CHAPTER VIII

A Bright Chapter * * * * * * * * * 1925–1939

When a man takes God at His word that no more is required of him than “to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly,” the world stands puzzled, especially when a position of leadership is involved. Then one by one the brilliant and the eager, the backward and the diffident fall into the cadence of his step. Only afterwards, when they try to retrace the trail, do they wonder how they could have traveled so far with so few monuments to mark the way.

Ralph Earle came to Tech in its sixtieth year as its sixth president. By admission of persons who followed him most closely during his fourteen years at the school “Nothing of great note took place,” “It was a day by day affair—a quiet time.” Yet even while they speak, the mask of appraisal breaks up into fragments of remembering, and strong men speak words such as “love” and “affection.”

The projects which materialized during Ralph Earle’s presidency were largely other person’s dreams; his own did not come true until after he was gone. There were tremendous changes in the country’s concepts of technology and economy, but he had no part in their evolution except as he adjusted to them. There was a remarkable increase of Institute endowment—doubling in spite of the depression—but it was a growth which might have happened anyway, at least in part, without his indefatigable effort. The most radical of his plans, a limited admissions program, backfired because of an untimely introduction. His greatest writings were preserved on little memorandum slips in small cramped letters. His speeches were memorable because they were as painfully listened to as they were delivered.

Nevertheless, Ralph Earle was unique as president of Worcester Polytechnic Institute in the esprit de corps he was able to create not only on Boynton Hill but also among the alumni of the Institute and among its friends.

Everyone was completely disarmed by this man, who the first day on campus said with no embarrassment, “I am entirely new in this work,” then set out by tireless schedule to learn the details of his job. Even the students restrained from the usual harrassment of freshmen simply because this mild-mannered new president asked them to. And later, during the economic crisis of the 1930’s, the citizens of Worcester chose him for president of their reconstruction corporation, not because he was a financial expert, but because a whole community trusted him.

When Ralph Earle came to Worcester Tech in 1925, he literally came home, to be surrounded by many buildings on Boynton

Some day the full account of these latter years will be written. If the writer possesses an understanding heart, his appraisal of President Ralph Earle, his colleagues, and his times, will constitute a bright chapter.

—Herbert Foster Taylor, 1937
Hill and in the City which had been designed by his architect father. Born in Worcester, and with a heritage dating back to the settlement of Leicester, the new president had attended Tech as an apprentice in 1892 before going on to the Naval Academy at Annapolis.

Two achievements were always mentioned in connection with Admiral Earle’s war-time record—the construction of the Northern Barrage, in which one hundred thousand mines constituted an impassable barrier for submarines, and the installation of naval railway batteries in France. Even these he modestly disclaimed with the remark, “The men did those things. I didn’t.”

He came back to Worcester Tech in the role of president-elect at the time of graduation in 1925. President Hollis, who announced his retirement in 1923, officiated at the Commencement exercises and wished his old Navy friend “a good voyage.”

The speeches were well sprinkled with Navy phrases. With Ralph Earle it was always a course on which the school was embarking, a prosperous cruise, or the weathering of a gale. Invariably the Alumni Association was an anchor, the teachers a fleet, the students his shipmates. During the depression the Institute sailed close to the wind; in uncertain times it was both afloat and ashore. When new floors were laid in the corridors of Boynton Hall, naturally they were the brown and white tiles of battle-ship linoleum.

The formal inauguration of President Earle took place in October, 1925, with the most impressive ceremonies ever organized for such an occasion at Tech; informally it occurred at the alumni dinner the previous June. It had been a day of strong sentiment. There to give his historical reminiscence was the aging, stately Charles G. Washburn, as distinguished on the Hill for his long career in Congress and in industry as for his devotion to his Alma Mater. Dr. Hollis, who had retired primarily to write a history of engineering, was presented with a generous fund for books and travel. A. Atwater Kent, of whom the school was so proud, extended his good wishes. Then the tall George Haynes, who had been the interim acting-president, unwound his great height and in his own pontifical way presented the faculty to President-elect Earle. “They have hearts as well as hands,” he said, “and I believe both are in working order.”

