

# The Spirit of the Midwest

A HOMECOMING ADDRESS

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*President*



**I** THINK IT IS IMPORTANT TO ALWAYS HAVE A PLACE FOR INSPIRATION. For me, that place is in front of my office window. From there I can see a broad expanse of our campus. I often focus on the walkways from Stockdale up to Wallace Hall and McMichael Academic. Between classes there are hundreds of students going up or down the stairs that punctuate these sidewalks.

As I watch these students I think about the thousands of previous students who walked those same paths. I think about the ways they have used their Monmouth experience to make ours a better world. I think about the remarkable potential of the current students and the promise of those who are yet to enroll. One can't help but be inspired by the view and the thoughts that flow in through my window.

One afternoon this fall, while looking out at campus, I saw numerous students spaced across the lawn. All of them seemed to be engaged in a particular task. Soon, curiosity got the bet-



ter of me, and I went outside to see what they were up to. The first student I came to told me that she was "drawing a tree" for an art class. "What kind of tree?" I asked. "That one" was the response. Clearly, I was not talking to a biology major!

As I went from student to student, I received nearly identical answers from each. Finally, I suggested to one of the students that we walk over for an up-close look and see if we could identify the type of tree she was drawing. It was a mulberry tree.

There are lots of mulberry trees on our campus. I know they are there; neverthe-

less, I am always surprised when I come across a healthy specimen. First, I wonder who would plant a messy mulberry tree alongside a sidewalk. Of course, it was probably planted by birds long before the sidewalks were in place. Second, I wonder how it is that it survived another year. Each winter, after the first ice storm, there is what appears to be fatal damage to our mulberry trees. Large limbs break off and sections of the trunk split. The whole tree appears to be ready for the chain saw and the firewood pile.



### The mulberry tree

Pyle wrote:

To me the summer wind in the Midwest is one of the most melancholy things in all life. It comes from so far and blows so gently and yet so relentlessly; it rustles the leaves and the branches of the maple trees in a sort of symphony of sadness, and it doesn't pass on and leave them still. It just keeps coming, like the infinite flow of Old Man River. You could—and you do—wear out your lifetime on the dusty plains with that wind of futility blowing in your face. And when you are worn out and gone, the wind—still saying nothing, still so gentle and sad and timeless—is still blowing across the prairies, and will blow in the faces of the little men who follow you, forever.<sup>1</sup>

In his compelling description of this area, you can see the writer's Midwestern personality. We all recognize the mood—the melancholy—that strikes when we are again reminded that we live at the mercy of nature. We recognize the feeling that comes from being knocked down one too many times.

However, we also recognize that, like the mulberry, true Midwesterners are remarkably resilient. We can hardly wait to shake off the dirt, pick ourselves back up, and get back to work.

While the mulberry trees on campus began producing lush, waxy green foliage within hours of losing large limbs, local farmers were modifying their combines and picking record

As I stood with the art student and looked up into the mulberry tree, I was amazed at how this tree had created so much healthy, vibrant growth to hide the scars of past storms. If you were in Monmouth just before the semester started, you will remember the 100-mph winds that tore apart so many of our trees. However, from a distance, there is now little evidence of that damage. In only a few months it has been hidden by new growth.

It is instructive to review memories of that late August storm. We were completing the final touches on preparation for our Matriculation ceremony. We were almost ready to welcome our largest entering class of 445 new students. In a mere moment, we went from a campus ready for the semester to one covered with downed branches and trees, along with several adjacent streets blocked to traffic. Soon we discovered that others had been hit even harder. Local farmers who had begun the day with expectations of a bumper crop were looking at flattened fields.

It is times like that summer day, right after a brutal wind storm, that I am drawn to a poetic description of the Midwest by renowned journalist Ernie Pyle. In the opening paragraphs of his collection of essays entitled *Home Country*,

<sup>1</sup> Chapter 1, "Home in Indiana," page 3 from *Home Country* by Ernie Pyle; Copyright, 1947 by Williams Sloane Associates, Inc. Publishers, New York, NY USA; Scripps-Howard Newspaper Alliance

yields off the ground. If you ask any of them how they managed such an impressive recovery, they will shrug and say, “There was work to do and we did it.”

Predictably, we saw the same quick bounce-back on campus. Within hours after the storm, staff had moved from their dark offices and were outside helping with the clean-up. When students arrived less than 48 hours later, there was little evidence of the destructive winds.

