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Chapter VIII

MR. ARGENTINE

If anyone is befitting the title of "Mr. Argentine," J. C. Harmon is that man. Mr. Harmon has lived in the Argentine community for fifty years. He has devoted his entire life to the field of education. At eighty-seven years old, he is remarkably alert. His mind is almost unbelievably sharp in its capacity to remember facts and dates.

J. C. Harmon was born in Montgomery County, Missouri, on December 9, 1886. He was one of seven brothers and sisters. His christened name is James Chester. However, few Argentians know his full name. His late wife preferred to call him J.C., and he has gone by this shortened version ever since.¹

Harmon's parents were farmers. It was expected that he, like his other brothers, would carry on the family tradition. However, at the age of thirteen, he suffered a severe appendicitis attack and almost died. His parents felt that he would never be strong enough during the rest of his life to be a farmer. Therefore, they decided he should get an education in order that he might pursue a more suitable occupation. So, they moved to Montgomery City, the county seat, because it had a four-year high school. Harmon's brothers and sisters did not continue their schooling beyond the elementary level.

Mr. Harmon graduated from Central Wesleyan College of Missouri with a B.A. degree in 1910. His majors were mathematics and English. His career began with a principalship at Martinsburg, Missouri where he served for one year. Then he became the superintendent of a high school and two elementary schools in Girard, Illinois, for three years.

During the school term of 1915-1916, he re-entered college at the University of Missouri and successfully completed his Bachelor of Science Degree in 1916. Also, while there, he met Miss Mary Yancy who became his wife. Harmon continued attending the university during summer sessions and obtained a Master of Arts Degree in School Administration in 1925.

He resumed his career in Moberly, Missouri, in the fall of 1916 where he was the principal of the high school until 1916. Then he moved to Nevada, Missouri, where he was Superintendent of Schools until 1920. Then he was the President of the Cottey Junior College of Nevada, Missouri. This was a girls' school and he was to remain there until 1924.

While visiting in Kansas City, Missouri, he learned of two principal openings on the Kansas side.

I got on the street car and came over and talked with Mr. Pearson who was the Superintendent of the Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools. Mr. Pearson informed me of two openings: one at Wyandotte High School and the other at Argentine High School. Mr. Pearson, however, did not seem too encouraging about my prospects. I went back to Nevada, Missouri and forgot about the matter. A week later I got a telephone call from Mr. Pearson and he told me that the Argentine job was mine.

So in 1924, I replaced Mr. Schlagle as the Principal of Argentine High School. I began to look around for living quarters for my family. Dr. Haas, a physician of the community, was at the time building some new homes in the 3200 block of Barber in Argentine. I had been told that no principal of the high school had ever lived in the community. However, I felt that this was essential in order to develop a proper rapport between myself and the community. So I lived in one of Dr. Haas' homes for two years. Then on August 1, 1926, we moved to this house on Ruby.

¹ J. C. Harmon, personal interview held in his home at 1424 Ruby, Kansas City, Kansas, January 7, 1974. This author had the opportunity of two interviews with Mr. Harmon at his home. The first interview, held on January 7, 1974, lasted one hour-and-one-half. The second interview of only a few minutes took place on January 11, 1974. From these conversations, the author was able to gain a deep insight into this great man. All of the following material up to that credited in footnote two comes from the interviews with Mr. Harmon.

This house was just across the street from Mr. Charles W. Green. Mr. Green was one of the most influential spokesmen of our community. Mr. Green had been on the board of directors of several banks. He was also an official of the Kansas City Structural Steel Company. He was also the mayor of the town of Argentine and a past mayor of Kansas City, Kansas. I did not know him all that well, but I had the highest record for him.

Harmon's home was only a few blocks from the high school. Until 1948, he walked to school every day. At six-feet-four inches and 210 pounds he was visible at a considerable distance. Mr. Harmon feels that his stature, though a handicap in his youth, was a great asset to his profession. He recalled an incident where an irate father of a spanked child came up to the high school to even the score. He cooled down considerably, however, when he saw the towering principal.

