



THE FIRST ALUMNUS

WHEN LITTLE BOB TODD was a senior at the University of Missouri, he gave this Fourth of July toast in 1842: "The State University, our pride and boast. Palsied be the hand or tongue that would do or say anything to procure jealousy or dissention among the good people of this land in relation to its usefulness. An editor has attempted this thing; may he have the gout in his toes and chilblains in his fingers when he may attempt another such essay." Robert Levi Todd was the valedictorian of Mizzou's first graduating class. And as the toast suggests, he had that fierce kind of pride in alma mater that alumni associations like.

TODD WAS BORN in 1822 in a log cabin in Boone County. A family story maintains that one day, while Robert's mother was nursing him, a timber wolf was attracted by the fragrance of the family dinner cooking in a pot over the flames in the fireplace. The wolf apparently jumped on top of a "lean-to" attached to the cabin, scrambled on the roof, and then either jumped or fell down the chimney. Mother Todd ran out of the cabin with her baby and hailed a man nearby who was chopping wood for her husband. The workman shut himself in the cabin with the wolf and killed the beast with an axe. Mother Todd then went back and finished nursing Robert. All in the life of a pioneer mother. Well, it sounds a little like Red Riding Hood and the Three Little Pigs, but the family told it for the truth.

FOOTBALL and its attendant benefits were not available to Mizzou students of the '40s. Favorite sports included foot races and jumping. At weddings, the student body showed up uninvited and announced its arrival by blowing tin horns, whereupon the host shared the repast of the wedding feast.

THE FIRST COMMENCEMENT was held in the late fall of 1843 instead of the spring in order that ceremonies could be held in the imposing new Academic Hall that had been completed that summer. Three days of public examinations preceded commencement day which, according to the announcement, "would occupy about three hours without recess." The graduates were Robert Levi Todd and his cousin Robert Barr Todd (Big Bob). Little Bob noted in his valedictory that "Of a number of ambitious and aspiring youths who with us commenced the race for literary honors, we two alone are permitted to stand here at the completion of our collegiate career." Apparently, the dropout has been with us always. Big Bob delivered his salutatory in Latin, so we can't report what he said. But Little Bob expressed a desire to be useful as a citizen of his town and his country. He observed that "To educate one's self is the business of a lifetime," and foresaw the formation of

an alumni association, which he later was to organize and become its first president: "It is here that we have found those ties, which it must be our great pleasure in life to preserve unbroken, ties that would have been contracted nowhere else, which must ever make us want to revert to these halcyon days spent here; to the association which clusters around these scenes, to the friends this day parted from." Robert Barr departed to become a judge in Louisiana. Robert Levi remained in Columbia. It's a pattern still being followed. Of Mizzou's 100,000 living alumni, about half live in the state, about half outside Missouri.

IN 1845 Mr. Todd was admitted to the Columbia bar," said the *Missouri Statesman* in a 1898 issue, "and although never a practicing lawyer, yet as a judge of law he had no superior in the state, and his counsels were sought far and near. Shortly after his graduation, he was elected tutor in the State University, the first man ever chosen for that position in that institution. In the year 1846, he was appointed clerk of the circuit court and recorder of this county (which position was vacant owing to the death of his father, who was the first clerk of this county). This position he held continuously till January 1, 1867. As soon as he went out of the county office, Mr. Todd was made cashier of the Exchange National Bank of Columbia, which position he held and discharged his duties with remarkable ability till the day of his death. For 15 years he was a Curator of the State University, and for 25 years he was secretary of the Board of Curators of that institution. His labors in connection with the University and with the Agriculture College, at home and away from home, were untiring; and he did much to place our great educational institutions on the high plane on which they now stand."

THE ABOVE is from Todd's obituary. It failed to mention that in 1847 it was at his suggestion that the court house (where the four columns now stand) and Academic Hall were built one-half mile apart and that the center door of the former was due north of the center door of the latter. Of more importance, perhaps, was the building of a stone jail in 1856. The log dungeon used for 20 years was deemed insecure, so the county court employed a blacksmith to weld a piece of iron around the ankle of each prisoner and that was attached by a chain to the floor. Todd was opposed to such treatment and more than once refused to issue a commitment. Thus, the construction of the new jail.