It wasn't the first time that the college had bounced back. One hundred years ago this month, our beloved “Old Main,” which housed virtually the entire college, was consumed by fire, leaving many to conclude that Monmouth College would close. But, within a few months of that devastating fire on November 14, 1907, construction was begun on Wallace Hall. That remarkable building is still going strong as it enters its second century. None of us were there to observe, but I have a feeling that after a few hours of hand-wringing those Midwestern pioneers simply shrugged their shoulders and went to work on what needed to be done.



**Destruction of Old Main, November 1907**



**Harvesting downed corn with a custom reel attachment**

*Monmouth is once again a healthy, vibrant college and its resurgence was made without compromising our strong commitment to a traditional liberal arts education.*

Some of you remember a more recent time when conventional wisdom was ready to close Monmouth College. It was only 15 years ago that our college enrolled fewer than 130 new students in the fall of 1992. That spring, enrollment dropped below 600 and the

future was bleak indeed. I am sure that, for a time, melancholy settled over our Midwestern predecessors. But as always, good people went to work and recreated this community that we enjoy today.

This fall is an ideal time to celebrate the remarkable progress that has been realized in the 15 short years since we faced difficult times. When we review the minutes of the meetings at which Monmouth's renaissance was planned, it is clear that we have followed a path that was as intentional as it has been successful. That intentional path has brought us to a point where we must make a sharp turn, a turn that has been as carefully planned and as eagerly anticipated as any other part of the journey. Before I discuss that turn, however, I want to reflect with joy on the path we have come down so far.

When our enrollment dwindled, some wise men and women of our college recognized the importance of making Monmouth a “destination.” We needed to establish a reason for young people and their parents to drive past many competing colleges in order to arrive at Monmouth. A college can be a destination for many reasons. It might have a national reputation for academic excellence, or it might be renowned for its special curriculum or for its actively engaged students. The insight 15 years ago was that prospective students would overlook these distinctive traits if the campus



**While familiar farm fields still dominate the horizon just beyond Monmouth College’s doorstep, the campus itself has undergone a remarkable transformation in the last decade, with the acquisition of more than 60 acres of land and the addition of four major new buildings on the western perimeter.**

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didn’t “look the part” of one of the Midwest’s finest liberal arts colleges. Our membership in the prestigious Associated Colleges of the Midwest would be ignored if we looked like a college that was struggling to stay afloat. The plan 15 years ago was to make the physical appearance of the campus reflect the quality of the college. The desire was to create a campus that inspired students to take full advantage of our strong educational opportunities.

The result has been remarkable. Monmouth is once again a healthy, vibrant college, and its resurgence was made without compromising our strong commitment to a traditional liberal arts education. Unlike some colleges seeking a quick fix, we at Monmouth maintained our belief in the validity of our core mission and engaged in the expensive process of physical renovation at a time when finances were tight.

This decision had at its heart the following assumptions:

■ **Students need a comfortable place to live.** Modern and spacious residence halls are a key factor in attracting prospective students and are equally important for retaining current students. Beginning in 1997 we inaugurated an ambitious plan to create one of the most comfortable and aesthetically-pleasing residential campuses in the Midwest. Venerable old dormitories such as McMichael received spectacular makeovers. The campus, once landlocked and modest in size, was gradually expanded to the west to allow for the construction of three modern new residence halls housing 275 students. A nearby private apartment complex was purchased and renovated to give our upper-class students the opportunity to experience

independent living. Our magnificent residential campus today accommodates nearly 95 percent of the student body, reflecting our philosophy that personal interaction outside the classroom is an important part of a college education.

■ **Meal time is important.** In addition to enjoying a nutritious meal, students need a comfortable space in which to relax, socialize and discuss the important questions of life. The main dining hall in Stockdale Center has undergone a complete transformation. A series of attractive food stations, at which students can select from a wide variety of cuisines, have replaced the impersonal and institutional cafeteria line. Because of students' busy and varying schedules, we have also added alternative dining facilities in Scotland Yard, Huff Athletic Center, the Underground Café in Grier Hall and in the Hewes Library Coffee Shop.

■ **All facilities must be made relevant to today's needs.** Dating to 1896, our Dahl Chapel and Auditorium is one of the most beautiful buildings on campus, but prior to 2002 it had fallen into disrepair and was not conducive to either learning or performing. A \$3.5 million renovation added air conditioning, modern practice rooms and a comfortable performance hall. Similarly, the Hewes Library had a good location and lots of space, but foot traffic and usage were dwindling. Built in the pre-electronic age, it lacked not only air conditioning and modern technology but also the proper aesthetics. More than \$6.5 million was invested in a complete makeover, which resulted in bright, inviting study spaces, accessible collections, and classrooms and offices equipped with the latest technologies.

