11-1-1984

The Death of an American College: A Retrospective Look

Dean Gabbert

Follow this and additional works at: https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest

Part of the United States History Commons

Recommended Citation

Gabbert, Dean. "The Death of an American College: A Retrospective Look." The Palimpsest 65 (1984), 190-206. Available at: https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol65/iss6/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the State Historical Society of Iowa at Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Palimpsest by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.
The Death of an American College:  
A Retrospective Look

by Dean Gabbert

Fairfield’s darkest day came in an unlikely setting of bright sunshine and spring flowers. It was the day Parsons College died — June 1, 1973 — and it marked the final chapter in an incredible story that had begun nearly eighteen years earlier when the flamboyant Millard G. Roberts became president of Parsons College and set out to make it the most talked-about school in America.

The day started with a 9 o'clock committee meeting in Parsons Hall. Eight people, elected by their peers, huddled in the once-opulent office of Acting President Everett Hadley. Back in the Roberts heyday, they had called it the Cloud Room.

Those present included: Hadley; Robert Gamrath and M.K. Long from the board of trustees; John Amberg, finance officer; Dick Wessler, administrative assistant; Harry Cannon and John Wahrer from the faculty; and Larry Hinton, representing the student body. By 10:15 a.m. they knew what they had to do and how they were going to do it. In solemn procession they walked across Carter Drive and filed into Brown Learning Center, where the entire college community waited with feelings of both fear and hope.

The applause which erupted from the standing room only crowd quickly gave way to silence when Hadley moved to center stage. Reading from a prepared statement, he told his listeners what they didn’t want to hear: The college would close its doors after Saturday’s commencement exercises, less than twenty-four hours away.

"Insurmountable odds," he said, had forced upon them the decision to close the college after ninety-eight years. In a matter-of-fact fashion he said that students would be able to transfer to the University of Iowa or Dubuque University without loss of credit. Students in the aviation program could go to Park College in St. Louis. Someone in the audience sobbed softly. Others tried unsuccessfully to hold back their tears. Hadley kept emotion out of his voice, but when he started to express his thanks to all present, he hesitated, and then handed the paper to a student to read.

The meeting ended with an unexpected bit of drama when Dr. Charles Sloca, an English professor, seized the microphone and proposed a last-ditch scheme to keep the college alive by bringing back Millard Roberts.

"He has the resources to maintain this college, at least for a short period, and he is interested," Sloca declared. The students, however, hooted him down with a loud chorus of "no!"

Since that fateful day ten years ago, Parsons has been the subject of unending autopsies. Both participants and onlookers have offered their own theories and explanations of what happened. In one form or another they have
But in the end, it was probably the college’s monumental debt, exceeding $16 million, that sent the patient to its grave.

When Roberts arrived on the Parsons scene in 1955, he brought with him a consuming personal ambition and a flair for making headlines. He had served on the staff of Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City for three years when he was chosen for the presidency at the age of thirty-seven.

Attacking many educational “sacred cows,” he attracted wide attention with his revolutionary ideas. Few men outside the ranks of politics and show business or inside the ranks of education ever received as much publicity. His supporters praised his practical, hardheaded approach while his critics accused him of being a promoter and a “con man” disguised as an educator.

David Boroff, in his book *Campus U.S.A.*, described him in these words: “Pudgy, flamboyant, tireless, Roberts has the glad-handing manner of a Chamber of Commerce president, the force of a bulldozer, and the guile . . . of a snake-oil salesman.”

One of his first flamboyant acts was to lavish $10,000 on his inauguration, an affair on October 29, 1955, which students jokingly termed “The Ascension.” Roberts’ initial objectives were to boost enrollment and expand the physical plant. He was eminently successful in both areas. For ten straight years Parsons topped all colleges in the state in percentage of enrollment gain. After the student body passed the 1,000-mark, new dormitories sprang up almost overnight and new construction continued at a frantic pace almost to the end of his tenure. His successes were reflected in his local popularity. In 1958 Roberts was chosen Fairfield’s “Man of the Year.” In 1960 he was presented with a new Cadillac as a gift from forty local business and professional people.