THE OBITUARY also failed to reveal that Todd has a "jolly laugh — one that would be remembered by anyone who heard it." Todd's nephew, William R. Gentry Sr., recalled that "on one occasion, Uncle Robert was in Washington while Lincoln was president and went to call on him. While wait-

ing to be admitted, he was conversing with someone and something was said that made him laugh. . . . Lincoln, who was situated so that he could not see him, heard the laugh, and said at once, 'That's Bob Todd.' " Todd knew Lincoln because the Missourian was the first cousin of Mary Todd Lincoln, the President's wife. In fact, Lincoln came to Columbia in 1840 to see Mary when she was at the Todds' visiting her kin. In 1860 Lincoln got only 12 votes in Boone County, Bob Todd's being one of them. When the new President was having difficulty putting together his cabinet, some of Todd's friends suggested the Mizzou graduate. But Todd wrote Lincoln: "Your administration will be criticized enough without having the additional ground of criticism that you appointed a first cousin of your wife's to a cabinet position."

DURING THE CIVIL WAR, Todd's relationship with the President turned out to be a good thing for Columbia and the University of Missouri. In 1862 federal soldiers under Col. Lewis Merrill (Merrill's Horse) were camped on the Mizzou Campus. Merrill already had lost 13 Confederate prisoners who had escaped from a third-floor classroom being used as a jail when one of the prisoners' mother smuggled a saw and a knife in turkey and dressing. Later, when 200 Rebel soldiers dashed into Columbia and freed five prisoners from the county jail and captured 80 horses, Merrill was beside himself. The Union forces had been taken by surprise because they had neglected to post sentinels. Merrill figured that Southern sympathizers had informed the Confederates of this oversight, and he vowed to burn the town, the University, and the colleges. Boone County Union men tried to dissuade him, but to no avail. Merrill was going to teach the Southerners a lesson. Finally, Little Bob Todd got mad and said, "Well sir, you are to blame for all of this; you should have had guards posted on every road leading into Columbia, as every other military man who knows anything would have done. You have other duties besides singing songs and speaking on the occasion of a flag presentation. Now Sir, if you set fire to and burn our university, our colleges, and our town, our friends will kindle a fire under you, and I tremble for you at the result." There was no fire.

ACCORDING to another nephew, North Todd Gentry, Todd "was often asked to appear before the general assembly and explain University appropriation bills; and, at his own expense, he went to Jefferson City, which trip then required three days. . . . On one occasion, he said, 'Some day I hope the University will be so large, and its usefulness so thoroughly appreciated, that it will not be necessary for anyone to appear before the appropriation committees.' " Obviously, getting large wasn't the critical part of that proviso.

TODD WAS A CURATOR when women first were admitted to the University in 1867, and he reportedly favored that "forward" step, although many persons were said to be opposed. He also was a Curator at the time Eugene Field attended the University in 1871. Field became well-known for his practical jokes and pranks, and some University teachers thought he should be dismissed. But Todd said, "He is a bright boy. Perhaps some day he will amount to something, and he may be a credit to our University."

IN A MOVE that might not have endeared him to Mizzou's students, Todd in 1875 was author of a Missouri statute known as the "three-mile law," which prohibited the granting of dram-shop licenses within three miles of the University. Todd himself urged total abstinence from liquor, although he did like his cigars. Some of his friends thought he smoked too much, and one Baptist friend (Todd was a Presbyterian) asked how long he had been smoking. When Todd replied 50 years, the friend noted that the habit had cost a great sum of money that could have gone to "home and foreign missions." "Well, sir," said Todd, "you do not smoke, have not smoked for 50 years. How much have you given to the cause of missions?" Todd's smoking did help control gambling in Columbia, however. One day he saw a slot machine being used by young men and boys in the store where he purchased his cigars. He called the proprietor to one side and said, "Because of that gambling device being used in this store, I have bought my last cigar from you." When the store owner saw he was about to lose his best customer, he had the slot machine removed.

ONE OF THE CONTRIBUTORS to the fund that made Boone County the site of the University in 1839 was Todd's father. In 1892, when fire destroyed Academic Hall, Todd was one of the principal subscribers to a fund to see that Mizzou remained in Columbia. Many in the State Legislature were urging that the University of Missouri be relocated. It was Todd who was charged by a committee to write the case for rebuilding the University in Columbia. He urged that the University "not be put on wheels" and that the good name of Missouri not be injured "by the repudiation of its solemn agreement made with Boone County in 1839." Todd was 76 when he was fatally stricken as he left home for the bank. There were many eulogies. But perhaps the most appropriate tribute had come in 1890, the year the University celebrated the 50th anniversary of the laying of its cornerstone: "Robert L. Todd is a benefactor of this institution. He has proven himself a dutiful son, a faithful servant and a true friend of the University upon every occasion involving her interest and advancement." May such be said of all Mizzou alumni. □