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Garst, Henry

Dr. Willard W. Bartlett

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(From "Education for Humanity", by Dr. Willard W. Bartlett.)

"The real leadership of this period was not the driving power of Lewis Davis, nor the educational efficiency of Henry Adams Thompson, but it was the human sympathy of Henry Garst. The latter never sought authority, he never needed it. He had within himself a spirit which caused men to wish to follow him. Other men might occupy the positions of leadership, he was content to spread friendliness, to disseminate encouragement, and to watch for and to give attention to the vital details which might have been overlooked. The quality of his leadership within the faculty is illustrated by the following item which appears in the minutes of the faculty meeting of May 27, 1872:

Professor Garst having retired, it was voted that we regard Professor Garst as a proper man and as our choice for president of the university that we hold this opinion in reserve to be given out in case it is called for by the board.

"At this time Professor Garst had been a member of the faculty but three years and, with the exception of two music teachers, was the junior member of that body. His leadership among the students is nowhere better illustrated than in an item written by an unidentified student in the Aegis of January, 1894:

Dr. Garst in his characteristic manner gave one of his excellent talks on the morning of the 22nd. inst. It was called forth by some actions on the part of a few students last term. Dr. Garst showed plainly his great interest in the student body, and the welfare of each individual in a manner that should indicate to all students the great love he has for them. His appeal to the gentlemen students was touching and forceful. No doubt many if not all the boys there purposed to be manly. The scene at the close of the remarks, in which a number of the students implicated themselves in an action which was compromising to themselves, was most unusual, and called forth the admiration of many who considered the act of confession a manly one.

"Professor Garst, in addition to being a member of the faculty was continuously a member of the board of trustees from 1876 to his death in 1911. In accepting his resignation from active teaching in 1899, the board passed a resolution which contained the following words: 'To Dr. Garst, more than to any other man, belongs the credit for the high standing of Otterbein University.'"

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Professor Garst was the heart and center of Otterbein University for many decades. Perhaps it was inevitable that he should be the center of controversy. Being a man of decided opinions and strong convictions and loyalties, he also loved a good fight. The prominent jaw meant something, when forced to take violent sides it stuck out and his adversaries should look out.

He was a mild mannered man, but his honest wrath was devastating.

In a visit one afternoon with Dr. T. J. Sanders, we were discussing the project of "The Spirit of Otterbein". Naturally the talk centered around a few leading spirits and among them Professor Garst.

Dr. Sanders related to me a circumstance which was, to say the least, illuminating.

Dr. Sanders had been president since 1891. His strong supporters were Professors Garst and Scott. Almost the whole time during his administration, the so-called Dayton movement was in motion. A strong section of the constituency wanted to move the University from Westerville to Dayton. At times the Dayton sentiment was in the majority.

There were several phases of the controversy, aside from the commercial one, which was perhaps the strongest one from the Dayton viewpoint. Dayton was the headquarters of the Church. Its leaders were there and many of them were Otterbein graduates. It was a natural desire on their part to bring their Alma Mater to the fast growing city, where they felt it would have a greater future.

But there was also another underlying factor. The faculty was still a powerful force in the government of the college. However never brought out in the open, it thought in the terms of the original founders of the institution - that Otterbein was founded to bring higher education to the membership of the church.

Lewis Davis himself had said that Otterbein was not a "priest factory". That was putting baldly the point of division. The church control in Dayton largely thought of Otterbein as a seminary rather than a school of higher learning for all people.

Professor Garst could not keep out of this controversy. By natural instincts, he became the leader of the contingent to keep the college in Westerville. He was the outstanding spirit for many years on the campus. Although a minister himself, he supported the broader theory that the college was founded for broader education under Christian church influences. And then Westerville was home, as it was to so many of the faculty.

So Henry Garst became the center of attack from Dayton.

Dr. Sanders told me this story of his experience at a crucial time in the battle. Presumably it was at about the time 1899.

Whether they voluntarily went to Dayton to smooth out the ruffled spirits, or they were summoned by the leaders in the movement, or whether there was a regular committee meeting is not known. From Dr. Sanders' relation of the happenings, I think they were "summoned".

"Dr. Scott and I left before daybreak. We thought no one knew our destination or the purpose of our absence.

"The meeting in Dayton was a stormy one and we came home downhearted. We felt defeated.

"I was seated in my study resting and turning over in my mind the events of the day. There came up my walk the quick, firm steps which I knew so well. How did Henry Garst know?

"I opened the door and invited him to enter. 'What did they say?'

"I was astonished and disconcerted. What should I say to this loyal servant of Otterbein? How should I tell him that powerful forces in the church and school were against him?

"It came to me that I should give him the facts and not try to soften the blow. 'Henry, they say you must go.'

"He bowed in deep thought but a moment. 'What should I do?'

"I was again on the defensive, but I again took the strong tactic. 'I would beat them to it.'

"And so it happened that Henry Garst resigned his professorship in Otterbein University, which had been his life. He was the victim of a movement, strong at that time, but which was destined to fail. The opposition persisted for some time, but Henry Garst lived to see the day of victory."

RWS

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