

# The Era Of President Gist: The Pre-World War II Years

## PART 3

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### The New President

The life, indeed the viability, of Humboldt State University, during the administration of President Arthur S. Gist (1930-1950) was severely tested by two national crises – the Great Depression of the thirties and World War II – and by the aftermath of the War that brought a sudden inflow of students under the “G.I.” Bill.

President Gist was appointed to succeed President Swetman in the fall of 1930. He received his B.Ed. and M.A. degrees from the University of Washington and did additional graduate work at the University of California and Columbia University. He had worked as an elementary school principal in Seattle and Oakland, whence he went to San Francisco State College as Director of Teacher Education. He enjoyed considerable national reputation as the author of several books: *Elementary School Supervision: Administration of an Elementary School*; *Clarifying the Teacher's Problem: The Teaching and Supervision of Reading* (co-author); and as Editor of Yearbooks, Department of Elementary School Principals, N.E.A.

By virtue of his educational and professional background President Gist's initial and almost sole interest was in teacher education. To quote from the first issue of the College Catalog under his administration: “The purpose of a Teachers College is to train teachers for the public schools.” At that time that was also the official policy of the State.

In 1930, as previously, all State Teachers Colleges were administered through the State Depart-

ment of Education. The activities of the Board were concentrated on formulating policy governing the public schools of this State at the elementary and secondary levels. Policy recommendations and administration of the State Teachers Colleges were delegated by the Board to an executive officer, the Director of Education, who in 1930 was the dynamic Vierling Kersey. In later years, the State College Deans would meet twice a year to recommend policy to the Council of the State College Presidents, who in turn recommended policy to the Board through the Director of Education.

### Personnel Changes

Upon assuming his office as President of an institution with an enrollment of less than 400 students and a teaching faculty of 30 members, President Gist assigned to Mrs. Jessie W. Woodcock the functions of Financial Secretary and appointed Miss Sarah M. Davies as his personal secretary. Mrs. Woodcock was placed in charge of budget making and financial control, and was given additional responsibility over campus maintenance, dormitories, and other minor matters. In later years, particularly under the Siemens administration, Mr. William Johnson, an industrious, conscientious and dedicated man, assumed responsibility over campus maintenance. Mr. Johnson retired only recently. He has many stories to tell. Miss Imogene B. Platt, Registrar, was now given the additional title of Director of Student Placement. Several other

"Directors" were placed in charge of such areas as Health and News Service. (The title of "Director" at a Teacher's College was later disapproved as derogatory to the dignity of the one Director in the State, the Director of Education. "Coordinator" became the commonly used term.)

In the spring of 1931, I was awarded the Ph.D. degree in Economics by Stanford University, and almost immediately I was appointed Vice President and Director of Summer Sessions. The position was not then recognized by the State and carried no additional salary. Such administrative functions as I discharged, I did as assistant to the President, acting in his absence, with particular responsibility over Student Body finances. The new President also proceeded to give professional rank to each teaching member of the faculty, based on his own personal evaluation of the candidate's merit and years of service to the institution. I was ranked as Professor of Social Science and, as Vice President, still continued to offer nine to twelve units of instruction each semester.

### Instructional Programs

The College now offered courses to meet the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts degree with the General Elementary, the Junior High School and the Special Credential in Physical Education. However, by this time, the liberal-arts program had been sufficiently expanded to offer the A.B. degree with majors in Biological Science, English, and Social Science, presumably in preparation for teaching in secondary schools.

Since most of our graduates then were to teach in rural or semi-rural schools, from the beginning the program aimed to bring the prospective teacher into contact with rural conditions in general and Humboldt County conditions in particular. The 1931-1932 College Catalog devotes almost two pages in explaining rural conditions and their environmental influences on local schools and on the "rural child." One of the first courses I taught at Humboldt was Rural Sociology.