In a cascading series of reforms, Roberts...
altered the educational landscape at Parsons. He established the trimester system, making it possible for students to reduce the time they would spend in college while enabling the college to make year-round use of its facilities. Scoffing at the idea that colleges should admit only those students who ranked near the top of their high school classes, Roberts won for Parsons a reputation as America’s “second chance” school. He streamlined the curriculum, increased the student-teacher ratio, and dispatched an army of recruiters across the land to bring in students. At that time higher education was a “seller’s market.” Students turned away at other colleges began to see Parsons as a new hope and they flocked to Fairfield by the hundreds. By 1964 enrollment had reached 2,500 — nearly a ten-fold growth in nine years. By 1966 it had doubled in size again.

Roberts built a strong faculty by openly raiding other institutions with offers of fabulous salaries and fringe benefits. Cynics called it the “Gold Rush” but by 1966 the level of faculty salaries at Parsons was the third highest in the nation.

Roberts found supporters for most of his ideas, but he aroused the ire of the academic world when he contended that colleges could make a profit by borrowing management principles from the corporate world. In 1966 he was quoted by the Wall Street Journal as saying that he expected Parsons to show a profit of $5.3 million that year. His profits were all to be on paper, however. In fact, the college’s debt grew at an average rate of $100,000 per month during Roberts’ twelve-year tenure.

But Roberts’ ability as a salesman caused other communities to clamor for a place on the Parsons “bandwagon.” He once boasted that more than forty cities had asked him to set up new colleges. He did help organize five “satellite” colleges and he was well paid for such consulting services. By 1973, however, four of them had folded and the fifth was in its last throes.

Roberts’ critics accused him of running a one-man show and of playing fast and loose with figures. In time, these and other charges brought him into conflict with both the Presbyterian Church and the North Central Association [NCA]. The first conflict was resolved when, at Roberts’ urging, the board of trustees adopted new articles in 1963 severing Parsons’ historic ties with the church.

His troubles with the North Central Association were not so easily handled. They began in
1962 when six professors, tagged as the “dissidents,” issued a formal complaint against the administration of the college. All were to resign or be fired within a year. Their charges were never made public, but the NCA conducted an investigation and Parsons was placed on probation July 24, 1963. An NCA evaluation team visited the campus in 1964, and the probation was lifted in 1965 with the stipulation that another evaluation be made within two years. Roberts suffered a more damaging blow in June 1966 when Life magazine published a highly-critical article describing him as “The Wizard of Flunk-Out U.”

A new NCA fact-finding team arrived early in 1967 and on April 6 the association announced that it had revoked Parsons’ accreditation, effective June 30. The quality of the college’s academic program was never questioned, but the report cited administrative weaknesses and took Roberts to task for a “credibility gap” in the operation of the college. Roberts threatened legal action against the NCA and this sparked a faculty revolt. By a vote of 101 to 58, the faculty asked the board of trustees to relieve him of his duties. The board took formal action on June 5, 1967, and called for his resignation less than four months after they had granted him a new five-year contract. (Roberts is now retired and living in Oneonta, New York, in a large home which he purchased while at Parsons. His last academic position was that of dean of students at the State University of New York at Albany.)
The post-Roberts era at Parsons was one of frustration and false hopes. Four men headed the administration during the six-year period and their defeats far outnumbered their victories. The first was Dr. William B. Munson, vice-president for academic affairs, who took ill-advised legal action against the North Central Association in federal court in Chicago. His administration lasted less than ninety days.

Next came Dr. Wayne Stamper, chairman of the biology department, who was named provost and later acting president. Stamper took a first step toward making peace with the NCA in 1968 when he won for Parsons the new status of "recognized candidate for accreditation.

When Stamper resigned for reasons of health, on May 10, 1968, the board turned to yet another faculty member, Dr. Carl W. Kreisler, head of the education department. Kreisler was sworn in as president on June 7, 1968, and two months later he announced a long-term refinancing agreement with most of the college's secured creditors, covering more than half the total debts. Kreisler then devoted most of his time to the task of regaining the college's accreditation. His primary goal was to close what the North Central Association had described as a "credibility gap" in the college operations. His work paid off and on April 8, 1970, the NCA voted to restore full accreditation to Parsons. Probably the high point of Kreisler's presidency came on his return from Chicago that night, when celebrating students met his plane at the Fairfield Airport and hoisted him to their shoulders like a triumphant football coach.

