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A History of Business Education as Seen By a Bryant College Administrator

When Mrs. Hochberg asked me to tell you something about Bryant College at your February meeting, I was reluctant to say "yes". January through April 15 is a busy time for someone with a part-time public accounting practice and, as I grow older, my bedtime gets earlier and earlier. But, like most people, I succumb to flattery-- that's all it is--and I said "yes". Later, when I saw your announcement stating that I was an historian and would speak about the history of education in Rhode Island, I was aghast. I am not an historian and I am not qualified to speak about the history of education in Rhode Island. But, at that point, I was stuck with the assignment and now you are with me.

My colleagues who teach history tell me that a valid appraisal of any person or event can only be made by a disinterested person viewing the situation from the vantage point of a later date and in view of subsequent developments.

What I am going to tell you about business education and Bryant College cannot help but be very much a matter of biased judgment and lack of perspective because I have been a part of this school for fifty years. Consequently, what I have to say may be much in the same class as the writing effort labeled "An Unbiased Account of the Civil War from the Point of View of a Southern Gentleman". With that lengthy apology, let's look at what has happened in the one hundred and eleven years that Bryant and its predecessors have been in Rhode Island.

The earliest record of private business education I find goes back to 1834 with a school run by R.M. Bartlett in Philadelphia. It appears that penmanship, bookkeeping, and commercial arithmetic made up the offerings. Apparently Mr. Bartlett was a rover as he went on to Pittsburgh and Cincinnati. At about the same time, Silas S. Packard, an itinerant penman, was moving through Ohio and Kentucky and eventually established the Packard Business School in New York. Another gentleman--and a penman--was Mr. Platt R. Spencer who, with his sons and a nephew, developed and marketed the Spencerian system of writing which I am sure some of you can recall. Members of the Spencer family later established private business schools in Chicago and Milwaukee where they prospered for years.

[In 1853 Henry B. Bryant and Henry D. Stratton, who had attended the Folsom Business College in Cleveland, formed a partnership and started the first Bryant and Stratton College in Cleveland.]

As you may have guessed, I didn't know Mr. Stratton but he was apparently a sharp and aggressive businessman and realizing the limited rewards from a single school, he conceived the idea of a chain of schools. To effect this expansion, they aggressively bought out existing schools, sometimes at a bargain after a dose of stiff competition. Sometimes they latched on to a young man with the requisite qualities and made him a partner. It is said that Stratton, who was apparently the brains and muscle of the partnership, boasted of an ambition to put a school in every city with a

population of 10,000 or more. I can't vouch for the total number, but documents give evidence that the schools reached 35 in number and took on the name of the International Chain of Business Colleges. We tend to think of franchising as a modern business practice but here, in the 1860's, was a definite franchising operation with uniform textbooks and interchangeable scholarships. (Reference to some of the old textbooks).

[In 1863 a branch was opened in Providence. This was the result of a partnership agreement between a Mr. E.W. Mason and Messrs. Bryant and Stratton.] (Read partnership agreement. Also read Scholarship Certificate). This partnership apparently did not last very long, for very soon thereafter the city records show that Messrs. Warner and Ladd are the proprietors and soon it is Warner as the sole local partner.

The first convention of local partners was held in New York in 1863. Their collective voices shouting their dissatisfaction very nearly caused the breakup of the chain. It was only due to the astuteness of Mr. Stratton that the local partners went back to their diggings. 1866 seemed to see a culmination of problems. Mr. Stratton was in failing health and Mr. Bryant reportedly did not have the personality or the ability to manage the project so, one by one, the partnerships were closed out by sale to the local partners.

Apparently the early years were not all peaches and cream for the school occupied many locations: In 1863 it was 56 Westminster Street; in 1864, 137 Westminster; in 1865, 217 Westminster; in 1869, City Hall Building--corner of Dorrance and Washington; in 1871, 164 Westminster.

In 1872 a man by the name of Theodore B. Stowell joined the faculty as a teacher. The records indicate that he had been teaching in the public schools and is described as an earnest, sympathetic, enthusiastic, yet determined and aggressive man. I never knew T.B. Stowell, as he was called by his associates, but I would guess that he really was an outstanding individual.