By 1931 a scholastic average of "C" became a prerequisite to student teaching, as well as other personal qualifications; and, by 1934 a system of probation and disqualification was introduced.

As yet the State Teachers Colleges were not authorized to offer other occupational degree curricula, or a curriculum meeting the General Secondary Credential, which at that time required

a year's work beyond the A.B. degree in a major field. First then, we expanded our liberal-arts offerings to consist of two-year programs termed "pre-secondary work," in agriculture, animal science, pre-dental, pre-engineering, pre-nursing, and pre-pharmacy. Another purpose for developing this "pre-secondary work" – not mentioned in the catalog – was, however, to develop a program of upper-division courses in the liberal arts (for instance, four upper-division courses in Economics) to serve students who aimed to complete their undergraduate major at Humboldt and then transfer to the University of California for completion of the General Secondary Credential requirements. Later, this undergraduate foundation served to boost our claim that all we needed was authority to offer one year of post-graduate work to fulfill all the Credential requirements.

Almost every extension in the Liberal Arts in the State Teachers Colleges faced opposition from Berkeley. Such extension was viewed as constituting an inroad into the program and prerogatives of the University of California, with possible adverse effects upon their enrollment. Only after the War, when the University enrollment increased to undigestible proportions, were their fears allayed. (Some checks by the State Coordinating Council were later instituted, but Chancellor Dumke had a voice in this.)

Throughout the College's life we had to struggle to meet the objections of the University and of the State Department of Finance with its restrictive policy, by adopting in our budget requests the strategy of coining terms which appeared non-competitive and within our primary function. For instance, we could not offer straight liberal-arts baccalaureate programs but we could offer "pre-secondary" programs. We were not authorized to have a biological museum but we were approved for a "conservatorium." Humboldt could not have a gallery but it could have "exhibit space." Our Marine Station at Trinidad was only a "fisheries laboratory," etc., etc.

An avowedly non-teaching program which we organized at that time, to meet a specific need, was one in "Commerce." This was a two-year sequence of courses consisting mostly of tool subjects like typing, shorthand, and bookkeeping. In the absence of a Junior College in this area, we justified this program as meeting the needs of those of our students who did not exhibit the special personal qualifications for teaching or success in academic work. Professor Maurice Hicklin now assumed the

Office of Registrar with the title of Dean of the Lower Division, and Miss Imogene Platt was assigned, as Assistant Professor, to the "Commerce Department." Here one finds the foundation for our current curriculum in Business Education.

### Now State Colleges

In 1935, under pressure from the various communities where State Teachers Colleges were located, and in recognition of the expanding functions of these colleges, the legislature changed their names to State Colleges. At the same time, these institutions assumed a "regional" service function, with Humboldt's area of service encompassing Humboldt, Del Norte, Mendocino, Lake Counties, and the western portion of Trinity County. This regional concept was later utilized by Humboldt to justify curricula intended to meet the peculiar needs of this area. Our radio program, designed to train managers of rural radio stations, was one of these programs.

The course in student teaching remained the core of the teacher education curriculum and our "Training School" served this purpose. Initially, the school, consisting of eight grades, occupied the west wing of what is now Founder's Hall. In 1934 a new "College Elementary School," long in the planning, was completed, dedicated in recent years to the memory of Arthur S. Gist, even though at the time it had ceased to function as a teacher-training laboratory. The new school was a concrete expression of the educational philosophy of the institution and of its President. Prior to its construction, the entire faculty met several times with the architect who incorporated their ideas into his plan.

### The College Elementary School

The new school provided classrooms for eight well-equipped grades plus a functional kindergarten room, a manual training room, a spacious library with fireplace, and a gymnasium and showers for physical education. An ample playground was also provided. All of us felt that this was a model elementary school, and through the years it was visited by many school administrators planning similar buildings.