During the dark days of 1968 and 1969 the college community, and Fairfield too, had believed that the regaining of accreditation would be the cure for all the ills of the college. When it came, despair gave way to optimism and there was a general belief that enrollment would quickly climb again. But it didn't happen.

Accreditation did little more than put the college on even terms with its competitors. Rapid changes were occurring in higher education. Parsons found itself now with a new set of problems: soaring operating costs; fewer young people of college age; the emergence of community colleges; and a general de-emphasis on the need and importance of a liberal arts education.

If Parsons was slow to adjust to changing conditions, it was even slower to adjust to shrinking revenues. One faculty member characterized the situation as "the old story of a champagne appetite and a beer income."

One of the biggest financial problems for the college was the sprawling physical plant which was out of all proportion to the size of the student body. Continuous construction during the boom years of the 1960s had provided dormitory facilities for 3,600 students, but by 1973 the number housed on campus had dwindled to 500.

Starting early in 1973 the college was beset by a succession of crises that resulted in unwanted publicity as well as campus unrest. On February 24, fifteen faculty members were notified that they would be released at the end of the school year. On March 12 Kreisler resigned as president and the board named Everett Hadley to succeed him as acting president. Hadley had joined the faculty in 1965 as an associate professor of education and psychology, and had later served as vice-president of student services and dean of college life.

By April the proverbial handwriting was on the wall for those who could see it. On April 26 the college confirmed that it could not meet its May 1 payroll. Those earning $600 or more per month were to receive only half-pay and hourly workers would be placed on a half-time schedule starting May 1.

Early in May, Kranin, one of the fifteen faculty members scheduled for layoff, claimed the cutbacks were illegal and threatened legal
At the May 1973 meeting of the board of trustees, board members opted to try and save Parsons College by seeking protection of the court under Chapter 11 of the federal bankruptcy code. Clockwise, from left to right, Robert Gamrath, T.J. McDonough, Roger Lund, Everett Hadley, and John Amberg. (courtesy the Fairfield Ledger)

action. At the same time, Kranin (who used only one name) charged that Kreisler had drawn his presidential salary from Parsons College from December 15 to March 12 while serving as a full-time faculty member at Western Kentucky University.

Kreisler had been granted sabbatical leave without pay for the 1971 fall semester to serve as a visiting professor at the Kentucky school. After returning to Parsons in December, he had continued to commute between Fairfield and Bowling Green. Kreisler agreed to pay back the monies received during the three-month period, but the whole affair put a cloud over the services of the man who had worked for nearly two years to regain accreditation for Parsons.

A movement to close the college had strong support when the board of trustees convened for its spring meeting May 17, 1973. And closure would have probably occurred at that time had it not been for T.J. McDonough, a Drake law professor and member of a Des Moines law firm, who appeared on the scene with what looked like a daring and last-ditch plan to save Parsons. By seeking protection of the court under Chapter 11 of the federal bankruptcy code, McDonough counseled, the college could continue to operate while being temporarily freed of its crushing debt.

The trustees voted to accept this plan, but on May 18 they faced a new problem. The four Iowa banks which held a $556,000 mortgage on all books in the campus library instigated foreclosure proceedings and impounded the college’s dwindling bank account. The loan had been the joint effort of the First National Bank and the Iowa State Bank and Trust Company, Fairfield, Union Bank and Trust Company, Ottumwa, and Merchants National Bank,
Cedar Rapids. The terms of the loan called for payments twice a year. The first payment of principal and interest had been made in October 1972, but only the interest had been paid in February 1973. The banks denied any intention of physically closing the college library, saying that they only wished to protect their interests.

At this time the board also voted to reinstate the fifteen faculty members, offering them new contracts in an effort to forestall any lawsuits that could further jeopardize the college’s precarious position. In an interesting sidelight, the board also accepted the resignation of board chairman Roger Lund, Des Moines, and named a recently-appointed trustee, twenty-nine year old Arthur Grant of San Francisco, to succeed him. A 1967 graduate of Parsons, Grant was the youngest board chairman ever to serve. And his tenure as chairman was also the shortest — fifteen days, to be exact.

