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James Gordon Emerson: A Scholar Graduates

by LELAND CHAPIN*

When a DSR installation team came out to Ames from Iowa City in 1909, it found among the charter members of the new Iowa State chapter an upperclassman by the name of Howard Hill and an underclassman who is the subject of this particular sketch. Hill became President of the chapter and his lower-class admirer recalls to this day the impressiveness which, during later initiations, he imparted to the splendid DSR ritual. Howard Hill, he declared, was one of the finest speakers ever to grace a college forensic platform. His wide popularity over the years as a speaker and reader attests that the admiration of his fellow students at ISC—bordering on adoration—was not the result of mere hero worship.

Both Hill and Emerson served for many years as teachers of public speaking and both became, in their respective times, sponsors of DSR. The friendship formed at Ames has continued through the years and there has seldom been a time when they have not been in close touch. It is fitting that sketches of their careers should appear together in *The Gavel*.

"Mike" Emerson's college days saw him a member of a varsity debating team as an underclassman, but thereafter his role was cast largely in the field of oratory. As a junior he won the Old Line State oratorical contest, and went on to capture first honors in the Interstate Contest—ten states competing. In his senior year, the State Peace contest was added to his laurels, and he became the first winner of the newly constituted Missouri Valley Oratorical Contest. As a law student at Stanford, he won the local Berwick Peace oratorical contest in 1914.

At ISC he had served, *inter alia*, as freshman class president, YMCA president, business manager of the annual, and editor of the college paper, the *ISC Student*. It was in the latter capacity that he got the idea that constant practice in *writing* was a superb training for the would-be speaker—an idea which



he was later to hammer home in his courses and to find vindicated in the training of debaters.

The year 1912-13 saw him at Harvard Law School on a scholarship supplied by the Iowa Harvard clubs. Although he qualified for a second-year scholarship, considerations of climate caused him to turn West to Stanford, whose law school had a high rating and whose Dr. David Starr Jordan had inspired him to an admiration of Stanford when he attended an address given by Dr. Jordan at Iowa State College.

By dint of a summer session spent at the University of California School of Jurisprudence, he was able to complete his work for the law degree Juris Doctor in December of 1914 and to be admitted to the California Bar. In the spring of 1915 he was elected to the Order of the Coif, the legal Phi Beta Kappa.

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Five months of practice in Davenport, Iowa, found him again under the necessity of seeking a milder climate and he accepted a position at Kansas State College as instructor in charge of the department of public speaking (a one-man department then) in the fall of 1915. By 1917, he was a full professor and department head (by this time a two-man department). He enlisted in the army in January of 1918, joined the 404th Telegraph Battalion in April, and spent eleven months in France and Germany as a Master Signal Electrician. (As a lad, he had learned telegraphy and had served as station agent, and later as relief operator in the dispatcher's office, and still later in the Postal Telegraph relay office in San Francisco and this experience influenced him toward the Signal Corps).

He returned to Kansas State in 1919. In 1921 he received a call from Lee Emerson Bassett to take over the debate coaching job at Stanford. Here he has remained through the years, with the exception of some eight years spent on sick-leave. On his return in 1940, he took part in the building of the graduate program in rhetoric and public address. He has served intermittently as debate director, and has taught some performance courses, but mainly his courses have been in the field of classical rhetoric and oratory, argumentation, and prelegal argumentation.

The prelegal course, begun in 1946 at the request of law students who had had his course in general argumentation, proved to fill a need, and he looks back upon this course with perhaps his greatest satisfaction. It was a course which put the students through actual case method processes as he had experienced them at Harvard and Stanford law schools. In a sense, it was a sort of coaching course for prospective law students, designed to equip them to meet the rigors of the case method when confronted with it later in the law school. The course integrated principles of reasoning—critical and persuasive—as found in the regular argumentation course, with the study of the principles of legal reasoning and advocacy.

