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September 27, 1910.

*At first everything went wrong,
the day the state commission to choose the site of the northeastern Ohio normal school came to Kent.
The 4,500 residents awoke to a chill wet morning of fog so dense it smudged their weeks of work
to make the village sparkle and shine.*

*Then the wires of communication got crossed.
And when the five commission members detrained at the Erie Depot at 11:00 a.m., there was no one to welcome them
because the reception committee of the Kent Board of Trade was a mile away, on the outskirts of town.
They expected the state commissioners to be traveling by motorcar and were waiting to greet them
along the roads coming from Wadsworth—one of many competitors for the normal school,
which was much coveted for the prosperity and prestige it would bring.*

*After some embarrassed scurrying about, the Kent men finally found the commissioners,
clad them in borrowed rain gear and boots, and drove them out unpaved East Main Street
to survey the farm William S. Kent was offering as site for the school.
Leading them up through thick undergrowth of brambles and grasses, the
Kent men trumpeted the “magnificent view” to be seen from the summit.
But when they got there, nothing could be seen through the encompassing gray fog.
Small wonder the commissioners, now as chilled and damp as were the spirits of their hosts,
betrayed some impatience to move on to their next inspection site in Ravenna, where they were expected at noon.*

*Seizing the moment—and thus saving the day—
the Kent men told the commissioners that a hot meal was waiting for them at the Merrill home in Twin Lakes,
which happened to be on the road to Ravenna.*

*Assured that it would not be out of their way, the commissioners listened to their stomachs
and soon found themselves seated around a banquet table that fairly groaned with platters of fried chicken and blue gill
fresh-plucked from the lake. After a leisurely lunch, they repaired to the porch for cigars and cider.
There their hosts beguiled them with the countless reasons for locating the normal school in Kent.*

*The Ravenna welcoming committee had been waiting, with mounting anxiety,
for four hours when three cars braked in front of the city hotel and the five commissioners climbed out,
along with some familiar Kent faces, all smiling and laughing.
The Ravenna men knew in their bones that they had missed their lunch and wasted four hours—all for nothing:
the normal school would not be coming to their town. And they were right,
though the commissioners did not make their final decision until after paying a surprise visit,
on November 12, to the fifty-three-acre Kent Farm.
There was, luckily, no fog to conceal what all agreed was a truly “magnificent” panorama of town, river, and countryside
to be viewed from the eminence soon to be called Normal Hill.*



The Frank A. Merrill farm on West Twin Lake, near the Ravenna Road.

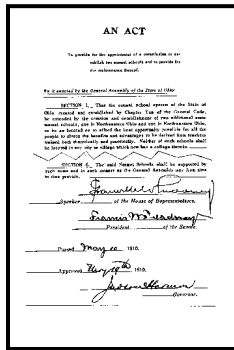
In this pastoral setting the normal school inspection commissioners enjoyed the legendary “blue-gill dinner” in 1910.

The day of the Blue Gill Dinner stands as a brief epitome of the history of Kent State University, of its struggles and triumphs. The resilience, fortitude, and quick thinking of the Kent Board of Trade, led by Martin L. Davey, would prove to be among the key qualities that, in the decades ahead, would enable the Kent school to endure and evolve, often against very great odds, into a major institution of higher learning.

The Kent State Normal School was created by the Lowry Normal School Bill of 1910, which authorized two new normals—one in the northwestern, another in the northeastern parts of the state. The Lowry bill was the last of numerous measures that had been proposed and defeated over several years to meet the urgent need for professionally trained elementary teachers in the northern half of the state. Ohio was one of the last states to provide professional training for its elementary teachers. Not until 1902 did the state’s oldest schools—Ohio and Miami universities—get colleges of education. The Ohio State University (OSU) had to wait until 1907. This predisposed all three, but especially so OSU, to treat any new schools as rivals. Moreover, those institutions were sprinkled across the mostly rural and small-town southern half of the state, where the fulcrum of political power had shifted after the death, in 1904, of Cleveland’s political boss Mark Hanna. Yet the greatest need for trained teachers was in the school systems popping up in the increasingly urbanized and industrialized northern half, which was also the most populous and prosperous. Political conflicts springing from sectional rivalry and competition for state funds, favor, and preeminence would shape much of the history of the Kent school.