In Admiral Earle’s response he outlined in general terms what he wanted for the school in intellectual growth, then he made specific mention of a swimming pool and a dormitory, both only remotely connected with scholastic achievements.

Nevertheless, this was what Tech needed most at the moment—a humanizing influence. By stiff and stern measures the school had become known as one of the most excellent engineering schools in the country. It was also known as a very hard one. Surely, Ralph Earle contended, it should also be a pleasant one.

Even before his inauguration, the swimming pool had be-
come a definite promise. At an alumni meeting in New York, Admiral Earle had invited a volunteer to assume the cost for this long-desired project. Before the Admiral had finished speaking, his old classmate, Henry J. Fuller, and Mr. Fuller's business partner, John E. Aldred, had indicated their willingness. Mr. Fuller, who had become involved in the directorship of at least thirty manufacturing companies, was a son of Dr. Homer T. Fuller, the second president of Worcester Tech.

At the first Commencement after President Earle's inauguration, he had the great good fun of standing on the springboard of the pool to accept this gift of what became known as the Fuller Memorial in honor of President Fuller. On the same day, Ralph Earle officiated at the groundbreaking ceremonies of Tech's first dormitory.

President Earle announced his intention of making the Institute the finest engineering college of medium size—not in the East or in the country, but “in existence.” No one before had ever quite dared to say it. He advised keeping the enrollment at about six hundred. He expected to institute sabbatical leaves and insurance programs for the faculty, to broaden the English and business courses. But before the cultural course and business course, he said, “we wish to add aeronautics.”

The hysteria of air flight, climaxing with Lindbergh's flight, was reaching its peak. While some persons expected the craze soon to subside, there were others who were aware of the potentials of aviation and supported this initial enthusiasm of Admiral Earle’s. As far as Tech’s board was concerned, it gave approval—but no funds.

Undaunted, Ralph Earle asked one of his youngest professors, Kenneth Merriam, to set up such a course and even agreed that it might be an option reserved for honor students. Francis Roys, the head of the Mechanical Engineering Department, counseled: “Develop something which is, and will remain, sound.” With this administrative support and departmental advice, Professor Merriam scheduled a year of self-directed study before attempting to teach the new technology. His program included consultation with experts in aviation (many of them Tech graduates) and long hours at the new Worcester airport, of which Admiral Earle had become president. It also involved time at the Boston airport, where Professor Merriam one day chartered a plane at fifty dollars an hour—at his own expense. It was quite an hour. The pilot, who had been told to take off and land and stand by the rest of the time, afterwards wryly commented that it had been a fairly busy time of “standing by.”

Professor Merriam built up his Aeromechanics option with more ingenuity than equipment. The students themselves developed a wind tunnel with a roar tremendous enough to impress the most indifferent visitor. And eventually there were helpful gifts—another tunnel, a Liberty engine, a Wright radial engine,
and a turbo-compressor. Then came the Navy monoplane, with its fifty-two-foot wing spread. The plane had to be hoisted through the small trap door of the Shops. “If it had had another coat of paint,” said one of the willing student movers, “we never would have made it.”

At last the trolley car had a successor—and the biggest irony of all was that it had taken up residence in the old Washburn Shops.

When President Earle expressed his intention to open up new markets and hire workmen for the Washburn Shops, the older teachers smiled with amusement. The old arguments were limp with exhaustion. Shop practice for students had dwindled to a very small percentage of time in the Mechanical Engineering course and consisted primarily of an analysis of processes and methods, not the actual manufacture of products. But when after the depression the Shops turned over a fund of $85,000 to the school, several oldtimers became convinced of the pleasant advantage of an academic facility’s being commercial—that is, if it did not at the same time attempt to be too instructive.

Admiral Earle searched back through the historical records of the school to find treasures which might have been dropped along the way. He revived the old motto, “Pauca fideliter,” and also the chapel exercises, which at first had been compulsory, then voluntary, then abandoned. It was with the best of humor that the classes involved in the Buckskin episode promised President Earle to pay belatedly for refurbishing the chapel, appropriately renamed Sinclair Hall in memory of the professor who had rescued the students from suspension. When the Class of 1930 (“Cookie”—M. Lawrence—Price was its president) gave six stained glass windows to be placed in the chapel, President Earle’s thank-you was for himself as well as for the school. He was not even annoyed that so few students attended chapel, accepting at face value the promise about where “two or three are gathered together.” And once in a while—just for old time’s sake—everyone sang Hymn number 44 again, the hymn which once had the status of a school song.

