from various universities, and get them to jell. But it was a talented team and that is the bottom line.”

Local fans quickly came to cheer and adore newcomers like quarterback Sammy Vacanti, halfbacks Chalmers “Bump” Elliott and Stan Dubicki, fullback Tony Butkovich, and rugged linemen like Agase and Dick Barwegen. Purdue trampled military teams from the Great Lakes (Illinois) Naval Training Station (the 1942 national champ) and Camp Grant (south of Rockford, Illinois) and romped past collegiate foes as well. In three games in Ross-Ade Stadium, the wartime Boilermakers drubbed Illinois forty to twenty-one, Camp Grant nineteen to nothing, and Iowa twenty-eight to seven. The crowds never exceeded 15,000, however. Butkovich set a Big Ten scoring record for one season by tallying seventy-eight points, but with one game left to play the Navy abruptly transferred Butkovich and eleven other Boilermakers to military assignments elsewhere. Without them, Purdue barely beat Indiana seven to nothing in Bloomington to claim the Old Oaken Bucket.

Even the war news brightened. American troops in the Pacific landed on Bougainville Island and soon the Marines invaded Tarawa. These were the newest lessons in wartime geography.