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Howard Hill, Speaker-Teacher

by JOHN ROBSON*

"We have come from elocution to well-conducted, specialized courses in Speech," wrote Dr. Howard T. Hill, retiring from the Kansas State College Department of Speech headship after thirty years of teaching. "Speech departments . . . should be emphasized, supported, and expanded as separate units. Public Address is an Art. It is dependent for development on ability, plus expert coaching or direction by persons who are superior in Speech rather than in other disciplines. The continued success of democracy depends in no small degree on the leadership of those who can influence people. Fundamental training in that field is the core of a Department of Speech."¹

At a capacity banquet commemorating Hill's work, President James McCain, addressing the group, referred to Hill as "one of the two or three greatest teachers ever to have served at Kansas State . . . a Great Guy."

"One of the best speakers extant—America needs more of his calibre within its academic ranks,"² is a recent press statement occasioned by the public speaking of Dr. Hill.

Toward the close of the 19th century, Hill was born on a farm just over two miles outside of Ames, Iowa. His English-Irish mother, who died shortly after his birth, had been a teacher. His Norwegian descent father was a quiet reflective man who, according to a neighbor, "didn't say much but did plenty of thinking." Hill's first acquaintance with Education, in which field he would spend much of his life, was in a whitewashed one-room schoolhouse, a short distance from his home.

At age 13, he climbed on his horse to journey to Ames, where he entered high school. In this school his future was foreshadowed by his talent for memorizing classic orations by such orators as Cicero. These he declaimed to the Iowa countryside as he jogged homeward on his horse, his carrot colored hair visible from a distance.

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1. Hill, Howard T., "Speech Grows in Kansas," *Kansas Speech Journal*, Vol. XV, No. 4, p. 14.

2. *Mercury Chronicle*, Manhattan, Kansas, Jan. 13, 1954.



William Jennings Bryan appeared in the Chautauqua at Ames one summer day. Hill, the student public speaker, studied him. He wanted to be a speaker and he had found his first speech model.

Following his graduation from Ames High School, Hill entered Iowa State College in Ames where after four years he received a Bachelor of Science degree. In his final year he was elected president of the Senior Class. He decided to continue his studies at the University of Chicago, in the field of Law. Then, unexpectedly, he became a teacher. During a summer vacation, while home at the farm in Iowa, his ex-debate coach, Arthur MacMurray, paid him a visit.

"How would you like to teach speech at the University of Kansas?" MacMurray called out from his early-model open touring car.

In explanation of the situation at Kansas University in Lawrence, Kansas, MacMurray told him that speech had not formerly been encouraged there because of earlier experience

with fly-by-night elocution teachers who had been mainly interested in collecting fees.

MacMurray recommended Hill to Governor Hoch of Kansas who was a member of the Board of Regents, for the position vacancy. A meeting was arranged at the Eldridge Hotel in Lawrence.

At the hotel the governor was informal. He pulled off his shoes and propped them upon the bed, explaining that he "thought better with his shoes off."

"Speech is an important field," stated the governor. "For example, I attended a board meeting recently in a small Kansas community. I observed a man skilled in speech win over to his side supporters for a proposition I was certain would be damaging to the community interests. I reasoned that men working for positive beneficial measures must be skilled in speech or else they will lose out to those who are. I feel that Kansas students should have speech training to prepare them for service in civic, state, and national affairs."

Hill was hired.

James Green, dean of the Law School, cautioned, advised, and encouraged him in his teaching work that year. He groomed Hill into a poised, knowing teacher. Hill's speech classes received support from the staff and student body not previously known at Kansas U.

In 1915, while teaching at Kansas University, Hill was offered the Headship of Speech at Kansas State College in Manhattan, Kansas, by President Waters. He declined because he felt that Kansas University had priority upon his services. Admiring loyalty, Waters had asked if he knew another fellow who had been "poisoned at the same spring." Hill had then recommended Dr. J. Gordon Emerson, who had been his classmate at Iowa State, and whose work he knew to be of high quality. Emerson accepted the offer to come and develop speech interest at Kansas State.

Circumstances, however, brought Hill to Kansas State to assist Emerson after service in World War I, and upon Emerson's later resignation caused by ill health, Hill became Head.

Among the undergraduate speech assistants hired by Hill was Milton Eisenhower, later president of Kansas State.