■ **Whenever possible, a sound mind should be supplemented by a healthy body.** Since the opening in 2003 of the \$22 million Huff Athletic Center we have made remarkable

strides in providing places to learn, play and exercise. The center's Glennie Gymnasium, Trotter Fitness Complex, Pepper Natatorium and Byrnes Education Wing offer athletic and wellness opportunities on a par with any liberal arts college in the nation. What better testament to center's versatility than our ability to simultaneously host a swim meet, a volleyball tournament, and a Homecoming crowd at a formal banquet for 250 people without pressure? The recreational facilities at Peacock Park are also among the best at any small college.

■ **While academics are our primary concern, the physical plant must not be ignored.** From the wrought-iron fencing that now graces the north side of campus to several newly-created plazas and green spaces, the campus has undergone a remarkable transformation in 15 years! In today's increasingly competitive admission environment, curb appeal has taken on a new level of importance. But Monmouth has also established an aggressive maintenance program to ensure that the campus remains both beautiful and up-to-date. Clearly, this is a process that will never be complete. We will continue our efforts to provide even more convenience to our students. But, all who have walked campus this fall are likely to agree that there is a feeling of completion. The campus has a finished look to it.

THIS FINISHED LOOK DOESN'T MEAN WE ARE DONE. Instead, it signals a time to move to the next phase. Our reason for rebuilding the physical infrastructure went far beyond simply creating an attractive campus. Our intention was to create a campus that could support one of the finest liberal arts programs in the country. The next logical step is to work just as diligently to make sure that our educational program fully exploits the physical improvements of the previous 15 years.

We Midwesterners aren't very good at

celebrating. We sometimes accomplish remarkable things—like rebuilding a campus—and shrug our shoulders as we move on to the next challenge. College communities are, I think, particularly susceptible to this trait. I hope we can break out of that mold long enough to celebrate the remarkable accomplishments of recent years.

That celebration should begin by recognizing many who have taken leadership roles. In particular, we must acknowledge the work of three trustees whose nature of service will change at the end of the year: **Roger Rasmusen**, who has served as a trustee for 33 years, five of those as chair; **Walter Huff**, whose service on the board extends 21 years with seven years as vice chair; and our current chairman, **David Bowers**, who has devoted 27 years as a board member, the last 13 as chair. Each of these men helped chart Monmouth's renaissance. Each has provided significant financial support at crucial times. Each will continue serving the college, with Roger and Walter moving to emeritus status and David moving from chairman to executive board member.

While it is proper and reasonable for us to celebrate the remarkable accomplishments of recent years, we must prepare ourselves for even more challenging tasks ahead. Chief among those challenges is fulfilling our pledge to become the most engaged college community in the country. We intend for students to learn from their professors, from coaches, from directors, and from each other. We intend for them to engage with each other and with new ideas. As we become a fully engaged campus we will find connections between ideas and disciplines that are often overlooked.

Already we are formulating a number of specific projects to help promote student engagement at Monmouth College. It is my pleasure tonight to be able to introduce one of



**Rasmusen**



**Huff**



**Bowers**

the most exciting of those projects.

Last winter our trustees approved a plan that calls for the construction of an innovative Academic Complex. This 120,000-square-foot facility will be located along Archer Avenue and will form one side of a quadrangle, bordered on the east by the Huff Athletic Center and on the north and west by three new residence halls. The complex will house eight of our academic programs: Mathematics, Computer Science, Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Psychology, Accounting and Political Economy and Commerce. We believe this mix of departments will provide special benefits to our students.

Consider briefly the place of these departments at liberal arts colleges. Some are present at every liberal arts college. Mathematics, along with the physical and life sciences, have been considered appropriate partners since liberal arts education emerged 2,500 years ago. In recent decades, there has been a growing awareness of the central role that our type of college fills in producing the best and brightest scientists. Without liberal arts colleges, this country would have trouble providing the research scientists and health care specialists that are important to maintaining our quality of life.

Accounting and business, on the other hand, are held at arm's length by many of the elite liberal arts colleges. That is not the case at Monmouth, where we subscribe to a traditional American view of the liberal arts. At the time the Midwest was being settled and

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colleges like Monmouth were being established, the liberal arts model was one that focused on preparing young people to advance the public good. Accordingly, the goal of such colleges was to produce teachers and preachers and leaders of commerce, along with doctors and lawyers. At Monmouth we still embrace this earlier vision of liberal arts education, reflected in our slogan that we are “what college was meant to be.” As such, we are proud of our strong programs in commerce and related fields.