[In 1876 the school moved from its former location to the new Hoppin Homestead Building at what is now 357 Westminster Street. Much was made of the fact that the school occupied the entire fourth floor--15,000 square feet-- with 17' ceilings and gas lights. Records indicate that there were 300 students, 11 teachers, and the tuition was \$10 per month.]

On July 1, 1878, Mr. Stowell, who had been a teacher, purchased the school and became Principal and Proprietor. Thus began a dynasty that lasted for 37 years when the school was sold to Harry L. Jacobs to whom we shall return. But first a few words about T.B. Stowell, his methods, philosophies, and coworkers.

The school, under T.B. Stowell, offered courses in Bookkeeping, Correspondence, Grammar, Rhetoric, Composition, Commercial Law, Political Economy, Analysis of Words, Spelling, Penmanship, Pen and Brush Lettering (Old English and German); also an Amanuensis Department which offered Phonography (Munson System) and Typewriting (Remington). The College Bulletins, some of which I have here should you care to peruse them, claimed that "Individual Instruction" is exemplified in the highest degree in Bryant and Stratton Business College. Progress as a whole must depend upon students' ability and application without relation to his fellow students---"He must meet a standard".

Words of advice to parents and faculty stated that individual instruction should involve:

- a. Study of the individual--instruction to suit his needs.
- b. Methods must be elastic to accommodate the grammar school lad and the college man.
- c. Means that the idle boy--shifted from one school to another--the despair of his parents--must be aroused to a desire for knowledge.
- d. Time, tact, energy, and unfailing patience is needed on the part of all to make individual instruction a reality.

In an era when apprenticeship had been the means of gaining competency in a job, Bryant and Stratton was out to prove that six to ten months of training would convert a bashful, green, and awkward boy or girl to that degree of efficiency necessary to take a job of trust and responsibility--and by Gee they did it!!

The method of instruction in the bookkeeping department was to establish a community plan of business practice wherein simulated trading took place, documents were prepared, recordkeeping was done from these documents rather than from a narrative in a book. Actual confirmation of receivables, payables, bank statements, was required.

Students were required to work and keep records, for specified periods of time, in the retail houses, the manufacturing companies, the transportation companies, the wholesale houses, the commission houses, and the banks.

I am sure that by today's standards the material was basic. Yet, in those years, they left the institution with something to sell and the mark of B & S. I can still recognize the penmanship of old-timers who went to B & S.

During the thirty-seven years between 1878 and 1915, Theodore Stowell owned and operated Bryant and Stratton Business College on the fourth floor of the Hoppin Homestead Building. Apparently the school didn't mushroom in size for no expansion is mentioned, and the two catalogs which have come to my attention showed 322 students in 1897, and 308 in 1902; while graduates went from 121 in the earlier year to 126 in 1902.

Apparently the faculty did not increase greatly in numbers either, but one thing that stands out in the record is the continuity of the teaching personnel and the impact they had on those they taught.

To the students of those years, T.B. Stowell was a legend respected by everyone I ever spoke to about him and referred to by one man who knew him well as a combination of Abraham Lincoln and keen businessman. Apparently he was more of the former, for I never heard that he died rich!

Other names to bring back memories to B&S graduates included William H. Scott from 1890 to 1927; William B. Sherman from 1890 to probably 1914; J.C. Barber from 1897 to 1940; and there were others.

At this point we must leave the Hoppin Homestead Building and go down to the ^{Butler} Butler Exchange Building which occupied the site of the present Industrial Trust Bank Building. ~~Here~~ we find a competing private business school--the Rhode Island Commercial School.] From approximately 1900 to 1908 this school was owned and operated by Adelbert S. Heaney. [In the latter year, 1908, the Rhode Island Commercial School was purchased by Harry L. Jacobs who had come to Providence from Dayton, Ohio. In Dayton, Mr. Jacobs established a small commercial school which he sold; ran a chain of dime stores in New York State. At one time in his career he had served as official stenographer for the Pennsylvania State Legislature.]

His background then was a combination of the academic experience, legislative exposure, and business acumen acquired in the private school field as well as the retailing business. With this background and his demonstrated willingness to move in and out of ventures, one should not be surprized to see his career unfold as it did.