On May 26 Judge Richard F. Stageman conducted a day-long hearing in Des Moines on Parsons’ request for protection under Chapter 11 of the bankruptcy act. Most members of the college community were braced for bad news, but few were prepared for the twelve-page death sentence which Judge Stageman handed down on May 29. Describing the college as “irretrievably insolvent,” he ordered it to post $250,000 in surety bonds within ten days in order to receive protection from its creditors. Candidly, he stated that he believed his order would in effect close the college unless it was reversed by a higher court.

He was right. The trustees who lived in Fairfield voted to close Parsons at an emergency meeting May 31. They then called the out-of-town trustees and asked them to concur in the action. There were no dissenters. The only remaining formality was a final meeting of the
committee of administrators, faculty, and staff which had been created by the board to work with the bankruptcy court.

Voluntary bankruptcy proceedings were filed early in June and only then did the reality of the college's total debt become clear: it was a staggering $16,241,119.49. That figure included secured debts of $12,675,239.47, judgment creditors with claims totaling $71,227.23, with an unsecured debt of $3,494,652.79. The largest secured creditors were the Connecticut General and Connecticut Mutual Life Insurance Companies which together held mortgage bonds totaling $7,263,000.

Since the peak of 5,141 students in the fall of 1966, enrollment had fallen to below 500. A special United States census requested by the city in 1966 placed Fairfield's population at 11,587. At its peak Parsons employed 814 individuals, including 250 faculty members. By 1973 the college payroll had shrunk to 175, which included administrators, faculty, staff workers, and hourly employees.

Acting President Hadley, who was to become director of admissions and associate professor of education at Ohio Northern University, had no misgivings about those final days of Parsons College. "It was a difficult scene," he once told the *Fairfield Ledger* in a telephone interview, "but there was also hope." Basically an optimist, Hadley said he never lost hope that Parsons would survive until Judge Stageman called for the $250,000 surety bond. "Then I knew we were dead," he said. Hadley also recalled the herculean job of contacting Parsons' creditors after the decision had been made to seek Chapter 11 court pro-
Cardboard bankruptcy signs told a mute story when they were posted at various locations on the Parsons campus. The college's debt totaled more than $16 million. (courtesy the Fairfield Ledger)

tection. "We called 728 creditors and 726 of them acquiesced. That [had] to be a minor miracle," he said.

Fairfield Mayor Robert Rasmussen believed Parsons might have continued to exist if the college had been able to hold its enrollment to 2,500 or 3,000 students. "There seemed to be no way to stop the merry-go-round," he once said. "As enrollment increased, additional facilities were needed. That meant borrowing more money and bringing in more students to maintain the cash flow. On and on it went."

Rasmussen had served as director of public relations at Parsons between 1959 and early 1972. He had joined the staff of the Iowa League of Municipalities in 1973 and was a member of the city council when the college closed. In his mind there were two basic reasons for Parsons' phenomenal growth in the early 1960s. One was the sudden demand for technology which caused Americans to look upon a college degree as a stepping-stone to all things. The other was the inability of most eastern colleges to meet the new enrollment demands. "These were the things that gave Parsons the impetus to take on the educational establishment," claimed Rasmussen. Acknowledging that the Parsons approach of spoonfeeding its students was a drastic change, Rasmussen remained convinced that the system worked very well. One measure he pointed to were the large numbers of Parsons students who went on to highly successful careers. Yet he contended that Parsons was doomed the day it lost its accreditation. "That meant the college [would lose] students and . . . the cash flow they provided."