People always knew exactly where the Admiral stood and what he expected. His teachers soon learned that his fiber was as tough as his voice was quiet and his heart was kind. A leader through and through, it did not take long for him to temper the old Navy pattern of command with an indirection compatible with an academic institution.

With the alumni he used no pressure, only persistence. He asked them for two million dollars, then added with his usual twinkle but unusual jest, “We are modest. We will take anything.” Almost as if under a spell, the alumni found themselves signing up for Ralph Earle’s “major” and “minor” projects.

One by one they were checked off the list. There was a fence for the athletic field, bleachers, field houses, new curbs for the

Now this Institute, as you know, has one great difference from others in its great asset of the Washburn Shops.
—Ralph Earle, 1933

We are still unique among engineering schools in the real combination of hand and brain possible here only because of the commercial work of the Washburn Shops.
—Ralph Earle

It [Hymn 44] had a swing to it that even a country band could play. The tune lent itself to bursts on the part of those who carried the air—as most of us did. I can see those tenors now, lifting up their heads and letting go. We didn’t feel too religious. But we all felt cheered.
—Robert S. Parks, 1963
running track, a truck for the ground crew, tennis courts, new boilers and stokers, tools and laboratory equipment. Sometimes an alumnus found himself signing for an evergreen tree or a foot of sidewalk. A. J. Knight, the Superintendent of Buildings and Grounds, who was as anxious as the president to have things “ship-shape,” set up a thorough program of repairing buildings, walks, and landscapes. Harry Sinclair (himself a Tech man, and the only one who could boast that both his father and mother had been Institute teachers) paid for the extensive project of tree surgery.

At the first Commencement at which Ralph Earle officiated as president, several honorary degrees were given. Only twice before had such a degree been given—to himself the previous year, and to Henry P. Armsby, first man in the alphabetical list of graduates of the first class, at his fiftieth reunion in 1921. Four months later, Mr. Armsby died.

In 1926 the same thing happened in the case of George I. Alden. With only a few months intervening, there then came the successive deaths of Charles G. Washburn and James Logan, both of whom also had been given long-deserved honorary recognition.

George Alden, the oldest at eighty-three, had been too feeble to attend the Commencement exercises. He nevertheless had had the satisfaction of equipping the Alden Hydraulic Laboratory with a completely new building in that year. He had extended its boundaries and set up a trust fund for its permanent endowment. He had also set up his entire estate, estimated at three million, in a plan of benefaction which would in time rival any other in the community for its generosity. In its specifications there was liberal provision for the “promotion of industrial education.”

Mr. Alden, with his rare combination of abilities both scientific and practical, had traveled far from the confines of the Alden homestead in Templeton. Completely unaffected by the affectation and sophistication with which he learned to live, he kept his country mannerisms and memories to the end of his life. In his later years he found a retreat on a Princeton hillside, where he often sat to watch the sunlight as it slipped back and forth through a stand of willows before going on to light the great valley beyond. It was long after Mr. Alden’s death before anyone noticed how similar was this Princeton view to one with which he had grown up—on the other side of the mountain.

On the day the new Alden Hydraulic Laboratory building was dedicated in 1926, another long-time friend of Tech died. R. Sanford Riley, president of Tech’s famous Class of 1896, had been literally a neighbor of the school, having lived in the old Higgins house on the corner (his wife was Katharine Higgins) since 1912. In friendly and financial ways, he and his family had continued to support Tech and through him many ties with the school’s past had remained unbroken.

Like Milton Higgins before him, he kept horses—not Buckskin,
Rob, or Nelson, but Rex, a big seventeen-hand horse, and Nahid, an Arabian mare. To exercise these riding horses, he often called on Jerome W. Howe, an alumnus and new professor in Civil Engineering, whose previous experience in the U. S. Cavalry had received much interested attention. Often Mr. Riley would join him, and the two old grads would talk about Tech’s past, its present, and what it needed most for the future—especially a dormitory.