The Rhode Island Commercial School was not a large operation-- 107 graduates in 1910 and 150 in 1914--but even in this four years we see almost a 40% growth. In 1915 Mr. Jacobs bought out the Bryant and Stratton Business College and brought it down to the upper floors of the Butler Exchange. For some little time the names were combined as the Bryant and Stratton Rhode Island Commercial School, but apparently the B&S name carried the greater prestige and soon the Rhode Island Commercial School was dropped.

This merger also brought together the stronger elements of the two faculties and thus gained the advantage of contact with alumni of both schools. Up until this time private business schools had operated without any special charters and awarded diplomas only. The new owner perceived an advantage in having something that his competitors did not have--the right to grant degrees. Through the use of special channels-- I know not what--he got the ^{1915?} R.I. legislature to pass an act granting Bryant and Stratton the power to grant degrees.] Now Bryant had something which its competitors did not have and which a sudden change in attitude on the part of the legislature denied to other private schools operated for profit. I know of only one other Rhode Island school to obtain this power before a complete clampdown on degree-granting powers to any but specially-chartered, eleemosynary institutions--a coup!

Moving quickly, as was characteristic of this man, he decided to upgrade his school by offering more advanced work than had heretofore been offered by private business schools. Up to this point, programs had

carried an emphasis on the clerical and secretarial skills. Only ten years earlier, in 1906, a chapter of Certified Public Accountants had been organized in Rhode Island. To get it started, the designation of C.P.A. had been offered to a number of individuals considered to be knowledgeable in the area of recordkeeping. At least one venerable instructor at B&S accepted the offer but another, more cynical, turned it down as being of no importance. But now, in 1917, accounting was becoming more sophisticated and to get a C.P.A. you had to pass a stiff examination which was reported to be such a barrier to acceptance that ^{NO ONE} ~~no one~~ gained acceptance to this exclusive club for a number of years.

In the light of this development, [Bryant and Stratton got the right to offer the Pace and Pace course in Higher Accountancy and, in 1918, made much of this move into a relatively new field by large advertisements calling ambitious young men to take up Accounting-- either days or evenings! A C.P.A. with a southern drawl, Warren Lane, was brought in to head up this new division of the College.] In contrast to earlier courses which were normally completed in one year, this career in so-called Higher Accountancy required two long years-- from early September to mid-August. The content of the new course was limited pretty much to Accounting and Business Law. Contrary to the earlier plan of individual progress with a willingness to accept new students every Monday, the new program was set up to operate on a lecture and problem-solving basis with new classes once each year. I believe the first degrees were granted in 1920.

It is interesting to note that no consideration was given to requiring a well-rounded program of professional and liberal studies. Nor was there any attempt made to measure the quantity of work in semester hours. Neither was the quality expressed in a grade point average as is the rule today.

With the development just described, Bryant and Stratton was a two-division school--the so-called General Business and Secretarial programs operating for the most part on an individual progress plan, offering one-year courses, and the Accounting program requiring two years and providing instruction in the lock-step style now being questioned by progressive educators. It may be of interest to note that the Pace course in Accounting was considered to be the best program in its field and became the foundation on which the Pace Schools in New York were built. It must be said, however, that by today's standards the test material was sketchy, the illustrations very poor or non-existent, and the problems of a repetitious type.

[These were the conditions when I joined the group in 1924. About thirty started the program.]

Spring of 1925 proved to be moving day. Bryant and Stratton, or one of its components, had been in the old wooden Butler Exchange Building since the turn of the century and now it was moving to a newly completed, fire resistant structure at

40 Fountain Street, the Gardner Building, sixth, seventh, and eighth floors. It all took place over a weekend and I guess that neither the faculty nor the movers were unionized for they worked together! One of the male faculty members ^{NOT REALLY BELOVED} showed up on Monday with a patch on his head--a casualty resulting from some careless student swinging a chair around. He said it was an "accident", but some callous students laughed. You must draw your own conclusions.

The new home was clean and neat. As always, the President insisted on a good appearance for his schools. Fay's Theatre, with vaudeville, was just around the corner. The Arcadia Dance Hall was in the same block and the burlesque house not far away. Street cars and buses stopped at the door. The Railroad Station was almost across the street. Atop the building was a tremendous lighted sign telling all that Bryant and Stratton College of Business Administration was housed here.

