In the Beginning There Was Hovey

Chapel Talk - November 18, 2010

Today I propose to review the life of Edmund Otis Hovey, to explain why his portrait is the first in the sequence of the fifteen that line the left and right-hand walls of this Chapel, rather than that of Caleb Mills, our first professor, or Elihu Baldwin, our first President. And this may be more than a matter of chronology, although it is true that Hovey was here before any of the others. In fact, Hovey hired both Mills and Baldwin. And, I think it is fair to say that if fate had not intervened to provide Hovey with a college education, to bring him to the Wabash country at just the right time, and to forestall his resigning when his fund-raising efforts were going nowhere, there would be no Wabash College today.

Edmund Otis Hovey was born in Hanover, New Hampshire – home of Dartmouth College – on July 15, 1801. A few years later his father, a blacksmith and farmer, moved the family to Thetford, Vermont, across the Connecticut River and twenty miles north of Hanover. As he grew up, Hovey must have felt the lure of the West. The inexorable migration of Americans across the continent was under way, and many New England Congregationalists and Presbyterians felt an obligation to send missionaries to the frontier, not only to save souls, but to serve as a civilizing influence. In 1814, representatives of the missionary societies of Massachusetts and Connecticut stated that the "preservation of the West from evil, undemocratic forces, would require energetic voluntary efforts channeled through churches, schools, and tract societies."

Like most New England boys, Hovey received an elementary school education, and throughout his teens he continued to read widely. He also developed an early interest in science, becoming one of the original subscribers to the *American Journal of Science and Art* – the first scientific publication in the United States. However, for most boys born in modest circumstances, formal education would have ended with elementary school.

Fortunately for both Edmund Hovey and Wabash College, in 1818 Asa Burton, minister of the local Congregational Church, had founded Thetford Academy, a preparatory high school. Recognizing Hovey's promise, Burton's congregation agreed to support his education at the Academy. In 1822, at the age of 21, Hovey enrolled in the Academy, where he remained until 1825. The total cost of his three years at the Academy was $16.75, of which the congregation provided $13.75.

In January, 1825 – against the opposition of his parents who wanted him to tend the family farm – Hovey enrolled at Dartmouth College, graduating in 1828. The Thetford congregation donated at least $108 out of the total $147 cost of his college education. To help pay the remaining bills, Hovey taught school during the long winter vacation. After graduation he established his own school, and taught there for several months before entering Andover Theological Seminary. Hovey took his teaching duties seriously, and came to value the importance of a good education.

At Dartmouth Hovey established two close friendships. The first was with Caleb Mills, beginning a relationship that would last for half a century. The other friendship, of much shorter duration, was with another student, Horace Carter. When his friend contracted typhoid fever, Hovey faithfully cared for him until his death, so exhausting himself in the effort that he was unable to attend the funeral. Grateful for Hovey's service, Carter's mother and two sisters came to Dartmouth to express their gratitude. The older sister, Martha, was the wife of Charles White, associate pastor of the Thetford Congregational Church. White, a future President of Wabash College, was a mentor to Hovey during the late 1820's.

According to Hovey's son **Horace Carter** Hovey – note the name – when Edmund met the younger sister, Mary Carter, it was love at first sight. However, Edmund would need to complete his preparation for the ministry before the two could consider marriage.

In January, 1829, Hovey enrolled in Andover Seminary. With its stimulating faculty and committed students, Andover seemed to be Paradise on earth. Writing to Charles White, Hovey said: "I feel, dear sir, that I have entered hallowed ground." Although many of his classmates planned to do missionary work in foreign lands, Hovey felt called to serve as a home missionary in the West. In a letter Mary expressed support for Edmund's commitment, although she was fully aware of the personal cost. "I have lately taken so great an interest in those infant Western States that I read with eagerness everything that relates to them, and wish for nothing so much as to see their interesting people, though you give me little encouragement that I shall ever meet my New England friends again."