Harry Cannon, who had come to Parsons in 1971 as chairman of business and accounting, had suffered through the closure of Lea Col-
The Palimpsest

College, one of Roberts' satellite institutions in Albert Lea, Minnesota. He had been a member of that last committee at Parsons which had been forced to make the ultimate closure decision on June 1, 1973. In the aftermath, Cannon believed something might have been done to save the college in the early 1960s. "But in retrospect, I don't think what we did or didn't do made much difference." Cannon believed that mortgaging the library had been a major mistake, one which led directly to the demise of the college. He was also critical of T.J. McDonough, the lawyer who had persuaded the board to move into Chapter 11 bankruptcy. "He led us to see that as the only alternative. If we had been a business, maybe Chapter 11 would have made it fly, but the college was not a business and we overlooked that. But I really can't blame that man, because in our desperation, we listened to him a little too eagerly."

Although Cannon's years at Parsons were difficult ones, he had glowing praise for the entire college community. "They hung in there and they did a good job against impossible odds," he said. "When it came time to close, we did it with order and dignity." He thought that the struggle to stay alive had brought people together, and he cited the cooperation among faculty members, the solidarity and maturity of students, and the support of the community.

Cannon remains as a prime source for what transpired at that last committee meeting held in Acting President Hadley's office. He has pointed out that while the trustees had voted the previous Thursday morning to close the college, they were prepared to hold off if the committee could arrive at a reasonable plan to keep things going.

"It was a free-wheeling discussion," he recalled. "We thought we could make it through the summer or even the fall, but there was no way we could do it without hurting the students and the community. Somebody asked Hadley to make a motion to close the college, but he wouldn't do it. So there never was a motion, but there was a consensus and the decision was made. I cried a little at that meeting."

Charles Barnett, executive vice-president of the Fairfield Area Chamber of Commerce, was once asked if there was much the community could have done to save Parsons during its last years. He replied, "When you're faced with unbearable fixed costs and an unbearable debt load, you don't have many choices."
Barnett was a 1953 graduate of Parsons and a longtime college staff member. He served as director of admissions until June 1, 1970, when he moved to Florida. Barnett believed that the departure of Millard Roberts was followed by a power struggle within the administration which tended to ignore other problems that should have had priority. "Roberts was a very powerful figure. By leaving, he created a vacuum and when that happens there's always a rush to fill it. Everybody wanted to know who was going to be boss. Instead, they should have been doing something about debt management, which was then the No. 1 problem."

Robert L. Gamrath, veteran Fairfield businessman, has described the final months and weeks of Parsons College as a time when "it seemed like we were taking one step forward and two backward." Gamrath had been named to the board of trustees in 1967, only a month after Roberts' departure, and during the last years he had served as vice-chairman under Roger Lund. As the college's problems became more complex, increased responsibility fell on Gamrath and the other six Fairfield board members: Scott Jordan, John Hunt, Lee Gobble, Robert Parkin, Ron Blough, and L.T. Evans. "It seemed like each semester we had to make a decision whether we were going to operate or not. We tried everything we could to keep things going."

In Gamrath's mind, hope began to fade in March 1973, when the trustees approached the two major creditors in Hartford, Connecticut, for an additional loan of $500,000. They were assured by the insurance companies' counsels that they had done the job, but in the end the loan was turned down. "Our biggest problem was not the secured but the unsecured creditors," Gamrath said. "We were spending two-thirds of our time and money on the unsecured creditors."

Gamrath could take solace in the fact that the college was able to pay its bills during its last six years, or at least until shortly before the end.

"Not one person went broke because of us," he said. Gamrath believed strongly that it was important to keep the college open as long as there was any hope of survival. It was painful to watch the size of the college operation diminish each year, but he was convinced that it was better than an abrupt closing which would have set off a rush to sell houses and otherwise damaged Fairfield's economy. "Where the community was concerned, I guess it was a case of being let down easy."

As the college's financial picture went from bad to worse in the spring of 1973, the board reached for whatever straws were available, including a possible merger with Ottumwa Heights College. "If we could have gotten..."
through the summer, we might have been able to limp into fall,” Gamrath said. “But we seemed to be devoting too much money and time [to] just putting out fires... It had reached the place where there was a question of the board’s personal liability.” Gamrath also made some observations on the mortgaging of the college library collection. “The banks knew that was a lousy loan in the first place. They did it to help us. The closing was inevitable and they weren’t the ones who closed it.”