The dormitory had been talked about for a long, long time. There had been an interval of nine years when a house on Court Street, Newton Hall, had been available to Tech students as a dining hall and so-called dormitory. But it had housed only twenty-six men and had been far away from campus. Off and on since 1900 there had been a lunch room in the basement of Boynton unsavorily known as the Rathole. With understatement, it could be said to be unsatisfactory.

The problem of housing and feeding became more troublesome as the school became less and less local. Only partially was it solved by the fraternities and the many Worcester folk who rented their spare rooms to students.

From the beginning of the Institute the task of finding living quarters had fallen to the Y.M.C.A., or Student Christian Association, the oldest organization on campus. This Association had maintained religious activities, found homes for the boys and jobs for after school or summer vacations. Tending babies and furnaces was the means by which many students had been graduated from Worcester Tech. The Student Christian Association had also introduced the freshmen reception, the Tech Carnival, and many recreational programs.

In recognition of its long service to students, the Student Christian Association was given a room of its own in the new dormitory, which in the fall of 1927 was opened to a hundred and fifteen freshmen. Its name, as indicated the previous year at groundbreaking, was Sanford Riley Hall. In the common room there were two Atwater Kent radio sets; cleaning and laundry service was arranged; a “hydraulic electric elevator” (its own echo of the past) was set into operation at the Institute Road entrance.

“The dormitory forms the southern boundary of a future quadrangle,” hopefully reported The Journal. Not until the night when four automobiles of ancient vintage were shoe-horned into the foyer, however, was the dormitory properly initiated. It had become, as it would remain, the home away from home for Tech students.

Noticeably missing were the mischievous episodes of early years. The most that students did during these years was unintentionally to give their good friend, Dr. Jennings, the mumps, and intentionally to remove the hands from Boynton’s tower clock. In 1928 the Goat’s Head tradition was revived when the class of 1893 presented a bronze replica of their black goat, which had been decapi-
tated, mounted, and hidden for twenty years in Nova Scotia by the
Class of 1894. During these twenty years the Class of 1893 had
pretended to possess the original head, although what they really
had was a substitute. They did not again see the original until
1913, when the crane in the Electrical Engineering Laboratory
carried it to them at the alumni dinner. The head was in such woe-
begone condition that its relinquishment for class rivalry in 1928
necessitated a bronze caricature. The presentation coincided with
the awarding of an honorary degree to Gompei Kuwada, the
Japanese student who had been the goat’s keeper in 1893, largely
because no one else had had the right initials.

In 1935 Ralph Earle gave a report of the school’s first seventy
years and his first ten. The title was a command: “Up anchor for
a Better Seventy Years.” But by this time the Admiral had been
so long at an engineering school that his imagery was becoming
confused. He still spoke of the Living Endowment as a “sheet
anchor” but went on to say, “We must now forge ahead.”

By 1935 the worst of the depression was over. Although the
income from endowment was seven per cent less than in 1929,
despite an increase of twelve per cent in the fund, there was a
net return on investments of almost five per cent. Compared to
the old standards, when returns had occasionally doubled over
night, this seemed a slow recovery.

President Earle spoke of his disappointment concerning the
continuation of the enrollment plan initiated in 1932, when only
a hundred and fifty students by strict screening had been ad-
mitted as freshmen. The faculty, who at the time had been in the
middle of a long soul-searching analysis, approved and recom-
mended this plan, but nervously asked, “But what if we don’t
have a hundred and fifty students who apply and are eligible?”

“There will be no lowering of standards,” President Earle made
it clear. “We shall have to take what we can get and let it go at that.”