In reviewing the college catalogs of those nine years on Fountain Street, one notes what a tremendous selling effort they were. Psychological appeals of every type, wording to make the ordinary appear glamorous, testimonials from "satisfied employers" and "grateful graduates". The degree programs were expanded in number to include Business Administration, Teacher Training, and Executive Secretarial. The course content included more and more

of the non-skill courses--Economics, Commerce and Transportation, Investments, Marketing, Business Finance, Salesmanship, and Advertising.

Classes still ran 25 hours per week for 44 weeks. Commencement was in mid-August with ceremonies in the Albee Theatre. Tuition was \$315 for degree programs and \$245 for diploma courses.

There had been earlier attempts to move the school out of downtown Providence. In the early 1920's, a site on Waterman St. where the RISD Refectory is located was purchased or optioned. A sign was erected telling that this was the site of the new Bryant and Stratton home. Angry Brown students tore it down and threw it in the river. There was brave talk of not being intimidated by such rowdy attitudes, but no move was made.

Now in 1934 the building formerly occupied by the Hope Hospital was vacant and could be leased. There was serious thought given to moving to a spot where there was limited public transportation. Street cars and buses were two to four blocks away in a variety of directions.

In the face of these questions and the fact that 1934 was right in the middle of the great depression, it took courage and foresight to make this move. Harry L. Jacobs had both of these qualities. In retrospect you realize how clearly he saw the situation at hand, how astutely he attracted hard-working people to his organization, and how keenly he relished the accouterments of success.

The move to the new campus--there really was a bit of grass--was accompanied by a change in name. While the Bryant and Stratton name had been considered an asset in the earlier days, it now appeared to be a liability. While many things had been done to upgrade the school--degree programs in many fields of business--a moving away from the skills--many graduates becoming CPAs and teachers--we were still being thought of by many as an old line business school. In fact, many of the Bryant and Stratton schools in other cities were doing what they did many years before and we were being tarred with the same brush. To make a break with the past, the name was changed to Bryant College. In the light of the reputations of Mr. Bryant and Mr. Stratton, I often wondered why we picked the name of the weaker partner for our banner. Many had suggested a drastic change to Eastern College of Commerce as a better name and, after working the the shadow of the old banner for many years, I believe that the radical-minded were right.

19th years in the past

The thirty-seven years at the Hope Street site were marked by many changes. I can touch on only a few. Physically our plant expanded from the one plot of ground on which the Hope Hospital stood to include over thirty buildings in a half dozen blocks of the East Side.]

The academic programs expanded to include majors in Accounting, Economics, Management, Marketing, Law Enforcement, Business Teacher Education, with Associate Degree programs in Secretarial Studies and some other areas. The faculty increased in numbers and areas of expertise--from 18 to 72--from business-oriented individuals to historians, scientists, sociologists, and many other fields.

The student body as measured by graduates varied greatly from the depression years of the thirties when 250 graduates might be expected, to the near disaster years of World War II when we graduated 10 men and 143 women in 1944. And then the GI flood which forced us to double sessions and crowded rooms, but produced graduating classes of over 700 men and 150 women in 1949 and 1950. The golden flow of tuition income did indeed enrich the coffers of the College which, like all businesses, was paying income taxes and real estate taxes, but also handsomely rewarding the owners for their good business judgment and courage to stick it out through the black years in hope of better times.

For forty years Harry L. Jacobs had been the President and principal stockholder in this private school. His business ability had caused it to prosper; he had done well. And now he really showed how smart a businessman he really was. He sold out at the top of the market!!

Appraisers arrived to set values on the physical properties; legal counsel was sought; and the shares of the stockholders were sold to Bryant College under an agreement to pay for them out of revenues over a period of time. For how much were they sold? That I do not know, but rumor had it that it was not peanuts.

[And now in 1949 a new charter is obtained from the legislature setting Bryant College up as an eleemosynary institution with a Board of Trustees and exemption from property and income taxes. All assets and liabilities of the old Bryant College are transferred to the new organization. The Board of Trustees elected H.L. Jacobs as President.]

For some reason never made clear, the new charter provided that on the death of H.L. Jacobs the College would be offered to Brown University. Many said, and the papers implied, that Mr. Jacobs was giving his school away. That was not so. He had sold it at a handsome profit and would be paying capital gains taxes on the installment basis as he was paid the purchase price out of the surplus revenues of the new Bryant College.

