

LEO "DOC" TRAISTER

I was a pretty good football player in my high schools days, and I was recruited by Iowa, Northern, and Wisconsin, but I was injured in the last game of my senior year and those big schools no longer wanted me. I was out of school a year, and Cornell and Eureka College were interested in me. Since Eureka was in Illinois, I thought about looking into it. Sam Harrod II (Sam III and Dan's father), who was doing admissions work for Eureka College, convinced me I could play at Eureka. I came to Eureka because of Sam's influence. I decided that I would try Eureka for a year. I found that Sam was right; I could and did play for Eureka that year, so I decided to come back for another year. I also had become interested in the Lambda Chi Fraternity my first year. Before then I had not heard of a fraternity much less be able to pronounce its name. So, the combination of football and the fraternity brought me back to Eureka for another year. Although my college education was interrupted by World War II, I played football and baseball for four years and basketball for two years.

I think that probably the smallness of the college is the one thing that attracted me to Eureka. I suppose that an individual has to decide about attending a small institution or a large one. That is the first decision one has to make about college. I chose Eureka because I like small classes and the individual attention that a professor can give to each student, especially if the student is having problems. That advantage was important to me at the time. The weakness of Eureka College is, of course, that a small college cannot offer the wide array of majors and courses that a large university can.

The faculty who influenced me the most were Burrus Dickinson and Harold Barrow. Burrus Dickinson's first year as President was my first year, and he stands out in my mind because he took special interest in the individual student. Although he was the President and not a member of the teaching faculty, he was interested in the individual needs of each student. I really enjoyed attending Eureka College during Burrus Dickinson's time. The other person who had an impact on me was Harold Barrow, a coach whom I encountered after the war. He influenced me to become a coach and a teacher. Because of him, I chose to teach and coach.

My special experiences here were mainly in playing football and baseball. I recall one day when I was playing in a baseball game at Western Illinois University. The third base coach for Western that day was their famous coach Rock Hanson. I was playing third base, and he started talking a lot of nonsense, ranting and raving to distract the Eureka players. I told him that if he would pay more attention to the game we would all be better off. Being the flighty character, he was, he told me exactly what he thought of me. Baseball at Eureka College was dropped, I believe, after the 1954-55 year. In my playing days, the field was located about where the tennis courts are today. We played the same teams we played in football, except we added Greenville and Illinois Wesleyan. It seems to me that it was about a .500 season we had in baseball.

The teams we played in football in those days were Carthage, Culver Stockton, Illinois College, Principia, St. Procopius—now Illinois Benedictine—and Concordia. How did we compete with those teams? I would say fair.

Did I remember any specific football game? I would say no; they all pretty much blur in my mind. But I do have a story about a practice one day. Our coach was Harold Ave, who had been a professional football player in his younger days. He had also boxed

and wrestled professionally, and he still had an impressive physique. He often scrimmaged with us without pads. One day he was just beating up on our tackle, and the tackle came to me—I played halfback—and told me on the next play to get down on my hands and knees behind Coach Ave, and he would knock him head over heels. Against my better judgment, I did that and Coach Ave went flying through the air. When he got up, he started after both of us, and we ran away as fast as we could. It made no sense for us to stand there and let him get hold of us, and I don't know what made me do it. It took Coach Ave a long time to get over that, and it was touch and go for us for a while. After leaving Eureka, Coach Ave went to Western Illinois University and coached for a while and then ended his career teaching health courses there.

I was married after I returned from the Service—Betty and I were married in March '46, and I resumed my college education in April. There were very few places to live, so we moved into an army trailer in back of the gym—I think there were twelve of them there. Each couple had their own trailer, and coming in between them was a boardwalk, and we could sit there and pretty soon you could tell each person by the sound of his or her walk. You didn't have to look to see who was walking. And that's where we lived until I graduated in mid-year 1948. We had the restroom down in the locker room in the gym, and the women had to do their laundry down there. Sometimes the laundry would freeze when they came out with it. I worked on the work plan, and I worked in the gym down in the basement. We were janitors, working for twenty-five cents an hour. We worked two hours a day. I did this work as a freshman and a sophomore. When I came back from the Service, I was a lockup, and I would lock all the buildings about nine o'clock at night and unlock them about six in the morning. I think there were two or three of us did that same job.

There was a swimming pool in Pritchard and water in it when I first came to college, but it was closed that year I came. There were people who would jump in and swim, but the pool was officially closed because of the lack of a filter system. I played basketball my first two years, but I did not play after I returned from the Service.

World War II was the most significant historical event in my college days. I went into the Service after my sophomore year. So, I had two years of college, and when I entered the service, it was absolutely amazing how beneficial those two years served me. I guess that that time in the military two years was unusual, let alone four. So, I had an advantage, and pretty much everywhere I went I was given opportunities because I had two years of college. I was promoted rather quickly and given important jobs. I became a supply sergeant and probably shouldn't have been. The CO called me in and said that I was his supply sergeant. When I expressed surprise, he said that he had looked at my record and noticed that I had two years of college and that was enough to qualify me for the position. That's an example of how my two years of college gave me opportunities. I never thought that those two years would turn out as important as they turned out to be.