Initially two supervisors, one for the upper grades and one for the lower grades, plus a

principal were assigned to this school. Later a full-time teacher, a member of the faculty, was assigned to each class, in addition to the above-mentioned personnel. From time to time, groups of teachers from outside would visit the school to observe demonstrations of good teaching techniques, and to review materials used, new materials in preparation, etc.

The College Elementary School entailed a considerable financial outlay each year, which was difficult to defend before the legislature and the State Department of Finance. Once when I was defending such a budget before a legislative committee, I had to face the argument that not all State Teachers Colleges had elementary training schools on their campuses. The President of San Jose, on this occasion, stated that his faculty preferred to place their student teachers in the public schools to be trained under actual, more realistic conditions than the ideal conditions prevailing at a campus elementary school. We won that day and many days afterwards, but as Humboldt grew and it became necessary to place many of our students in local public schools, the College Elementary School became more and more a "demonstration" school. Ultimately, (not in my day) the State judged the school an expensive luxury, especially when there was dire need for space to house other phases of instruction. Thus, student teaching on the campus was discontinued; the classroom teachers assigned to the school were released and the school building is now serving other educational purposes. (A few years ago the audio-visual department, now given the name of Department for Instructional Media, moved into Gist Hall, and there it built an empire.)

### Curricular Expansion

Year by year, especially after about 1937 and using our "isolation" and our regional function as justification, the instructional program was expanded little by little, to offer a greater variety of two-year "pre-secondary" courses plus two degree curricula, divorced from from teaching: one in Economics and Business and one in Social Science. These two curricula constituted our first real inroad into the non-teaching fields. Soon the University of California learned about it, when under date of May 10, 1938, Humboldt issued a special brochure entitled "Training for Government Positions at Humboldt State College," which

described the two programs. The brochure called attention to the need for a "large number of well qualified college graduates to fill government positions," especially after the Congress passed the Social Security Act and welfare legislation was enacted by the State.

The new curricula represented a new policy, sooner or later adopted by other State Colleges alert to the increase of new occupational opportunities arising out of new social and technological developments in both the private and public sectors.

### Summer Sessions

The summer session of 1931, the first under the administration of President Gist, was directed by Dr. Mitchel Pirie Briggs of Fresno State College. During the following three years I served as Director of Summer Sessions. Subsequently, I taught as Visiting Professor at other institutions during the summer, and later resumed my duties as "Dean of Summer Sessions."

The summer session bulletins issued during this period listed the entire faculty, although a relatively small number of professors, including some visiting professors together with a few special lecturers, constituted the summer faculty. The summer session program was geared primarily to serving the needs of the teachers in the field. All summer session fees put together amounted to around \$20 for students registered for a full load of six units. Enrollment was sizable.

A number of students who had graduated under the previously non-degree program returned to work for their baccalaureate. Some of the former degree graduates registered to complete courses toward their Administration or Supervision Credentials. Also, the College now offered the Bachelor of Education degree which allowed credit for teaching experience, reduced residency requirements, and gave teachers the opportunity to complete their programs by extension and summer session work. The B.Ed. degree never proved popular because it did not enjoy the higher prestige of the A.B. and only older graduates took advantage of it. It is no longer offered.

Mrs. Myrtle M. McKittrick, an intelligent, energetic and conscientious person, planned the summer session schedule of courses, and for many years she, with a few assistants, discharged functions now being discharged the year around by the

Dean of Admissions and his subordinate officers and staff.

It was the policy of the State that in the matter of summer session faculty salaries, the summer session would be self-financing. On rare occasions deficiencies in one institution might be covered from the surpluses accrued by some larger institutions and, while I was Dean of Instruction, our regular budget savings could be used occasionally to cover such deficits. But to avoid deficits, teachers in residence were engaged on a contingency basis; that is they received their full pay, \$150, provided all their course offerings attracted a sufficient number of students to cover their salaries. Every effort was made to attract summer session students from outside this area, and our summer session bulletins eloquently described the climatic and recreational advantages of this coastal region.