Harmon's fabulous memory has been his trademark. He can recall the names of students that he has not seen for many years. Names have always been a hobby with him. He explained his penchant for names this way:

I resolved, that if I remained in the teaching profession, to learn my student's first names. I also tried to make a habit of visiting as many of the students' homes as possible. My philosophy is this: A teacher should show a personal interest in her students. She should stand in the doorway and greet each incoming class by calling them by their first names as they entered. If she did this, she was not going to have any severe discipline problems. It is just a matter of the teacher showing her students that she cared.

Mr. Harmon cites a few accomplishments of the high school during his tenure there:

We were the first school in the metropolitan area to have a student council. Raymond Thomas was our first president. We were also the first school to sponsor dances. The school board was at first somewhat opposed to this idea. Therefore, we had to hold the dances down at the old Parish House. When they proved to be a success, we were allowed to use the high school gym.

Argentine was the first school in Kansas City, Kansas to have a vocational program. This I feel was my greatest accomplishment as principal. We were also the first school to have a part-time work-study program. This proved to be a great program for the school.

Mr. Harmon had these recollections about the years at Argentine High School:

Those years were the happiest of my life. But I realize that times have changed. Education requirements are different. Disciplinary problems seem greater now than in the past.

Unhappily it seems that teachers nowadays tend to view their work as being just another eight-to-four job. Much of the old dedication seems to have been lost. In the old days, teachers, though always underpaid, were among the most respected people of the community. Many teachers were women who never married. Teachers like Frances Taylor, Bertha Plumb, Bess Wilhite, Stella Cole, Edith Delaney and Gladys Congdon devoted their entire life to their profession. This is only to mention a few; there were many others.

Today, however, there is too much turnover and the teachers are much younger. Many young women teach only a few years, then get married and leave the profession. It would have disturbed me greatly if I would have faced such a great turnover when I was principal.

Many complain about the oversupply of teachers and the diminishing job market. But I would say this, a good teacher will never have any great difficulty finding a job. I would never discourage any young person from entering the profession. These young teachers just coming out of college start out at more money a year than I made as principal. Presently, teaching is a good paying occupation for a young woman.

Besides that and more importantly, there is the feeling of accomplishment. One of the happiest days of my life was when I was a guest of honor at the dedication of the new high school. Former students of mine, some of them going back almost fifty years, turned out for the dedication.

Thus, a teacher can really love his work. He can feel that it is a part of him and look forward to going to work with the feeling that he is contributing.

Harmon's service to the community has not ended with his retirement as principal. He has always been a healthy, active man. In his thirty years as principal, he was absent only sixteen days and only one day was on account of sickness. Though eighty-seven, he has the vigor of a man thirty years his junior.

After his retirement from the high school, he sold encyclopedias for a while. In November of 1954 he started working for the Missouri State Employment Office. Then in the spring of 1955 he came over on the Kansas side and worked for the Kansas State Employment Office for the next six and a half years. In the fall of 1961, he began working for the Mission Chamber of Commerce. He remained with them for about two-and-one-half years. Thus, he worked steadily until about the age of seventy-five.

Harmon has also been a prominent figure in civic affairs. He is a past President of the Argentine Activities Association. He was also its secretary-treasurer for two years. He was a past Marshall of the annual Argentine Fall Festival Parade. He picked the date of the parade for twenty years and it never rained on those days. Then, the first year that he did not pick the date, it rained! Mr. Harmon is also a member of the Metropolitan Avenue Methodist Church, the Kansas City Chamber of Commerce and Delta Kappa, an education fraternity.