At a later date, Brown University declined the gift; possibly feeling that our unaccredited status and our profit-oriented operation would be incompatible with its objectives.

Although Harry Jacobs remained at the Bryant helm for another decade, it might be well to pause here and see what his privately owned school has done for him, the thousands of students who attended his school, and the community.

Certainly he has become a well-to-do man, but perhaps no better than he would have done in some other enterprise. He has provided an opportunity for thousands of students to get the practical type of education they sought at a reasonable price. Were his product not of better quality than his competitors--both public and private--he would indeed have failed. In the process he has contributed to the support of the community through normal tax payments, rather than being a consumer of tax dollars as a publicly supported institution. And although it may have produced no financial benefit to the community, he ~~did~~ attract a host of distinguished personalities to Bryant Commencements as honorary degree recipients. Beside the usual parade of other college presidents, we find Charles Curtis, Vice President of the United States; Henry Ford; Ogden Mills, Secretary of the Treasury; * Burton K. Wheeler, Senator from Montana; Madam Chiang Kai Shek; Alben Barkley, Vice President of the United States; Irving Olds of U.S. Steel; Sylvia Porter; Ivy Baker Priest, Treasurer of the U.S.; and many more. Yes, Harry Jacobs was a showman as well as a businessman!

Over a period of many years Bryant had been offering what I call bread and butter courses--the type needed to get a job. Bryant people were welcome employees in banks, offices, accounting firms and as high school teachers of business subjects. But occasionally someone would want to go on to graduate study and here he met with disaster. The degree was earned in two years--unusual. The program was very lean in liberal arts. The school was not accredited, and no proprietary school could think of getting accreditation. So, while our people were welcome in business, they were snubbed in academe.

Many attempts were made to get our better students into graduate schools. Now and then one succeeded and we tried to use this as an entering wedge but, as fast as we succeeded, other road blocks were thrown up to thwart our efforts. To this point you could call Bryant an "educational renegade". It soon appeared advisable to conform to the "accepted pattern" and seek accreditation. The first serious thought in this direction came in 1956.

Mr. E. Gardner Jacobs, then Vice President, took the most active role in this effort to obtain accreditation. While the elder Jacobs was ^{not} enthusiastic about the benefits likely to accrue from accreditation, his son who was to succeed him as President in 1961, saw it as a must and bent his every effort in this direction.

A program was proposed which would take three years of forty-four weeks and would include the prescribed percentage of liberal arts. The class hours per week were reduced to twenty.

This did not meet with approval in all quarters. Much of our appeal had been from "High School to Business in Two Years" and we were not sure that the New England Association would look favorably on a three-year program. True, Babson had obtained accreditation on a three-year program but rumor had it that that had been accomplished by the "right people" and that no more three-year schools would be let in to the club! By adjusting the calendar, it became possible to complete the program in three long years or four standard ones. With this, and substantial improvements in our library and other facilities, we made our first try for accreditation in 1961. Just to show that even educators are human, I have to tell you about that first visit. The visiting committee of three arrived for the get-acquainted dinner on a Sunday night. One of the committee participated so freely of the pre-dinner drinks that he was not himself and at the dinner table loudly enumerated our weaknesses and insulted most of the trustees. The dinner was a disaster. The next two days of inspection were rather tense. Then the long wait for a decision. The visiting committee voted for approval (I wonder why?). The Commission for Higher Education turned us down. And there was not joy at Bryant.

Three years later, after more changes, a second try resulted in success. We were in the club. Our graduates would no longer be snubbed and, while we were turning out people who were less competent in their specialty, they did have a wider frame of reference and a greater appreciation of the world in which they lived.

For all of its years Bryant had been living out of tuition income. Nary a gift to help a struggling college. In the midst of dreams about an urban campus, an angel in the form of Earl Tupper appeared to E. Gardner Jacobs, and ^{now Providence 1961} said, "You may have my homestead in Smithfield--220 acres". Eyes were rubbed to make sure it was true. Fully awake we sold our Providence campus to Brown, borrowed a lot of money, built our dream campus in Smithfield. It's great--come out and visit us!!!