### Men's Athletics

By the mid-1930's, the male student enrollment was sufficiently large to justify a strengthening of Men's Physical Education. It became also impossible for one instructor, Mr. Fred Telonicher, to handle all men's athletics. In the opinion of the President and others, the College needed a strong football coach; however, the State did not recognize such a specialized faculty position. Charles Erb, a very colorful personality, a leading member of the University of California (Berkeley) "Wonder Team" under "Andy" Anderson, who had coached successfully at Washington State College (now Washington State University) was available. So the President asked Mr. Telonicher and myself to interview Mr. Erb and, if possible, come to terms with him. The interview took place at the Eureka Inn, and Mr. Erb agreed to coach our football team, provided half of the gate receipts went to his pocket. To this the President agreed, and placed me in charge of managing the football finances. Mr. Telonicher was now relieved of his duties as football coach and was able to concentrate on basketball with notable success.

Mr. Erb did build a strong football team. He imported a number of strong football players who enrolled as students, although the administration had to stretch the admission standards to admit them. Using these, along with some material from the rest of the men's enrollment, he had four spectacularly successful years, crowned by his

victory in 1936 against San Jose State College – a much larger institution – 20 to 0.

Mr. Erb would go to the faculty meetings and, in his inimitably convincing manner, would say: “Yes, I bring these boys to play football; it is your job to educate them.” And a number of them proved educable, graduated, and soon occupied important positions in business and education. Mr. Earl Meneweather was a spark plug in the Erb team, completed his work for the A.B. degree here, and later served as teacher and a successful principal of the East Palo Alto High School. He is the same Meneweather who recently served Humboldt as Ombudsman and Special Assistant to the President.

As mentioned before, Mr. Erb’s pay was derived from the receipts from the sale of football tickets and attendance at the games was vital to him. To attract as many spectators as possible he scheduled Sunday afternoon games with two Catholic Schools, Saint Mary’s College and Santa Clara College, though playing on Sunday was frowned upon by the Humboldt County Ministerial Association. Since our own field was yet undeveloped, the games were played at the Albee Stadium of the Eureka High School. The crowds did come and the games proved profitable for Erb.

On Monday morning following the weekend game, Mr. Erb would come to my office for his half share of the gate receipts, and I would instruct Mrs. Woodcock to issue him a check for the appropriate amount. Two days later Mr. Erb would be broke. His money was spent not on himself, but on others, particularly on members of his team. The rest of the week he would exist on loans from the faculty. When he left he gave me his golf clubs in payment of a loan I had made to him. “That is all I have,” he said. He was very careless in matters of personal finance, but he was such an able coach and such an enthusiastic, personable and likeable individual that when he moved on, he left many friends and fond memories behind. I learned later that he served in the Pacific theater of operations during World War II, and was employed by the army to go to remote islands and convince Japanese soldiers, there stranded, that their Emperor had ended the war.

By 1938 the State recognized men’s athletics as a legitimate segment of instruction, and Herbert Hart was appointed as Professor of Physical Education to coach football and to teach physical education courses.

## Campus Development

By the end of the decade, the College had a new gymnasium and the beginnings of an athletic field started with W.P.A. funds. One day during the Depression, when the President was out of town, a gang of some forty workers appeared on the campus for W.P.A. work. We had some plans for developing a football field in the canyon back of what is now Founders Hall, but had no funds to implement them. These men were assigned to carving the east bank above the canyon and filling the depression. We did not have enough picks and shovels or wheelbarrows on hand, but my good friend, J.J. Krohn, general manager of the California Barrel Company, came to our rescue and loaned us enough tools to put these men to work. For weeks afterwards one could see a group of men, working like ants, building a football field. By 1935 there was enough flat space which, after Mr. Erb succeeded in having a local lumber concern cover it with six inches of sawdust, served as a football practice field. W.P.A. workers accomplished other smaller projects on the campus, and the initials W.P.A. are still embedded on the cement sidewalk bordering the east side of Nelson Hall.