The depression took its inevitable bite out of enrollment, but
Ralph Earle stayed with his statement, combating the problem
by solicitation and publicity. “At Home Days” were instituted as
a recruiting program for preparatory students. And admissions
got one of its greatest boosts when Professor Coombs was pro-
moted from the work to the title of dean. In an overcrowded
schedule this professor had been in charge of admissions and
accreditation for many years. Only someone who could hear him
complete the dictation of his letters: “Zelotes W. Coombs, Dean
of Admissions,” knew how he relished the acquisition of this over-
due title. Since the 1880’s the appointment of deans had been
broached again and again. Professor A. L. Smith, as assistant to
the president in addition to his teaching load, had been the near-
est to Dean of Students, just as Professor Coombs had most
nearly approached the function of Dean of Admissions. And
there had been two powerful committees—on Courses of Study
and Degrees, and Work of Students.

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Monkey business loses much of its charm
if there is no penalty for being caught.
So, if history is henceforth dry as saw-
dust, the onus must fall upon the faculty.
It is traditional that they should be
blamed for everything and by this time
they ought to be used to it.
—The Journal, 1933

The state of the college is excellent, but
of course it can never be satisfactory, for
if we stop progressing or changing we
will atrophy.
—Ralph Earle, 1935
Finally, in 1937, the position of dean became a full-time actuality when Jerome W. Howe (who had been head of Civil Engineering succeeding A. W. French) was appointed as the first Dean of Admissions and Students.

The Techniquest was one of the first programs to be announced from the new administrative office. *The Journal* recorded it as “frankly an experiment” and the term as a “Howism.” Actually, it was a Mrs. Howism. Dean Howe wrote in his personal journal two months after his first suggestion for a pre-freshman boys’ camp, “My Helen suggested the name Techniquest.” On June 18 of 1934 he wrote again: “Monday, Fair and fine. We launched the Worcester Techniquest [already the Army man had adopted the Admiral’s language] with a first group of twenty-five boys.” Paul Swan was named the director of the program.

Dean Howe moved into President Thompson’s old house, where the Jennings family had lived for so many years. The old ark, as Mrs. Jennings often called it, was badly in need of repairs. There was not a closet in the whole house, it needed rewiring, its heating system was two generations old. But modernization of this house, which soon became known as the Deanery, was given priority on President Earle’s list of minor projects—a concession to sentiment, for his father had designed it in the 1860’s.

When in the fall of 1937 the faculty held their first meeting of the school year in Room 19 of Boynton Hall, many new men were sitting in the chairs which for forty years and more had been occupied by older men. Five senior professors had reached the retirement age of seventy at the same time, and with almost a shock, the school discovered that the average age of its new professors was forty-three.

Sitting in George Haynes’ chair was Albert J. Schwieger, the youngest department head in the history of the Institute with the exception of George Alden. Dr. Duff, who had worked for years as chairman of the special analysis committee, was no longer present to enliven the discussion with his strong Scottish burr. His department of Physics had become a degree-granting course, replacing the controversial General Science course of earlier years, and Arthur W. Ewell had taken over the responsibility as head of the department.

Dr. Jennings’ Chemistry had branched off to a strong tangent of engineering. Two men, Frederic R. Butler and Frank C. Howard, now represented the dual interests of this department. Arthur W. French, who was teaching a light load until he reached seventy, had relinquished his department of Civil Engineering several years previously to Dean Howe, but with Jerome Howe’s new status as dean, the job went to another man, Andrew H. Holt, from the Midwest. It had been a long time since so many persons new to the school had been appointed.

*The Journal* facetiously counted the men who were to take
over Professor Coombs’s responsibilities—Charles “Pop” Adams in the English Department, Francis J. Adams as secretary of the faculty, and, of course, Dean Howe as Dean of Admissions. “But who will lead our parades?” it wailed, “or give all the speeches, or keep our scrapbooks?”

Faculty meetings would never be so lively without Harold B. Smith, the brilliant professor who had fostered the Electrical Engineering Department since its inception through the eras of illumination, power, high voltage transmission and electronics. The progression had never seemed more dramatic than when the trolley tracks had been taken up on Salisbury Street, preliminary to the dismantling of the old Tech trolley and Professor Richey’s final report of its 3878 miles of testing. The final succession to high voltage came late one night when a young professor, Victor Siegfried, who was throwing sparks from his Tesla coil, saw fire blazing from the old trolley wire at the west end of the laboratory. With this final excitement came the reluctant admission that Tech’s car-barn days were over.