1831 was an eventful year for Edmund and Mary. On his thirtieth birthday Edmund wrote a letter proposing marriage. Mary accepted. In September Edmund was ordained a Presbyterian minister and graduated from Andover. On October 2 the banns were read in Mary's home church in Peacham, Vermont, and three days later the couple was married. At the wedding Mary was dressed in her travel clothes, and the newlyweds began their journey west immediately after the ceremony. Initial plans called for Hovey to begin his ministry in Fort Wayne, with Sault Ste. Marie – on Michigan's Upper Peninsula – a less appealing second choice. The Wabash country was not yet under consideration.

The overland trip from Vermont to Buffalo took more than a month. Like countless newlyweds after them, the Hovey's stopped off to visit Niagara Falls. The next leg of the journey, by steamship from Buffalo to Cleveland to Detroit, was completed in just four days. Mary was seasick throughout much of the voyage. The couple continued by steamship to Sandusky, Ohio, then by flatboat up the Maumee River to Fort Wayne.

By the time the Hoveys reached Detroit it was known that another minister had already taken the post in Fort Wayne, so the couple was obliged to make other plans. Sault Ste. Marie appears to have been ruled out, and Hovey also rejected the suggestion that he go to Fort Dearborn on Lake Michigan, where a promising village – Chicago – had recently been established. The commitment to service in the Wabash country had been made.

The next leg of the journey, by ox-cart and then canoe, took the Hoveys to Logansport and finally to Lafayette, where they arrived just before the end of the year. In early January two Presbyterian elders came up from Fountain County, and transported the couple to their chosen home on a two-horse sleigh. The journey was over.

Edmund immediately began his ministry, preaching at three different locations in the county and establishing a Sunday school and a temperance society. Mary set up housekeeping in a one-room log cabin, with a door on one side and a single window on the other. The floor was covered with roughly-hewed planks, and Mary did her cooking over a crude fireplace. Initially, the couple experienced a certain amount of culture-shock. In a letter home Mary wrote: "I hope you may never have to encounter so much ignorance, wickedness, and opposition to the truth as we are surrounded with." But of course Edmund's mission was to deal with those very issues. The Hoveys quickly adjusted to life on the frontier, and they appear to have gotten along well with their neighbors.

Hovey's ministry was a success from the very beginning, and he might well have spent the remainder of his life as a preacher. But James Thomson, pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Crawfordsville, invited a number of ministers and laymen from this region to a meeting to consider establishing a college. On November 21, 1832, nine men met in Thomson's house, located about a half mile west of here on what is now the Donnelley parking lot. John Steele Thomson, James' younger brother and Hovey's predecessor in Fountain County, gave the opening prayer and read from the Scriptures. Eventually John Thomson would join Mills and Hovey as one of the three original Wabash professors. The minutes of the meeting, which may be found at the beginning of the first book of Trustee minutes, are in Hovey's hand. To those who have examined early College documents, this is a familiar script. Until his death in 1877 Hovey was faculty secretary and secretary of the Executive Committee of the Board of Trustees. Our earliest Catalogs are also in his handwriting.

As many of you know, the nine men agreed unanimously to establish "an English and Classical High School rising to the grade of College as soon as the wants of the country warranted." The meeting concluded with the election of eight trustees, including Hovey and the Thomson brothers. [Incidentally, the names of James and John, as well as two of their brothers and two nephews, are inscribed on the Thomson Family Seat, what we call the Senior Bench. Check it out.] That evening, at the first meeting of the Board, James Thomson announced that Judge Williamson Dunn had donated fifteen acres of land, about half a mile northwest of here, to serve as a campus. The next day the Board accepted Dunn's offer and, in the words of one of the founders, "We then proceeded in a body to the intended location in the primeval forest, and there kneeling in the snow we dedicated the grounds to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost for a Christian college."

It's all well and good to vote to establish a college, but without funding, a faculty and a building, there can be no college. Only $1243 was raised during the year following the founding, but this was sufficient to construct Forest Hall. If you walk two blocks west on Wabash Avenue to Blair Street and four blocks north to Lane Avenue, on the southeast

corner you will find a plaque marking the approximate location of the building. In the 1850s Caleb Mills purchased Forest Hall and had it moved to this campus. It has been in its present location since the 1960s.