A senior member of the Parsons faculty, Philip E. “Tib” Young, has contended that the college was closed not because of Millard Roberts but because of a series of mistakes made by the board of trustees and others. “You understand I’m not defending Bob Roberts, he was a mistake himself, but the board didn’t use good common sense after Roberts departed,” Young said. “What they did was like hiring Walt Alston to coach the Chicago Bears. The men who followed Roberts were capable and good men when it came to academics, but you don’t hire a good baseball man to coach football.”

More than anything else, Young believed Parsons at that time needed a good, hard-nosed businessman to run things. “The problem then was not academics, it was business.” As enrollment declined, Young, who had come to Parsons in 1945 as head football coach, athletic director, and dean of students, felt that the
college administration didn't face up to the need for faculty cutbacks. During its final year of operation, he claimed, the college had twenty-two more faculty members than it could use. "The head of the speech department left and we should have let attrition take care of it . . . but we hired a new speech head although we had only five speech majors at the time." Young thought that the college should have decided how many faculty it needed and then informed them that they would be paid only fifty percent of their salaries for the next year. "I'm sure there would have been enough people willing to do this to keep the college going."

High on his list of mistakes was the decision to mortgage the library books. "This just drove more nails in the coffin." He also believed that the four banks involved were too quick to initiate foreclosure action. "The big insurance companies weren't pushing us. I think they had already written off their loans as bad debts and as long as the college was open, they had a chance to get a little back." He believed everyone would have been better off had the banks set up some kind of a collection plan with the college. "They could have moved somebody into the business office and taken one dollar of every four that came in, for example."

Young also agreed with the others about the decision to seek protection under Chapter 11 of the federal bankruptcy code. "Hadley and the administration were assured this was the way to go, but I think they were misled."

Lee Gobble, a Fairfield clothier, had strong Parsons ties, but he was not one to speculate on what did or did not cause the college to close. The college's downhill slide and eventual closing caused him pain, but he kept any feelings and opinions about the people involved to him-
Gobble served two hitches on the board of trustees, the first from 1955 to 1967, at which time he resigned at Roberts' request. He was reappointed to the board in 1970 and served during the college's last three years. There's one area he has discussed and that was the quality of education at Parsons during the Roberts years and beyond. "It was a great thing to see a student come here after he had failed to make the grade in other places and then watch him bloom. And not just a few, but hundreds of them."

Probably more than anyone in Fairfield, Gobble kept track of former Parsons people — students, faculty, and staff. Gobble's store, in fact, became an unofficial clearinghouse for any Parsons people passing through Fairfield. Not only has Gobble maintained in his store a large guest book listing the name, address, class, and comments of visitors dating back to 1971, but he has also made it a point to call on Parsons people in his travels.

Gobble's store is perhaps the only place in the world where one can still buy Parsons T-shirts, coffee mugs, and other items. "People come in and think they are left over and I always have to explain that this is new merchandise." Parsons T-shirts remain in demand, including one or two old favorites that have recorded sales beyond the 1,000-mark. "I've got one more T-shirt in mind," Gobble once said in a Ledger interview. "The inscription will read "There'll always be a Parsons College."

Supporting Gobble's comments about educational quality, Barry Green, a member of the last graduating class at Parsons College, believed he received a better education at Parsons than he would have gotten at a larger university. Green, a former resident of Centerville, Iowa, came to Parsons after two years at Indian Hills Community College's Centerville campus. At Parsons, Green received his bachelor's degree in education, specializing in math. He later completed a master's degree in secondary school administration at the University of Iowa. "I think my work at Parsons gave me an advantage in graduate school," Green was impressed by the emphasis on scholarship and the concern for the student at Parsons. "I thought the faculty was just great."

Charles Sloca, the English professor who proposed bringing back Millard Roberts on that last fateful day of the college's existence, has suggested that Richard Stageman, the federal bankruptcy judge, should bear some of the blame for the death of Parsons College. "[Stageman] imagined himself an authority on education. He told me in Des Moines that 'Frankly there are too many colleges and some of them have to go under.'"

When Parsons asked the bankruptcy court for protection from its creditors, Stageman ordered the college to post surety bonds of
$250,000 within ten days, something which Sloca described as “an enormous penalty.” Because of the adverse publicity which Parsons had received, Sloca thought that Stageman might have believed that education would be better off if the college were closed.