In radio the Electrical Engineering Department had always had a pioneering interest, encouraged by the leadership of some of its own alumni such as A. Atwater Kent in manufacturing and Harry Davis as the first chairman of the Board of the National Broadcasting Company. Hobart Newell was one of the many Tech graduates who had worked directly or indirectly in research with Mr. Davis’ development of the first radio station, KDKA. Later Professor Newell had come back to Tech to develop a pioneer course in electron mechanics—a forerunner of electronics—and incidentally, to be consultant in the designing and construction of Worcester’s radio broadcast transmitting station WTAG.

Professor Smith, proud of his department, had been extremely aggressive in its promotion. He and Francis J. Adams were famous for their work in high voltage and the one million volt transformer; and Professor Smith had earned such respect in the newest and largest engineering society—the Electrical—that he represented it as president.

After Professor Smith’s sad departure from Tech in broken health, Theodore H. Morgan, a graduate of Stanford University, was appointed head of Electrical Engineering.

Among the many newly-promoted professors sitting in Room 19 that September day of 1937 were Donald G. Downing, B. Leighton Wellman, Edwin Higginbottom, and M. Lawrence Price. President Earle outlined the inevitable changes in curriculum and despaired, “We have about reached the limit unless we add a fifth year,” then blurted out the real frustration: “A four-year course, or any college course, must be a compromise.” The two old contentions of language and business were settled temporarily by making language an option and business a requirement. Le-land L. Atwood was head of the department of Modern Lan-

The leader of tomorrow will be the master not of arts, nor of science, but of economics.

—Jerome W. Howe
guages and History with the assistance of a teacher of German, Claude K. Scheifley.

Herbert Taylor, the Alumni Secretary and editor of The Journal, reported this meeting of the faculty with the remark that this sixty-ninth year would mark the division between two epochs of school history. Actually it was the seventieth year which made the most lasting impression, chiefly because of Professor Taylor himself.

Herbert Taylor’s definitive history entitled Seventy Years of the Worcester Polytechnic Institute can never be too highly appraised or praised. A seven-year labor of devotion—even with its chronological detail, it had warm readability and surprising objectivity. The objectivity was doubtlessly a personal characteristic attained, as only such detachment can be attained, by a serious illness which developed shortly after Herbert Taylor accepted the assignment.

In 1929 The Journal had had one blank page with the explanation that the alumni secretary had spent “too much time and too much energy” to fill it up. For fourteen months thereafter Herbert Taylor recuperated in the Rutland Sanatorium. He was deluged with attention. “I am hopelessly in debt,” he wrote. “As soon as I get some strength I shall start refunding.”

“The debt had been paid in advance,” reassured The Journal, while twelve persons scrambled to take care of Professor Taylor’s many projects, especially the new ones connected with the Homecoming Day planned for the fall.

In inimitable fashion Herbert Taylor refunded with many subsequent years of alumni secretaryship and with his comprehensive record of Tech life, which has become the bible of reference at the Institute.

Meanwhile the Alumni registers became heavy with names and statistics of the school’s greatest pride—its graduates. Names of famous men began to tumble over each other in their bid for well-deserved recognition. In 1938 there were 4500 members in the Alumni Association, and many were the surveys made of their whereabouts and accomplishments. At one point the Alumni office attempted to make a projection of how many graduates would still be living in another fifty years.

“We don’t care how many,” teased Professor Allen out at the Alden Hydraulic Lab. “Just tell us which ones.”