Our traditional view of the liberal arts, with its focus on the role of a college in advancing the public good, makes the combining of science and commerce in a single complex an appealing idea. We have, in a single facility, students who will be developing a scientific expertise that will prepare them to solve important problems, and students who are developing the skills necessary to implement those solutions. We can imagine, for example, positive outcomes for our local, national and individual communities when our students understand, for example, both scientific principles behind creating more robust varieties of corn and the challenges of global marketing.

Indeed, we are excited by the prospect of Monmouth College having a significant impact on the region’s economy, as our students train to become leaders who can work effectively at the interface of science and business. As our civilization turns increasingly to renewable and sustainable products from the Midwest, Monmouth College will be at the forefront in helping develop, produce and market those products.

When we first considered this project, many of us wondered if it would be possible to pay



**Architect’s vision of the proposed Academic Complex**

for such an expansive and expensive project soon after completing a capital campaign. Although the task ahead seemed a bit overwhelming, because we are Midwesterners, we fretted for a few days and then went to work. The response was prompt and generous. Already we have received a number of strong commitments:

- Our good, longtime friends at **the Mellinger Foundation** stepped forward with a \$1 million gift that has supported the preliminary planning and design work.
- **David Byrnes and his wife, Elizabeth**, created early momentum with a \$5.5 million gift that will name the ground level of the complex as Byrnes Hall.
- **Safford and Betty Peacock**, who have a tradition of getting on board early with new projects, were true to form with a \$1 million pledge that will name a physics wing of the building.
- **The Pattee Foundation**, already having a history of supporting science and business at Monmouth College, has endowed a profes-

sorship currently filled by **Chris Fasano** of our Physics Department and a second professorship that is filled by **Ken McMillan** of our Political Economy and Commerce Department. The Foundation has stepped forward with additional support to help with the construction of the Academic Complex that will be home to both of these professors. We are happy to be able to name the main auditorium in honor of Fred and Martha Pattee.

■ The late **Dennis Lachel** '61, a geology major, was just one of many MC science graduates who went on to found their own successful businesses. Alumni like Dennis provided part of the inspiration for our idea to combine science and business programs in the same building. We miss Dennis' presence on the Board of Trustees but are pleased that his wife, **Kathy**, has agreed to carry on the Lachel tradition by serving on our Board. Kathy informs me that her husband's estate provides a generous deferred gift for the college. We will honor that generosity by establishing a Lachel Laboratory on the third floor of the complex.

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What better way to wrap up a summary of significant developments from the last 15 years than to mention two additional gifts that will have great sentimental value to generations of alumni and the local community?

Some of you may have noticed that the residence hall we completed this summer has a blank sign on its front lawn. That sign won't be blank much longer. Trustee and longtime supporter **Bill Goldsborough** recently informed me that he and his wife, **Beverly**, will make a \$2 million gift to our physical plant fund. They ask that we memorialize the gift by naming our newest building after one of our most beloved teachers. The new residence hall just happens to be located on the site of a former home of

that teacher, the legendary Gracie Peterson. We hope Gracie Peterson Hall will have a longevity to match that of Gracie, who lived to the ripe young age of 104.

Several months ago I received word that the college was a major beneficiary of the estate of **Muriel Conger**. That news was a surprise to me since Mrs. Conger was not a graduate, and I had no record of her involvement at the college. Upon further investigation, I learned that she was a close friend and next-door neighbor of our retired professor of religion and former dean, **Stafford Weeks** and his wife, **Winfred**. What a wonderful way to acknowledge that friendship—by supporting the institution where the Weeks have devoted so many years and so much effort. The Conger gift came at just the right time to help with the purchase and renovation of the attractive house at Ninth and Broadway that has become the home of our Philosophy and Religious Studies Department, along with our Chaplain's office and programs. It is a privilege to announce that we will honor this generous gift by naming the newest campus facility "Weeks House."

Whether a residence hall, an athletic facility or an academic complex, our structures are designed to provide an environment that will encourage students to work with professors and mentors to ponder the important questions with which we all wrestle. It will be in the Weeks House that many of the best insights will come to light.

I am gratified that so many loyal alumni and friends chose to attend this first President's Gala, an event we hope to make an annual Homecoming tradition. I hope I have been able to convey a small sense of the excitement we at Monmouth College hold for the future of this institution, and I look forward to your continuing support as we pursue these important projects.

*Presented at the President's Homecoming Gala  
October 26, 2007*