Eisenhower participated in the First Missouri Valley Tournament for Oratory. Hill recalls that the young speech student, experi-

encing "stage fright," asked to speak first in the contest.

"If I have to listen to all those fellows speak before I do, you'll have to take me out of here in a strait-jacket," whispered Eisenhower. He spoke first, and placed first in the contest.

Soon many of Hill's students were "speaking first" across the nation.

Hill drew together and coordinated the courses and activities relating to speech, providing personnel specifically trained in the speech field. Up and down the corridors of the Education Building which originally housed the Speech Department, trainee speakers could be heard holding forth in the classrooms.

Hill's skill as a public speaker had made itself felt in various areas, and he was besieged with invitations. Perplexed, he visited President Jardine for advice.

"Go ahead and speak for them!" intoned Jardine; "when they announce you—wherever you are—they'll know you belong to Kansas State. It's public relations."

This decision from the president regarding the importance of occasionally being absent from one's office made possible Hill's full life of teaching on the campus at Kansas State and public speaking "on the road."

At the beginning of Hill's administration, only Engineering required a basic speech course for graduation. However, after Milton Eisenhower returned to the campus as President, public speaking was made a required course for all students, recognized and respected as a necessary part of the training of men and women for effective participation in democratic society. In the resulting "boom" in speech teaching, every student became, for one semester at least, a public speaker.

"Each field represented in the school needs leaders," said Hill. "They ought to be speakers, for each field needs vigorous, forward-thinking spokesmen."

In an address to the Manhattan Chamber of Commerce, November 23, 1953, he stated:

"Education is constantly being urged to take on more things and handle more subjects. But two things stand out as all important. These are, firstly, to teach essential fundamentals; secondly, to make one's teaching so interesting that the student will develop

his own interest and continue his own study. Hard fact without inspirational lift doesn't go with students today."

An outstanding public speaker himself, Hill is able, while teaching speech, to make reference to pertinent experiences of his own to demonstrate aspects of how specific speech problems may be solved. He sees in speech skills a means to leadership.

In speech situations he is a well-groomed, smoothly tailored, slender, 5 foot 11 inch figure, with greying red hair and large eyes. He stands erect, thumbs often tucked under the lapels of his coat. His voice is baritone in quality.

The speech subjects he favors are related to the follies of war, the necessity for keeping faith with America's future and the youth who must preserve it, the need of every man for a well-rounded education, the history, traditions, and potentialities of the state of Kansas, and community betterment.

In one recent year, Hill found that he had, in addition to his teaching and administrative work, participated as speaker on 135 programs, averaging two a week, divided between fifteen states. He has spoken in 38 states in all.

Hill has been elected to various offices. He is the current president of the Manhattan Chamber of Commerce. He was a charter member of the local Kiwanis Club, once serving as its president. He has also served the latter organization as district governor, and as a member of the International Board of Trustees.

He would much rather talk about his family than himself. In 1928 he married Irma L. Smith, who was in charge of piano work for children at Kansas State, having been a music major at Illinois Wesleyan. In 1933 their son, Howard, Jr., was born. Howard, Junior, is a student at Kansas State and has entered enthusiastically into speech activities. He won the Larry Woods Memorial Speech Contest in a past year, and recently the Capper Oratorical Award.

As Hill stood at the banquet arranged in his honor on the night of April 24, 1954, delivering what might well rank as one of his most moving addresses, it was evident that he felt as warmly toward the assembly that met to honor him as that assembly felt to-

ward him. As he regarded the crowded hall he commented:

"Whatever I may have been or am today, it is, of course, largely because of you."

These Truths

(Continued from page 3)

both are capable of devastating effects. Thus we must be concerned with the individual as well as with the principles. Help lies not in the direction of despair, condemnation or censorship. It is found instead in training in the full scope of public discussion.

Both the principles and the ethics must be applied in that arena. If training in public address is to make any lasting contribution in building better citizens, we must hope that both private and public deliberations will be raised to higher ethical and intellectual levels by responsible and dedicated leaders.

Some, in their discourse, desire rather commendation of wit, in being able to hold all arguments, than of judgment, in discerning what is true; as if it were a praise to know what might be said, and not what should be thought.

—Bacon, *Essay XXXII*

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