In the school’s first sixteen years the “storm centre” of those conflicts was invariably its founding president, John Edward McGilvrey, whom the first Board of Trustees charged to “build the best normal school in the nation.” McGilvrey, a man of flair and dash, devoted all his abundant intellectual and vital energies to doing that—and much more. A dreamer and doer, he had a ranging, creative mind and a zest for innovation and experimentation—all in service of his belief in education’s power for “intellectual and moral quickening.” He was able to see the shape of the future beneath the shifting surface of current events. He sensed, as early as 1911, that the crest of the normal school movement was subsiding and that the rising tide favored institutions that trained teachers for

Prof. Lida M. Layton (right) conducts a “domestic science and household arts” class in one of the circus tents President McGilvrey set up to house the flood of students who showed up for Kent’s second summer of classes (1914).

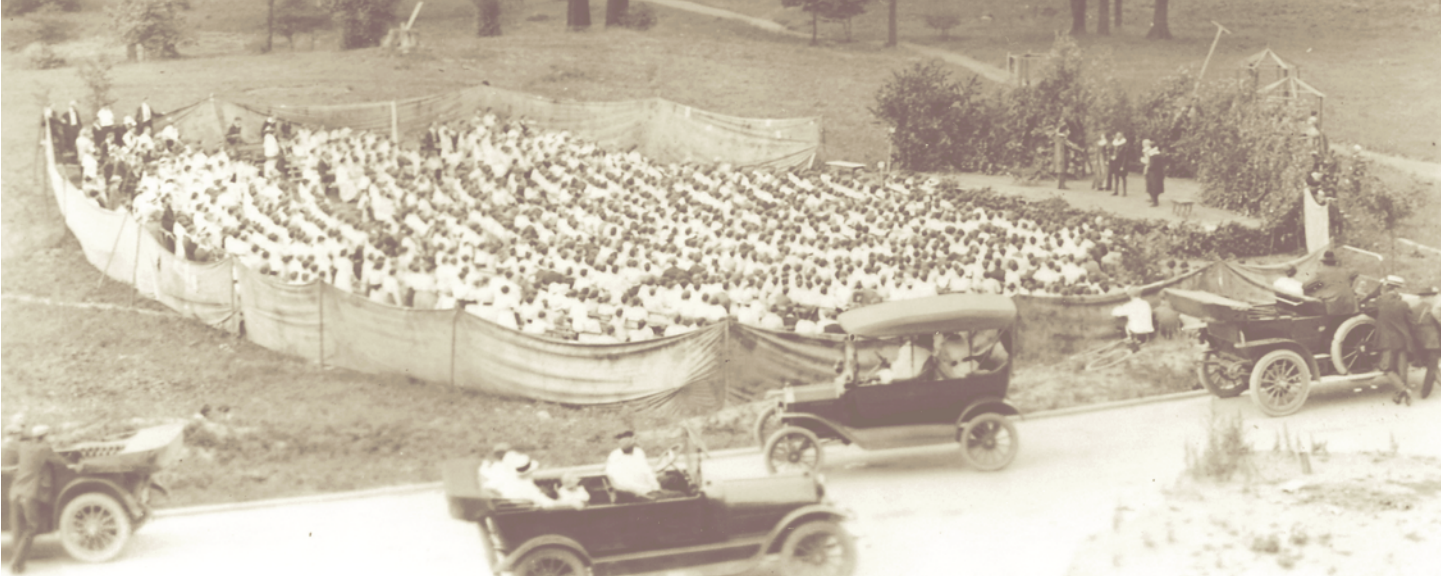


On May 9, 1910, Governor Harmon signed House Bill No. 44 (the Lowry Bill), which authorized the building of two new normal schools, one at Kent and one at Bowling Green.