As I look back on my life, I go back to the fact that the college was small and as a student you receive more attention than you would at a larger institution, and for me this would be important. As a start that is one of the things that I would really stress—for young people to decide whether they want to go to a large school or a small school. The fact that the professors could give you the attention that you needed is a major advantage for a student. When I started teaching, I realized that young people often need help from a teacher. I saw that when I was teaching in high school, and I carried that over when I

came to the college. I always tried to help the individuals in terms of their needs. When they found themselves in trouble, we would sit down and talk to see if we could find something to help them get over the problem that they were experiencing. And I also tried to be fair and honest. One thing that I learned from the college is that you should always be fair and honest with every student that you had any contact with, and I think Eureka instilled this in me. I tried to carry those principles in my coaching career.

What was my reaction from moving from Pritchard to Reagan Center, you ask? Well, it was traumatic. I was accustomed to the smallness of Pritchard, and my teams had pretty good success there. The transition was somewhat difficult because Reagan is a metal building, and to coach in that building was much, much more difficult than in Pritchard because the players couldn't understand me. I could yell and yell and still they couldn't understand what I was saying. Finally, I had to develop a system. If I blew my whistle once they would stop and I would go straight to the player I wanted to talk to. If I blew it twice, the entire team was to gather around me. You picked up little methods along the way because of the problems that the gym itself provided. We had to learn to adjust to play on a big floor. We had to learn to spread out and that took a lot of work on my part especially. There was some sadness in leaving Pritchard because it was at one time an important building. When it was built in 1915, it was a state of the arts building, with the indoor track, the swimming pool, and the basketball court. And before my time there was a radio station in there. But later in the 1940s, teams didn't want to play us because the indoor track would interfere with shots from the corners. The ball would bounce off the track and go out of bounds and be our ball. Even when the track came down, the floor itself was about the size of a high school gym. When I began coaching here the building had reached its point of obsolescence. There is no truth at all to Pete Hughes' kidding about my turning up the heat as a strategy against opposing teams.

There are some athletes from my early days of coaching at Eureka who come to mind. One was Fred Theirer from Washburn, who played center for me. Fred was just an outstanding young man. Also Craig Gerdes, another one from the same town comes to mind. He had an outstanding coaching career in Eureka after his playing days. Chuck Staley from Taylorville, another outstanding young man. Roger Icenogle from Oquawka and Bob Strickland from Ottawa. Rick Schwab from East Peoria is another. Butch McCready, Clint Forsyth, and Bob Albin come to mind. These are but a few of the many fine athletes who played for me. I have to stop at some point, but those come quickly to mind.

My coaching and teaching were certainly important and enjoyable, but probably my most significant contribution to the college was my role as a member of the team to seek re-accreditation from the North Central Association. The College had lost that accreditation in the 1930s, and when Ira Langston became President in 1954 he announced that our most important goal was to gain re-accreditation. When I accepted the job offer at Eureka College in 1956, I was assigned to three important duties—athletic director and coaching, assistant director of admissions, and working on the accrediting team. The latter assignment took some time because my job was to evaluate the five main buildings on campus. I had to examine the buildings and suggest upgrading to the point where they would be passable. To accomplish that project, I had to go to the various professors in the buildings and ask them for their assistance in identifying things that really needed to be done. For example, in the science building the heat was almost nil.

The building was at the end of the heating line, and when they turned on the heat at the Heating plant, it looked like Old Faithful erupting. So that line had to be repaired for heat to reach the building. The window sills were half open, and so the building needed lost and lots of work. I went to each building and studied it carefully. In Burgess Hall, you would bounce as you walked across the first floor, so that had to be shored up. When I turned my report in, Dean Clarence Noe was that hear of the team, but I had to turn it in first to Dr. Tye, who read it carefully. He accused me of being too negative, and I informed him that if anything in my report was changed, I would lodge a protest with the Trustees. Well, they went to work and made as many improvements as they could given the time and money.

It was one of the most outstanding moments in the history of the college when we were re-accredited. In fact, I think that re-accreditation saved the college. I don't think we could have lasted much longer without it. We had a big party, and the students had a dance in Pritchard. Going into the visit of the accrediting team, I was not uneasy because I believed that we did as much as we could do to prepare for the visit. There wasn't much more we could have done. I was sure that the biggest problem was finances, and that has always been the case here, I suppose. But I think we were fortunate in having the particular visiting team that we had. If you get a team from smaller institutions, they understand the problems of a small college, whereas a team from a large institution would lack that understanding.

When I accepted the position at the college, I was both the Athletic Director and the Coach. I had no assistant coaches in the beginning. I coached football and basketball; then I added track and golf because those two sports were relatively inexpensive and would draw students. In the mid-1970s I added soccer, but that program did not endure. I would consider my most significant contribution to be the addition of women's intercollegiate sports; it was past time for that to happen, and I had two daughters who were deprived of the opportunity to participate in intercollegiate programs. The first sport was volleyball and later basketball and softball.

Since I coach all the men's sports, I would not have had time to coach baseball unless we dropped golf and track. But the baseball field was not in shape to play. And at that time we played our football games at the high school field. It was inconvenient because we could not use the high school locker rooms, and that was a real problem. We had to pay rent to use the field and also to use the public address system. Finally, in the late 60s, we had to build our own field. The chief problem with our own field was poor drainage, so we tiled the field, and that was a big improvement. We could play football there, but it still isn't right because it wasn't graded. The field is level and it needs to have a crown in the middle and sloping to each side. They didn't know how to grade it, and they laid down a level field.