The gifts to the school began to reflect the prosperity and generosity of its graduates. Some gifts, to be sure—such as the David Hale Fanning legacy—came unexpectedly from outside sources in recognition of the school’s new prestige. There were others, like Dr. Kinnicutt’s and William Bird’s, which came from the teachers. But most of the gifts came from former students. More than a million dollars was contributed for scholarships, thereby giving one-third of the students some form of financial aid. There were also gifts of cherished land, exemplified best by the homes and property on West Street given by the Higgins families.
Although President Earle never judged a gift merely by size, it was impossible not to be impressed by the larger benefactions. Elmer Howe of the first class had left the bulk of his estate to the school; so had Frank O. Whitney of the same class. Henry Fuller had made possible the swimming pool, the Fuller Lectures and the Yankee Ingenuity Scholarship. With the publication of the Institute history, it was announced that William L. Ames had paid for its cost. Two months later he died, leaving to Tech his entire fortune. His benefaction and Moses Kaven’s legacy the previous year had the distinction of being the largest personal gifts since the founding of the school. Mr. Kaven, a former business associate of Elmer Howe, had come back to Worcester after his retirement from active business, primarily to be near the Tech campus. In a manner resembling that of Stephen Salisbury II, Mr. Kaven had watched over the corners of the school’s financial need and in unspectacular ways tidied up one area after another, usually with no more credit than “the generosity of an unnamed graduate.” He restored the Salisbury prizes to their original value, paid for paint and floors, and after the depression—when the Boynton funds had become a shambles—contributed to this first endowment fund to bring it back to its original prestige.

As adept as was Ralph Earle in accepting the attention of alumni and benefactors, he had a similar deference for everybody else. First of all, he was the student’s friend, and everyone knew it. There were no go-betweens. Sometimes the president championed his young friends at the peril of contradiction by his faculty. When once he “thought it best to postpone temporarily the action taken by the faculty concerning the suspension of students” the professors took him mildly to task, but he countered: “We may sometimes not be aware of all the facts, such as illness and trouble at home.” He fretted about the rough schedule the boys had to keep, wondering if the hours of supervised work might not be reduced. Never on the day of a final exam would he fail to appear at the classroom door. He would stand there a few moments, smile in his quiet way, say not a word but somehow communicate his support to the students.

On one of his priceless memorandums—now cherished by many a teacher and student—he pleaded for a boy who had failed in examination thereby forfeiting his right to graduate. “While not a good student,” he wrote to the committee in charge, the boy could be given another exam “and thus obtain his degree on time. Why not help him?”

Why not, indeed.

Sometimes the students hesitantly walked down Boynton Street to attend one of Mrs. Earle’s frequent teas hoping they would have an opportunity to say an awkward thank-you to the “prexy,” as they called their president-friend. By some unnamed magic, the students were never uneasy once inside that great welcoming door of the Earle house. Mrs. Earle had the comfortable combina-

Your physical health is a precious thing—guard it well. The athletic team, varsity or class, is well worth all the time you can give to it. We emphasize sport here, and urge you to take your full measure of it.

—Ralph Earle
tion of warmth and dignity, while the president had a way of expressing personal interest without ever being too personal. Often the students invited President and Mrs. Earle to their fraternity houses for Sunday dinner, not because it was the thing to do, but simply for the good company of the Earles.

Many a student during the depression was helped by a fund which Mrs. Earle and her faculty-wife friends established for annoying small crises which developed when a boy needed glasses, books, a warm coat, or sometimes even shoes. It was a fund administered in confidence and anonymity, usually by the Student Christian Association. There was no embarrassment, for no records were kept. Even Mrs. Earle did not know who received the money which was distributed as gifts, not as loans.

Mrs. Earle made such a vivid impression on people who knew and loved her best that many years afterwards, when there was a search for her picture, few likenesses could be found. “We never have felt the need of a picture,” was the surprised acknowledgment of one of her friends.

It was a constant courtesy—this graciousness of the Earles. At the slightest excuse President Earle sent his teachers a note of commendation. He did not forget that a few members of the faculty had been his own teachers. These few were never summoned to the president’s office, but often the Admiral could be seen climbing the long stairs of Boynton to consult with Professor Haynes, going down the hall to Professor Coombs, or to the Electrical Engineering Laboratory to Professor Phelon’s office.

There were so many beginnings and endings on the Tech campus in the late 1930’s that the very air seemed to be charged with change. Even the athletic teams reflected this surge of new direction in President Earle’s deceptively “quiet” administration. For the first time in Institute history, the school could boast of the only unbeaten and untied football team in New England. Comparably good records were held in basketball, soccer, and tennis. The athletic facilities had had numerous improvements, the coaches were as unbeatable as their teams, and the director himself had married the president’s secretary thereby guaranteeing for the department a superior kind of organization. The Athletic Council had never been busier nor the mascot, Pete, any happier.