the state’s burgeoning high schools. This meant that Kent would not long endure if it remained a two-year, degree-granting normal school. So he planned an alumni association and charted the course and set the coordinates for the school—to become first a college, then to add a liberal arts college, and finally to become a university—all before he had a campus or students or faculty. In his first catalog (October 1912) he disclosed his intention to make Kent a four-year college. That same fall, while the first classroom building (Merrill) and residence hall (Lowry) were still abuilding, he enrolled 849 students in twenty extension centers in area cities. Just four months later 1,045 students were studying in twenty-five such centers. And, in July 1914, Kent graduated its first class—a good year before classes even started at Bowling Green, its sister normal school. Within a few years, Kent had the biggest extension system in the country. And its on-campus summer enrollment was far larger than OSU and nearly equaled the combined enrollments of Ohio University, Miami University, and Bowling Green State Normal.

Formal instruction began at Kent in May 1913. Forty-seven students showed up for the first summer term, and two of the school’s most venerable traditions began the very next day. One group of Lowry women complained that chirruping birds had disturbed their sleep; another faulted the cook for cutting “the pies in nine pieces.” Enrollment soared to 290 for the second summer term. For McGilvrey and the faculty, however, campus life really began that fall, with the opening of the school’s first full academic year. When enrollments exceeded classroom space, McGilvrey, ever resourceful, had carpenters build the “Tabernacle,” a wood-roofed, canvas-walled, earth-floored structure that served as convocation and lecture hall for some 250 people. When yet more space was needed, he had them pitch four spacious white circus tents on top of Normal Hill.

That first class had six men and 138 women. Seventy women lived in what they called “Walden Hall” (Lowry), for its sylvan setting and for McGilvrey’s nonconformist hero Henry David Thoreau. Women would outnumber men, though by decreasing numbers, until 1939. Exhilarated to be part of an institution full of high promise, the “Walden” women founded a dramatic club and published a yearbook, *The Chestnut Burr*—named for the spiky burrs dropped by the chestnut trees that covered Normal Hill before the blight took them. In



The Ben Greet Players, a famous troupe of traveling Shakespeareans, entertain a town-gown audience on front campus (1914).

addition to classrooms, Merrill Hall housed administrative offices, dispensary, and the library, which sisters Margaret and Isabelle Dunbar started with 350 books. In 1915 the library moved to the atrium of the new Administration Building. The first newspaper was a weekly produced by ninth graders at the training school, a key component of all normal schools. But the next year some normal students started the weekly *Kentonian*, precursor of the *Kent Stater* (1926). Athletics were intramural at first, because there were so few men and because McGilvrey could see no correlation between varsity sports and the training of good teachers. This explains why the school's sports record, especially in basketball and football, ranged from dismal to disgraceful for years. A push to field competitive football teams began in 1920. But three painful years passed before Kent scored its first touchdown, and in that season Kent lost to Baldwin Wallace, 118-0. The teams improved markedly later in the decade.

When McGilvrey was not spending his spare time planting trees, bushes, and ivy, he was seeding many of the traditions (Campus Day, Homecoming, a cultural enrichment program that evolved into the Artist-Lecture Series, Maypole dancing, and step-singing) that would become enduring parts of the school's life. He persuaded the Trustees to purchase a snappy red Stanley Steamer to pick up summer students who trolleyed—a ten-minute ride cost a nickel—from cottages in Silver and Brady lakes. In front of Lowry he set up a Chau-tauqua-style alfresco arena where visiting artists and lecturers entertained and enlightened town and gown. Determined to make education as inexpensive as possible, he fixed room and board costs at \$4.00 per week per student and would charge no fees or tuition. “No obstacles,” he said, “will be placed in the way of students or teachers seeking to prepare themselves for better public service.” At the first commencement ceremony, in July, 1914, Ohio Governor James M. Cox declared Kent “an inspiration to other institutions in Ohio.”