At Hovey's suggestion, the trustees hired Caleb Mills as Professor of English, with the understanding that his salary would consist of whatever he could collect in the way of tuition. On December 3, 1833, Mills rang his bell for the first time, opening the preparatory school to the original twelve students.

At that point what the College desperately needed was more money, little of which was to be had in Indiana. Hovey agreed to do fund-raising in the East, and to search for a suitable candidate for the college presidency. Given his lack of experience, and with the country in the throes of a recession, it is not surprising that Hovey's initial fund raising efforts were unsuccessful. Eventually, he became so discouraged that he wrote a letter resigning his agency which closed: "Yours at the point of desperation." If the letter had been sent, that would have been the end of Wabash College. However, as fate would have it, John M. Ellis, the man who had presided at the founders' meeting, chose this very moment to pay Hovey a visit. Ellis persuaded Hovey to withhold the letter, and he identified some New England churches that might be receptive to requests for support.

And indeed, Hovey's visits to those churches bore fruit to the point where he felt ready to address the second part of his assignment: the recruitment of a President. Hovey quickly identified Elihu Baldwin, considered to be the most popular and successful pastor in New York City, as a promising candidate. In his appeal to Baldwin Hovey said: "The King's business requires haste; I have come to ask you to be president of Wabash College." Baldwin accepted, abandoning a life of relative ease and comfort for the unknown perils of the frontier. The trustees elected him to the presidency on December 31, 1834, and ten days later he formally accepted the appointment.

Before returning to Crawfordsville in September of 1835, Hovey worked with Baldwin to raise additional funds for the College. In the end the duo raised more than $28,000, including books donated to the library. Despite the shaky start, Hovey's journey to the East had ended in success.

In 1834 Hovey also made an important career decision. He resigned his pastorate in Fountain County and accepted appointments as Professor of Natural and Moral Science and as College Librarian; at the same time John Steele Thomson was appointed Professor of Mathematics. Later Hovey's title was changed to Professor of Rhetoric, but what the College really needed was someone to teach courses in science. After his return to Crawfordsville in 1835, Hovey agreed to serve as Professor of Chemistry and Natural Science. Most instrumental in persuading him to take the plunge were Julia Baldwin and Mary Hovey, whose collections of seashells and minerals formed the nucleus of a "cabinet", as it was called, of biological, geological and mineralogical specimens that enjoyed a national reputation and contained over 26,000 items by the time of Hovey's death in 1877.

In the fall of 1835, with a president and three professors available, the college proper opened. Hovey immersed himself in teaching classes in Latin, Rhetoric, Composition, Biology, Chemistry, Geology and Mineralogy. Forest Hall contained classrooms for the President and for each of the three professors – Mills' room also served as a Chapel – a library, and rooms in which a few of the students resided. The caretaker lived in the basement, where his wife served meals to boarders for a dollar per week. Tuition was fifteen dollars per year.

But the campus location was a problem. The grounds were too small for a proper college and too isolated from town. In those days what we now call Grant Street was the western boundary of Crawfordsville, and one had to cross a large ravine to reach the original campus. In 1835 the trustees purchased 160 acres of land from Major Ambrose Whitlock, formerly the federal land agent, for $6,400. They immediately auctioned off 100 acres for $9,000; Hovey and Mills each bought several acres. The remaining 60 acres comprise the nucleus of our present campus. Hovey and Mills proceeded to build homes on their lots – Mills' house on its present site and Hovey Cottage on a site now marked by a boulder behind Forest Hall. [Hovey cottage was to be moved three times to make way for the construction of new buildings before ending up at its present location in the 1960s.] The two friends would live side-by-side in perfect harmony for forty years, sharing a well, a cow, and a portable cider press.