In September of 1938 Nature itself reacted by tearing across Tech’s campus in the hurricane which tossed New England in a long day and night of devastation. Tech’s only irreparable damage was to its trees and the Electrical Engineering Laboratory’s copper roof, which rolled up like an ancient scroll. The cupola on the Washburn Shops was completely demolished so that no matter how carefully it was copied in the reconstruction, many alumni members never again thought it merited a second glance. With uncanny foresight, President Earle had arranged for windstorm insurance the previous year.

In February of 1939 Admiral Earle spent what he described
as his “proudest and happiest day” at Tech. The Corporation, the Alumni Council, and the faculty had approved his five-year plan, which involved a complete expansion of facilities, the purchase of property on West Street, the construction of an addition to Salisbury Laboratories (which had already been started), an auditorium, and a mechanical engineering building. As usual, there were also many “minor” projects.

Later he confided to George I. Rockwood, “I’ve done everything I came here to do.”

Fatigued from the effort, he was natural prey for a bad bout with grippe, from which he stayed home for a few days to recuperate.

The day he returned to the Hill, February 13, he was scheduled to give a ten-minute chapel talk. As always, his remarks were written out in neat tight letters and lines; the topic was “Persistence.” Dean Howe reminded him of the long flights of stairs up to the chapel and offered to substitute. So did Paul Swan. But no, the president answered, he felt quite fit.

When it was time for him to speak, President Earle rose in his customarily stiff way—for many years he had been troubled with a bad back for which he wore a brace—and for a moment looked out the windows at the north end of the chapel as if gazing far out to sea. He placed his watch and chain on the lectern and started to speak.

He greeted the students in his usual manner as shipmates, mentioned his hope that no disappointment over mid-term grades would turn to discouragement, then introduced his topic.

Three or four sentences later, he slumped to the floor. The crashing of his watch as it also fell was the only other sound in the room. He recovered in a few moments, smiled sheepishly and reached for the watch—

“I hope I didn’t break it. My father gave it to me.”

His father—the very man who had designed this building where now his son lay so ill. This building—which seventy-five years before had been identified by Stephen Earle with the words: “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.”

Ralph Earle had kept his father’s faith, both for himself and for the Institute. Shortly after noon, he died.

At the funeral there was not enough room for all the persons who wished to attend. As the dignitaries, the faculty, and family came from the service in All Saints Church, they found themselves surrounded by a throng of hundreds of students. Outside on the street they had been doing their own respectful remembering.

And yes, it was raining hard.

By the time you leave us, you will be real shipmates. —Ralph Earle
Historic Walk on Tech campus

Medallions from stained-glass windows of Sinclair Hall, presented by Class of 1930, designed and made by Percy F. Marsaw of the same class

Opposite:
A. Atwater Kent receives honorary degree from President Earle

Hymn 44, in early days of the Institute, generated as much spirit as a school song
Psalm 136.

Milton.

Let us with a gladsome mind
Praise the Lord, for he is kind:
For his mercies shall endure
Ever faithful, ever sure.

1 He, with all-commanding might,
Filled the new-made world with light:
For his mercies shall endure,
Ever faithful, ever sure.

2 All things living he doth feed;
His full hand supplies their need;
For his mercies shall endure,
Ever faithful, ever sure.

3 He hath, with a piteous eye,
Looked upon our misery:
For his mercies shall endure,
Ever faithful, ever sure.

4 Let us, then, with gladsome mind,
Praise the Lord, for he is kind:
For his mercies shall endure,
Ever faithful, ever sure.
Monoplane of Aeromechanics Option

Administrative helpers in Boynton Hall, 1925, left to right: Florence Olin, Martha Strong, Ruth McQueen, Emily Danforth, Gertrude Rugg
Greetings

In this opening month of the new year, we welcome the opportunity to send greetings to all alumni of the college. We hope that you will all enjoy health and happiness during 1934, and that the college will merit your continued regard.

Three Mechanical Engineering professors: Donald G. Downing, B. Leighton Wellman, M. Lawrence Price