Sometime after 1915, when the school became Kent State College, McGilvrey sketched a fifty-year plan. It featured a “semi-circle of classical buildings” strung along crescent-shaped Normal Hill. It projected as its ultimate goal a full-fledged university, a student body of 10,000, and a wide spectrum of graduate programs. To implement it, he took a number of bold initiatives that met with immediate success but raised the eyebrows and blood pressures of more hide-



Benefactors Mr. and Mrs. William Stewart Kent with the first Board of Trustees, the school's first president, and its first architect: [left to right] John A. McDowell (sec.), Mrs. Kent, James P. Seward (vice-pres.), Edwin F. Moulton (pres.), Frank A. Merrill (tres.), Peter F. Doyle, Pres. McGilvrey, architect George F. Hammond, and Mr. Kent.



John Edward McGilvrey (1911-1926). Kent's visionary founder was called the "Meiklejohn of the West" for his bold innovations and "the storm centre" for his conflicts with the educational establishment.

bound educators, who referred to him as "that Little Upstart." For example, to make education available to people living too far from campus and extension centers or needing specialized courses of study, he began, in 1922, offering correspondence courses carrying full college credit. That same year he introduced summer educational tours, to broaden students' understanding of history and the world. The first tour offered credit in either history or geography and included a series of lectures followed by a visit to historic sights in the Washington, D. C., area. This program, though it did not long survive McGilvrey's departure, foreshadowed what in the 1980s became one of the nation's most extensive international exchange programs. This array of progressive approaches to curriculum, evaluation (pass/fail), extension, correspondence and rural education programs, educational tours, and student life soon caused a stir in national education circles. Kent became known as "the fastest growing college" in the land, and educators from prestigious institutions from Ohio and other states came to Kent to consult with McGilvrey.

But Kent's success and McGilvrey's acclaim galled his foe, OSU president William Oxley Thompson. They first clashed in 1912 when Thompson, roused by McGilvrey's plan for a four-year school, called the presidents to Columbus and told McGilvrey Kent was to remain a two-year normal. This triggered a thirteen-year struggle over Kent's future: Would it stay a normal school or grow into a college and later a university? The struggle was waged in the press, in the legislature, and in state education circles, where Thompson had great influence, and involved many skirmishes. In 1915, for example, McGilvrey marshaled other college presidents and blocked Thompson's move to impose uniform fees on all state schools. And twice—in 1921 and 1923—Thompson thwarted McGilvrey's plans for a liberal arts college. But no issue was more hotly contested than that of the funding formula, which greatly favored OSU and, in descending order, Ohio U. and Miami U. McGilvrey denounced it privately and publicly as inequitable and inappropriate. Why should the southern schools, he asked, get proportionately more state money than Kent and Bowling Green, which served the region providing the lion's share of state revenues? He eventually won his campaign for a formula based on a per-student cost of instruction, but it was a costly victory. In 1923 a Thompson-appointed committee gave Kent a no-credit rating, and OSU stopped accepting transfer credits from Kent students, starting what McGilvrey called the "Credit War." Soon institutions in and out of Ohio lined up behind OSU, threatening Kent's very existence.

McGilvrey had prestigious allies. *The New York Times* compared him favorably to Amherst's famous educational reformer Alexander Meiklejohn, and Columbia University, home of the nation's leading college of education, put Kent on its list of schools approved for transfer credit. But Thompson's voice rang louder in the chambers of the state office of education, and McGilvrey's support among Kent's trustees crumbled as the Credit War ground on. In January, 1926, while he was in England arranging an exchange program with Cambridge University, the trustees fired him, ostensibly for having left campus without giving official notice. And their decision stuck, despite public outcries and student protests. In his valedictory McGilvrey, ever undaunted, scorched the state's educational "drillmasters" for their "goose-stepping credit systems" and their blindness to "the moving power of ideals." Though exiled from campus until 1934, he continued waging his campaign to win university status for his school until May 17, 1935, when Governor Davey signed House Bill No. 324, making Kent State University. McGilvrey was a man who expands life's possibilities for others.