In those early years one of the professors' tasks was to transform the wilderness into a campus. Reminiscing seventy years later, Horace Hovey wrote: "No pioneers ever worked harder than they did to clear up the dead wood and underbrush from campus. I seem even now to see them handling the axe, rolling huge logs for bonfires, blowing up stumps, and prying out the boulders. They built and mended fences, drove out stray cows and swine, and meanwhile taught the young Hoosiers history, mathematics, Greek, Latin, philosophy and the natural sciences."

Financially, things had worked out well for the College, but there was one problem. Major Whitlock wanted to be paid in gold. Hovey journeyed to a national bank in Cincinnati and returned by stagecoach with the $6,400. He hired a day laborer, "Honest Tom Kelley," to transport the gold by wheelbarrow to Whitlock's home on the east side of town, whereupon he and the major proceeded to count out the coins. A similar incident was to take place near the end of Hovey's life. Chauncey Rose was a successful businessman and founder of Rose Polytechnic Institute. In 1873 Rose, the College's first major benefactor and an admirer of Hovey, wrote a letter proposing to give Wabash $50,000 and asking whether he should send the money to Crawfordsville or if someone would come to Terre Haute to pick it up. Hovey responded that he would go to Terre Haute. There are conflicting accounts as to what happened next – whether Rose handed Hovey a check or $50,000 in cash. I prefer the latter version, in which Hovey returned to Crawfordsville after the banks had closed, so that he and Mary were obliged to guard the cash overnight. The next morning, before turning the gift over to the Treasurer, Hovey called in his faculty colleagues so that they would have an opportunity to handle the money – the equivalent of millions of today's dollars.

Back to the 1830s: Flush with cash, the College was in position to build a substantial building on its new campus. While in New York Hovey had acquired architectural drawings, and now he oversaw the construction of what later came to be called South Hall, located on the site of Baxter Hall. At the beginning of the fall semester of 1838 the building was partially completed and already in use. Then disaster struck.

Hovey's faculty minutes for September 23, 1838 read as follows: "About two o'clock this morning the cry of fire was heard and by half past two the whole roof and the fourth floor of our beautiful edifice was in one complete blaze. The first impression was, on arriving at the building, that nothing could be done to save any part of the building." But Caleb Mills organized a bucket brigade, and most of the major walls were saved, although the library and scientific apparatus were completely destroyed. On the following Sunday Professor Thomson preached a fiery sermon in the Presbyterian Church using a text drawn from Isaiah: "Our holy and beautiful house is burned up with fire, and all our pleasant things are laid waste." The citizens of Crawfordsville responded by contributing $5,000 for reconstruction, and the College was saved. However, Wabash would remain deeply in debt for years to come. This was particularly vexatious for Hovey, who had just become Treasurer, an office he would hold for 26 years.

After a year in rented rooms in downtown Crawfordsville, the College returned to its reconstructed building. But once again disaster struck. In 1840, after a brief illness, President Baldwin died, probably from typhoid fever. Baldwin was everything a college president should be: a visionary, a moral and intellectual leader, and a tireless fund-raiser, loved and admired by students and faculty.

When the trustees considered the matter of succession, Hovey persuaded them to offer the presidency to his brother-in-law, Charles White. After exchanges of letters between Edmund Hovey and Charles White and, perhaps more importantly, between the sisters Mary Hovey and Martha White, White accepted the call. He was inaugurated in 1841. White was more dignified and less down-to-earth than Baldwin, who had a common touch with Hoosiers, but he was an effective president, guiding the College through twenty years of steady growth. He was a wise counselor, a gifted public speaker and a brilliant teacher of Mental and Moral Philosophy, English and American Literature, and Composition. Although he lacked the multiple colors of ink that are now available, he corrected the students' compositions with the same zeal as our own Professor Blix.

In 1860 White's beloved wife Martha died. He was never the same thereafter and died a year later of a stroke. His final written words, in a sermon he was preparing for the next day's chapel, were: "Faith sees the blessed Saviour at the death bedside, with attendant angels to soothe and sustain, and bear up the spirit to heaven."