During the 1939 session of the State legislature, Michael J. Burns, whose memory is being honored by calling Highway 101 (in addition to Redwood Highway) the Michael Burns Freeway, was the Assemblyman from this district. He gave an eloquent address before the legislature, describing the “shabby, delapidated, and uncomfortable” temporary buildings used as dormitories at Humboldt, their dismal surroundings, and the primitive conditions under which students had to live.

Indeed living conditions at “Sunset Hall” were as primitive as Burns had described them; but the students of “Sunset Hall” had the good fortune of having as their Head Resident, Miss Imogene B. Platt. Affectionately known as “Maddy” Platt, she contributed much to the physical comfort of the students, to finance their parties, and to build an *esprit de corps* through her motherly solicitude for student needs, and her warmth of character. To this day, the alumni refer to Miss Platt in truly endearing terms.

The conditions described by Assemblyman Burns convinced the legislature that Humboldt needed a decent dormitory. So, under Governor Olson, an appropriation was approved authorizing

the use of \$195,000 to build a new permanent dormitory for Humboldt, the first such facility in any State College. The new structure had two wings, one for men and the other for women students, separated by a dining room and kitchen – the “Commons” – with a small room reserved for faculty dining, all fully equipped. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner were served cafeteria style. Once a week the faculty would meet for lunch with the President to discuss informally such problems and plans as needed faculty cooperation. The building was named Nelson Hall in memory of Senator Hans Nelson of Eureka, who had introduced the legislation founding Humboldt and was for many years its ardent supporter in the legislature.

### The Period as a Whole

The decade of the thirties, especially the first five years, was a period of the Great Depression with its attending critically high unemployment, drop in prices, and deep cuts in wages, salaries, profits, and government revenue. Along with all the other states, California found it very difficult to finance public education, although it must be said, to the credit of the then state administrations, that education still enjoyed a high priority in the budgets of the State. But of necessity, at Humboldt and at other State schools, salaries were to suffer severe cuts, some positions eliminated, faculty teaching loads increased, and other economies effectuated. The faculty were paid not in cash, but in warrants redeemable at the local bank.

The 1932 report of the Director of Finance recommended that three of the State Teachers Colleges, Humboldt, Chico, and Santa Barbara, be closed. This report filed in January of 1933, immediately caused an uproar in every community affected by the Director's recommendation. Petitions and resolutions flooded the legislature and the institutions were saved. Indeed, it was most difficult to defend Humboldt's position because of its small enrollment. The necessity for maintaining certain minimum facilities and personnel at every institution, regardless of size, distinguished Humboldt for having the highest student *per capita* cost of any State College. One time, when I was defending our budget before a legislative committee, one assemblyman told me: “Doctor, we could take every one of your students to San Francisco State College, pay for their board and room, and

educate them there at considerable savings to the State.” It was a long, painful experience, but we endured and in 1934 Humboldt celebrated its twentieth anniversary, much credit for our survival goes to Senator Hans Nelson and Assemblyman Michael Burns.

Those were difficult years, but we made considerable progress, nevertheless, both in terms of instructional programs and enrollment. At one point, Robert Matthews, a long-standing optimist and staunch supporter of the College, was predicting that some day Humboldt would have an enrollment of one thousand students. A preposterous forecast, so we thought! In later years President Siemens was satisfied to call Humboldt “a little friendly school,” and friendly it was. The small faculty and enrollment permitted close personal relations between faculty and students and among faculty and administrators. What we could not offer in material goods, we tried to offer in human values. The institution was student-centered and the faculty had a stake in the survival and reputation of the institution. Personal advantage was minimized and a high quality of instruction was maintained. Neither Socrates nor Plato had the physical facilities some think indispensable to good education. In time Humboldt graduates from those years came to occupy important positions in industry, government, and the professions, and since then have remained the most loyal alumni and supporters of their Alma Mater.