

1-2-98

CHAPEL

When I entered Southern Methodist University in 1937, attendance at weekly Chapel was mandatory for all undergraduates.

At 11:00, every Thursday morning, no other classes were scheduled and the entire student body of some twelve hundred students took assigned seats in McFarlin Auditorium. The first order of business was the taking of the roll. Students who had the plush jobs as monitors checked out two rows each, listing vacant seats, with the names of the persons assigned to them. Chapel was not high on anyone's list of things to do on Thursday morning, so an occasional student who had his quota of three unexcused absences would persuade a friend with few or no absences to sit in his seat. I early discovered that organ students played great preludes while we were getting settled in our seats, giving delightful concerts on the magnificent organ in McFarlin Auditorium, a good reason for being early.

A typical morning began with a number of school officials, led by Dean of Students A.C. Zumbrunnen, filing onto the stage and taking their seats. The dean, a lean, tall man, would step to the lectern, clear his throat several times, call the student body to order, and open the service with a prayer in his typically dry fashion. He would then make announcements, clearing his throat every few words. Next, he would introduce the speaker for the day, usually a member of the faculty, often from the Theology School.

We would settle down more or less attentively to hear the address, without any expectation of much entertainment, sometimes inspirational, sometimes didactic, and nearly always dull. We were required to be there. A summons to the Dean's office was the penalty for excessive absences. During student elections the speeches might be made by aspiring student politicians, campaigning for themselves or one of their pals. Many of the students would bring books to study or papers to finish before the next class, although such conduct was not encouraged. At 11:50 chapel would be over until the following Thursday.

Chapel was the obvious place for general announcements to the student body, and these were sometimes in the form of remonstrances. Once Dean Zum was gently demanding better behavior on the part of the students, citing the embarrassment the University suffered when important visitors were being shown around the campus and came upon a group of students (hrmfuf, hrmfuf) smoking, sometimes right under a sign that said (hrmfuf, hrmfuf) "NO SMOKING"! In the momentary silence there came from the rear of the auditorium a quite distinct "Tsk,Tsk"! In the ensuing applause and bedlam, Dean Zum quickly changed to a new topic.

I don't remember any overt grumbling in the audience about compulsory chapel during my first year at SMU, but by my sophomore year the *Semi-weekly Campus*, the student newspaper, began a series of editorials agitating for fewer, or even no, chapels. Frequently when Dean Zumbrunnen would clear his throat for the fourth or fifth time, the audience would become audibly restless. At

first Dean Zum would ignore such noises, but soon the sounds became so obtrusive that he was forced to comment on the rudeness and call on us to behave properly.

By midterm, more obvious rebellion made itself manifest during chapel. One Thursday, a marble rolled down the center aisle, then another one down a side aisle, and several more, one at a time, through the seats. The floor was hard and the noise, while not loud, was plainly protesting, and it soon caused titters among the student body. By the next year the interruptions were more imaginative, but the faculty had not responded to the protests.

One Thursday, an alarm clock went off in the footlights on the stage. As soon as it was found and turned off, another one began in a different part of the footlights. In all, some four alarms sounded, with a frantic Dean searching them out and glaring at the students. He admonished us with a little speech about the disruptions, and chapel proceeded on schedule.

More articles urging the cessation of compulsory Chapel appeared in the *Semi-weekly Campus*, without any further comment from the faculty. No more disruptions occurred until the last Thursday of the Spring Semester. On that day, a feisty little Fox Terrier walked across the stage from stage left to stage right. It was received with obvious delight by the students. After order was restored, the same little dog walked back across the stage, from stage right to stage left, this time to the accompaniment of enthusiastic applause. Dean Zum was delivering his annual end-of-the-year talk. He continued doggedly to the end with more than usual throat clearings, wished us all a productive summer, and hoped he would see us the following fall.

The first *Semi-weekly Campus* of the fall semester, 1939, bore a great black banner announcing the end of Chapel. I'm sure the only regret came from the student checkers who thereby lost their cushy jobs.