Sloca had been a controversial figure from the time he joined the Parsons faculty in 1957 as dean of the college and professor of English. Roberts had fired him as dean in 1964, blaming him for the actions of six professors who had made a critical report to the North Central Association. Sloca smiled when he recalled Roberts’ words: “They [the dissidents] were out to get me, Charlie, but they got you instead.”

A strong critic of the Hadley administration, Sloca believed the decision to place Parsons under Chapter 11 bankruptcy scared the banks and caused them to foreclose on the college library collections. Sloca has contended that the library could have been saved for about $80,000. “It breaks my heart that I didn’t see it until it was too late.”

Sloca had petitioned Judge Stageman to release the library books to the banks and he had appealed to the banks’ counsel, Ottumwa attorney Wilbur Dull, to support the plan. “We still had prospects for 700 students in the fall and we could have repaid the banks right off the top.” His proposal never got off the ground which caused Sloca to begin what he termed “my legal education.” Together with a fellow faculty member, R. Brank Fulton, Sloca filed a suit in federal court, charging that the college had been deprived of its library without due
process. Tenaciously, he pursued it all the way to the top and the college bankruptcy wheels ground to a halt until the justices of the United States Supreme Court voted 8-1 not to hear the case. Sloca's only support came from Justice William O. Douglas, a one-time Parsons commencement speaker. "It was an education in both law and futility," Sloca recalled.

Why did Professor Sloca propose bringing back former president Roberts on that Friday morning when the closing of the college was announced?

"I had thought about it, I had talked to him on the phone a few days before and he was interested," Sloca said later in an interview. "I forgave him his arrogance and his contempt for the faculty. I thought he might be able to do something." But Sloca wasn't prepared for the bitter reaction to his proposal. "I didn't realize the hatred for this man. It was like going to a funeral and trying to lift up the corpse when everybody else [wanted] to bury it."

An individual who saw Parsons as both a student and staff member was Dave Neff. He had been an undergraduate during the boom years of the late 1960s. Having graduated in 1969, he had joined the athletic staff that fall as intramural director.

Dave valued his days at Parsons, both as a student and a member of the staff. But he has described the late 1960s as a period of uncontrolled growth. "It was a time of counting up how many students you had and then building whatever was needed."

The college lacked financial stability and direction after losing its accreditation in 1967. Better communications with creditors and some kind of a financial plan might have softened the blow. "When enrollment declined there seemed to be panic and not much else."

According to Neff, the time to regroup and look for programs that would have given the school greater stability was when Parsons regained its accreditation in 1970. "My hindsight, of course, is 20-20."

* * *

A standing audience estimated at 500 gathered for Parsons' final commencement on Saturday morning, June 2, 1973. Exercises were held "on the green" between Foster and Ewing Halls.

The speaker, United States Senator Dick Clark, told graduates that "for the last few years, the administration, faculty and students have worked together to save the college. That you did not succeed . . . does not make the effort any less worthwhile. And, I think, in terms of your own achievement, it has been a success."

The college awarded its last honorary degrees to Senator Clark and Sydney Spayde, the retired head of the fine arts department. Then the gathering sang the alma mater and
Parsons College faculty and students gathered to sing the alma mater one last time. (courtesy the Fairfield Ledger)

Parsons passed into history.

Where the wild rose tints
the prairies
With its summer sheen,
Stands our noble Alma Mater,
Of the Rose and Green.

Lift the chorus till it reaches
Even heaven’s blue,
Singing to our Alma Mater,
Parsons, hail to you.

Note on Sources

The files of the Fairfield Ledger were the source for nearly all of the material used in the story. Other sources include the author’s recollections and observations while gathering and writing news stories during the final days of Parsons College. Two volumes were also used: David Boroff, Campus U.S.A. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), and Willis Edwards Parsons, Fifty Years of Parsons College 1875-1925 (Fairfield, Iowa: 1925).

The editor of the Palimpsest should like to thank Dean and Joyce Gabbert for the time, effort, and assistance they gave to this project.