The author interviewed several people to learn their impressions of Mr. Harmon. The author's father, Edwin Dale Shutt, Sr., was a student at Argentine and had this to say:

You had to be a very bad boy before Mr. Harmon would ever kick you out of school. He had the students with discipline problems pick up trash and mow the school lawns. He was a father figure to many boys during the depression. I will always cherish the fondest memories of Mr. Harmon and what he has stood for.²

The author's mother, Mrs. Mabel Marie (Smith) Shutt, said:

Mr. Harmon always knew every student of the high school by his or her name. He was a stern disciplinarian yet was not all that strict. He always seemed to be joking and kidding. I can never recall ever seeing him get angry at a student. Yet, if you stepped out of line, you knew that he meant business. I always had the deepest respect for both Mr. Harmon and the late J. C. Shankland who for several years was the vice-principal.³

Harmon told the author that the three most inspirational men he has ever known were Gene Spaulding, Harry Crew, and Pete Larson. These men all arose above physical handicaps. The author had an interview with one of these, Mr. Joseph L. (Pete) Larson, a graduate of Argentine High School. He also had nothing but praise for Mr. Harmon:

One of the proudest moments I ever spent was when I escorted Mr. Harmon to the last Turner-Argentine basketball game. To me he is probably the greatest man that ever lived in Argentine or anywhere for that matter. I have as much respect for that man as for any other person I have ever known. It has been a real privilege to call him a friend and serve with him in various community activities. Mr. Harmon is a man who cares for you as an individual. You realized that by the fact that he could call you by your first name.⁴

Former teachers who served under Mr. Harmon also have the highest regard for him. Mr. Clyde E. "Pop" Swender had nothing but fond memories of Argentine High School. He was the head coach of track and an assistant coach of football and basketball. He left Argentine and moved to Blue Mound, Kansas, where he operated a dry goods and variety store for about ten years. Then he spent four years at Strong City in Chase County as an elementary principal, after which he was a school counselor at Humbolt, Kansas, and later for

² Edwin Dale Shutt, Sr., personal interview held in his home at 2428 S. 47th St., Kansas City, KS, November 28, 1973

³ Mabel Marie Shutt, personal interview held in his home at 2428 S. 47th St., Kansas City, KS, December 10, 1973

⁴ Joseph L. Larson, personal interview held in his home at 1208 Ruby, Kansas City, Kansas, March 1, 1974

the Blue Mound, Mound City, and Prescott, Kansas communities. Then he retired. However, since last fall he has been working as a part-time counselor in Pleasanton, Kansas.

This is what "Pop" Swender had to say:

I served the Argentine High School and community from 1930 through 1947. When I came to Argentine I had a full set of teeth. I was a bachelor with a lot of drive and ambition. When I left Argentine, I had a full set of "stone choppers" and a receding hair line and an increase in circumference. I served the seventeen years with Mr. Harmon as the patron saint and father confessor. He was an excellent valued friend and Mrs. Swender and I cherish the kindest thoughts of Mr. Harmon and his family.⁵

Another teacher who served under Mr. Harmon also had the highest regard for him. Mr. Earl Moody was one of these the author interviewed.

Mr. Moody was a teacher at Argentine High School for twenty-five years. He was born in Sheridan, Kansas, in 1888 of farm folks. His family moved to Eudora in Douglas County, Kansas. When he was sixteen, his family moved to Wisconsin where he attended high school and college. His college major was Industrial Arts.

After a six-month stint in the service of World War I, he started teaching. He returned to Kansas and taught in Salina for four years. He came to Argentine in 1928 and was to remain there until the mandatory retirement age. Then he taught for a few years at Oak Grove Grade School in the Turner Unified School District. Mr. Moody had this to say of the ex-principal:

Mr. Harmon was one of the finest men I ever worked for. We got along just fine. I never had a thing against the man I could complain about whatsoever. I think he had the love and respect of all. He is just a prince of a man and a gentleman in every sense of the word at all times. I enjoyed my twenty-five years with him as much as I had at any place that I had ever taught.⁶

⁵ Clyde E. Swender, personal letter written by him from Blue Mound, Kansas.

⁶ Earl Moody, personal interview held in his home at 2900 Steele Road, Kansas City, Kansas, March 7, 1974