Once again the trustees chose a Presbyterian minister from the East to be President, and sent Hovey to New Jersey to offer the position to Joseph Farrand Tuttle. Tuttle agreed to visit the College – now accessible by train – before deciding whether or not to accept the offer. After dining with the faculty in Hovey Cottage he agreed to come and was inaugurated in 1862. Throughout most of his thirty years in office Tuttle was a popular

and successful President, but he probably remained in office a little too long, finally retiring at the age of 74.

Throughout the 1860s and 1870s Hovey gradually relinquished some of his duties, resigning as Treasurer in 1864 and surrendering responsibilities for supervising building construction and managing the buildings and grounds. He remained an outstanding professor, revered for his character and intellect. The following remarks were made at the College's semi-centennial celebration in 1882. "Hovey was an enthusiastic teacher, taking the greatest pleasure not only in the studious youth, but in a chemical experiment and in a geological specimen… He was an elegant writer, a graceful speaker, and an entertaining conversationalist… There was a quiet dignity in his manner that restrained boys in the class-room, who elsewhere were rude, and developed in them a politeness that had not been manifested away from his presence."

By the mid-seventies, as Hovey's health began to fail, he relinquished his duties as Professor of Chemistry but continued to teach geology. The final illness came in the winter of 1877. During the last twelve hours Mills was constantly at his bedside. Hovey died on March 10. His last words were: "God bless Wabash College."

To end on a less somber note, I'll introduce you to one of the College's most important but least known landmarks. On the east side (the true front) of Center Hall, across the brick path from the south wing, you will find a granite boulder with the following inscription on its north face: "Class '76, to Dr. Hovey." This boulder originally was located on Pike Street, a block north of campus. Professor Hovey used to take his geology students, the entire senior class, to examine the rock's unusual features. In 1876 the seniors decided to have the rock engraved, to parade it to its present location, and to dedicate it to Professor Hovey.

The so-called "Centennial Class" – 1876 was the hundredth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence – was unpopular with the underclassmen, who decided to sabotage the project. The following account was written in 1943 by Dr. Wilson T. Lawson, who was standing guard armed with a shotgun the night before the scheduled ceremony: "Soon numbers of boys began to congregate at the rock, coming prepared, as I later learned, to blast the rock, bury it, or carry it back to Sugar Creek. When I thought something was about to happen, I fired the shot-gun into the locust trees and the crowd fled. I ran across the street, where Dr. Tuttle met me on his lawn and asked about the gun-fire. I told him that the undergraduates were planning to destroy the rock. Dr. Tuttle replied, 'Go down town, get help, and put them all in the calaboose.' I soon met with a night policeman who returned with me. We found about twenty-five students sitting on the stone or standing about its base. We arrested eleven and took them to jail as directed.

"On Monday, our program was conducted much as planned. But during the exercises as many of the undergraduates as could crowd onto the balcony in front of Center Hall yelled and sang and clapped their hands while Dr. Tuttle stood below, pleading with all the fervor at his command that they be gentlemen and keep order in respect to Dr. Hovey,

whom we all loved. They scarcely paid more attention to him than had he been a Freshman."

That night the eleven students were released from jail. Lawson continues: "The undergraduates soon got together and appointed one of their number to 'beat up on Lawson,' so that I could not graduate on Wednesday." Having got wind of the plan, Lawson armed himself with a pistol. His narrative continues: "Tuesday afternoon was very warm and we were in shirt sleeves when I met my opponent on a campus walk just west of the dormitory [South Hall]. We spoke and passed but a moment later I turned around; his fist was coming my way. In a quick tussle, I managed to throw him to the ground and when he had come to his feet again, my artillery was trained on his advanced positions! That phase of the incident was then and there concluded.

"That was the end of the worst fuss Wabash ever had ─ and the College has the stone, as the Centennial Class intended it should." As we have already noted, Professor Hovey died the following March.

Next time you're walking along the east side of Center Hall, stop to look at the inscription on Hovey's Rock. And take a moment to reflect on how fortunate it is for Wabash College that "In the beginning there was Hovey." Thank you.