Considerations of health have limited his writing, but he had the satisfaction of seeing his first effort ("The Old Debating Society" QJS June 1931), made the subject of a commendatory editorial in the *New York Times*. Later he authored a three-installment article

"The Case Method in Argumentation" (QJS, Feb. and Oct. 1945, Feb. 1946)—and a history of the first fifty years of the Carnot-Joffre debate (*Gavel*, March 1945). He has written a few miscellaneous articles for Stanford publications, and has done book reviews for the QJS; *Modern Language Quarterly*; *American Speech*; *Western Speech*; and the *Southern California Law Review*.

Last December, he was able for the first time to attend the Speech Association of America convention (in New York), where he presented a paper on a panel devoted to consideration of Probability in Debate, and was chairman of a panel on Legal Advocacy on which prominent New York attorneys appeared.

At Kansas State he had full responsibility for dramatics although he collaborated closely with a member of the English department in coaching debate. Soon after Howard Hill assumed the headship in 1921, control of forensics was shifted to the speech department.

At Stanford, Emerson was in charge of forensics during the years 1921-32; and intermittently during and after World War II, particularly from 1948-52. If asked to name the highlight of the Stanford period, he would undoubtedly say the Prohibition debate with the first Oxford team to come to the Coast: that of 1924-25 consisting of Woodruff, Hollis and Malcolm Macdonald. Although admission was charged, some 500 were turned away. Members of the football team were ushers; President Ray Lyman Wilbur presided. The debate itself was a revelation of what could be done to make discussion of a public question delightful and stimulating. From that time forward, Stanford debating was to be a popular activity.

In the fall of 1931, his team engaged with Harvard in the first transcontinental collegiate radio debate.

Scarcely less interesting, in his estimation, has been the annual series with California known as the *Medaille Joffre Debate* (until 1947 called the *Medaille Carnot*). Established in 1894 by the Baron Pierre de Coubertin of France, founder of the modern Olympic Games, it has maintained its popularity through all vicissitudes of war and peace, and continues to attract sizable audiences. This debate is always upon some question of French politics and government. A general topic is

chosen some months in advance of the debate, the specific proposition being given to the debaters only two or two-and-a-half hours before the contest. Broad and detailed knowledge of French and European affairs is thus called for on the part of the speakers, as well as remarkable extemporaneous ability, a fine command of language, and a flexible urbanity of style generally. During his time at Stanford, Professor Emerson prepared fifteen teams for this climactic event of the season, winning on twelve occasions.

Professor Emerson was one of the organizers, in 1923, of the Pacific Forensic League, and has been twice its president. Formed primarily to bring coaches and students together for friendly discussion, it has retained its leisurely, informal character to this day. Some of the activities are non-competitive, some competitive but even the latter proceed in friendly fashion, with victory not taken too seriously. Still active in League affairs are two others of the original organizers: Professors Earl Wells of Oregon State and Alan Nichols of Southern California.

The series with the University of Southern California has also been a lively and interesting one, and here he has enjoyed the rivalry of his longtime friend and director of USC teams, Alan Nichols.

The human side of Mike Emerson is recorded in the minds of his former students.

They are now scattered in the far corners of the world, but a sampling would include a distinguished diplomat in Europe, a prominent attorney in New York City, a leading divine in Minneapolis, a university professor in the Deep South, a Chancellor of the University of Chicago, and prominent legal, political, and academic personages in the Far West. All of them would describe him as a good man who spoke well; a scholar first and foremost, but withal, a human teacher with a big heart and a broad mind. Even when guarding his health against an ailment acquired while he served with the army in World War I, he preserved his sense of humor and practiced selflessness in order to devote his time to the growing generations that passed through his classrooms.

At its Fresno convention last November, the Western Speech Association awarded Mr. Emerson a life honorary membership.

In 1953, the Speech Association of the Associated Students of Stanford University established the J. Gordon Emerson Award for Oratory to be conferred each year for outstanding excellence in oratory throughout the year.

A much beloved professor marched in the academic procession last June at Stanford University. He was "graduating" from his chair of Rhetoric and Public Speaking after almost a third of a century of service at Kansas State College and Stanford University.

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